The Female Voice in Italian Narrative of the 1930s

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# **Abstract**

This thesis represents a study of Italian female narrative of the 1930s, a period which has been regarded as a hiatus in female literary production in Italy. Focusing on the work of Anna Banti, Maria Bellonci, Fausta Cialente, Alba de Céspedes, Gianna Manzini, Paola Masino, Elsa Morante, and Anna Maria Ortese, I site their early literary production in the political, social, and cultural context of 1930s' Italy and reveal how these writers not only created models of female subjectivity which challenged the dominant representations of femininity but also how they came to be regarded as a vital new force in Italian narrative at a time when the Fascist regime was at the height of its power.

The thesis is composed of two parts. The first part, which uses a historical and bibliographical approach, discusses the reception of women writers by the critics, the public, and the regime; the second part, which draws on socio-historical research into women's lives, explores their search for self-identity as both women and writers. The first chapter examines how women's writing moved from a position of marginalisation to one of increased respect within the literary establishment during the thirties. The second chapter analyses the complex relationship between women writers and the regime, whose ambiguous status as a supporter of female culture yet symbol of patriarchal repression elicited both allegiance and dissent in the female literary community. In chapter three, I discuss the dominant models of womanhood from the period and show how women used the power of writing to rebel against these artificial images of femininity. Finally, in chapter four, I examine the influence of foreign literature on female narrative, contrasting the impact of the modernist aesthetic of Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield with the influence of American realism on young male writers.

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# Introduction

This thesis examines Italian female narrative of the 1930s and offers a reappraisal of a period which has been widely regarded as a hiatus in female literary production in Italy. Focusing on key women writers of the period, who began their literary careers at the height of Fascist rule and who went on to become some of the most notable Italian novelists of the twentieth century, namely Anna Banti (1895-1985), Maria Bellonci (1902-1986), Fausta Cialente (1898-1993), Alba de Céspedes (1911-1997), Gianna Manzini (1896-1974), Paola Masino (1908-1989), Elsa Morante (1912-1985), and Anna Maria Ortese (1914-1998), this research project sites their early literary production in the political, social, and cultural context of 1930s' Italy and reveals how these 'new generation writers', as I have dubbed them, overturned popular prejudice about women's writing and came to be regarded as a vital new force in Italian narrative. I have chosen the publication of Manzini's first novel in 1928 and Morante's first volume of short fiction in 1941 to form the parameters of my research and, within this thirteen-year time frame, I analyse the social, political, and literary influences which shaped the narrative of these new generation writers and the reception of their work by the public, critics, and Fascist regime. Starting with an analysis of the position of women writers in relation to the literary establishment and the regime, I chart the growing support which developed for their writing as a result not only of changes in the press and publishing industry but also the government's focus on glorifying the cultural achievements of Fascist Italy. I then go on to explore the response of women writers to the conflicting models of womanhood promulgated by conservative forces, and the influence exerted by the modernist aesthetic of Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield. In so doing, I reposition female narrative within the literary environment of 1930s' Italy and offer an alternative view of a decade which has traditionally been defined in masculine terms.

In focusing on female literary production, I am not reading women writers as a separate female tradition, nor do I advocate the notion of difference in their work. While gender provides a useful framework in which to view their writing, it does not serve as the only categorisation. Indeed, gender categorisation was something that the writers who form the subject of my research specifically sought to avoid. Anxious to distance themselves from the pejorative label of *letteratura femminile*, with its connotations of imitative and sentimental fiction, and keenly aware that separate categorisation reinforced the secondary

status of women, they referred to themselves as *scrittori* and sought equal ranking alongside their male peers. However, in examining an era governed by sexual politics in which women found themselves defined by their gender, I believe it is productive to consider women writers collectively in order to explore their position within a society in which femininity was equated with subordination and to look at the similarity of their response to the conflicting images of womanhood emanating from Fascist thinking and the new consumer culture. In examining their work in this way, we can see that women writers of the period produced a narrative which was distinct from that of their male colleagues, adopting an introspective, impressionistic style, which ran counter to the neorealist imperative underscoring the work of their male left-wing contemporaries.

### The new generation

This research project centres on a group of female writers whom I have labelled the 'new generation'. This is not to say that they formed a cohesive group - indeed, each actively resisted membership of any school which defined them by either gender or genre – but rather they were writers united by stylistic affinities and shared concerns, from a common desire to portray womanhood in a manner which accorded with their own experience, to a shared interest in European literature. Born between 1895 and 1914, they began their literary careers between 1928 and 1941 and went on to become some of the most respected names in twentieth-century Italian literature. Alongside these signore della scrittura, as they have been termed by the journalist and novelist Sandra Petrignani, are a group of lesser known novelists who shared many of the same themes and influences as their new generation counterparts but whose names have now all but been forgotten, including Margherita Cattaneo (b. 1907), Maria Luisa Fehr (b. 1894), Marise Ferro (1907-1991), and Orsola Nemi (b. 1905), and within their number, I have included a writer who was at the end of her literary career in the 1930s but whose name was cited alongside those of the new generation in contributing to the renaissance of female narrative, namely Paola Drigo (1876-1938).1

The writers who made up the new generation bore many similarities. With the exception of Ortese, whose itinerant childhood and poor health meant she received little formal education, they benefited from secondary, and even tertiary, education, Manzini,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Sandra Petrignani, ed., Le signore della scrittura: interviste (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1984).

Banti, and Ferro all attending university. They also came from middle-class, cultured backgrounds: Manzini received her early literary formation in the European climate of Solaria, the influential Florentine journal to which she contributed between 1929 and 1932; Masino became fully immersed in avant-garde culture when she moved to Paris with her partner Massimo Bontempelli at the age of twenty-one; while Cialente developed a love of European literature in the early years of her marriage when, having moved to Egypt with her husband, the composer Enrico Terni, she devoured the contents of his library. 'In Egitto disponevo della ricca biblioteca di mio marito', she recalled in an interview with Sandra Petrignani. 'Passai i primi anni a leggere. Non facevo altro.' Representing a new type of confident, educated woman, who had been led to expect more out of life than marriage and motherhood, the new generation pursued writing as a full-time career, establishing themselves as journalists as well as novelists: Banti and Morante both wrote regular features for the arts magazine Oggi between 1939 and 1942, the latter publishing under the pseudonym Antonio Carrera; Cialente founded the weekly newspaper Fronte unito in Cairo in 1943, which served as a vehicle for popular anti-Fascist sentiment; de Céspedes worked as a staff writer at Il Giornale d'Italia from 1934; Masino wrote for Europe Nouvelle whilst living in Paris in the late 1920s; Ortese spent a year as a subeditor for the Venetian newspaper Il Gazzettino in 1938; while Manzini worked as a fashion journalist during the war. Countering the popular image of the scribacchina, for whom writing was a means to earn pocket money, they treated their work as a profession rather than a pastime. 'Sulla breccia da oramai otto anni non so che cosa significhi guadagnare un quattrino con questo mio lieto mestiere. Perchè è indubbiamente un mestiere', declared Cialente, her professional approach contrasting with the more traditional view expressed by the journalist Paola Ojetti, who claimed that, for a woman, '[lo scrivere] è sempre meno mestiere e più passione di quanto lo sia per un uomo'.3

As well as sharing similar backgrounds, there were also personal links between the writers: Bellonci described Banti as 'una cara amica'; Ortese began a life-long friendship with Masino in 1937 after being introduced by Bontempelli; while de Céspedes spoke of her great friendship with Bellonci.<sup>4</sup> Geography played an important role in forging these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 'Fausta Cialente: straniera dappertutto', in Petrignani, pp. 83-89 (p. 87).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Fausta Cialente, 'Inchiesta tra gli scrittori laureati', *Quadrivio*, 20 December 1936, p. 2. Paola Ojetti, 'Premio Galante', *Quadrivio*, 6 December 1936, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Maria Bellonci, *Pubblici segreti*, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1965), I, 38.

bonds: Morante, Bellonci, de Céspedes, and Ortese were all born in Rome and chose to reside there, Manzini moved to Rome from Florence in 1933 after separating from her husband, while Masino settled there in 1934, and the vibrant social life of Roman society afforded them the opportunity to form close friendships, Sibilla Aleramo recalling parties hosted by de Céspedes and dinners with Masino and Manzini. Yet, despite forging close friendships with one another, each writer recognised the solitary nature of their profession - 'lo scrivere è fatto di raccoglimento, solitudine', affirmed Masino - and this solitude was magnified not only by their decision to distance themselves from cultural movements but also by their gender for, as intellectual women, they felt like outsiders in a society which subscribed to a narrow definition of femininity. 'Io sono quasi sempre sola', noted Morante in her diary of 1938, a sentiment echoed by Banti, who, in an interview with Petrignani, remarked: 'Sono sempre stata solitaria.'6

Reflecting this sense of isolation in their work, the new generation depicted rebellious women whose refusal to conform to societal expectations resulted in alienation. Mirroring their own lives in their fiction, they portrayed independent, educated young women, who benefited from the freedoms born of social change but felt the constraints imposed by a society in which femininity was defined along conservative lines. Through their protagonists, they described the range of opportunities available to women in the interwar years while, at the same time, revealing the sense of solitude which accompanied the pursuit of an alternate course in life, and, in so doing, they articulated the confusion experienced by a generation of young women who were caught between the desire for autonomy and the pressure to conform to prescribed roles.

De Céspedes recalled her friendship with Bellonci in an interview with Piera Carroli, 'Colloqui con Alba de Céspedes (Parigi, 19-29 marzo 1990)', in *Esperienza e narrazione nella scrittura di Alba de Céspedes* (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 131-94 (p. 158).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Sibilla Aleramo, *Un amore insolito: diario 1940-1944*, ed. by Alba Morino, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), pp. 71 and 122.

The friendship between these writers stood in marked contrast to the hostility which characterised the relationships of their predecessors: Matilde Serao and Grazia Deledda were well-known for being arch rivals, their rivalry coming to a head in 1926 when they were both selected as candidates for the Nobel prize; while Sibilla Aleramo found herself the target of an acerbic attack from Amalia Guglielminetti, who laughed publicly at her play *Endimione* (1923) when it flopped on its first night. Although relations between the new generation were not unproblematic, they were able to set aside their personal differences when it came to their work, de Céspedes expressing great admiration for Banti whilst, on a personal level, finding her 'una donna molto difficile' (Carroli, p. 158).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> 'Paola Masino: où sont les neiges d'antan?', in Petrignani, pp. 25-33 (p. 32). Elsa Morante, *Diario 1938*, ed. by Alba Andreini (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), p. 10.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Anna Banti: la sfortuna di essere seri', in Petrignani, pp. 101-09 (p. 103).

# Defining a decade

The thirties was a period of political upheaval and far-reaching social and cultural change throughout Europe as right-wing dictators swept to power in Germany and Spain and the totalitarian regimes in Italy and Soviet Russia strengthened their grip, while rapid advances in technology revolutionised the workplace and leisure market. In Italy, the thirties was a decade framed by the Lateran Treaty of 1929, which sealed Mussolini's alliance with the papacy and conservative forces, and the outbreak of war in 1939. It was a period which saw the Fascist regime at the height of its power, the historian Renzo De Felice describing the years 1929 to 1936 as 'gli anni del consenso' as the government of Mussolini consolidated its control over the Italian populace and elicited widespread conformism.<sup>7</sup> For women in Italy, the thirties represented an era of mass mobilisation and acute gender consciousness as they were enlisted in organisations such as the Fasci femminili to spread Fascist propaganda and their role as wives and mothers were invested with strategic importance by the regime, whose imperialist dream was dependent on maximising the number of births. Recast in the role of sposa e madre esemplare, they found the new-found freedom they had gained through education and employment threatened by repressive legislation, while their female identity was placed under the spotlight as the regime sought to replace the image of the emancipated donna nuova with the model of the donna autentica. Urged to conform to this passive maternal ideal by the twin forces of government legislation and societal pressure, young women also faced an onslaught of consumerist images of femininity emanating from Hollywood and consumer goods' manufacturers, who promoted images of women as consumers and sexual beings and rooted femininity firmly in the realm of beauty and desirability.8

## Revising the canon: the politics of memory

The thirties not only represents a well-defined period in political history but it has also assumed a clear literary identity. In Britain, the decade has come to be associated with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Renzo De Felice, Mussolini il Duce: gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936 (Turin: Einaudi, 1974). For an overview of Italian history of the 1930s, see Martin Blinkhorn, Mussolini and Fascist Italy (London: Methuen, 1984); Martin Clark, Modern Italy 1871-1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Longman, 1996); and Denis Mack Smith, Modern Italy: A Political History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For an examination of women's lives under Fascism, see Alexander De Grand, 'Women under Italian Fascism', *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), 947-68; Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Emiliana P. Noether, 'Italian Women and Fascism: A Re-evaluation', *Italian Quarterly*, Autumn 1982, pp. 69-80.

Auden Generation, the group of young left-wing poets whose number includes W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, with the result that female writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Vera Brittain, and Ivy Compton-Burnett have been sidelined.<sup>9</sup> A similar fate has befallen women writers in Italy, who have become victims of the post-war editing of the canon, which deemed the significant literature of the period to be the result of movements in which male writers reigned supreme, from the neorealist aesthetic of left-wing idealists such as Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, whose narrative functioned as a fiction of political resistance, to the hermeticist poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale, whose enigmatic poetic expression, detached from everyday reality, has been viewed as pure art uncorrupted by Fascism. The few women who have been associated with this period are cited in the context of their relationship with these movements, as in the case of Gianna Manzini, whose membership of the Solariani, the group of writers who congregated around the Florentine journal Solaria (1926-1934), has secured her position in the literary avantgarde of the thirties alongside fellow contributors Eugenio Montale and Carlo Emilio Gadda. Yet, while Manzini's delicate balance between linguistic expression and psychological insight signals her kinship with the Solariani, her allusive and metaphorical style, which favours the epiphany of the moment over linear narrative, has evaded classification. 'Confesso che sono un po' perplesso a definire puntualmente questo volume della Manzini', remarked Benedetto Migliore in his review of Boscovivo (1932). 'Racconti, bozzetti, stati d'animo, pezzi di bravura?.'10

Manzini was not alone in creating an individual style that was resistant to critical categories and literary trends. The work of Anna Banti also defied classification, Banti recalling how, when asked to categorise her work, the critic Emilio Cecchi declined to respond: "Cecchi, mi dica, in tutto questo magma di gente che scrive – i neorealisti, [...] i surreali, gli informali – che cosa rappresento, io?" Lui scosse la testa sorridendo. Forse non sapeva o non voleva dirmelo.'11

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For a discussion of British women writers in the 1930s, see Nichola Beauman, A Very Great Profession: The Women's Novel 1914-1939 (London: Virago, 1983); Maroula Joannou, Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38 (Oxford: Berg, 1995); and Janet Montefiore, Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Benedetto Migliore, 'Gianna Manzini: Boscovivo', L'Italia che scrive, 1933, pp. 41-42 (p. 41).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Cited in Margherita Ghilardi, 'Le piccole tempeste: sugli "scritti non narrativi" di Anna Banti', in *L'opera di Anna Banti: atti del convegno di studi (Firenze, 8-9 maggio 1992)*, ed. by Enza Biagini (Florence: Olschki, 1997), pp. 41-69 (p. 66).

While elements of *prosa d'arte*, the highly refined prose style developed in the literary journal *La Voce* (1908-1916), can be detected in the lyricism of Banti's first work *Itinerario di Paolina* (1937), the tighter narrative structure and simpler descriptive language of her subsequent collections of short fiction *Il coraggio delle donne* (1940) and *Le monache cantano* (1942) reveal her departure from *prosa d'arte* and her determination not to become rooted in any literary movement. 'Disprezzavo quello che si faceva in Italia a quel tempo, attorno al '30: il cardarellismo, la prosa d'arte, tutta quella letteratura gratuita ornamentale', Banti affirmed, her distaste for the prevailing literary styles of the period confirming her solitary position within Italian culture of the 1930s. <sup>12</sup> Maria Bellonci was to display a similar disregard for literary trends, her historical novel, *Lucrezia Borgia* (1939), which narrates the private history of the Italian noblewoman, appearing at a time when neorealism, with its utopian vision of the common man, was emerging as the dominant aesthetic. 'Ho scritto i miei libri senza mai curarmi delle tendenze letterarie in voga anche se in me stessa registro il mio tempo: a modo mio, con i miei filtri', Bellonci declared in an interview with Petrignani. <sup>13</sup>

The example of these three writers demonstrates the resolutely individual path which the new generation writers pursued in their fiction. In contrast to their predecessors, such as Matilde Serao and Grazia Deledda, who developed their narrative style in accordance with the prevailing movement of *verismo*, the new generation writers sited their work outside contemporary cultural trends, opting for a personal rather than collective response to social and political issues, a sign not only of their confidence as writers but also their determination to avoid classification, particularly on the grounds of gender. Conscious of the charges of plagiarism levelled at female writers and, anxious to avoid a unifying voice in their work which could be interpreted as *femminile*, with its implied weakness and sentimentality, they emphasised their independence from all literary schools and traditions in order to affirm their status as serious writers. Their decision to forge an independent path was also motivated by their belief in political disengagement in art. Subscribing to the Crocean view that the artist should 'far opera bella e nient'altro che opera bella', they kept their distance from any movement which would place them under a political or social

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Il Corriere della Sera, 14 April 1971 (cited in Carlo De Matteis, Il romanzo italiano del Novecento (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1984), p. 97).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> 'Maria Bellonci: l'indifferente', in Petrignani, pp. 49-56 (p. 51).

banner and impinge on their artistic freedom.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that they were apolitical. Indeed, Cialente and de Céspedes both took an active part in the Resistance, as I will discuss in chapter two; Banti, Bellonci, and Morante were all outspoken critics of the Fascist regime in the immediate post-war period; while Ortese became an active member of the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, at the end of the war. Yet, unlike their male peers engaged in neorealism, who viewed literature as an effective instrument in changing social consciousness, the new generation resisted any overt ideological engagement in their work but held the function of art to lie in individual expression and self-exploration, a view to which they continued to subscribe in the ideologically charged post-war period. In the words of Masino, speaking in a radio interview in 1951: 'Si badi che al contrario di molti slogan che corrono oggi per la maggiore e in cui si dice: 'arte per il popolo', io non penso affatto a questo: io penso all'arte per se stessa, [...] come liberazione di me stessa.' <sup>15</sup>

In their decision to pursue an individual path independent from cultural movements, the new generation writers found a means of maintaining their literary freedom during the *ventennio*, evading the conformism demanded of intellectuals who enjoyed state patronage and a prominent position in the literary establishment. 'Essere soli era un modo di essere liberi', as Bellonci remarked of the solitary lives which she and her husband led under Fascist rule. 'Essere was a heavy price to pay for this independence in the post-war period: exclusion from the canon. Despite producing some of the most critically acclaimed narrative of the thirties, women writers were to fall victim to the post-war editing of the canon, as Robin Pickering-Iazzi has observed, for not only was their narrative style deemed difficult to categorise, which meant they were frequently overlooked in canonical compilations classified by genre, but they also found themselves marginalised both on account of their modernist style, which ran counter to the prevailing left-wing ideology, and due to the perceived lack of anti-Fascist sentiment in their work. 'I'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Benedetto Croce, 'Ada Negri', 1906 (repr. in *Letteratura della nuova Italia*, 4 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1914-1915), II, 335-55 (p. 351)).

Croce's belief in the need for political and social disengagement in art in order to attain absolute poetic beauty, which he outlined in *Estetica* (1902), came to represent a dominating influence on Italian intellectual life throughout the first half of the century, his view that culture should be freed from the contingencies of life encouraging a sense of detachment in writers. This position of disengagement would come under fire in the post-war period, however, when writers were accused of passivity in the face of Fascism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> AA. VV., Confessioni di scrittori: interviste con se stessi (Turin: Edizioni Radio Italiana, 1951), p. 65.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Cited in *Il Premio Viareggio ha 25 anni*, ed. by Leone Sbrana (Florence: Luciano Landi, 1955), p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women: Selected Short Stories Written by Italian Women during Fascism (New York: Feminist Press, 1993), pp. 103-04.

In the ideologically charged climate of post-war Italy, the views of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, which were enunciated in his posthumous Lettere dal carcere (1947), wielded enormous influence. Holding that literary production should be sited within the broader historical and social process, Gramsci was deeply critical of the elitist nature of Italian literature of the thirties, which he claimed was remote from ordinary people, and he advocated in its place a 'national-popular' literature that would produce a mass culture freed from the hierarchies of class. As left-wing writers sought an aesthetic that would capture the social and political hopes of the post-Fascist era, neorealism came to symbolise this national literature posited by Gramsci. Rooted in social reality and political action, neorealism aimed to depict human life in a sincere and dispassionate way, thereby offering a corrective to the triumphalist rhetoric of Fascist culture, and it positioned the writer as a politically engaged figure who was committed to the cause of the oppressed. Modernism, by contrast, with its focus on interiority rather than social realism, its preoccupation with individual destiny not mass society, and its displacement of historical time for the epiphany of the moment, was associated with a world of privilege and political disengagement. The influential Marxist critic Georg Lukács condemned the modernist style as symptomatic of the oppressed human subject of capitalism, whose exponents were guilty of privileging bourgeois individualist autonomy over issues of public significance.<sup>18</sup> In this politically charged climate, the new generation found themselves labelled highbrow and elitist, while their allusive and metaphorical prose was seen as a product of a bourgeois, European tradition whose values were out of touch with post-war Italian society. Moreover, as writers who rejected the tenet that literature should function as a vehicle for political and social change, they were seen to lack engagement with contemporary issues. This lack of overt ideological commitment in their work, which ran counter to the cultural climate, not only resulted in their writing being criticised as introverted and intimist, as Ann Caesar has observed in her study of post-war female narrative, but it also meant that their early narratives produced under Fascism, which served as important critiques of patriarchal oppression, were overlooked in the post-war revision of the literary canon due to their lack of perceived resistance to the regime.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> For a discussion of Lukács's influence on the critical reception of modernist writing, see Marianne Dekoven, 'Modernism and Gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 174-93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ann Hallamore Caesar, 'The Novel, 1945-1965', in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, ed. by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 205-17 (p. 208).

A further factor in the critical neglect of women's writing of the 1930s has been the assumption by more recent literary historians that female cultural production was stifled under Fascism, the repression of women's voices in the public sphere being equated with the repression of their literary voices. In Quel mondo dei guanti e delle stoffe (1987), Paola Blelloch refers to 'lo iato che esiste fra la produzione letteraria femminile dell'inizio del secolo e quella del periodo posteriore alla seconda guerra mondiale', and she argues that 'per almeno un ventennio, dal 1925 al 1945, si consolida lo stato di inferiorità delle donne e quindi delle scrittrici', a view reiterated by Luisa Quartermaine, who, in her essay 'Women's Viewpoint: Expectations and Experience in Twentieth-Century Italy' (1991), affirms that 'between 1925 and 1945 the state of women in Italy, including that of women writers, was consolidated into one of inferiority; creativity was a quality women were not allowed to possess'. 20 Feminist interpretations of the ventennio have also contributed to the omission of women from the thirties' canon, for the demise of the feminist movement under Fascism has been seen as precipitating a decline in women's literary output. As Alba della Fazia Amoia notes in Women on the Italian Literary Scene: A Panorama (1992), women's writing of the ventennio, which refrained from overt references to feminist issues, 'underwent significant improvement of style and structure – but not of content'.<sup>21</sup> This problem has been compounded by the reluctance of the new generation writers to embrace a feminist agenda, a subject I will discuss in chapter three, their continued resistance to feminist labels throughout their careers resulting in their early literary output being overlooked during the feminist literary revisions of the 1970s.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Paola Blelloch, Quel mondo dei guanti e delle stoffe: profili di scrittrici italiane del '900 (Verona: Essedue, 1987), p. 16.

Luisa Quartermaine, 'Women's Viewpoint: Expectations and Experience in Twentieth-Century Italy', in *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Helen Forsås-Scott (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 227-63 (pp. 235-36).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Alba della Fazia Amoia, Women on the Italian Literary Scene: A Panorama (New York: Whitson, 1992), p. 6.

While the work of turn-of-the-century female writers underwent a revival during the 1970s, with novels such as Sibilla Aleramo's Una donna (1906), Neera's Teresa (1886), and Marchesa Colombi's Un matrimonio in provincia (1885) republished and held up as proto-feminist works, the only work from the thirties to be rediscovered during this time was Masino's openly anti-Fascist Nascita e morte della massaia (1945), which was republished by Bompiani in 1970. It was not until the 1980s that interest in other writers of the period was rekindled: second editions of Cialente's Natalia (1930) and Drigo's Maria Zef (1936) both appeared in 1982, Banti's Il coraggio delle donne (1940) was republished in 1983 and Masino's Monte Ignoso (1931) in 1994. Much, however, still remains out of print, including Banti's Itinerario di Paolina (1937), Cialente's Marianna (1933) and Pamela o la bella estate (1935), de Céspedes's L'anima degli altri (1935), Concerto (1937), and Fuga (1940), Manzini's Boscovivo (1932), Un filo di brezza (1936), and Rive remote (1940), and Masino's Periferia (1933).

# The flowering of female narrative

This post-war revision of literary history has resulted in a distorted view of the thirties, with women's contribution to Italian literature suffering from neglect and the names of writers whose narrative oeuvre was concentrated in this period, such as Marise Ferro and Margherita Cattaneo, being erased from literary history. In the words of the critic Carlo Bo:

Ci troviamo di fronte a un mondo perduto, nel senso che non si trovano più i libri e perfino l'eco del loro lavoro subisce l'affronto del tempo. [...] Chi parla più di Gianna Manzini, di Anna Banti, di Paola Masino, di Marise Ferro? Anche in questi casi i loro libri sono irreperibili o sono stati mandati al macero e a poco a poco la stessa memoria si è fatta sempre più spenta.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, far from representing a hiatus in female literary production, the ventennio was a period in which women's writing flourished, with the 1930s witnessing a much-vaunted renaissance in female narrative. The interwar years saw women writing in greater numbers than ever before as the growth in female readership and developments in printing technology prompted publishing houses to explore new ways of catering to this expanding market, which resulted in a plethora of new opportunities for female writers and journalists. Newspapers, literary journals, and periodicals all proved fertile ground for women writers, offering them a wide readership and regular salary, while the new publishing houses proved eager to promote women's writing to a mass audience, fostering a climate of support which was conducive to the nurturing of female literary talent. While popular romance remained a mainstay of female literature, the conservative values which it enshrined reflecting the dominant ideology of the period, female literary output was by no means confined to populist genres, as attested by the critic Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, who made reference to 'decine e decine di volumi nei quali le penne femminili si sono cimentate in tutte le manifestazioni letterarie' in her review of female literary production for the 1933 Almanacco della donna italiana.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the decade was characterised by an explosion of female literary talent as the new generation of writers burst onto the literary scene. Displaying bold stylistic experimentation and innovative narrative strategies which revealed a strong modernist influence, they attracted both best-selling status and critical acclaim, enjoying the sustained attention of some of the leading critics of the period, who

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Carlo Bo, 'Presentazione', in *Scrittrici d'Italia: atti del convegno nazionale di studi (Rapallo, 14 maggio 1994)*, ed. by Francesco De Nicola and Pier Antonio Zannoni (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1995), pp. 5-6 (p. 5).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1933, pp. 131-64 (p. 131).

declared them responsible for reinvigorating the Italian novel. In the words of Giacomo Debenedetti, commenting on the writer who spearheaded this renaissance: 'La Manzini parve ribattezzare, nel senso sperato, la nostra prosa come Montale pochi anni prima aveva ribattezzato la nostra poesia.'25

#### Rewriting the thirties

The literary landscape of 1930s' Italy was therefore, in the words of Lucia Re, 'much less unified and male-dominated than it would appear from literary histories, where women's names are hardly mentioned'. <sup>26</sup> Recent literary studies have begun to correct this omission, among them Re's chapter on Futurism and Fascism in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy* (2000), which offers an overview of female literary production from 1914 to 1945; Elisabetta Mondello's *La nuova italiana: la donna nella stampa e nella cultura del Ventennio* (1987), a study of women's periodicals during the *ventennio*, which was one of the first to position female literary and journalistic output as resistant to the dominant models of womanhood promoted by the regime; and *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (1995), a collection of essays edited by Robin Pickering-Iazzi, which provides a portrait of female cultural production under Fascism and the ways in which female writers, artists, and journalists negotiated the dominant ideologies of the period, together with *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism* (1997), a close reading by Pickering-Iazzi of female autobiography, poetry, popular fiction, and realist narrative of the *ventennio*.

My thesis builds on this research while focusing on a more narrowly delineated time frame. In choosing to examine the 1930s as opposed to the *ventennio* as a whole, I have looked beyond Fascism to explore a period characterised by profound social and cultural change, from the sea change in the press and publishing industry to the flowering of a new mass culture, changes which, as the cultural historian Victoria De Grazia has observed in *How Fascism Ruled Women*, provoked confusion in young women about the female role as they benefited from greater freedom while at the same time facing pressure to conform to conservative models of domesticated femininity. In examining women's narrative within this social and cultural framework, I have sought to move away from the tendency to read

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> 'Galleria degli scrittori italiani: Gianna Manzini', La Fiera letteraria, 6 May 1956, pp. 3-7 (p. 6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Lucia Re, 'Futurism and Fascism, 1914-1945', in *A History Of Women's Writing in Italy*, ed. by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, pp. 190-204 (p. 192).

female literature of the period in a purely Fascist context, whether in terms of women's conformity to Fascist propaganda, as in the work of Alexander De Grand and Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, or their position as critics of the regime who produced a fiction of dissent, as in the work of Robin Pickering-Iazzi and Carole Gallucci.<sup>27</sup> While the political climate exerted a strong influence over women's lives during the 1930s, it did not dictate their literary production but was one of a number of external factors which shaped their writing, as I will discuss in chapters three and four, and in this respect, they resembled their male colleagues such as Alberto Moravia, Luigi Pirandello, and Italo Svevo, who distanced themselves from the historical context of Fascism in their work. In the words of Moravia, commenting on the impact of Fascism on Italian literature in *Domenica* in 1944: 'Sotto il Fascismo e nonostante il Fascismo [...] molto lavoro fu compiuto nel campo letterario.'<sup>28</sup>

In examining female literary production of the thirties, I have concentrated my research on narrative, although my discussion of the changing status of the woman writer and her relationship with the regime encompasses female literature as a whole. I have chosen to focus on narrative for it not only represented the dominant literary genre among female writers of the thirties but it was also regarded as the driving force behind the renaissance in women's literature, with the new generation writers praised for counteracting the so-called *crisi del libro*, which was thought to have beset the Italian novel in the wake of an influx of popular and foreign fiction. By the 1930s, the novel and short story had established themselves as the preferred literary genres among women, taking over from the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century penchant for poetry, their popularity driven largely by their economic potential at a time when writing was seen increasingly as a profession rather than a hobby. Indeed, the short story enjoyed a particular following among women writers of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> For examples of these two interpretations, see De Grand, 'Women under Italian Fascism'; Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna 'nera': consenso femminile e fascismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976); Robin Pickering-Iazzi, 'Unseduced Mothers: Configurations of a Different Female Subject Transgressing Fascistized Femininity', in *Feminine Feminists: Cultural Practices in Italy*, ed. by Giovanna Miceli-Jeffries (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 16-42; and Carole C. Gallucci, 'Alba De Céspedes's *There's No Turning Back*: Challenging the New Woman's Future', in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*, ed. by Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 200-19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Cited in Enrico Falqui, 'Lettere', Mercurio, October 1944, pp. 141-46 (p. 142).

For an overview of the work of male writers during the 1930s and their position relative to the regime, see Robert Dombroski, L'esistenza ubbidiente: letterati italiani sotto il fascismo (Naples: Guida, 1984); Giuseppe Farinelli, Il romanzo tra le due guerre (Brescia: La Scuola, 1980; Giuliano Manacorda, Momenti della letteratura italiana degli anni trenta (Foggia: Bastogi, 1979); and Lino Pertile, 'Fascism and Literature', in Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism, and Culture, ed. by David Forgacs (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), pp. 162-84.

period for not only did it represent a staple of the *terza pagina* in the press, thereby securing its author a regular income, but it was also a genre suited to the impressionistic style of many female writers of the period, offering a subtle and flexible vehicle for transcribing the fleeting moment and the rhythmic flux of life, a form 'più adatto ai tempi affrettati dell'età moderna', in the words of Anna Banti (Petrignani, p. 108).

My thesis is divided into two parts. The first part, which uses a methodological approach that is primarily historical and bibliographical, examines the position of women writers within Italian literary society of the thirties and the reaction of both the literary establishment and the regime to their work. In chapter one, I discuss the change in status of women's writing during the course of the thirties, analysing the shift in the popular perception of the female writer as she moved from being a 'scribbler' to a literary amazon. Examining the different factors which helped effect this change, from the growth in mass market periodicals to the launch of influential collane that were compiled on the basis of genre rather than gender, I plot the changing attitude towards women's writing and make reference to the key female narrative works of the decade. Chapter two examines the complex relationship between women writers and the regime, looking at the contradictory attitude of the regime to female literary production and the ways in which women writers supported or resisted the dominant Fascist myths in their work. Starting with an analysis of female repression under Fascism, I discuss how writers escaped the repressive legislation meted out to women in other areas of employment, the attempt by hardliners to limit female cultural production being thwarted by Mussolini's desire to establish Italy as a nation of cultural standing. In the second part of the chapter, I examine how the lack of a clear censorship programme allowed women to voice their dissent and to challenge prescriptive gender roles. I conclude with a discussion of the ambiguous response of the new generation writers to the regime and their reluctance to use their work as a vehicle for their anti-Fascist views.

The second part of the thesis, which draws on socio-historical research into women's lives during the *ventennio*, including De Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women* (1992) and Michela De Giorgio's *Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi* (1992), explores the response of women writers to the disparate images of femininity which prevailed during the thirties, together with the influence of modernism on their work as they searched for new literary forms that would express their female identity. In chapter three, I discuss the conflicting images of femininity which informed female behaviour during the thirties, from the

conservative models of womanhood promoted by the regime to the images of consumerism and sexuality emanating from the new commercial culture. Through a close reading of women's texts, I examine the depiction of these models in women's fiction, contrasting the conservative genre of romantic fiction with the work of the new generation, who refuted prescriptive definitions of femininity in their narrative. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the new models of subjectivity created by these writers, who sought to strip away the trappings of culturally constructed womanhood to create a female subject that accorded with their own experience. The final chapter explores the search for an authentic female literary voice, one which would express female identity but which was far removed from the confessional register. Starting with the search by women writers for literary parentage, I discuss how Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield came to fulfil the role of literary mother for the new generation, who drew inspiration from their impressionistic narrative style and exploration of the female condition which resisted adhesion to a feminist agenda. Through an overview of the translation market during the thirties, I examine the interest ignited in the twin poetics of modernism and realism by the increased access to foreign literature and the differing imperatives which underscored these two aesthetics as female writers turned to modernist forms to explore the female consciousness while their male peers were drawn to American realism by a political agenda, finding in its terse narratives, populated by solitary male figures, a utopian society freed from the constraints of Fascism.

# Chapter One From *scribacchine* to *amazzoni*: The Changing Status of Women's Writing in the 1930s

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The interwar years witnessed a significant change in the status of women's writing in Italy. The early years of the century had been marked by fears about increasing numbers of women embarking on a literary career and the resultant pericolo roseo which threatened to engulf the publishing industry. While a select number of writers attracted praise, including Matilde Serao, Sibilla Aleramo, and Grazia Deledda, women's writing as a whole was defined by gender and labelled letteratura femminile, with its attendant meaning of sentimental and unoriginal prose destined for the female market. This prejudice lingered well into the interwar period as the increasing tendency of women writers to embrace popular fiction and the autobiographical novel fuelled the belief that female literary production was formulaic and characterised by personal revelation. It was during the 1930s that this prejudice was overturned as a new generation of writers came to the fore and caused the literary establishment to reassess its view of women's writing. Well versed in European literature, these writers revealed the influence of the modernist aesthetic in their work, using narratives rich in introspection to explore the female consciousness and the impressionistic nature of lived experience, providing a breath of fresh air in the insular world of Italian letters, which had grown increasingly stale and provincial under the grip of Fascist rule. Publishing novels which achieved both critical acclaim and best-selling status, they were embraced by the reading public, fêted in literary award ceremonies, and attracted the sustained attention of prominent figures in the literary establishment, who announced a renaissance in Italian female narrative and affirmed its European credentials.

In this chapter, I will explore how this change in the status of women's writing came about. Starting with an overview of the popular perception of female literature in the prewar period, I will chart the emergence of mass female readership in turn-of-the-century Italy and the corresponding growth in female writers, and the hostility which this provoked in the male literary establishment. I will then go on to analyse the changing perception of women's literature over the course of the *ventennio*, discussing how the image of the

'scribbler' in the late 1920s was replaced by that of the literary amazon in the late 1930s, making reference to the key female narrative works which helped effect this change. In the second part of the chapter, I will discuss the burgeoning publishing industry during the interwar years, which laid the foundations for the resurgence of women's writing. Examining the emergence of the new publishing houses of Mondadori and Bompiani, I will discuss how the developments in the publishing industry worked to the advantage of women, from the increased use of marketing to the establishment of literary awards, and I will conclude with an examination of the ways in which the press catered for the female reading public, from a wave of new women's periodicals to the refashioning of newspapers to attract a wider female readership.

#### 1.2 THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S WRITING PRIOR TO 1930

#### 1.2.1 The pre-war period and the *pericolo roseo*

The period which spanned 1880 to the First World War witnessed a sharp rise in the number of female writers as those women who had benefited from the opening up of secondary and university education came of age and the rapid industrialisation of northern Italy resulted in women entering the workforce in greater numbers. Influenced by the movements for social reform, a new generation of female writers came to the fore, who sought to portray the changing role of women in their work. They included Marchesa Colombi, the pen-name of Maria Antonietta Torriani, whose novel *In risaia* (1885) depicted a young woman's failure to find a husband due to the disfiguring disease which she contracted in the rice fields of the Po Valley; Matilde Serao, one of the most respected writers and journalists of her day, who founded and edited the Neapolitan newspaper *Il Giorno*, and penned critically acclaimed novels such as *Il paese di Cuccagna* (1891), which chonicled the social ills of Neapolitan life; and Sibilla Aleramo, whose autobiographical novel *Una donna* (1906) brought its author great notoriety through its depiction of a woman abandoning her husband and young son in her quest for independence and self-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Women were first admitted to university in Italy in 1874 and secondary education was extended to women in 1883. Although the Casati Law of 1859 had mandated two years of elementary education for girls, the law was not strictly enforced and, it was not until 1883, with the opening of grammar schools and technical colleges to both sexes, that female illiteracy levels began to decline significantly. For an overview of the expansion of female education in post-Unification Italy, see Judith Jeffrey Howard, 'Patriot Mothers in the Post-Risorgimento: Women after the Italian Revolution', in *Women, War, and Revolution*, ed. by Carol R. Berkin and Clara M. Lovett (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), pp. 237-58 (pp. 241-44).

definition. Breaking free from the traditional female sphere of children's fiction, pedagogical works, and lyric poetry, these women redrew the parameters of women's writing, analysing female experience and social reality with intellectual rigour and making inroads into what had been regarded as male territory.<sup>2</sup>

The example of writers such as Serao, who could earn up to 600 lire a month from her work, inspired many young women to seek their fortune with their pen.<sup>3</sup> Compared with teaching, where the average annual wage for a female school teacher at the turn of the century was just 1350 lire, writing seemed a more lucrative career, even though the reality was very different for most. 'In Italia, una buona sarta guadagna sempre più di una buona scrittrice affaticandosi meno', as Jolanda, the editor of the women's magazine Cordelia, cautioned her readers.<sup>4</sup> The perceived drab provincialism of a teaching career also had little to recommend it when compared with the glamorous lifestyle associated with fictionwriting, as authors such as Contessa Lara fuelled the myth of celebrity by dramatising their eventful lives in their fiction, and the impassioned cry of the teenage protagonist in Barbara Allason's Quando non si sogna più (1920), 'io voglio diventare una scrittrice, [...] neanche un istante penserò a insegnare, [...] insegnare vuol dire disseccarsi, spremersi', was symptomatic of a period in which the pen represented 'il preferito compagno spirituale della donna', in the words of Jolanda (Il libro delle signore, p. 521). Eager to seek their name in print, and encouraged in their endeavours by the new fashion for literary competitions in the press, the ranks of women writers swelled. 'Le donne che scrivono, da un piccolo, modesto gruppo, sono in pochi anni diventate legione', declared Jolanda (Il libro delle signore, p. 521), while the critic Renato Serra remarked in 1914: 'Chi è che

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For an overview of the work of women writers during this period, see With a Pen in Her Hand: Women and Writing in Italy in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond, ed. by Verina R. Jones and Anna Laura Lepschy (Leeds: Society for Italian Studies, 2000); Lucienne Kroha, The Woman Writer in Late-Nineteenth-Century Italy; A History of Women's Writing in Italy, ed. by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood; and Sharon Wood, Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994 (London: Athlone Press, 1995).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In her biography of the Neapolitan writer, *Matilde Serao* (Turin: UTET, 1965), Anna Banti describes how, by 1882, Serao could count on 600 lire a month from her fiction and journalism (p. 34).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Jolanda, Eva Regina. Il libro delle signore: consigli e norme di vita femminile contemporanea (Milan: Amaldo De Mohr, 1907), p. 522.

For details of female salaries in the teaching profession, see Michela De Giorgio, Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi: modelli culturali e comportamenti sociali (Rome: Laterza, 1992), pp. 465-68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Barbara Allason, Quando non si sogna più (Milan: Sonzogno, 1920), pp. 11-12.

Contessa Lara, the pseudonym of Evelina Cattermole Mancini, was a dramatic personality in the latenineteenth-century literary world. Having dramatised the duel between her husband and her lover in L'innamorata (1892), she in turn was shot dead by the young lover she had threatened to abandon.

scrive? [...] L'esercizio della penna – si può dire che appartenga oramai in proprio alle donne.'6

The sharp rise in the number of women writers was accompanied by a corresponding growth in female readership, as higher literacy levels, together with increased leisure time, resulted in a growing female market for fiction. With female literacy levels increasing steadily in post-Unification Italy, from nineteen per cent in 1861 to fifty-eight per cent in 1911, and working hours having become more regulated due to the mechanisation of work practices, greater numbers of women from the lower classes joined the reading public and a new thirst developed for fiction which combined escapism with the new reality of women's lives. Seeking to capitalise on this lucrative market, the publishing industry began to focus increasingly on letteratura amena for a female readership and it pandered to modern tastes by creating series devoted to popular and romantic fiction. This in turn led to aspiring writers being attracted to popular fiction due to the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for the sentimental romances of Daisy di Carpenetto and the schoolgirl novels of Jolanda, and the subsequent financial security which it conferred. In the wake of this tide of popular female fiction, the appellation letteratura femminile took hold, which not only denoted fiction destined for a female audience but implied a genre of clichéd, sentimental prose. The term femminile became widely associated with a populist, formulaic style, which displayed weakness of form and excessive emotion, and, as such, it stood in opposition to the Crocean concept of the virile, which denoted creative power and an intellectual style.

The increasing number of women on the literary scene was accompanied by growing consternation among the male literary establishment, who viewed the ranks of female writers with a mixture of fear and disdain. Although the actual percentage of female writers remained low, the *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno* recording that out of a total of 10,532 literary works completed in the years 1902 to 1909, only five per cent were by women (De Giorgio, p. 395), their strong presence was a cause for concern both in terms of the force they represented and the quality of their work, which was considered to be in indirect proportion to its perceived high volume. 'C'è da impensiersi, come fanno taluni, dell'invadente concorrenza della donna nella letteratura narrativa?' asked Luigi Capuana, one of Italy's most influential critics, about the phenomenon of *letteratura femminile* in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Renato Serra, 'Le donne', in *Le Lettere* (Rome: La Voce, 1920), pp. 222-24 (p. 222).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Statistics relating to female literacy in post-Unification Italy can be found in Howard, 'Patriot Mothers in the Post-Risorgimento', p. 241, and De Giorgio, p. 412.

Nuova Antologia of 1 January 1907. While concluding that the actual number of women did not pose a threat, Capuana was nonetheless disparaging about their literary output, basing his argument on the tenet that women did not possess the intellect to produce original work. 'Scrittrici di romanzi [...] esistono unicamente perché ci sono stati gli intelletti mascolini che hanno aperto la via', he stated. 'Nessuna donna al mondo ha mai fatto quel che essi hanno fatto; l'intelletto immaginativo è mascolino.'8 This view was echoed by Luciano Zùccoli, writing in the Corriere della Sera in March 1911, who warned about the dangers of women taking over the publishing industry, which, in the now well-known epithet, he referred to as the pericolo roseo. Citing some of the most popular novelists of the period, such as Flavia Steno and Térésah, he argued that women's literary output was inherently inferior to that of their male peers and the lack of substance in their work resulted from their inexperience of the world.

This belief that women were incapable of creative thought was symptomatic of a period which had witnessed a proliferation of sociological and anthropological treatises on gender difference. Foremost among the theorists who held sway were Paul Julius Moebius, whose Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes (1898) was translated into Italian in 1904 as L'inferiorità mentale della donna, and Otto Weininger, whose Geschlect und Charakter (1903) was published as Sesso e carattere in 1912, both men upholding the Aristotelian precept that men were the creators and women the created. 'Il creare, l'inventare nuovi metodi riesce impossibile alla donna', Moebius asserted, while Weininger dismissed women's creative achievements out of hand. 'There is not a single woman in the history of thought [...] who can be truthfully compared with men of fifth or sixth-rate genius', he declared, and he went on to define genius strictly in terms of the male: 'A female genius is a contradiction in terms, for genius is simply intensified, perfectly developed, universally conscious maleness.'9 Women who strayed from a fixed gendered identity and pursued an intellectual path were considered an anomaly and branded 'sexually intermediate forms' (p. 65). Weininger illustrated his theory using the examples of George

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Luigi Capuana's essay has been republished as *Letteratura femminile*, ed. by Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri (Catania: CUECM, 1988), pp. 19 and 20-21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Paul Julius Moebius, *L'inferiorità mentale della donna*, trans. by Ugo Cerletti (Turin: Bocca, 1924), p. 17.

Otto Weininger, Sex and Character, authorised anonymous translation from the 6<sup>th</sup> German edn (London: Heinemann, 1910), pp. 69 and 189.

Sand and George Eliot, whose masculine appearance and mannerisms precluded 'all womanly grace' (p. 67).

The influence of social theorists such as Weininger and Moebius was pervasive in literary criticism of the period. Not only was women's writing deemed intuitive rather than intellectual but work which defied these stereotypes was considered masculine in style and women who displayed such qualities were labelled virile, a term which denoted creative power but brought their femininity into question. The praise that critically acclaimed writers such as Matilde Serao and Ada Negri received thus came at the expense of their gender for their literary talent was considered a product of their masculine intellect and, as such, was incompatible with a feminine nature. Serao was described as 'quasi virile' by Capuana, while Verga branded her a hermaphrodite, his admiration for her work being at odds with his negative view of women writers as a whole. 'Debbo confessarvelo, non abbia molta fede nelle donne scrittrici, o meglio nel loro valore artistico', he wrote in a letter to Paola Greppi in 1890, 'la Serao eccettuata perch'è ermafrodita.' (cited in Kroha, p. 4) Even Benedetto Croce, who was perhaps the most sympathetic critic to women's literature during this period, reverted to gender stereotyping in his profile of the poet Ada Negri. Describing the seeming haste with which Negri produced her work and her lack of attention to the final editing process, in an essay on the author dating from 1906, he compared the creation of a literary work to the birth of a child, and claimed that women needed to give the same attention to literary production as they did to reproduction:

Sembra che le donne, valenti a svolgere in sè per nove mesi un germe di vita, a partorirlo travagliosamente, ad allevarlo con un'intelligente pazienza [...] siano di solito incapaci di regolari gestazioni poetiche: i loro parti artistici sono quasi sempre prematuri: anzi, alla concezione segue istantanea la *délivrance* e il neonato è poi gettato sulla strada, privo di tutti quegli aiuti di cui avrebbe bisogno. (*La letteratura della nuova Italia*, p. 352)

The prejudice faced by the woman writer in turn-of-the-century Italy was thus considerable. Perceived as a usurper in the male preserve of literature, she was deemed part of an invading force which was overrunning the publishing industry and which posed a threat to the established male order. Defined exclusively by her gender, her work was judged according to predetermined characteristics rather than on its literary merit, and she was faced with a stark choice: either to prove her worth as an honorary man, thereby earning herself the label *virile*, or risk being relegated to the subculture of popular romantic fiction and having her work dismissed as *letteratura femminile*.

#### 1.2.2 The post-war period and the *scribacchine*

In the years following the First World War, the status of women's writing fared little better. As patterns of female sexual behaviour began to change in the aftermath of the war, the sentimental style of pre-war women's fiction became charged with a new eroticism in the manner of the popular novelist Guido Da Verona. Between 1914 and 1922, Da Verona was the single most widely read author in Italy and the fast-paced erotic style he used in his best-selling Mimì Bluette, fiore del mio giardino (1916) and Sciogli la treccia, Maria Maddalena (1920) found favour among a wide number of female writers, including Carola Prosperi, Mura, and Amalia Guglielminetti, who in turn found a receptive audience among a generation of post-war women, who looked to novels such as Prosperi's Amore amore (1920) and Guglielminetti's Quand'avevo un amante (1919) for escapism and the representation of modern sexuality.<sup>10</sup> With the growth in popularity of the genre came further stigmatisation of women's writing, however, as female literature came to be associated with sexually charged fiction, as can be seen in a review of La casa venduta (1930) by Bianca De Maj, who was praised for distancing herself from the erotic themes which underpinned women's fiction: 'Mentre la letteratura femminile, per il consueto, va alla ricerca di temi erotici e passionali, piacciono alla De Maj le umili tragedie della vita quotidiana.'11

Not only was women's writing deemed immoral but it continued to attract charges of plagiarism and lack of literary worth. 'La donna scrittrice [...] dimostra una facilità a tutta prova a utilizzare all'infinito i residui della peggiore letteratura maschile', remarked Pietro Pancrazi in his 1918 study of contemporary writers, and he went on to declare: 'È difficile immaginare, in letteratura, una cosa più mortificante delle scritture delle donne contemporanee.' Luigi Tonelli was equally disparaging, claiming that the majority of women writers did nothing more than imitate their male colleagues: 'Imitano, ricalcano le orme segnate dagli uomini, ripetono le intuizioni di questi, magari diluendole e guastandole.' Even the newly launched women's periodicals, which showed considerable

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For an examination of Da Verona's work, see *I best seller del ventennio: il regime e il libro di massa*, ed. by Gigliola De Donato and Vanna Gazzola Stacchini (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991), pp. 77-82; and Michele Giocondi, *Lettori in camicia nera: narrativa di successo nell'Italia fascista* (Messina: D'Anna, 1978), pp. 53-69.

<sup>11</sup> E. Rho, 'Bianca De Maj: La casa venduta', Leonardo, 1930, pp. 523-24 (p. 523).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Pietro Pancrazi, 'Attrattiva di Annie Vivanti', in *Scrittori d'oggi* (Bari: Laterza, repr. 1946), pp. 8-13 (pp. 9 and 8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Luigi Tonelli, 'Rassegna letteraria', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1922, pp. 239-55 (p. 239).

support for female cultural production, as I will discuss later in the chapter, retained a bleak view of female fiction in the early 1920s. Having launched a competition for a short story to encourage the development of new female literary talent, the 1923 *Almanacco della donna italiana* announced that it would not be awarding any prizes as none of the manuscripts were worthy of publication. 'I più erano indizio di una leggerezza e di un'incoscienza imperdonabile, pochi mostravano qualche segno di temperamento artistico', remarked its editor, Silvia Bemporad, with some regret.<sup>14</sup>

This typecasting of women's literature was exacerbated during the late 1920s by the growing tendency in women's writing towards personal confession. Influenced by autobiographical works, such as Ada Negri's Stella mattutina (1921) and Sibilla Aleramo's Una donna (1906), which was republished in 1919 and 1921, female writers adopted firstperson narratives to describe the reality of women's lives from their own experience. By the late 1920s, this practice was so widespread that many critics regarded autobiography as endemic in women's writing, the critic Camillo Pellizzi referring to 'il bacillo dell'autobiografia' being rife among female writers. 15 Pellizzi's view that women's writing was riddled with excessive emotion and self-revelation was echoed by his contemporaries. Female novelists were accused of letting emotion dictate their work. 'Gran prevenzioni contro la letteratura femminile', warned Giannino Zanelli in his article on the state of women's literature in 1930, and he continued: 'La più seria accusa è che le donne sanno difficilmente sciogliersi dagli schemi autobiografici, raccontano cioè come sentono, come vivono, spesso impotenti a creare quel distacco fra materia e forma che permette la poesia.'16 Corrado Pavolini, writing in L'Italia che scrive in 1925, bemoaned the fact that women's writing tended towards unstructured autobiography, while Mario Gastaldi claimed that women were rarely concerned with method in their work. 'La premessa necessaria per l'opera d'arte [...] sono la ricerca e la disciplina, cioè il metodo. Raramente quest'ultima se lo impongono le donne', he affirmed in his study of contemporary female writers, Donne luce d'Italia (1930).17

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Silvia Bemporad, 'Prefazione', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1923, pp. V-VII (p. VII).

<sup>15</sup> Camillo Pellizzi, Le lettere italiane del nostro secolo (Milan: Libreria d'Italia, 1929), p. 77.

For a discussion of the autobiographical form in women's writing of the *ventennio*, see chapter two in Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 57-88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Giannino Zanelli, 'Libri di donne: 1930', Almanacco di Cordelia, 1931, pp. 56-63 (p. 56).

<sup>17</sup> Mario Gastaldi, Donne luce d'Italia (Pistoia: Grazzini, 1930), p. 87.

As the Fascist regime tightened its grip during the mid-1920s, the debate about women's writing became fuelled with anti-emancipationist rhetoric, which recast femininity in terms of maternity and domesticity. Latent prejudice about gender and creative ability came to the fore once again and this was combined with a new impetus to assign clearly defined gendered characteristics to both sexes. Intellect and logic were deemed the property of the male, encompassed in the term virile, and female writers who displayed such traits in their work received cautious praise for the quality of their work but, at the same time, muted condemnation for their lack of femininity. At the other extreme, writers who displayed intuition and sensitivity were applauded for being squisitamente femminile but the quality of their work was deemed lesser for its implied lack of originality and excessive display of emotion. In the former category was Grazia Deledda, 'la scrittrice "virile" per eccellenza', in the words of Silvio Pellegrino, due to 'la mancanza [...] in lei, di quegli sfoghi di gracile sentimentalismo e romanticheggiamento'; and Margherita Sarfatti, who wrote, according to Goffredo Bellonci, 'con maschio vigor di stile'. <sup>18</sup> In the latter category were Daisy di Carpenetto, hailed as 'squisitamente femminile' by Luigi Tonelli, and Sibilla Aleramo, who was 'tutta donna', in the words of Corrado Pavolini.<sup>19</sup> Women writers thus found themselves caught in a double bind: either applauded for their literary ability, with its connotations of masculinity, or praised for their feminine style, which implied a lesser literary achievement; they could not be both writers and women.

Not only was women's literary style held up to close scrutiny but their very presence on the literary stage was called into question as increasing pressure was placed on them to fulfil their maternal and domestic duties. This repressive attitude had already surfaced at the start of the decade when Luigi Tonelli called for women to abandon their literary pretensions and return to the home. 'La donna va incoraggiata a vivere bene, non a fare della letteratura', he stated in the 1922 *Almanacco della donna italiana*. 'Va aiutata ad essere buona sposa ed ottima madre, non a diventare una vuota ed inutile "notorietà" (p. 255). Giuseppe Ravegnani, writing in 1930, appealed for a similar return to gender-specific roles, dismissing the modern habit among female writers to 'infilare i pantaloni' and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Silvio Pellegrino, *Appunti di storia letteraria e civile italiana* (Turin: Gambino, 1939), pp. 83 and 88. Goffredo Bellonci, 'Margherita Sarfatti: *Il Palazzone*', *La Fiera letteraria*, 23 June 1929, p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Luigi Tonelli, 'Profili: Daisy di Carpenetto', *L'Italia che scrive*, 1931, pp. 265-66 (p. 265). Corrado Pavolini, 'Profili: Sibilla Aleramo', *L'Italia che scrive*, 1925, pp. 133-34 (p. 133).

advocating a return to old-fashioned feminine qualities: 'La donna, e specialmente quella pròdiga d'inchiostro, la desidereremmo all'antica, magari romantica, casalinga.'20

However, it was with the publication of Scrittrici e scribacchine d'oggi (1930) by the Fascist journalist Stanis Ruinas that this repressive rhetoric reached its apotheosis. The pseudonym of Giovanni Antonio De Rosas, Ruinas was an ardent Fascist who subscribed to the theory of biological determinism, whereby women were inherently inferior to men and incapable of original thought, the capacity to reproduce representing the dominant component in their psychological make-up. Purporting to be a study of contemporary women's writing in Italy, Ruinas's book was little more than a diatribe against the legions of female 'scribblers', whom he believed had overrun the publishing industry. Claiming that of the one thousand women who were active in the literary sphere only fifty were worthy of the label scrittrice, he dismissed the rest as scribacchine and called for them to be sent out into the countryside to procreate: 'Io sarei dell'opinione di irreggimentare queste donne scribacchine [...] e di mandarle nelle regioni meno popolate perchè diano incremento alla demografia.'21 Although extreme, the opinions which Ruinas expressed in the book reflected the period. Just as Pellizzi had described the growing trend for female autobiography as a bacillus, so Ruinas referred to the impulse for women to write as 'una malattia sociale che bisogna arginare' (p. 28), and he subscribed to the belief in women's innate inferiority in literature, claiming that their propensity to fill their work with emotion precluded them from greatness:

Le nostre scrittrici [...] non conoscono che la tempesta dei sensi, delle umane passioni. [...] Di qui la assoluta inferiorità delle grandi scrittrici – Giorgio Sand, Selma Lagerlöf, Grazia Deledda – di fronte ai grandi scrittori. (pp. 98-99)

Reserving his praise for those writers whom he believed fulfilled the role of the ideal woman, he held up Deledda as 'donna all'antica, tradizionalmente italiana' (p. 41), and portrayed Negri as the epitome of the new Italian woman: 'Ella ha interpretato, con la sua arte [...] la volontà di amare e di vivere nella gioia e nell'umiltà.' (p. 82) In Ruinas's eyes, the key quality of the female writer was her femininity rather than her literary prowess and those writers who allowed their femininity to be subsumed by their intellect were deemed to be of indeterminate gender. 'Sono [...] ermafrodite perchè sono – almeno a giudicare dal

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Giuseppe Ravegnani, 'La Vivanti, l'Aleramo, e la letteratura femminile', in *I contemporanei: dal tramonto dell'Ottocento all'alba del Novecento* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1930), pp. 55-66 (pp. 55-56).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Stanis Ruinas, Scrittrici e scribacchine d'oggi (Rome: Accademia d'Italia, 1930), p. 271.

loro viso e dalle loro abitudini – per metà femmine e per metà maschi', he declared, in language which echoed that of Weininger (p. 254).

Ruinas's work is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, it testifies to the number of women who were active in the literary sphere: naming a total of 566 female writers, Ruinas claimed that the list 'potrebbe arrivare a mille nomi', exaggerating the number in order to underline his thesis that the publishing industry was in danger of being overrun by women. Secondly, the book serves as a gauge of the hostility which existed towards women's writing at the end of the twenties, a hostility born from the perceived threat to male livelihoods as well as from deep-rooted prejudice about women's writing, fuelled by the theories of biological determinism which held sway among Fascist thinkers. This hostility underscored all aspects of the literary process, from the difficulties experienced by female writers in finding a publisher for their work to the bias against women's writing among the literary establishment. 'Vi è una diffidenza istintiva per il libro femminile nuovo', observed the critic Mercede Mùndula, a view echoed by the novelist Virginia Piatti Tango, who warned aspiring writers that 'un libro nuovo di donna ha ora tutte le probabilità di venire esaminato con sfiducia e di esser svalorizzato a priori'.22 Evidence of such prejudice was widespread. In his review of Fausta Cialente's debut novel Natalia (1930), the critic Giovanni Titta Rosa openly admitted his reluctance to read the work of a young female author: 'Dirò che ho cominciato a leggere Natalia con qualche diffidenza. E se devo essere proprio sincero, anche perché scritto da una donna.<sup>23</sup>

It was not only contemporary women's writing that was treated with disdain but the fledgling female literary tradition established at the turn of the century was also disputed. Pietro Pancrazi, writing in 1918, declared that established writers, such as Serao and Deledda, had now lost their touch: 'La Serao, dopo la sua bella stagione, non scrive più che per vendere, e la Deledda persiste a moltiplicare la tristezza sua e della sua Sardegna.' (Scrittori d'oggi, p. 8) Alfredo Panzini went even further, claiming that Italian women's literature had only produced a few writers 'di brevi prose, o meglio ancora di scritti d'impressione e di lievi pastelli', and he made no mention of the legacy of Deledda,

Mercede Mùndula, 'Le donne e la critica', L'Italia che scrive, 1926, pp. 94-95 (p. 94).
Virginia Piatti Tango, 'Sermone a una donna che scrive', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1930, pp. 41-47 (p. 43).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Giovanni Titta Rosa, 'Natalia', L'Italia letteraria, 16 February 1930, p. 1.

Aleramo, or Serao.<sup>24</sup> This was echoed by Giuseppe Ravegnani, who called into question the existence of a female literary tradition in Italy, establishing his criteria as 'qualcosa di vivo, di nutrito, di spontaneo che abbia sicure e chiare rispondenze con i climi nostri letterari'. He concluded that, with the exception of five or six writers, such a tradition did not exist and that women's writing was confined to the fringes of the male tradition, which it sought to emulate: 'Non crediamo esista una vera e propria letteratura femminile. Quella che c'è, per la maggior parte vive e si nutre sui margini d'un'altra più grande.' (*I contemporanei*, p. 55)

By the end of the 1920s, Italian women's writing was widely considered to be in a state of terminal decline. The female literary heritage dating back to the turn of the century had all but been forgotten, with the novels of Neera and Marchesa Colombi falling out of print and interest in Matilde Serao waning shortly after her death in 1927.<sup>25</sup> The well-known polemicists of the turn-of-the-century, such as Anna Franchi, had ceased their political campaigning and were keeping a low profile, while Grazia Deledda was at the end of her literary career and seemingly without successors. Even Sibilla Aleramo found herself confined to a position of marginalisation, as Elisabetta Mondello has shown.<sup>26</sup> Criticised for the excessive emotion displayed in her poetry, Stanis Ruinas declaring her verse to be nothing more than 'grida di passione violenta, quasi morbosa e animalesca' (*Scrittrici e scribacchine*, p. 137), she was deemed an author of scant literary merit and her seminal work *Una donna* was dismissed as 'una miseria morale che avuto il coraggio di manifestarsi in un romanzo che è poi una autobiografia'.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the decade, the literary heroines of the turn of the century had fallen victim to what Sharon Wood refers to

Alfredo Panzini, 'Letteratura al femminile', La Fiera letteraria, 18 April 1929 (cited in Mariarosaria Olivieri, Tra libertà e solitudine. Saggi su letteratura e giornalismo femminile: Matilde Serao, Sibilla Aleramo, Clotilde Marghieri (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1991), p. 12).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> From being one of the most widely read female writers at the turn of the century, Serao's popularity began to wane during the 1920s when her prose style was deemed old-fashioned. 'La verità è che non si trova in lei quella cerebrale sottigliezza che è il motivo fondamentale su cui si deve aggirare oggi ogni racconto che abbia l'ambizione di riprodurre l'anima moderna', remarked G. S. Gargàno in the 1924 *Almanacco della donna italiana* (p. 295). Within a few years of her death, she had been erased almost completely from public memory, with the 1930s representing, in the words of Banti, 'un periodo di sdegnoso oblio della scrittrice' (*Matilde Serao*, p. 88). It was only in 1944, with the publication of an anthology of her writing by Garzanti, that interest in Serao's work was rekindled.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Elisabetta Mondello, 'L'immagine di Sibilla nella stampa femminile dei primi decenni del Novecento', in *Svelamento. Sibilla Aleramo: una biografia intellettuale*, ed. by Annarita Buttafuoco and Marina Zancan (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988), pp. 260-71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Giuseppe Lipparini, 'Rassegna letteraria', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1920, pp. 167-77 (p. 171).

as 'the process of disremembering', with their achievements belittled or ignored (*Italian Women's Writing*, p. 41). For those writers at the start of their career, the prospects looked equally bleak. As Virginia Piatti Tango noted in the 1930 *Almanacco della donna italiana*: 'Il vento spira contro le donne che scrivono e pensano.' (p. 42) Criticised on one hand for failing to emulate the male literary style and display sufficient method in their work, while castigated on the other for their lack of femininity and for neglecting their maternal duty, women writers at the beginning of the 1930s found themselves in an impossible situation. Defined exclusively by their gender, they were labelled *scribacchine* and their work was dismissed as *letteratura femminile*, which appealed to an exclusively female readership.

It was during the course of the 1930s that this position of marginalisation was to change. At a time when repressive Fascist policies towards women had reached their height and the female intellectual was viewed as 'l'espressione tipica della mezzacultura e della mediocrità spirituale', in the words of the *Critica fascista*, women's writing enjoyed an unprecedented increase in status as a new generation of writers came to the fore, who were hailed for instigating a renaissance in female narrative.<sup>28</sup> In the following section, I will examine the key narrative works published by these writers between 1928 and 1941, which were applauded for their linguistic experimentation and psychological insight, and which not only conferred public and critical success on their authors but were instrumental in raising the status and profile of women's writing as a whole.

#### 1.3 THE KEY FEMALE NOVELS OF THE 1930s

## 1.3.1 Tempo innamorato

The first sign of a new vein in women's narrative came in 1928 with the publication of Gianna Manzini's *Tempo innamorato*. A recent graduate from the University of Florence, where she had studied literature under Giuseppe De Robertis, Manzini had been introduced by De Robertis to *prosa d'arte*, a highly lyrical style of refined prose in line with Croce's concept of autonomous art, which had emerged in the literary journal *La Voce* (1908-1916) and was later developed in *La Ronda* (1919-1923) and *Novecento* (1926-1929), and it was this fragmentary poetic style which moulded the young writer, together with her keen

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> "Argo", 'Compiti della donna', *Critica fascista*, 15 July 1933 (repr. in *Sposa e madre esemplare: ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo*, ed. by Piero Meldini (Rimini: Guaraldi, 1975), pp. 212-17 (p. 215)).

interest in the impressionistic style of Proust. Manzini's first novel displayed a unique narrative style, which combined melodic lyricism with an intellectual analysis of the human psyche, and revealed influences of *prosa d'arte* as well as the visual fragmentism of Proust in its portrayal of reality as a synthesis of images and sensations. However, in contrast to exponents of *prosa d'arte*, Manzini did not allow the search for pure linguistic expression to become an end in itself, nor did she present reality as a series of isolated fragmentary impressions but rather she sought to represent its complex stratal nature by superimposing layers of images and sensations upon one another so that the interconnection of images and ideas dominated her narrative rather than a sense of fragmentation. As she later remarked in an interview with Lia Fava Guzzetta:

La mia è stata essenzialmente una ricerca di ritmo: specialmente all'inizio si è trattato di esprimere un accordo tra le cose, la realtà ed un mio interiore movimento; sempre più però per me lo stesso ritmo si è venuto definendo come un'idea di architettura. Questo è più che il frammento.<sup>29</sup>

In the novel, Manzini abandons the linear narrative mode, whose structure is determined by chronologically ordered events, and adopts the lyric mode, described by the critic Joanna Russ as the principle of construction in which images and memories are organised around an unspoken thematic or emotional centre.<sup>30</sup> In a lyrical prose rich in metaphor and allusion, Manzini moves backwards and forwards in time, weaving together impressions and interior monologue to create a narrative in which disparate elements are connected by association rather than by chronology. In this way, she is able to capture the true nature of the visible and invisible world with their network of hidden relationships and reveal the close correlation between the rhythms of nature and those of the body, rhythms which are echoed in the rhythmic quality of her prose. In the novel, the female protagonists are seen to become one with nature, their characters represented by the changing seasons and the weather which accompanies them. The unattractive Clementina feels affinity with the foggy days of winter, 'riconosceva sue [...] le giornate livide e nebbiose, piene di compatimento', and the barrenness of the season mirrors her own infertility.<sup>31</sup> The fecund Rita, by contrast, is described by her husband as one of those people who can halt time,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Cited in Lia Fava Guzzetta, Gianna Manzini (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Joanna Russ, 'What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write', in *Images of Women in Fiction:* Feminist Perspectives, ed. by Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), pp. 3-20 (p. 12).

<sup>31</sup> Gianna Manzini, Tempo innamorato (Milan: Corbaccio, 1928), p. 103.

who are 'fatte d'una sola stagione', and in a play on the word *tempo*, Manzini shows how Rita has bewitched both time and the weather so that she is forever youthful, her beauty and vitality symbolising the heat of a summer's day: 'In una luce di fecondità, ricca, era il cuore caldo della giornata.' (p. 24)

The publication of *Tempo innamorato* excited immediate critical interest and caused Manzini to be hailed as an important new voice in Italian narrative. 'Poche personalità artistiche si rivelano fin dalle prime righe come Gianna Manzini', observed Mercede Mùndula, while Emilio Cecchi noted: 'Dai primi capitoli si avverte, in questo romanzo, una capacità davvero poetica d'istituire personaggi.' With her focus not only on lyricism but also on the sensitive portrayal of the human psyche, Manzini was regarded as 'un filo d'aria' in the rarified atmosphere of Italian literature, which had grown stale through lack of innovation. In the words of Montale:

Ella ha fatto già molto e molto ancora può fare per il romanzo italiano abbandonato più che a narratori troppo intelligenti, a scrittori e scrittrici che [...] tentano in tutti i modi di far passare come nuova [...] una vecchia merce polverosa e tarmolita.<sup>33</sup>

Manzini confirmed her reputation with *Incontro col falco* (1929) and *Boscovivo* (1932), volumes of short fiction which placed her firmly at the forefront of modern Italian narrative. 'Libri come questo appartengono, più che alla personale storia di una autore, a quella di tutta una letteratura in faticoso progresso', declared Raffaello Franchi.<sup>34</sup>

In her creation of a narrative style which privileged both linguistic expression and psychological insight, Manzini revealed her kinship with her fellow *Solariani*, the group of writers and critics who congregated around the Florentine review *Solaria*, whose number included Eugenio Montale, Raffaello Franchi, and Bonaventura Tecchi. Rejecting the prevailing focus on pure linguistic expression, the *Solariani* sought a balance between form and content and looked to the work of modernist writers, such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, for an innovative literary style that would reflect the modern consciousness. Manzini was one of the first exponents of this new narrative style and, in her work, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Mercede Mùndula, 'Gianna Manzini: *Tempo innamorato'*, *L'Italia che scrive*, 1929, pp. 150-51 (p. 150).

Emilio Cecchi, 'Gianna Manzini: Tempo innamorato', Pègaso, January 1929, pp. 116-17 (p. 116).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Eugenio Montale, 'Gianna Manzini: Tempo innamorato', La Fiera letteraria, 5 August 1928, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Gianna Manzini: Incontro col falco', L'Italia letteraria, 10 February 1929, p. 7.

Solariani saw the first full expression of their literary aims and a resolution to the ongoing debate between the so-called *calligrafi* and *contenutisti*. In the words of Raffaello Franchi:

Basterebbe un po' d'attenzione per accorgersi di come una donna, una scrittrice, abbia risolto in pieno con ardore e persuasione d'arte la polemica uggiosa. [...] Nessuno è più calligrafo, in senso buono, ossia più artista di G. Manzini; nessuno più di lei, è capace di trascendere il gusto estremo della parola, l'assurdità felice dell'immagine [...] in concretezza di umanità e commozione.<sup>35</sup>

It was not only Manzini's success at reconciling two opposing literary forces which elicited praise but also her ability to combine a sharp intelligence with keen emotional insight. 'Veramente non so di un [...] primo libro che associ con un fervore tanto intransigente le ragioni del cuore con quello dell'intelletto', as Montale remarked of Tempo innamorato (La Fiera letteraria, 5 August 1928, p. 2). It was this combination of intelligence and sensitivity which was to have a profound effect on the way in which women's writing was regarded in Italy. Hailed by Giansiro Ferrata as 'la donna più intelligente e più sensibile che in Italia abbia mai preso la penna', Manzini challenged the commonplace belief that intellect and sensitivity were gender-specific characteristics, the former inherently masculine and the latter feminine.<sup>36</sup> In an excessively gender-conscious age in which women writers were categorised as either virile or squisitamente femminile, Manzini resisted categorisation, defying those critics who sought to make a distinction between a masculine style, which displayed intellectual analysis and a robust construction, and a feminine style steeped in emotion but lacking in structure. In her sensitive and intelligent portrayal of the emotional world, she revealed a female sensibility worthy of consideration and a feminine style of writing that was seen as a strength rather than a weakness. In the words of Giansiro Ferrata:

La Manzini [...] ha dei momenti tutti femminili in cui [...] il "sentimento" fa capolino con mollezze inattese. Ma anche questo è un difetto? In lei no [...] perché è un indispensabile elemento del suo gioco. (*Solaria*, September 1928, p. 73)

Manzini's position as 'una voce nuova, inconfondibile' in Italian narrative was confirmed with her inclusion within the ranks of the *scrittori nuovi*, a group of avant-garde writers, among them Alberto Moravia and Elio Vittorini, who were intent on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Raffaello Franchi, 'Gianna Manzini: *Boscovivo*', *Solaria*, July-August 1932, pp. 50-55 (p. 50).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Giansiro Ferrata, 'Gianna Manzini: *Tempo innamorato*', *Solaria*, September-October 1928, pp. 72-73 (p. 73).

deprovincialising Italian culture and injecting new life into the Italian novel.<sup>37</sup> Included by Falqui and Vittorini in their anthology of new writers, *Scrittori nuovi: antologia italiana contemporanea* (1930), and cited alongside Moravia and Corrado Alvaro as one of the main players in the renewal of Italian narrative by Bonaventura Tecchi in the *Corriere Padano* in October 1932, Manzini was considered the equal of her male colleagues. In his review of *Un filo di brezza* (1936), Ruggero Jacobbi claimed that the prose fragment 'La visita del cardinale' was 'talmente significativo che nessuno dei migliori scrittori esiterebbe ad apporvi la propria firma', and he compared her narrative style with that of Alvaro.<sup>38</sup> Comparisons were also drawn with other leading male writers, Raffaello Franchi claiming that her short story 'Il segreto' 'potrebb'essere [...] una novella di Pirandello' (*La Fiera letteraria*, 10 February 1929, p. 7); while Giansiro Ferrata compared the lyricism and psychological insight of Manzini to that of the Tuscan novelist Federigo Tozzi. 'La parentela con Tozzi è stretta e profonda', he stated. 'Musica e disegno dello stile, e sopratutto quell'interiorità di immagini [...] aderente, sempre, a uno stato d'animo esattamente percepito.' (*Solaria*, September 1928, pp. 72-73)

Yet, despite being cited as one of the *scrittori d'avanguardia* and showing herself to be a writer 'che si stacca [...] completamente dai toni dell'ordinaria letteratura femminile', Manzini did not achieve such an accolade at the expense of her gender.<sup>39</sup> Described as a *scrittrice*, a term which attested to her diversity rather than to her inferiority, she was hailed as 'la migliore scrittrice della nostra giovane letteratura' and ranked alongside Katherine Mansfield.<sup>40</sup> 'Quel che la letteratura inglese ha perduto in Catherine [*sic*] Mansfield [...] la letteratura italiana sembra ben acquistarlo in Gianni Manzini', declared Giansiro Ferrata in *Solaria* (September 1928, p. 72). Hers was an *ingegno femminile* which, in its ability to explore and analyse the human psyche, was even judged superior to the *ingegno maschile*:

Ci sono ancora taluni critici che mostrano di tenere in minor conto la letteratura femminile. Vedano nelle ultime pagine di questo libro la 'Giornata di Don Giovanni' e dicano se un ingegno maschile saprebbe intuire e scrutare, con più libera e acuta penetrazione, le più riposte pieghe dell'anima umana.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> 'Gianna Manzini: Rive remote', Meridiano di Roma, April 1940, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Ruggero Jacobbi, 'La Manzini, cavaliere senza macchia della letteratura italiana', *Quadrivio*, 23 August 1936, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Sergio Solmi, 'Tre narratori', *Il Convegno*, 25 May 1929 (repr. in *La letteratura italiana*, ed. by Giovanni Pacchiano, 2 vols (Milan: Adelphi, 1992), I, 101-10 (p. 105)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Aldo Capasso, 'Letture di contemporanei', *Quadrivio*, 22 September 1940, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in an advertisement for *Boscovivo*, L'Italia letteraria, 26 June 1932, p. 2.

## 1.3.2 *Natalia* and *Periferia*

Manzini's description as a breath of fresh air in Italian narrative was echoed in the reception given to two of her fellow writers, Fausta Cialente and Paola Masino. Cialente's first novel, Natalia (1930), brought her immediate critical attention following its receipt of the Premio dei Dieci in 1929 while still a manuscript, a prize so called because its jury was made up of the ten most prestigious writers of the period. Set in the period during and immediately after the First World War, Natalia explores the difficulties of the eponymous heroine in constructing an authentic sense of self, tracing the various personae she adopts throughout her adolescence and early married life until the death of her child forces her to abandon the marital home and search for an autonomous identity. In her refusal to comply with social norms or allow her actions to be dictated by a moral conscience, Natalia was hailed as a new type of female protagonist who reflected the changing circumstances of women's lives, while the lyric style of Cialente's prose, 'una prosa [...] vicina alla poesia, che scava nell'intimo dei personaggi' in the words of the author, revealed the influence of Proust and Gide in its melodic quality and psychological insight. 'Mi sono sempre mantenuta fedele a una tradizione precisa: la grande letteratura francese moderna, quella di Proust, di Gide', as Cialente later remarked in an interview with Sandra Petrignani (pp. 85 and 84). Advertised by its publisher Sapienza as 'il romanzo appassionante di una donna moderna' (cited in L'Italia letteraria, 19 January 1930, p. 6), the novel was applauded by Giovanni Titta Rosa for 'la novità di questa figura femminile', and, despite his initial reluctance at reading a novel 'scritto da una donna', he acknowledged its innovative qualities and praised it for bringing '[un'] aria nuova che ogni buon libro porta [...] con sé' (L'Italia letteraria, 16 February 1930, p. 1). The book also found immediate success with the public, the first edition selling out within a matter of weeks, and it was even considered worthy of translation, with a French edition appearing in 1932. Success was shortlived, however. The second edition was blocked by the regime, who objected to its depiction of a lesbian relationship and its allusion to Italy's defeat at Caporetto, and it was not until 1982 that a second edition finally appeared.

Cialente followed the success of *Natalia* with two novellas, *Marianna*, first serialised in *L'Italia letteraria* in 1929 and awarded the *Premio Galante* when it was published by

Bompiani in 1933, and *Pamela o la bella estate*, serialised in *Occidente* in 1935, both of which helped establish her as 'una delle nostre più vigorose giovani scrittrici', in the words of *Leonardo*. <sup>42</sup> These novellas were followed by *Cortile a Cleopatra* (1936), a novel set in her adoptive country of Egypt, which depicts the protagonist Marco resisting the stifling bourgeois lifestyle which his fiancée plans for them and the conformist society which she represents. The novel was deemed 'una rivelazione di stile' by Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, its impressionistic style and psychological insight revealing the influence of Woolf and Conrad, of whose work Cialente was a passionate reader. <sup>43</sup> Similar praise was extended to the author's expressive and observational powers, Francesco Bernardelli applauding her 'ricca, sicura esperienza di osservazione e di immaginazione'; and, although it was not until the post-war period that the novel was recognised as 'una delle più belle opere narrative italiane dell'ultimo trentennio', in the words of Emilio Cecchi, it nonetheless secured Cialente's position as one of the leading female figures in modern Italian narrative, Ruggero Jacobbi ranking her alongside Manzini in displaying 'quei sensibile e profondo risveglio e rinnovamento della letteratura femminile italiana'.<sup>44</sup>

The early thirties also witnessed the literary debut of Paola Masino. The partner of the writer and academician Massimo Bontempelli, Masino was steeped in some of the most influential cultural movements of the period, having been introduced to the poetics of magic realism by Bontempelli in her late teens, and forming friendships with the *Solariani* whilst living in Florence and the group of avant-garde writers that included Pirandello and Valéry whilst residing in Paris in the late 1920s. The influence of Bontempelli can be seen in Masino's first novel *Monte Ignoso* (1931), which was situated in the realm of the fantastic, but it was in her subsequent novel, *Periferia* (1933), that she cast off the vestiges of magic realism and established her own style, which was more realist in tone and employed modernist narrative techniques, such as the depiction of reality through multiple viewpoints. Focusing on a group of ten children who live in the suburbs of an unnamed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> M. Lo Vecchio Musti, 'Fausta Terni Cialente: *Cortile a Cleopatra*', *Leonardo*, 1936, pp. 314-15 (p. 315).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Donne italiane: almanacco annuario*, 1937, pp. 225-65 (p. 225).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Francesco Bernardelli, 'Fausta Cialente: Cortile a Cleopatra', La Stampa, 3 December 1936, p. 3. Emilio Cecchi, 'Prefazione', in Cortile a Cleopatra, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1953) (repr. as 'Ritorno di un bel romanzo: Cortile a Cleopatra', in Letteratura italiana del Novecento, ed. by Pietro Citati, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1972), II, 968-70 (p. 968)).

Ruggero Jacobbi, 'Ain Zara Magno: Tramontana', Quadrivio, 4 October 1936, p. 4.

Italian city, the book depicts the abuse suffered by children at the hands of insensitive and uncaring parents. United by the common bond of suffering, the children resort to games and role-play in order to seek refuge from the harsh reality of their lives. Using a choral narrative, Masino allows each child to voice their personality and articulate their despair.

Awarded second prize at Viareggio in 1933, the novel received wide critical acclaim and established Masino as a major new talent on the literary scene. Like Manzini and Cialente, she was hailed as 'un'aria nuova' in Italian narrative by Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, and was cited as further proof of the renaissance of the Italian novel: Adriano Grande declared *Periferia* to be '[un] libro originalissimo [...] che dà un'altra smentita a coloro che s'ostinano ad affermare l'impossibilità dalla nascita del romanzo italiano'; Aldo Modica described it as 'un ottimo libro', which served as an 'una affermazione di più che in Italia esiste anche della buona e concreta letteratura femminile'; and Masino's role as a standard bearer for Italian narrative was confirmed when the novel was selected for translation into German in 1935.45 As with Manzini, she was compared with international literary heavyweights: the women's periodical *Lidel* described her as '[un'] artista orginale, sobria, sinteticamente impressionista, con audacie alla Poe' (May 1934, p. 302); while Adriano Grande cited the influence of Dostoevsky in her depiction of human nature, comparing her tendency to 'curvarsi continuamente su taluni anormali aspetti della natura umana', with the Russian writer's fascination with 'personaggi morbosamente scentrati' (L'Italia letteraria, 30 July 1933, p. 6).

#### 1.3.3 *Maria Zef* and the mid-1930s

By the mid-thirties, the new generation of women writers had firmly asserted their presence on the literary stage. Manzini, Cialente, and Masino had all established themselves 'nella schiera più avanzata degli scrittori d'oggi', in the words of *Il Mattino*, and, rather than isolated examples of female literary achievement, they were seen as heralding a new wave of female narrative, with writers such as Giana Anguissola, Marise Ferro, and Margherita Cattaneo following in their wake.<sup>46</sup> Giana Anguissola had emerged

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1934, pp. 135-64 (p. 159).

Adriano Grande, 'Paola Masino e i bambini', L'Italia letteraria, 30 July 1933, p. 6.

Aldo Modica, 'Paola Masino: Periferia', Rassegna nazionale, August 1933, pp. 138-39 (p. 139).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Cited in an advertisement for Masino's *Racconto grosso e altri*, *Almanacco letterario Bompiani*, 1942, p. XXVII.

on the literary scene at the age of twenty-four with her debut novel *Il romanzo di molta gente*, which was published in 1931 after winning the *Premio dell'Accademia Mondadori*. Using a choral narrative, the novel recounts the lives of a group of women who seek to determine their own lives in the face of strict social rules, and its strong characterisation and innovative narrative style won Anguissola a gold medal at Viareggio and attracted praise from Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, Mario Bonfantini, and Lorenzo Gigli, who were impressed by the maturity shown by the young author. '[È] un libro che più d'uno scrittore maturo le può invidiare', declared Gigli in the *Gazzetta del Popolo*, while Bonfantini applauded 'la indubbia maturità che essa dimostra'.<sup>47</sup>

Marise Ferro enjoyed a similar literary debut to Anguissola: her first novel Disordine (1932) was awarded the Premio dell'Accademia Mondadori in 1932, and she went on to confirm her reputation with Barbara (1934) and Trent'anni (1940), for which she shared the Premio Galante with Anna Banti. Using a series of sensory images to depict setting and character, Ferro explored the sensory way in which we experience life, the eponymous heroine of Barbara enjoying a heightened awareness of sensory stimuli, such as the scent of irises or the sound of the waves lapping the shore. '[Barbara è] una fanciulla [...] tutta aperta per il tramite dei sensi sul mondo esteriore', affirmed Arnaldo Frateili. 'La sua vita [è] tutta negli occhi, nelle narici, nella punta delle dita.'48 In her depiction of complex sensory images, which combined a keen intelligence with a rare sensibility, Ferro followed in the path of Manzini, 'le sensazioni sottili e complesse, che dal fisico si riflettono sullo spirituale, hanno nella Ferro una intelligente, precisa avocatrice', observed Francesco Bernardelli in La Stampa (10 January 1933, p. 3); and she was cited by Arnaldo Frateili as further proof that women writers had become a major literary force who could compete on the world stage: 'Basta guardarsi attorno, per vedere che le donne oggi occupano un posto di prim'ordine nella letteratura mondiale.' (Pan, July 1934, p. 458)

Sensory impressions were also to play an important role in the work of Margherita Cattaneo. A journalist at *La Nazione*, Cattaneo published her first narrative work *Io nel mezzo* in 1935, a collection of prose writing which rejected a developing narrative in favour of a series of vignettes. Using an impressionistic narrative style, Cattaneo privileged the power of memory and observation, the first-person narrator relating episodes from her life

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Cited in an advertisement for *Il romanzo di molta gente*, *L'Italia letteraria*, 12 July 1931, p. 5. Mario Bonfantini, 'Giana Anguissola: *Il romanzo di molta gente*', *Leonardo*, 1931, p. 503.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Arnaldo Frateili, 'Marise Ferro: Barbara', Pan, July 1934, pp. 458-60 (p. 459).

in terms of sensations and fleeting memories. Highly commended at Viareggio, the book received a warm welcome from Pietro Pancrazi and Arnaldo Bocelli, the latter describing it as '[un] bel libro, pieno di vivacità, di estro, di risalto, di limpido lirismo'.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to Cattaneo, who structured her work through the device of memory, the Molisean writer Lina Pietravalle adopted a realist style, her narrative influenced by the regional realism practised by Grazia Deledda and Caterina Percoto. Using her native region as the setting for her narratives, Pietravalle depicted, in a language rich in dialectal expressions, the hardship of rural life in her volumes of short fiction *I racconti della terra* (1924), *Storie di paese* (1930), and *Marcia nuziale* (1932), while her use of black humour served to mitigate the misery of rural poverty and distance her work from social realism. Pietravalle's work met with both public and critical success from the outset. 'Il coro degli elogi fu altissimo e concorde', wrote Mario Gastaldi of *I racconti della terra*. 'E il pubblico da parte sua, sanzionò il giudizio accogliendo l'opera nel modo più lieto e positivo.' (*Donne luce d'Italia*, p. 448) Her second volume of short stories, *Storie di paese*, was commended at Viareggio, while the publication of *Marcia nuziale* in 1932 ensured her 'posto di primo piano tra i nostri prosatori moderni', in the words of Enrico Emanuelli.<sup>50</sup>

While young writers such as Anguissola and Pietravalle were applauded for their efforts in reinvigorating female narrative, it was an established writer, Paola Drigo, who provoked the greatest interest in women's writing during the mid-1930s. Born in 1876, Drigo was a contemporary of Deledda and Aleramo, and, although she was now at the end of her career, the publication of her final novel *Maria Zef* (1936) resulted in her being fêted alongside her younger colleagues for renewing female narrative and bringing the Italian novel to international attention. Drigo had begun her literary career with two collections of short fiction, *La fortuna* (1913) and *Codino* (1918), which portrayed the drama of daily life played out against the backdrop of the Veneto landscape. Her third collection *La signorina Anna* (1932), which appeared after a fourteen-year silence, re-established her reputation as an author of merit, who combined a keen intellect with a strong empathy with her characters. Hers was '[un] ingegno femminile', in the words of Giovanni Necco, for not only did she display a commendable lack of 'dispersioni sentimentalistiche' in her work but also an absence of 'mascolina ostentazione'.51 With her autobiographical novel *Fine d'anno* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Arnaldo Bocelli, 'Margherita Cattaneo: *Io nel mezzo*', *Almanacco letterario Bompiani*, 1936, p. 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Enrico Emanuelli, 'Marcia nuziale', L'Italia letteraria, 15 May 1932, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Giovanni Necco, 'Paola Drigo: La Signorina Anna', L'Italia letteraria, 14 January 1934, p. 8.

(1936), Drigo attained 'uno dei vertici più alti raggiunti da una scrittrice italiana contemporanea', according to Necco, but it was her final novel, *Maria Zef*, published later that year, which confirmed her pre-eminent position in Italian narrative.<sup>52</sup> Set in the mountainous landscape of the Friuli region, the novel recounts the tragic tale of Mariutine and her sister Rosute, who, on the death of their mother, are sent to live with their paternal uncle, Barbe Zef. A silent, brooding presence, Zef becomes increasingly violent with drink, and this violence turns into a cycle of sexual abuse when Mariutine reaches womanhood. After contracting syphilis, Mariutine turns to a local woman healer for help, from whom she learns that her mother had been similarly abused at the hands of Zef, and the novel ends with Mariutine killing her uncle with an axe in order to save her sister from a similar fate.

The publication of *Maria Zef* in December 1936 met with immediate public success. Entering the best-seller list in early 1937, the novel ran to five editions within the space of a year and remained on the list until April 1938. The critics proved equally receptive: described as 'un autentico capolavoro' by Ettore Allodoli, the novel was cited by Ettore Cozzano, in a lecture of December 1937, as an example of an unadorned prose style which served as an antidote to the linguistic preciousness of *prosa d'arte*.<sup>53</sup> Hailed as an example of literary achievement in the new Italy, the novel was commended at Viareggio and selected for publication in an anthology of Italian literature for foreign readers, while Drigo herself was deemed a writer not only 'in prima linea fra le scrittrici italiane', but one who symbolised achievement in Italian literature as a whole: 'I suoi scritti resteranno nella nostra letteratura e non solo in quella femminile', affirmed Emilio Bodrero.<sup>54</sup>

#### 1.3.4 Angelici dolori, Itinerario di Paolina, and the late 1930s

The excitement caused by the publication of Drigo's crowning work was echoed the following year by the literary debuts of Anna Maria Ortese and Anna Banti. Ortese burst onto the literary scene at the age of twenty-three with *Angelici dolori* (1937), a volume of short stories published with the backing of Massimo Bontempelli, who not only secured an award from the Academy of Italy for the young author but also published a highly complimentary review in the *Gazzetta del Popolo* in April 1937, declaring that her work

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Giovanni Necco, 'Paola Drigo: Maria Zef', Meridiano di Roma, 5 September 1937, p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Ettore Allodoli, 'Letteratura femminile dell'anno XV', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1938, pp. 87-97 (p. 87).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Emilio Bodrero, 'Paola Drigo', *Meridiano di Roma*, 16 January 1938, p. 7.

possessed 'tutti i caratteri del miracolo'.55 Poorly educated as a child, Ortese had compensated for her lack of schooling by reading voraciously, developing a particular predilection for the short fiction of Anton Chekhov, Edgar Allan Poe, and Katherine Mansfield. The fantastical world of Poe and the impressionistic style of Mansfield can be seen in her early narrative style, as can the influence of Bontempelli's magic realism. *Angelici dolori* depicts the fantasy present within everyday reality, from the young siblings in 'Pellerossa', who indulge in make-believe to heighten the adventure of their childhood games, to the narrator of 'Isola', who projects onto a deserted house her need for a sanctuary from solitude and suffering. However, in contrast to magic realism, which made a clear distinction between the inner world of the imagination and external reality, Ortese blurred the boundaries between them, and her stories inhabited a world of magical fantasy in which dreams and reality became one.

Promoted as a precocious new talent by Bontempelli, who hailed her as 'un caso letterario', Ortese was also heavily publicised by her publisher, Valentino Bompiani, whose *Almanacco letterario Bompiani* declared the young author to be 'la rivelazione dell'annata'. Further publicity was generated by Ortese's admission in the inside front cover of the book that she was ignorant of Italian culture. 'Sono un'ignorante', she confessed. 'Non conosco i classici latini né greci; d'Annunzio è per me, con reverenza, un ignoto.'57 The controversy which resulted from her self-confessed cultural ignorance, together with the heavy publicity accompanying the book's publication, provoked intense media interest, generating eleven reviews in the space of one month, while the work itself divided critical opinion. Enrico Falqui and Luigi Tonelli were both dismissive of Ortese's immature narrative style, the latter claiming that 'sotto quelle fantasticherie puerili di pellirosse [...] palpita un vero cuore di fanciulla', while the former criticised her adjective-laden prose, 'la Ortese complica e appesantisce ogni suo istinto e desiderio', and challenged her status as a precocious new talent: 'A parlare di "caso letterario" o di "rivelazione", già in quel tempo si sarebbe commessa inesattezza.'58 The opposing view was represented by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Cited in Giancarlo Borri, *Invito alla lettura di Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Mursia, 1988), p. 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Arnaldo Bocelli, 'Anna Maria Ortese: Angelici dolori', Almanacco letterario Bompiani, 1938, p. 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, *Angelici dolori* (Milan: Bompiani, 1937).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Luigi Tonelli, 'Anna Maria Ortese: *Angelici dolori'*, *L'Italia che scrive*, 1937, pp. 187-88 (p. 187). Enrico Falqui, 'A. M. Ortese', *Quadrivio*, 16 May 1937 (repr. in *Novecento letterario italiano*, 6 vols (Florence: Vallecchi, 1970), IV, 901-05 (p. 902).

Falqui was later to admit that his scathing review had been motivated by a desire to attack Bontempelli, whose literary style and political views were antithetical to his own. 'Non ce l'avevo con lei, ma con chi l'ha

Giuseppe De Robertis and Ugo Dèttore. While dismissing her narrative style as undeveloped, 'non si può dire che A. M. Ortese [...] scriva bene', De Robertis applauded 'il nuovo del suo ingegno' and her ability to inject a fantastical element into everyday reality: 'Ha [...] un dono, [...] un incantamento, un colore che trasfigura ciò che tocca.'<sup>59</sup> Dèttore was more forthcoming in his praise. Disputing the charges of immaturity levelled at Ortese, he noted an 'indiscutibile maturità letteraria' in her work and praised the refinement of her narrative style: 'Che sonora felicità di aggettivazione, [...] che compiacenza di immagini espresse.'<sup>60</sup>

The interest which Angelici dolori generated in female narrative was further increased with the publication of Anna Banti's Itinerario di Paolina later that year. A graduate in history of art, Banti's narrative contained a pictorial quality while her poetic style and the fragmentary structure of her work revealed the influence of prosa d'arte. In Itinerario di Paolina (1937), Banti places the female consciousness firmly at the centre of the book in the form of the narrator, Paolina, through whose subjective eye events are filtered and interpreted. Each of the thirteen loosely connected chapters focuses on a key episode in Paolina's progression from childhood to adulthood, from her aunt's death to her close relationship with a schoolfriend. Rather than a traditional rites of passage novel in which the development of the protagonist is traced in a linear pattern, memory becomes the principle of structure as the childhood of Paolina is traced through a series of recollected emotions and sensory experiences, such as the fear she experiences as a young child while waiting in the dark for her mother to light the oil lamp, or the smell of oranges during her adolescent years in Rome. 'La scrittrice ricerca nel tempo le sue sensazioni dominanti e le libera dall'inutile e insignificante e procede [...] inseguendo queste sottilissime suggestioni che raggiunte sono governate con delicata mano', affirmed Francesco Jovine.<sup>61</sup>

The book also revealed Banti's determination to sever the link between personal reminiscence and sentimentality. Using a third-person narrator onto whom she projected her own memories and emotions, she was able to distance her authorial self from her autobiographical self and analyse her thoughts and feelings in a detached manner. By mixing autobiography and fiction in this way, displaying a well-defined structure and a lack

appoggiata', he told Ortese when they met for the first time in 1967 (cited in Luca Clerici, Apparizione e visione: vita e opere di Anna Maria Ortese (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), p. 83).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Giuseppe De Robertis, 'A. M. Ortese: Angelici dolori', Leonardo, 1937, p. 271.

<sup>60</sup> Ugo Dèttore, 'Anna Maria Ortese', Meridiano di Roma, 2 May 1937, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Francesco Jovine, 'Anna Banti: Itinerario di Paolina', Meridiano di Roma, 1 August 1937, p. 11.

of sentimentality, Banti helped combat the prejudice that female autobiography privileged sentiment at the expense of form and the emotional restraint which she displayed won her the praise of Emilio Cecchi: 'Giunta alla soglia d'una quantità di situazioni, che parevano reclamare una risoluzione sentimentale, la scrittrice le oltrepassa con appena un accenno, un'ombra di punteggiatura.' Applauding her originality, Cecchi ranked the novice author alongside Manzini and Cialente and credited her with helping instigate a renewal of female literature in Italy:

Sembra così che [...] i quadri della nostra letteratura femminile si stiano rinnovando. Alle scrittrici d'impeto e slancio: tipo Deledda, Aleramo, Drigo, Negri, vengono ormai accompagnandosi scrittrici non meno sincere, ma più complesse e riflesse. E sul piano di questa inaspettata Anna Banti, ci basti ricordare la Cialente e Gianna Manzini. (p. 6)

Cecchi's endorsement of contemporary women's literature was echoed by his fellow critics. Giovanni Titta Rosa made reference to the 'improvviso fiorire [...] della letteratura femminile, specie nei rami della narrativa'; Ruggero Jacobbi spoke of 'quel sensibile e profondo risveglio e rinnovamento della letteratura femminile italiana'; and the subject was further debated in the journal eighteen months later, when the contribution of female writers to the cultural standing of the new Italy was underlined: 'Bisogna riconoscere che in questi ultimi anni la letteratura femminile – e sono recentissimi i nomi [...] di Gianna Manzini, Paola Drigo, Anna Maria Ortese – [...] si è decisamente spostata su un primo piano nazionale.'63 The Meridiano di Roma entered the debate that same month. In an article entitled 'Fortuna delle donne', the journal discussed whether the recent flowering of women's literature was a sign 'che gli uomini abbandonano il campo delle lettere per darsi ai campi veri, dell'agricoltura o della guerra', but, rather than simply attributing women's success to a lack of male competition, the author concluded that literature, like many other sectors of the economy, was now an arena in which women represented an increasingly visible presence: 'L'esercito femminile avanza: nella storia dell'arte, nell'archeologia, nell'insegnamento.'64 A further discussion about women's writing took place in the pages of Quadrivio. In a letter published in August 1936, the journalist Ottorino Modugno reflected on the state of women's writing in the wake of Grazia Deledda's death. Charting

<sup>62</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Anna Banti: Itinerario di Paolina', Omnibus, 17 April 1937, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Giovanni Titta Rosa, 'La festa del libro', La Stampa, 16 August 1937, p. 3.

Ruggero Jacobbi, 'Ain Zara Magno: Tramontana', Quadrivio, 4 October 1936, p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>quot;A. V.", 'Emilia Salvioni: Gli anni migliori', Quadrivio, 6 March 1938, p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> 'Fortuna delle donne', Meridiano di Roma, 27 March 1938, p. 3.

the development of Italian women's writing from the turn of the century to the present day, he declared that not only had contemporary female literature attained a pre-eminent position in Italian culture but that women's writing had lost its gendered nature: 'La letteratura femminile ha cessato con la Deledda e la Negri d'essere femminile; essa è diventata della letteratura pura e semplice.'65

This belief that gender no longer represented the dominant characteristic in female literature reflected the shift in attitude which was taking place in the literary community. As writers such as Banti and Manzini created a new form of narrative which highlighted the female consciousness but which was far removed from the sentimentality and lack of structure traditionally associated with women's literature, so the distinction made between male and female forms of writing was undermined. By the late 1930s, the practice of dividing narrative into the *virile* and the *squisitamente femminile* had rapidly declined, with many critics rejecting gender as a criterion on which a work of literature could be judged. In the words of Renato Majolo:

Bisogna respingere come formale e fittizia ogni limitazione aprioristica che condanni od esalti le opere ancor prima ch'esse si siano realizzate, che tenda ad aggiungere o a togliere un punto in classifica [...] soltanto per il fatto ch'escono da una penna maschile o femminile.<sup>66</sup>

Majolo's view was echoed by the journalist Liliana Scalero. Writing in the *Almanacco della donna italiana*, she argued against the notion of gendered writing, 'per me non esiste la *letteratura femminile*, esiste la letteratura senz'altro, sia essa fatta dagli uomini o dalle donne', and she called on the public to reject the insulting term *letteratura femminile*: 'La formula, poi, è offensiva. Forse che George Sand e Mad. de Staël facevano della *letteratura femminile*?.'67

This rejection of gendered literature reflected the extent to which attitudes towards women's writing had changed over the course of the decade. No longer dismissed as *letteratura femminile*, the work of the new generation was applauded for effecting a renaissance in female narrative and bringing Italian literature to worldwide attention. By the late 1930s, female literary production had become a subject of intense interest among the public and critics alike and this interest was to reach its height in 1939 following the

<sup>65</sup> Ottorino Modugno, 'Le letteratura femminile italiana', Quadrivio, 30 August 1936, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Renato Majolo, 'Letteratura maschia e femmina?', Meridiano di Roma, 3 September 1939, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Liliana Scalero, 'Le donne che scrivono', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1937, pp. 211-16 (pp. 214 and 216).

publication of a novel by Alba de Céspedes, which was hailed as a publishing phenomenon, and a historical novel by Maria Bellonci, which was awarded the revered Viareggio prize.

## 1.3.5 Nessuno torna indietro and Lucrezia Borgia

De Céspedes had begun her literary career in 1935 with a volume of short stories, L'anima degli altri, which attracted critical attention after being shortlisted at Viareggio. 'Una nuova scrittrice. Del suo libro Anime degli altri [sic] dicono bene tutti', announced the Almanacco letterario Bompiani (1936, p. 55). Her second collection, Concerto (1937), confirmed her early promise, Benedetto Migliore noting 'un progresso, un affinamento di qualità naturali' in her narrative style, and Ugo Dèttore remarking on '[il] grande progresso compiuto da questa scrittrice'.68 This modest success was to increase exponentially following the publication of Nessuno torna indietro (1938), which catapulted the young author into the media spotlight. Set in an all-female college during the early 1930s, the novel focused on eight young women who formed a close friendship whilst studying at Rome University. Brought together from a range of different backgrounds, from the bourgeois Emanuela, who had been sent away by her wealthy family after falling pregnant, to the spinsterish Augusta, who had escaped the hardship of her Sardinian upbringing only to find herself trapped within the college and unable to establish an independent identity in the outside world, the protagonists represented a cross-section of young women for whom education served as a means of liberation and self-improvement but who were struggling to come to terms with their new-found independence and the changing female role.

The novel was an immediate success with the public, readers responding to its fast-paced narrative and realistic depiction of women's issues, from unwanted pregnancy to the tedium of menial office work. First published in November 1938, the book sold out within a week and was reprinted once a month throughout 1939 until it was banned by the regime at the end of 1940, by which time it was on to its nineteenth edition and had sold 150,000 copies, a volume of sales only normally achieved by best-selling authors such as Guido Da Verona. The novel also enjoyed great success abroad: by January 1941, it had been translated into seventeen languages and had achieved sales of 100,000 copies in Germany alone, and by 1943 there were over thirty translations. The enormous popularity of the book was widely reported in the press, who were keen to advertise the success of Italian literature

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Benedetto Migliore, 'Alba de Céspedes: *Concerto*', *L'Italia che scrive*, 1937, p. 222.

Ugo Dèttore, 'Alba de Céspedes: Concerto', Meridiano di Roma, 4 July 1937, p. 11.

in reaching an international audience. 'Quel primo romanzo di Alba de Céspedes è stato portato a un successo editoriale, in Italia e fuori, eccezionale', wrote Montale in the *Corriere della Sera*; while Emilio Villa hailed the young author as 'un fenomeno letterario'.<sup>69</sup>

Public success was accompanied by resounding critical acclaim. Augusto Vicinelli, writing in *L'Ambrosiano*, expressed enthusiasm for the novel's 'incisività psicologica', while Silvio Benco, writing in *Il Piccolo*, hailed its author as 'una romanziera che promette gran respiro'.<sup>70</sup> Even those critics who had expressed doubts about the novel when it first appeared were forced to reconsider their views in light of the plaudits it received. The *Meridiano di Roma*, whose initial cursory examination of the novel had equated its status as a female best-seller with a formulaic page-turner, 'più che un romanzo può dirsi un concentrato di vecchi motivi della novellistica femminile', published a far more favourable review the following month, which praised the novel for its rare combination of readability and literary merit: 'Il romanzo è nato leggibile', declared Garibaldo Marussi. 'Abbiamo detto leggibile nel senso migliore che si possa attribuire a questa parola in sede letteraria. [...] In un anno ce ne saranno dieci [romanzi] che si leggano fino in fondo. Fra questi dieci occupa un buon posto il presente.'<sup>71</sup>

It was this readability which proved the key to the novel's wide-reaching appeal. Straddling the divide between highbrow and popular literature, the novel appealed both to the mass reading public, who responded to its gripping storyline and fast-paced narrative style, and to the literary elite, who admired its intelligent insight into the female condition and its use of realist discourse which privileged everyday events and employed a vocabulary rich in conversational Italian.<sup>72</sup> The novel was also assured a wide appeal through its references to popular culture, from its 'tecnica essenzialmente cinematografica', as noted by Arnaldo Bocelli, to its borrowing of conventions from popular fiction and film, such as the romance novel and the schoolgirl comedy, elements which, as I will discuss in chapter three, were subverted by de Céspedes in order to counter the moralistic content

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Eugenio Montale, 'Racconti e commenti', *Corriere della Sera*, 12 August 1941, p. 3. Emilio Villa, 'Alba de Céspedes: *Fuga*', *L'Italia che scrive*, 1941, pp. 26-27 (p. 26).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Cited in an advertisement for Nessuno torna indietro, Meridiano di Roma, 15 January 1939, p. 11.

<sup>71 &</sup>quot;Opico", 'Narrativa: due romanzi', *Meridiano di Roma*, 25 December 1938, p. 10.

Garibaldo Marussi, 'Alba de Céspedes: Nessuno torna indietro', Meridiano di Roma, 29 January 1939, p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> For a discussion of the use of realism in the work of de Céspedes and Drigo, and its divergence from the populist realist aesthetic developed by writers such as Vittorini and Pratolini, see chapter four in Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible*, pp. 124-88.

proferred by these genres: 'Evidentemente il lavoro è suggerito dagli innumerevoli film (da *Ragazze in uniforme a Prigione senza sbarre*) di giovani donne in pensioni, collegi, riformatorî, che sono passati sugli schermi internazionali', noted Maria Borgese.<sup>73</sup> Combining literary merit and popular appeal, the novel narrowed the divide between popular and highbrow literature and, as the case of the *Meridiano di Roma* shows, it helped correct the misapprehension that best-sellers penned by women were formulaic and lacked literary merit.

In the same way that Nessuno torna indietro brought modern female narrative to the mass market, so Maria Bellonci's Lucrezia Borgia (1939) brought historical biography to a mass audience through its accessible narrative style and empathetic depiction of its subject. Relating the life of one of the most notorious female figures in history, the book stripped away the myths surrounding Lucrezia to reveal the private history of the Italian noblewoman, portraying a sensitive woman whose life was ruled by her overarching sense of duty and who displayed great strength of character in the face of adversity. 'Maria Bellonci riesce ad offrirci di Lucrezia un ritratto preciso ma caldo di vita, non più smarginato fino alla mostruosità [...] ma intensissimo di umana verità', stated Mario Stefanile, a view echoed by Serafino Groppa: 'Ridà a Lucrezia Borgia una proporzione quotidiana e vera di donna.'<sup>74</sup> Bellonci's human portrait of Lucrezia touched a chord with the public at a time when war was imminent and personal courage demanded. First published in April 1939, the book entered the best-seller list in May and had sold 15,000 copies by the following December, which was considered an extraordinary feat for a historical work. 'Quali libri di storia scritti da donne hanno avuto un esito così rapido e unanime?' as Ugo Ojetti remarked in the Corriere della Sera.<sup>75</sup> Translations into Spanish, German, Swedish, and Hungarian followed in 1940, while the onset of war further increased the book's popularity at home, Bellonci recalling how soldiers and prisoners of war drew strength from the fortitude of its central character:

Arnaldo Bocelli, 'Alba de Céspedes: Nessuno torna indietro', Almanacco letterario Bompiani, 1940, p.
 112.

Maria Borgese, 'Letteratura femminile', *Nuova Antologia*, July-August 1939, pp. 232-35 (p. 232). As Jacqueline Reich has observed in 'Reading, Writing, and Rebellion: Collectivity, Specularity, and Sexuality in the Italian Schoolgirl Comedy, 1934-1934', in *Mothers of Invention*, ed. by Robin Pickering-Iazzi, pp. 220-51, the schoolgirl comedy was a cinematic genre which enjoyed enormous popularity during the thirties, the 1931 German film *Mädchen in Uniform* having inspired a series of Italian versions between 1934 and 1943, which were used as vehicles for the starlets from the newly created film school in Rome.

Mario Stefanile, 'Il vero volto di Lucrezia Borgia', *Il Mattino*, 31 May 1939, p. 5. Serafino Groppa, 'Maria Bellonci: *Lucrezia Borgia*', *Oggi*, 1 July 1939, p. 9.

Quando vennero i tempi di guerra le vendite si accelerarono invece di rallentarsi. Cominciarono ad arrivarmi lettere di soldati, e poi di feriti, e poi di prigionieri [...] che mi hanno detto come Lucrezia li abbia aiutati a vivere quando si erano sentiti più logori e perduti. (cited in Sbrana, p. 65)

The public success of *Lucrezia Borgia* was matched by widespread critical acclaim. The result of eight years' research, the book was seen as further proof that women had adopted a more disciplined approach to writing and were distancing themselves from effusive sentiment. 'Lo stile [...] non ha alcunché di donnesco nel senso dei patetici languori', declared Eugenio Giovannetti, and he applauded Bellonci's 'scientifica felice ricerca'. '6 Similar praise for Bellonci's painstaking research was voiced by Bontempelli, who presided over the jury which awarded her the *Premio Galante*. Claiming that the book was 'al polo opposto della storia romanzata', he expressed great satisfaction with the work. 'Da quanti anni non mi accadeva di leggere un libro che mi piacesse così pienamente?'77 Bontempelli's judgment was shared by the jury of the *Premio Viareggio*, who awarded Bellonci joint first prize in 1939, and, for Guido Piovene, who served as a member of the jury, the book served as further proof that Italian literature was in the ascendant: 'L'esito del Premio Viareggio dimostra, se ce n'è bisogno contro tutti i piagnoni, che la letteratura italiana [...] è non già in decadenza, ma in crescente rigoglio.'78

As a spirited defender of Lucrezia Borgia, who made use of her extensive literary armoury to champion the cause of one of the most notorious figures in Italian history, Bellonci was deemed 'un'autentica amazzone' by Eugenio Giovannetti. 'Conosce a meraviglia la vastità degli orizzonti, la potenza delle armi e la grazia avventurosa della corsa', he declared (*Il Giornale d'Italia*, 22 June 1939, p. 3). This reference to Bellonci as a literary amazon symbolised the changing attitude towards the woman writer in Italian society of the 1930s. No longer a scribbler, who used literature to vent her unrequited passions, the female writer was now a warrior fighting for supremacy in the literary arena. The image of the amazon was particularly potent in the popular imagination of the period as increasing numbers of women demonstrated their athletic prowess on the sports field and took up masculine pursuits, such as aviation and shooting. 'Fuma, s'imbelletta, giuoca al tennis e magari anche al biliardo, và a cavallo, guida l'automobile, fa l'aviatrice', as Pietro

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ugo Ojetti, 'Maria Bellonci: Lucrezia Borgia', Corriere della Sera, 20 March 1941, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Eugenio Giovannetti, 'Rivendicazione e rivelazione: *Lucrezia Borgia*', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 22 June 1939, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Cited in an advertisement for Lucrezia Borgia, Meridiano di Roma, 2 February 1941, p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Guido Piovene, 'Maria Bellonci: Lucrezia Borgia', Almanacco letterario Bompiani, 1940, p. LVII.

Palermo noted of the 'signorina moderna', describing this new breed of women as 'modernissime amazzoni'. While this image of the modern amazon reflected underlying male fears about female supremacy, it also denoted the vigour and determination of the new Italian woman, qualities which, in the militaristic climate of Fascist Italy, met with approbation. This can be seen in Giovanni Titta Rosa's description of female writers competing at the 1931 *Premio Viareggio*, whom he described as amazonian in their strength and determination to succeed. Noting their 'impeto amazzonico degno di leggenda', he described their efforts to outstrip their male rivals in terms of a sports contest, the strength of the female candidates echoing that of the *donne sportive* who competed in the Fascist *littoriali*: 'Forti di garretti, le ciocche di capelli al vento, [...] gli occhi accesi dall'amor della gloria, esse pungolano ai fianchi i colleghi scrittori, senza dar loro respiro.'80

From being cast in terms of an invading enemy horde at the turn of the century, women writers were now seen as a contending rather than a threatening force in Italian literature. Applauded for their narrative ability, they were considered worthy competitors in the literary arena and, on a national scale, they were positioned as literary warriors in the service of the new Italy. 'Adesso le scrittrici, se proprio non sono legione, certo sono centuria', affirmed Daria Banfi Malaguzzi in her survey of women's writing for the 1933 Almanacco della donna italiana, her analogy to ancient Rome confirming the patriotic nature of this new female army (p. 131).

## 1.3.6 Rococò, Il gioco segreto, and the early 1940s

With the onset of war, the frenzy of media attention surrounding de Céspedes and Bellonci began to dissipate but the belief that female narrative was in the ascendant was confirmed with the emergence of two new writers, Orsola Nemi and Elsa Morante. The pen-name of Flora Vezzani, Nemi had come to public attention in the late thirties with the publication of her poetry and short fiction in *Letteratura* and *Meridiano di Roma*, the latter ascribing to her verse 'una bellezza occulta e scontrosa'.<sup>81</sup> The lyricism and fantasy which characterised Nemi's early narrative style found their full expression in her debut novel *Rococò*, which was published in 1940 after winning a literary competition in the *Giornale* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Pietro Palermo, 'La donna', *Almanacco degli scrittori*, 1936, pp. 96-98 (p. 96).

<sup>80</sup> Giovanni Titta Rosa, 'Scrittori e sirene', La Stampa, 18 August 1931, p. 6.

<sup>81 &#</sup>x27;Orsola Nemi', Meridiano di Roma, 10 December 1939, p. 6.

di Genova. Described by Anna Banti as 'più favola che romanzo', the novel blurred the distinction between reality and fantasy as Nemi sought to represent the fantastical elements present in everyday reality; to combine, in the words of Francesco Squarcia, 'l'ordinaria amministrazione con l'anormale fantasia'.82 Set in a decaying eighteenth-century country house, the novel portrays the aristocratic Lemerec family seeking to escape the outside world and the relentless flow of time, the house functioning both as a refuge and a place where past and present overlap, as seen in the character of Amata, who shares her name and fate with one of her eighteenth-century ancestors. Weaving together the natural and the supernatural, the novel reveals the interconnection between lives separated in time, while at the same time emphasising the ephemeral nature of human existence, which is represented by the sense of decay permeating the house. The lyric quality of Nemi's narrative style and the dreamlike atmosphere she evoked in the novel found a receptive audience in the critical community. Franco Fortini detected in Nemi 'un ingegno fine e vibratile', while Gian Paolo Callegari described her as 'una rivelazione', and underlined her distance from the themes commonly found in women's fiction: '[È] una delle poche donne che [...] dimostrano di staccarsi dai modi e dalle forme della abituale letteratura femminile nostra.'83

The oneiric quality which Nemi evoked in *Rococò* was also present in Elsa Morante's first published work, *Il gioco segreto* (1941), which was characterised, in the words of Salvatore Rosati, by 'una'aria di fiaba'.<sup>84</sup> A collection of short fiction, which had appeared in the press between 1937 and 1941, *Il gioco segreto* blended reality and illusion in a semi-mythical world, from the ghostly presence of a schoolboy who haunts a schoolteacher's imagination in 'Lo scolaro pallido' to an ageing woman's self-delusion in 'Una storia d'amore', in which she turns to witchcraft to make a young tutor fall in love with her. As a writer of fables, in which the protagonists are controlled by the delusional power of their imagination, Morante was compared to Kafka, a writer whom she greatly admired, Salvatore Rosati likening the 'fantastica e fabulosa' quality of her prose to that of the Czech writer (*L'Italia che scrive*, 1942, p. 90). The originality of Morante's narrative style was also commended, Rosati claiming that the originality of her prose derived from her 'voce femminile', which injected a freshness and exuberance into her narrative (p. 89).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Anna Banti, 'Vocazione di Orsola Nemi', *Illustrazione italiana*, 20 March 1949 (repr. in *Opinioni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), pp. 136-39 (p. 136)).

Francesco Squarcia, 'Orsola Nemi: Rococò', Oggi, 9 November 1940, p. 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Franco Fortini, 'Orsola Nemi: *Rococò*', *Letteratura*, October 1940, pp. 178-79 (p. 178). Gian Paolo Callegari, 'Orsola Nemi: *Rococò*', *Meridiano di Roma*, 15 September 1940, p. 11.

The comparisons with eminent foreign writers which Morante and her peers elicited underlined the esteem in which the new generation were held. Challenging the view that female literature was sentimental and second-rate, they proved that women's writing could be innovative, intelligent, and on a par with that of leading male writers. Through their work, they showed that gender was not a determining factor in literary ability and revealed the female narrative voice to be sincere, original, and capable of injecting vigour into Italian narrative. The achievements of these writers signalled an end to the wholesale branding of women's literature as *letteratura femminile*, and, although their success did not lessen the hold which popular fiction enjoyed over the female market, the respect which they earned meant that women's writing was no longer regarded as a by-product of *letteratura amena*. From being derided as *scribacchine* at the start of the decade, women writers were viewed as a major literary force by the end of the 1930s, whose achievements not only rivalled those of their male colleagues but conferred glory on the Italian nation, with their work selected for translation and achieving best-selling status in Italy and abroad.

The change in status of women's writing was not only the result of this strong female literary output but it was also due to the important role played by the press and publishing industry in the publication and promotion of women's writing during the thirties. In the second part of this chapter, I will examine the developments which took place in these industries during the interwar years as they responded to the growth in mass female readership and sought a foothold in this lucrative new market. Increasing its coverage of women's literature and its proportion of female contributors in order to appeal to a more diverse readership, the press fostered an environment that was receptive to women's writing; while the new publishing houses displayed an eagerness to sign up female writers and promote them to a mass audience and proved influential in breaking down the gender-based divisions in writing and readership.

<sup>84</sup> Salvatore Rosati, 'Elsa Morante: Il gioco segreto', L'Italia che scrive, 1942, pp. 89-90 (p. 89).

#### 1.4 THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY AND WOMEN'S WRITING

The burgeoning female leisure market, which had emerged at the turn of the century as a result of changes in female employment and more regulated working hours, underwent considerable expansion during the interwar years, as De Grazia has shown in *How Fascism Ruled Women* (pp. 207-10). Reading became one of the most popular pastimes among young women during the *ventennio* and a thriving female readership developed which cut across all social classes as office workers devoured the latest best-seller on their commute to work and mass-circulation magazines attracted an avid readership. 'Negli ultimi tempi le lettrici erano diventate assai più numerose dei lettori', observed Ettore Fabietti in the 1932 *Almanacco di Cordelia*, a view echoed by Maria Maggi: 'Le donne che leggono superano in numero gli uomini che leggono. Non c'è sartina o dattilografa che non abbia la tavola ingombra di libri.'85

The demand for new fiction created by this boom in female readership was to have a significant effect on the publishing industry. Not only did the volume of new titles increase, rising from 600 in 1926 to an average of 1500 per year in the period 1933 to 1935, but new publishing houses emerged which were geared to the demands of this new market and exploited its potential to the full. The major new player on the scene was Mondadori, a firm established in 1911 but which came to the fore in the early 1920s when Arnoldo Mondadori exploited the advantage of owning his own printing works to switch from costly editions of highbrow literature to the more lucrative market of populist fiction, as David Forgacs has observed. By producing cheap editions priced between two and three lire, Mondadori brought down the price of a novel to that of a cinema ticket, a move which not only opened up book-buying to the masses but also led to the phenomenon of the best-seller, an accolade awarded to titles which achieved sales of more than 50,000 copies, when the average print-run of a novel stood at 2,000 copies.

During the *ventennio*, a total of 85 titles reached best-seller status, among them de Céspedes's *Nessuno torna indietro*, which sold over 150,000 copies in just three years, an achievement which was due not only to the popular appeal of the novel but also the heavy

<sup>85</sup> Ettore Fabietti, 'Lettrici', Almanacco di Cordelia, 1932, p. 145.

Maria Maggi, 'Come leggono le donne', L'Italia letteraria, 13 September 1931, pp. 1-2 (p. 2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Figures cited in Marino Livolsi, 'Lettura e altri consumi culturali negli anni '20-'40', in *Editoria e cultura a Milano tra le due guerre (1920-1940): atti del convegno (Milano, 19-21 febbraio 1981)* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), pp. 61-75 (p. 63).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era*, 1880-1980 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 58-59.

marketing which accompanied its release. The discipline of marketing was new to the publishing industry, which had previously relied on the crossover between magazine and book publishing to boost sales, but, by the mid-1930s, with commentators warning of a crisi del libro caused both by a slump in home-grown highbrow narrative in favour of foreign and popular fiction and by the growing popularity of the radio and cinema, publishers were encouraged to bring national literature to the attention of the masses, and the press, radio, and cinema were all enlisted to help promote Italian literary production.<sup>88</sup> The promotional activity which surrounded the publication of Nessuno torna indietro was indicative of this increased support for Italian narrative, as well as the commercial acumen of its publisher, Mondadori. The most intense marketing of the novel took place in the Meridiano di Roma, a popular weekly literary review. The first advertisement appeared on 4 December 1938 to coincide with the novel's release and announced, 'tra poco non si parlerà che di Nessuno torna indietro, romanzo di Alba de Céspedes, una narratrice di prim'ordine', and this was followed by advertisements placed at fortnightly intervals, which listed the number of volumes sold both in Italy and abroad. Indeed, Mondadori even used the advertisements to boast of its own contribution in the novel's success, stating: 'Ecco come si dimostra che anche in Italia, unendo le qualità indiscusse di uno scrittore di talento a una vigile azione editoriale, si possono ottonere quei trionfi librari tanto decantati all'estero.'89

The innovative marketing campaigns utilised by Mondadori and its fellow new arrival Bompiani, the Milanese firm founded by Valentino Bompiani in 1929, were matched by an aggressive attitude towards acquisitions. At the end of the war, Arnoldo Mondadori had embarked on an ambitious period of author acquisition and, by 1930, he had succeeded in building up a catalogue of 30,000 titles, which exceeded in both quantity and quality that of his two leading rivals, Treves and Sonzogno. The success displayed by the new publishing houses in signing up writers was particularly evident among the female literary community. Aleramo was one of Mondadori's prized acquisitions in the late 1920s and, during the 1930s, it republished much of her early work, including *Una donna*, which was reprinted

The government minister Giuseppe Bottai was at the centre of the debate about the *crisi del libro*. Declaring that 'il libro non è più arbitro e signore della società', he argued that the new media should not be blamed for the book's decline but should be enlisted in the effort to reaffirm its importance: 'Solo quando il libro apparirà il termine ideale, cui tendere, non *contro*, ma *attraverso* e *con* gli altri mezzi di diffusione della cultura, la sua crisi sarà avviata a soluzione.' ('Il libro e la cultura del popolo', *Il libro italiano: rassegna bibliografica generale*, June 1937, pp. 1-6 (p. 5)).

<sup>89</sup> Cited in an advertisement for Nessuno torna indietro, Quadrivio, 21 May 1939, p. 6.

three times between 1930 and 1944, together with new works including Gioie d'occasione (1930), Il frustino (1932), Sì alla terra (1935), and Orsa minore (1938). New generation writers were also drawn to Mondadori and Bompiani, attracted by their growing reputation for reaching a wide audience: Masino published her first novel Decadenza della morte (1931) with the Roman firm Alberto Stock before moving to Bompiani with Monte Ignoso (1931) and Periferia (1933); Banti published with Augustea and Le Monnier during the thirties and then moved to Bompiani in 1941 with Sette lune; Manzini published with Corbaccio and Treves before moving to Mondadori with Rive remote in 1940; while de Céspedes published with both Maglione and Carabba before switching to Mondadori in 1938 with Nessuno torna indietro, a firm with whom she remained throughout the rest of her career.90

Mondadori and Bompiani were not only major players in the publication of women's writing during the 1930s but they were also instrumental in raising the status of women's writing within the industry. In contrast to established publishers, such as Treves and Bemporad, who grouped women writers under the category of *letteratura femminile* and advertised them to a female readership, the new firms broke down these gender divisions, categorising writers by genre rather than gender. This innovative approach can be seen in the range of *collane* established during the thirties, from Bompiani's *Letteratura moderna* and Mondadori's *Lo Specchio*, founded in 1933 and 1940 respectively, which featured modern Italian poetry and narrative, to Mondadori's *Medusa*, established in 1933, which consisted of contemporary foreign fiction in translation. Comprising both male and female writers, these series placed women alongside their male counterparts, the short stories of Manzini listed alongside those of Dino Buzzati in *Lo Specchio*, and *Letteratura moderna* publishing the works of Masino and Ortese alongside those of Bontempelli, a practice which helped confirm the inclusion of women in the ranks of great writers.

The status and profile of women's writing was further increased during the *ventennio* by the advent of literary awards, an arena in which Mondadori and Bompiani once again led the way. The *Premio Mondadori*, which was founded in 1924 alongside the *Accademia* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> The risk of opting for a small publisher with limited resources was illustrated by the case of Cialente. An author who had attracted widespread acclaim with *Natalia*, the publication of her second novel, *Cortile a Cleopatra*, passed almost unobserved for, as a small firm with no advertising budget and no affiliated publications in which to promote its titles, its publisher Corticelli was unable to launch the novel in the same way as its more affluent rivals. Indeed, it was not until the novel was reprinted in 1953 that it received the attention it deserved, Emilio Cecchi, who wrote the preface to the second edition, admitting that he had only become aware of the novel several years after its publication.

Mondadori, was one of the first major literary prizes to be established in Italy and consisted of an annual award of 10,000 lire conferred on an unpublished novel by members of the academy. With a jury that included Borgese and Pirandello, the competition was a prestigious event in the literary calendar and created a flurry of interest in new Italian writing, as can be seen in the case of Giana Anguissola's *Il romanzo di molta gente*. 'L'Anguissola [...] tra le nostre scrittrici giovani è una di quelle che furono messe subito in vista', noted Daria Banfi Malaguzzi. 'Il suo primo romanzo fu segnalato dall'Accademia Mondadori ed un grande critico ne proclamò i pregi su di un grande giornale.'91

Bompiani was also to tie its name to a prestigious literary award. The *Premio Galante* was established by the Bompiani publication, the *Almanacco letterario Bompiani*, in 1932. As its name suggests, it was a prize which was reserved exclusively for women. In contrast to previous all-female awards, such as the *Pensione Milli*, a grant established in 1890 to honour strong moral values as well as literary prowess, the *Premio Galante* was awarded solely on literary merit. Its recipients were notable, from Gianna Manzini in 1932 to Anna Banti in 1940, and the award not only attracted significant media attention but it also served to chart the strength of female narrative, representing, 'il contrassegno più evidente della rinascita della nuova letteratura femminile italiana'.<sup>92</sup>

The *Premio Mondadori* and *Premio Galante* were at the forefront of a wave of new literary awards established during the late 1920s and 1930s, which resulted both from heightened public interest in literary production and from the efforts of the regime to glorify Italian cultural achievement. From the *Premio Bagutta*, founded by a group of literary friends in 1926, to the pro-Fascist *Premio Cervia* established in 1934, these awards helped reignite public interest in Italian fiction and brought a touch of prestige to the world of fiction in the same way that the Oscars had done for the film industry. 'L'assegnazione dei premi rappresenta per noi qualcosa di avventuroso e raffinato', as the social commentator Irene Brin noted in her column in *Omnibus*. 'The most prestigious of these awards was the *Premio Viareggio*. Established in 1929 by Leonida Rèpaci, the award was designed as a meeting point for writers who refused to succumb to the pressures of Fascism, offering 'una possibilità di [...] riconoscimento di tutte quelle forze, di quelle

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Almanacco annuario della donna italiana*, 1936, pp. 191-222 (p. 219).

<sup>92</sup> Cited in 'Il Premio Galante', Meridiano di Roma, 12 December 1937, p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Repr. in *Cose viste 1938-1939* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1994), p. 103.

testimonianze, che meno avessero subito la pressione ideologica della dittatura', in the words of Rèpaci, and, as such, it reflected the more innovative writing of the period. Like the *Galante*, the *Premio Viareggio* was to play a significant role in the promotion of women's writing. In contrast to the *Bagutta*, which was conferred exclusively on male writers, the *Viareggio* honoured both men and women. In addition to Bellonci, who won joint first prize in 1939, gold medals were awarded to Masino, Anguissola, and Pietravalle in 1931, and to Fehr and Cattaneo in 1934 and 1935 respectively. Although less prestigious than the main award, the gold medal conferred recognition on an author's work and attracted considerable media interest, and even those who were shortlisted at Viareggio found themselves exposed to increased publicity, the exposure helping launch the careers of Ferro, whose *Disordine* was shortlisted in 1933, and de Céspedes, whose *L'anima degli altri* was shortlisted in 1935.

The developments in the publishing industry during the interwar years paved the way for the growing acceptance of women's writing during the thirties. From the establishment of literary awards to the production of mass-market fiction, these changes were instrumental in bringing literature to a wider audience and breaking down the gender-based divisions in both writing and readership. Seeking to capitalise on the growth in mass female readership, and facing pressure to promote Italian narrative and thereby counter the *crisi del libro*, publishers such as Mondadori and Bompiani were highly receptive to female literary production and eager to open it to a wider readership through targeted marketing campaigns and inclusion in prestigious literary series. The increasing feminisation of the publishing industry was not confined solely to book publishing, however, but was felt throughout the press as both newspapers and periodicals sought to cater for the expanding female market, and, in the following section, I will consider the changing nature of the press and its role in promoting women's writing.

### 1.5 THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S WRITING

#### 1.5.1 Newspapers

The changes which took place in the Italian press during the interwar years served as a visible sign of the increase in female readership and the economic force which women now

<sup>94</sup> Cited in Carlo Martini, Dizionario dei premi letterari (Milan: Mursia, 1969), p. 167.

represented. As greater numbers of women benefited from education and employment, so demand increased for publications which reflected these new social realities. Responding to this shift in the market, publishers began to change the male focus of newspapers by taking on more female journalists and incorporating subject matter which had a more feminine appeal. This process of modernisation was led by the *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*. Swift to adopt photogravure, the printing process which allowed photography to be reproduced at low cost on a mass scale, they introduced new magazine-style publications in the early 1930s, whose lively journalistic style and wealth of photographs attracted a new audience composed largely of women. A further innovation of Alfredo Signoretti, who took over the directorship of *La Stampa* in 1932, was the introduction of a women's page in 1933, edited by the popular writer Carola Prosperi, which contained a mixture of fashion and female-interest articles. The page was brought to an end in 1935, when new regulations limiting the length of newspapers came into force, but during this time, the willingness of the paper to cater for its new female audience sent circulation figures upwards, rising tenfold from 30,000 in 1930 to 300,000 in 1934.95

Similar changes were introduced to the cultural page of the daily press. An institution dating back to 1901, the *terza pagina* had been established as a means of bringing the ideas of eminent authors to a mass audience but, during the 1920s, the focus had moved to short fiction as publishers used leading writers to boost their circulation figures. This growing appetite for fiction resulted in greater opportunities for female writers, as Robin Pickering-Iazzi has observed, with established writers such as Negri and Deledda contributing to the *Corriere della Sera*, while their younger colleagues, such as Manzini and de Céspedes, found a receptive publisher in *Il Giornale d'Italia*. For up-and-coming writers such as Manzini and de Céspedes, the opportunity to publish their short fiction in a quality daily was of enormous benefit. Not only did the genre allow them to hone their narrative skills but it also provided a regular income and the opportunity to reach a large and diverse audience. Compared with the average print-run of a novel of 2,000 copies, top-selling newspapers such as the *Corriere della Sera* could reach over 400,000 readers per day, and this audience was made up of a much broader cross-section of the reading public for it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Figures cited in Paolo Murialdi, 'La stampa quotidiana del regime fascista', in *La stampa italiana nell'età fascista*, ed. by Massimo Legnani, Paolo Murialdi, and Nicola Tranfaglia (Rome: Laterza, 1980), pp. 31-257 (pp. 158 and 186).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> For a discussion of women's writing and the cultural page, see chapter one in Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible*, pp. 22-56.

contained a high volume of people who could not afford books as well as a significant proportion of male readers who would not normally invest their time in female literature but were more amenable to the immediacy of short fiction.

#### 1.5.2 Literary journals and magazines

The platform provided by newspapers for women's writing was replicated by literary periodicals, whose number increased significantly during the 1920s as the introduction of the rotogravure system, a high-speed printing process previously confined to newspapers, allowed the creation of cheaply produced periodicals for a mass market. The first of these new-style publications was *L'Italia che scrive*, a monthly literary supplement founded in 1918, which was followed seven years later by *La Fiera letteraria*, whose aim was to act as 'il grande organo diffusore di tutta la produzione nazionale', and whose price of 50 centesimi assured its accessibility to a mass readership.<sup>97</sup> Alongside these two mass-produced publications developed a wealth of smaller scale literary reviews, which encouraged cultural debate at a local level, such as the Milanese *Il Convegno* (1920-1939), the Rome-based *Novecento* (1926-1929), and the Florentine *Solaria* (1926-1934), and, by 1927, Antonio Bruers could claim there were close to one hundred literary journals across Italy.<sup>98</sup>

A further boost was given to the periodical market in the 1930s with the advent of the photogravure printing system. Rizzoli was the first Italian publisher to install photogravure presses and, during the late thirties, it launched *Omnibus* (1937-1939) and *Oggi* (1939-1942), which combined news and literature in a weekly tabloid format, while Mondadori founded the hugely popular *Tempo* in 1939, which placed a strong focus on pictorial news in the style of the American magazine *Life*.<sup>99</sup> It was these mass-market publications which were to play a key role in the promotion of women's writing during the thirties. While small-scale reviews were active in promoting European narrative in the face of parochial Fascist culture and, indeed, were instrumental in the development of writers such as Manzini, who received her early literary training at *Solaria*, their limited circulation meant

<sup>97</sup> Cited in *L'Indice*, 10 January 1931, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Antonio Bruers, 'I periodici', L'Italia che scrive, 1927, p. 195.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> For an overview of literary journals during the interwar years, see Giorgio Luti, *La letteratura nel ventennio fascista: cronache letterarie tra le due guerre 1920-1940* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1972); Giuseppe Langella, *Le riviste di metà Novecento* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1981); and Maria Teresa Carnevale Sciaudone, *Il ruolo delle riviste letterarie nella cultura italiana tra le due guerre* (Naples: Fratelli Conte, 1985).

they remained elitist journals, *Solaria* selling just 700 copies per issue. By contrast, top-selling periodicals such as *Tempo* could command sales of 400,000 and, despite their outward conformism, they proved steady champions of female literary production, featuring short fiction penned by women and reviews of female literature. Under the direction of Alberto Mondadori, *Tempo* featured the work of de Céspedes, Manzini, Masino, and Ortese, alongside that of Alvaro, Moravia, and Pavese; while *Oggi* published Morante, Banti, and Nemi, and its support was particularly important for the young Morante, for whom it provided a regular income and served as the launchpad for her literary career, her short stories appearing on an almost weekly basis between 1939 and 1941.

Quadrivio (1933-1943), a weekly pro-Fascist arts review founded by Telesio Interlandi, also proved an unlikely champion of women's writing. The declared aim of the journal was to 'conferire maggior decoro all'Italia letteraria ed artistica del tempo fascista' (29 December 1935, p. 1), yet, despite its avowedly pro-Fascist stance, it did not dismiss female literary production out of hand but followed the thinking of the Fascist intellectual Giuseppe Bottai, who, as I will discuss in chapter two, viewed Italian culture as an important vehicle for creating a favourable impression of Italy abroad. The position which Quadrivio adopted was one of support for literary production which would enhance the cultural prestige of the nation and, to this end, it singled out for praise the work of new generation writers, such as Manzini and Cialente, for ushering in an era of Italian female literary achievement. 'La letteratura femminile nostra ha, ora, raggiunto il suo posto dignitoso e glorioso nel quadro dell'arte', declared Ottorino Modugno in a discussion of Italian women's writing (30 August 1936, p. 8); while Ruggero Jacobbi identified in the work of the Premio Cervia winner, Ain Zara Magno, 'i sintomi di quel sensibile e profondo risveglio e rinnovamento della letteratura femminile italiana', which he had previously noted in the work of Manzini and Cialente (4 October 1936, p. 4).

It was La Fiera letteraria, however, which proved the greatest champion of women's writing. With a list of contributors that included Montale and Vittorini, the periodical

<sup>100</sup> Circulation figures for *Tempo* cited in *Alberto Mondadori: lettere di una vita 1922-1975*, ed. by Gian Carlo Ferretti (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), p. XXXIV.

The role of small-scale literary reviews, such as *Solaria*, in deprovincialising Italian narrative and resisting official Fascist culture has been well documented. See, for example, Sandro Briosi, *Il problema della letteratura in Solaria* (Milan: Mursia, 1976); and Lia Fava Guzzetta, *Solaria e la narrativa italiana intorno al 1930* (Ravenna: Longo, 1973).

quickly secured a pre-eminent position for itself, and its director Umberto Fracchia displayed his forward-looking approach by publishing the work of modernist writers, from Joyce to Mansfield, and by devoting significant attention to the work of female writers, such as Manzini, who was hailed for her contribution to the renaissance of the Italian novel during the late 1920s. Fracchia's replacement by Gian Battista Angioletti in late 1928 signalled the journal's closer involvement with Fascism, and its alignment with the regime was symbolised by the change in its title in early 1929 to *L'Italia letteraria* to mark the importance of national culture. However, its emphasis on modern Italian and European narrative remained due to the modernist leanings of Angioletti, who encouraged Italian authors to absorb contemporary literary influences from France and Britain. The journal's support for women's narrative also remained strong: during the early thirties, it featured the short fiction of Manzini, Banti, and Ferro, together with that of newcomers such as Ortese, whose work it first published in 1933; and it also serialised unpublished work, including Cialente's *Marianna* and *Cortile a Cleopatra*, the latter appearing in late 1935.

This support for women's writing suffered a temporary setback in 1936 when Bontempelli became director and the journal assumed an increasingly pro-Fascist tone. Although Bontempelli was a well-known champion of Ortese, the new editor-in-chief, Raul Maria De Angelis, was an entrenched critic of women's writing and, under his editorship, the publication of female fiction all but ceased and the tone of articles on female literature became increasingly hostile, with De Angelis declaring in July 1936 that women's writing deserved to be burned, although he did make exceptions for Manzini and Cialente. This period of hostility was shortlived, however, for the journal closed in December 1936 only to be relaunched the following month as Meridiano di Roma. Following in the footsteps of its predecessors, Meridiano di Roma enlisted a distinguished line-up of contributors, including Emilio Cecchi and Goffredo Bellonci, and offered a wide panorama of modern Italian literature, with a strong emphasis on female narrative. Featuring short fiction by Ortese, Morante, and Nemi, it showed itself to be a strong supporter of female literary production and was one of the periodicals responsible for declaring a renaissance in women's writing during the late 1930s, declaring Manzini, Drigo, and Ortese to be at the forefront of a resurgence in Italian female narrative and heralding 'il successo sempre crescente delle donne in letteratura' (27 March 1938, p. 3).

Support for women's writing also came from individual critics, with three of the most important names in Italian literary criticism, Goffredo Bellonci, Enrico Falqui, and Emilio

Cecchi, expressing praise for the new generation writers: Bellonci championed the work of Banti from the pages of Il Giornale d'Italia, declaring that the author had assured her entry 'nella più chiusa città della nostra letteratura contemporanea' with Itinerario di Paolina; while Falqui ensured that young female authors received the recognition they deserved, slating a French anthology of contemporary Italian writing, Anthologie des narrateurs italiens contemporains (1933), for citing only Negri and Deledda. 'Lyna [sic] Pietravalle, Marise Ferro, Paola Masino, Fausta Terni Cialente aspettano ancora, nel '33, un più galante antologista', he wrote (Novecento letterario italiano, II, 599). 101 Of the three, Cecchi was the most influential. A distinguished journalist and critic, Cecchi's essays and reviews commanded a wide readership and he represented, in the words of Banti, 'la voce più valida e più autorevole' in Italian literary criticism of the period. 102 During the 1930s, Cecchi played an important role in promoting the work of female writers, both in championing Italian novelists and introducing foreign authors to the reading public, as I will discuss in chapter four. His review of Manzini's Tempo innamorato, published in Pègaso in January 1929, challenged the prevailing belief that women's writing lacked originality, 'nell'espressione è un'incontro singolare d'ingenuità e ricerca, d'industria e candore' (p. 116), and he ascribed Banti with a similar originality, describing how she used the impressionistic style of Mansfield and Woolf as her departure point but developed it in her own inimitable way: 'La Banti [...] ha voluto seguire altra strada che quella dell'imitazione.' (Omnibus, 17 April 1937, p. 6) This was an endorsement which, as Goffredo Bellonci observed, opened the closed doors of the literary world to the novice writer: 'Le fu spalancata la porta dal più scontroso revisore di passaporti che io conosca, Emilio Cecchi.'103

Female critics were also to act as important champions of women's writing. Although fewer in number than their male counterparts, they represented a growing presence in literary journalism during the *ventennio*; the percentage of female journalists rose from seven per cent in 1921 to twelve per cent in 1931, as De Grazia has noted (*How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 196). While their presence in literary criticism attracted hostility from certain quarters, Luigi Tonelli remarking 'le donne non sono adatte alla critica vera e propria' (*Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1922, p. 255), they held their own against their

<sup>101</sup> Goffredo Bellonci, 'Una nuova scrittrice: Anna Banti', Il Giornale d'Italia, 13 June 1937, p. 3.

Anna Banti, 'Critica e letteratura', 1955 (repr. in *Opinioni*, pp. 83-89 (p. 84)).

<sup>103</sup> Goffredo Bellonci, 'Anna Banti', Mercurio, March-June 1948, pp. 157-64 (p. 157).

male colleagues and used their position to champion women's writing. One such example was Mercede Mùndula, a literary critic for *L'Italia che scrive*, who described the work of Manzini as 'nuova, fresca e originale', and hailed Cialente as 'accorta e originale'.<sup>104</sup> Mùndula was also active in countering the prejudice surrounding women's writing. 'Troppe donne scrivono, certo', she admitted in an article which discussed the adverse critical reaction to women writers, but she went on to argue: 'Parmi siano un po' troppi anche gli uomini e delle molte tonnellate di carta inutilmente stampata essi sono i più instancabili produttori.'<sup>105</sup>

Maria Luisa Fiumi represented a similarly strong advocate of women's writing. The editor of the cultural review Rassegna nazionale, Fiumi was a prominent member of the Fasci femminili, who promoted Italian female literary production through European lecture tours and articles in the foreign press as part of the regime's attempt to establish Italy as a nation of cultural standing. She was also a spirited defender of female writers and proved critical of any attempt to belittle their literary production. In response to Mario Gastaldi's self-proclaimed role as a defender of the weak in Donne luce d'Italia, she retorted, 'quel che gli uomini non hanno ben compreso è che [...] le donne che scrivono [...] non chiedono [...] di essere difese'; while the misogynistic content of Ruinas's Scrittrici e scribacchine d'oggi was also slated, his idea of forcing women to abandon their literary careers and serve as reproductive machines provoking a stern response from Fiumi: 'Per tutte le donne d'Italia che alla maggior grandezza della patria [...] portano l'offerta [...] della propria operosa intelligenza, gli uomini non hanno altro da fare che togliersi il cappello.'106 While Fiumi and Mundula championed women's writing in leading arts reviews, an even greater focus was placed on female literature by the women's press, with Maria Maggi, Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, and Irene Brin all serving as tireless supporters of modern female narrative from the pages of the Almanacco della donna italiana, and in the following section, I will discuss the influence of these critics, and the role played by female periodicals in the promotion of women's writing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Mercede Mùndula, 'Gianna Manzini: *Tempo innamorato'*, *L'Italia che scrive*, 1929, pp. 150-51 (p. 150).

Mercede Mùndula, 'Fausta Terni Cialente: Cortile a Cleopatra', L'Italia che scrive, 1937, pp. 55-56 (p. 55)

<sup>105</sup> Mercede Mùndula, 'Le donne e la critica', L'Italia che scrive, 1926, pp. 94-95 (p. 94).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Maria Luisa Fiumi, 'Rassegna letteraria', *La Rassegna nazionale*, May 1930, pp. 135-37 (pp. 136 and 137).

# 1.5.3 Women's periodicals

The post-war period witnessed the emergence of a new type of women's magazine, which, in common with the changes that were happening elsewhere in the press, resulted from the growth in female readership and a demand for publications which reflected the new reality of women's lives. Departing from the didactic style of periodicals such as Cordelia, which instructed middle-class women in social etiquette and moral behaviour, the new magazines combined fashion, fiction, and entertainment in an illustrated format to offer their readers 'una pubblicazione che raccolga tutto ciò che interessa la donna', in the words of the Corriere delle signore (1 January 1928, p. 1). The first of these new-style periodicals was Lidel. Launched in 1919 for an audience of wealthy upper-class women, and with a list of contributors that included Aleramo, Bontempelli, and Pirandello, Lidel acted as a serious cultural review while, at the same time, possessing the more lightweight appeal of a fashion and society magazine. Priced at 8 lire per issue, Lidel was out of reach of all but the wealthiest women but magazines aimed at the mass market were soon to follow, including Novella, a weekly magazine priced at 50 centesimi, which featured serialised fiction and photographs of film stars; Vita femminile, a fashion and entertainment magazine founded by the pro-Fascist journalist Ester Lombardo, whose price of 2.5 lire allowed it to be 'accessibile a tutte le borse anche le più modeste' (cited in Almanacco della donna italiana, 1923, p. 242); and Alba, a weekly Catholic periodical for the petitbourgeoisie, which, by early 1931, could claim that it was 'la rivista settimanale illustrata più diffusa d'Italia nel campo femminile', with 80,000 subscribers (18 January 1931, p. 8). These magazines were supplemented by women's almanacs, which included the Almanacco di Cordelia, a spin-off of Cordelia which was launched in 1930, and the Almanacco della donna italiana, which was founded in 1920. These two publications were very different in tone. The former was tied to its sister publication, whose work it continued by educating young women to become wives and mothers, while the latter was far broader in its scope, appealing to educated women across the social spectrum and seeking to raise both individual and collective female consciousness by highlighting the cultural, political, and social achievements of women. In the words of its editor, Silvia Bemporad: '[L'Almanacco] cerca di dare alla donna la conoscenza di sé e dei suoi mezzi d'azione e le addita le vie del miglioramento individuale e collettivo.'107

<sup>107</sup> Silvia Bemporad, 'Prefazione', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1922, pp. V-VI (p. V).

The focus of each periodical varied depending on the audience it was seeking to attract but common to all was a recognition of the popularity of fiction. From the romances serialised in *Novella* to the short fiction of Manzini featured in the *Almanacco della donna italiana*, women's magazines devoted considerable space to women's fiction, enabling readers to access a wealth of fiction at an affordable price, while those publications aimed at a more educated readership, such as *Lidel* and *Eva*, placed a strong emphasis on reviewing the latest works by contemporary writers. In contrast to turn-of-the-century publications, whose editors had been highly prescriptive in their choice of reading material, the new magazines introduced their readers to a much wider spectrum of work than one might have expected, the literary section of *Lidel* offering a panorama of European and American literature during the early 1930s, from Pirandello to Virginia Woolf, while the *Corriere delle signore* countered the widespread charges of immorality levelled at Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* by carrying a highly complimentary review of the novel, hailing it as 'un libro originale'. 108

In contrast to *Lidel* and *Corriere delle signore*, the *Almanacco della donna italiana* focused exclusively on women's writing, offering a comprehensive overview of female literary production. The work and lives of women writers were the subject of great fascination by the reading public and the almanac catered for this interest by carrying detailed reviews of their work, while its status as an annual publication, which ran to over three hundred pages, meant that it was able to offer far more extensive coverage of literary production than its weekly or monthly counterparts. <sup>109</sup> The aim of the almanac was to 'far conoscere le donne più attive e l'opera loro in qualsiasi campo si svolga, assistenza sociale, lettere, arti', and this was reflected in its detailed coverage of women's writing, which began at a modest eleven pages in 1920 and increased year on year until it reached forty pages by 1937. <sup>110</sup> Consisting of a detailed discussion of the trends in female narrative and

For an overview of the women's press during the *ventennio*, see Elisabetta Mondello, *La nuova italiana:* la donna nella stampa e nella cultura del Ventennio (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987).

<sup>108 &#</sup>x27;Libri da leggere', Corriere delle signore, 22 August 1929, p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> The great interest displayed in female writers can be seen in the results of a readers' survey, conducted by the almanac in 1923, of the ten most famous contemporary female figures. Although the survey elicited only a minimal response, with just 131 votes received from a subscriber base of 17,000, the results pointed to the overwhelming popularity of the writer in female culture. Five of the ten women chosen were writers and four of these appeared in the top five, namely Ada Negri, Grazia Deledda, Matilde Serao, and Annie Vivanti. ('Le dieci più illustri donne viventi scelte da un Referendum fra le lettrici dell'Almanacco', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1923, pp. 41-54).

<sup>110</sup> Silvia Bemporad, 'Prefazione', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1935, pp. XI-XII (pp. XI-XII).

reviews of the latest publications, the *rassegna letteraria* also featured photographs of the authors, an innovation which helped combat the belief that women writers were unattractive bluestockings.

Despite its firm commitment to female cultural production, the considerable space devoted to women's literary output was not always accompanied by a comparable degree of praise. The almanac was not slavish in its support of women's writing; indeed, during the 1920s, it was one of its harshest critics, the first compiler of the *rassegna letteraria*, Giuseppe Lipparini, calling on women to break free from the constraints of popular fiction, while his successor Luigi Tonelli lamented the lack of artistic merit in women's writing: 'Da una scrittrice si vuole [...] soprattutto dell'arte, e l'arte, nuova, profonda, originale, veramente *femminile*, è [...] assai difficile a trovare.' (1922, p. 254) Such criticism was symptomatic of the prevailing opinions which held sway about female literary production during the 1920s. However, with the emergence of a new vein in female narrative at the end of the decade, attitudes began to change and nowhere was this more visible than in the pages of the almanac, which acted as a vocal supporter of female narrative throughout the thirties.

The early thirties witnessed the start of a reign of female literary critics on the almanac, who would play a significant role in championing female literature that was resistant to Fascist culture. The first to take up the role was the novelist Maria Maggi in 1931 and, under her authorship, the rassegna letteraria became more polemicised as she made a clear distinction between the new generation of writers and those devoid of artistic merit who used their work to moralise. In the first category, she placed Masino and Cialente, highlighting the 'opere originali' of the former (1932, p. 136) and declaring of the latter's Natalia, 'quanta richezza d'insieme! che profondità d'indagine!' (1931, p. 202); while in the second category, she placed Mura and Flavia Steno, whose moralistic fiction she criticised for undermining artistic independence and integrity. Not only did Maggi's belief in art for art's sake conflict with the political engagement demanded of writers by the regime but she also proved resistant to Fascist ideology in her criticism of the pressures exerted on writers to view their career as secondary to their maternal role. In contrast to Stanis Ruinas, who praised the Fascist novelist Lisa Salvadori for being 'prima che artista donna e madre' (Scrittrici e scribacchine, p. 185), Maggi argued that women could not allow their identity as writers to be subsumed by their familial roles: 'La donna che scrive

soltanto da madre, da moglie, da figlia è per lo meno una contraddizione in termini.' (1932, p. 183).

Maggi's successor, the writer and journalist Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, proved equally resistant to the narrowly cast vision of the female role promulgated by the regime. In a review of *Eva e il paracadute* (1933) by the pro-Fascist writer Pia Rimini, a novel which upheld the notion of female subservience, Banfi Malaguzzi argued strongly in favour of equality of the sexes, declaring, 'noi sappiamo che lo sforzo della via moderna è di raggiungere l'eguaglianza dei due sessi' (1934, p. 152). She was similarly forthright in her rejection of the appellation *virile* to notions of intellect, using the example of Margherita Sarfatti to disprove this belief which had achieved widespread currency during the late twenties. 'Si è già detto che Margherita Sarfatti è donna di ingegno maschio', she noted in her review of the republished *I vivi e l'ombra* (1921). 'In questo suo volumetto [...] essa dimostra tutta l'assurdità di questa definizione. Ingegno maschio per dire robusto? [...] Ma un ingegno è robusto anche se è di donna.'111

Banfi Malaguzzi, who served as the almanac's literary critic from 1933 to 1938, was a formidable ally for women writers. Not only was she an outspoken critic of the submissive female model but she was also vociferous in her efforts to counter the deep-rooted prejudice about women's writing. Rather than expressing alarm at the number of women entering the literary sphere, she applauded their arrival, 'non ce ne lamenteremo, piuttosto diremo [...] che questo è buon segno', and her description of their growing number as 'centuria' positioned them as literary warriors conferring glory on the Italian nation (1933, p. 131). She also refuted the claim that female authors lacked originality. Women's relative lack of cultural education was a benefit rather than a hindrance, she argued, for they were

During the mid-1930s, the almanac underwent a schism when the position of its editor, Silvia Bemporad, became untenable following a scandal involving her husband. After being forced to leave, Bemporad created an alternative almanac in 1936, entitled Almanacco annuario della donna italiana, which changed its name to Donne italiane: almanacco annuario the following year. Daria Banfi Malaguzzi was one of the writers who went to work on the new publication, where she continued in her efforts to promote Italian women's writing, expanding the section on Italian women's literature to forty pages in length. The original almanac, meanwhile, became much more conformist in tone. Under the editorship of Gabriella Aruch Scaravaglio, the rassegna letteraria passed to Francesco Jovine, who changed it from a showcase for women's writing to an overview of male literary production in which women were marginalised under the subsection 'letteratura femminile' and limited in number due to Jovine's wish to include 'solo libri narrativi che abbiano vera importanza per i loro pregi intrinseci' (1936, p. 75). This schism ended in 1939, when the the Almanacco della donna italiana was sold to Marzocco, and Donne italiane ceased publication. For a detailed examination of the Almanacco della donna italiana during its twenty-three-year history, see Mondello, La nuova italiana, pp. 159-202.

free from the *letteratismo* which encumbered the work of their male counterparts, 'la scrittrice non è quasi mai letterata e la sua ispirazione è libera da retaggi e suggestioni spesso atrofizzanti', and, in this respect, women were pioneers for they were able to capture details with a freshness that was lacking in male writing: 'Le scrittrici [...] scoprono il loro mondo e cercano di capirlo con una freschezza, con una impetuosità [...] quale gli uomini scrittori non hanno più o hanno rarissimamente.'

She was also strongly committed to a separate female literature, arguing that women should not seek to write like men but create a distinctive literature that reflected the modern female consciousness. Taking Britain and France as her role models, she claimed that literary production in both countries was dominated by women who rejoiced in their gender rather than seeking to disguise it: 'La letteratura femminile più matura, e cioè l'inglese, è tipicamente femminile, e quella francese, che la segue immediatamente per importanza, si gloria anzi della sua femminilità.' (1933, p. 135) Her call for female writers to follow in the footsteps of their European counterparts and create a literature which captured modern life seemed to have been answered in 1934 when she observed a departure from the formulaic plot-based novel towards the novel of experience in the vein of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson. 'Usciamo [...] dal tipo del romanzo ad intreccio ed entriamo nel romanzo d'esperienza', she noted with satisfaction; 113 and, two years later, she announced that Italian women were standing 'fianco a fianco dell'uomo' in the literary world and their writing would soon achieve the status it enjoyed in other countries:

La letteratura femminile italiana sta diventando sempre più seria e importante e non è errato prevedere che, tra non molto, prenderà quel posto di prima linea che la produzione femminile ha già negli altri paesi. (1936, p. 191)

The strength of conviction which Banfi Malaguzzi displayed in female narrative was echoed by her successor, Irene Brin, who took over the *rassegna letteraria* in 1939. Just twenty-five years of age and fresh from working on *Omnibus* and *Tempo*, Brin gave a more contemporary feel to the literature section of the almanac, changing its title to 'I libri che ho letto' and abolishing the categories which separated Italian and foreign fiction to create a single overview of modern literary production. By grouping authors together in this way, Brin not only showed a blatant disregard for the cultural autarchy demanded by the regime

Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Donne italiane: almanacco annuario*, 1938, pp. 177-206 (p. 179).

<sup>113</sup> Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1934, pp. 135-64 (p. 136).

but she also encouraged the practice of comparing authors across regional divides: Banti's narrative style in *Sette lune* (1941) was likened to that of Moravia and Proust; the influence of Kipling was noted in Nemi's *Rococò*; and even the popular writer Luciana Peverelli was discussed in a European context, with influences cited from Proust to Rosamond Lehmann. Like her predecessors, Brin also proved an indefatigable supporter of Italian female narrative. Although the section was greatly reduced in length from the days of Banfi Malaguzzi, amounting to only half a dozen pages in total, it featured the most significant names in contemporary women's writing and Brin herself proved militant in her support for the new generation, declaring in the 1940 edition:

Mi solleva al grado di Suffragetta; e [...] imitando la signora Pankhurst, che gridando *Voto alle donne*, si gettava, al Derby, tra le zampe dei cavalli in corsa, dovrò sacrificarmi alle Capannelle, agitando bandierine con *W. Maria Bellonci e Alba de Céspedes!*. (p. 189)

The women's press served to mirror the changing attitudes towards female literary production. The 1920s was governed by a prevailing hostility towards women's writing as male critics viewed the increase in female writers with alarm, whereas the 1930s witnessed growing support for female literary production as well as a renewed pride in Italy's female literary heritage. As part of the concerted effort to glorify Italy's literary past, significant attention was given to late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers in the female press, the 1930 Almanacco di Cordelia featuring an article entitled 'Profili di donne dimenticate', which acknowledged the contribution made to women's literature by Ida Baccini, Caterina Percoto, and Marchesa Colombi, and this interest was fuelled by booklength studies, such as Jolanda De Blasi's Le scrittrici italiane dalle origini al 1800 (1931) and Maria Castellani's Donne italiane di ieri e di oggi (1937), the latter hailing the patriotic fervour of Risorgimento writers such as Cristina Belgioioso and Erminia Fuà Fusinato, who sang forth 'le glorie guerriere della Nazione'. 114 Even Aleramo, who had been sidelined during the 1920s found herself reinstated into the ranks of great writers during the early thirties; as Elisabetta Mondello has noted, the magazine Eva described her as 'una scrittrice insigne che ha portato la sua gloria di italiana oltre i confini della patria', while the academic Teresa Labriola claimed that Una donna marked the start of 'la via regia' in Italian female narrative. 115

<sup>114</sup> Maria Castellani, Donne italiane di ieri e di oggi (Florence: Bemporad, 1937), pp. 73-74.

<sup>115</sup> Eva, 17 June 1933 (cited in Mondello, 'L'immagine di Sibilla nella stampa femminile', p. 265). Teresa Labriola, 'Di Voi, con Voi, per Voi', La Donna Italiana, December 1933, p. 659.

#### 1.6 CONCLUSION

The renaissance which was heralded in Italian female narrative during the 1930s was the result of a number of convergent factors: the emergence of a new generation of female writers coincided both with a period of profound change in the press and the publishing industry which laid the foundations for a vibrant female literature, and with an increased focus on literary achievement by the regime, which was seeking to enhance the nation's cultural prowess. Responding to the growth in female readership, the press created massmarket publications which appealed to a female audience, thereby opening up new opportunities for women to reach a wide readership and helping them establish careers as professional writers, while the newly established publishing houses of Mondadori and Bompiani acted as firm champions of female narrative, marketing the work of female authors to a wide audience and ending the practice of segregating authors by gender. As professional writers, who countered the stereotypical image of the scribacchina, the new generation helped sever the link between women's writing and letteratura amena. Challenging the belief that women's fiction lacked substance and was produced spontaneously with no concern for style or form, they proved that it could be innovative and intelligent and, by creating narratives which combined a sharp intellect with a keen sensibility, they undermined the distinction between masculine and feminine styles of writing, arguing that a work of literature should not be judged on the gender of its author. Hailed for effecting a renaissance in Italian female narrative, they succeeded both in raising the profile and status of women's literature and in reducing the divide between male and female writers, an achievement which is all the more remarkable considering it took place in a period in which gender had become increasingly politicised and the inferior status of women was constantly reaffirmed, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

# Chapter Two Women Writers and Fascism

# 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Under Mussolini's dictatorship, the female role was redefined according to prescriptive formulae. The new models of womanhood, which had emerged in the early part of the century promoting a heightened sense of autonomy, were progressively stifled under Fascism as the regime sought to increase its imperial strength by maximising the number of births and to reimpose patriarchal authority, an authority which was perceived to have been eroded by the increasing independence of women. Womanhood was reinvented as a combination of domesticity, fertility, and obedience, and the female role was deemed to be one of self-sacrifice and subordination. In the words of the Fascist theoretician Ferdinando Loffredo: 'La donna deve tornare sotto la sudditanza assoluta dell'uomo: padre o marito; sudditanza, e quindi inferiorità: spirituale, culturale ed economica.' There was, however, a noticeable ambiguity in the attitude of the regime towards women. As Victoria De Grazia has observed, not only did the Fascist state seek to exclude women from public life and recast them in a biologically determined role but it also sought to mobilise them in an effort to increase national economic strength and international prestige, a policy which undercut conservative notions of the female role (How Fascism Ruled Women, p. 2). Women's organisations, such as the Fasci femminili, were founded as part of this mass mobilisation programme, organisations which opened up new spaces for women in the public sphere as propagandists and social workers. Thus, not only was the Italian woman required to be a prolific mother and angel of the hearth, a role which she carried out from the confines of the home, but she was also expected to contribute to the strength and glory of the Italian nation, which required her active participation in public life.

This contradictory view of the female role was to inform the regime's attitude towards women's writing. Despite the desire of Fascist theoreticians to relegate women to a position of cultural inferiority, women's writing was not only tolerated by the regime but, in many respects, it was actively supported. As part of the effort to include women in the struggle to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Ferdinando Loffredo, *Politica della famiglia* (Milan: Bompiani, 1938), p. 369.

achieve a new Italy and glorify Fascism's achievements abroad, notable female literary figures were enlisted to promote Italian women's writing, female literary achievement was championed by women's periodicals in order to foster a sense of pride in the role played by women in serving the nation, while state bursaries and prizes were awarded to assist and encourage young writers. This is not to say that the regime permitted women to enter the higher echelons of literary society nor that it countered the prevailing anti-female bias in Italian culture. Nevertheless, female culture enjoyed a noticeable rise in visibility and status during the thirties, while women writers experienced a greater degree of freedom than many post-war commentators have tended to assume, a freedom which was not conditional on support for the regime.

In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss the regime's contradictory response to women's writing, contrasting the repressive rhetoric of Fascist ideologues, such as Ferdinando Loffredo and Nicola Pende, with the more tolerant attitude of government ministers such as Giuseppe Bottai, and examining the differing ways in which the Fascist state supported and promoted female cultural production despite its avowed aim of returning women to the home. In the second part of the chapter, I will deal with the issue of censorship, looking at individual writers whose work was targeted by the censors and how the lack of a clear censorship programme allowed women to voice dissent to Fascist ideology. In the final part of the chapter, I will examine the complex, and often contradictory, reaction of women writers to the regime, and reveal the extent to which they supported or resisted the dominant Fascist myths in their work.

# 2.2 THE REPRESSION OF WOMEN BY THE REGIME

# 2.2.1 Female employment and education

When Mussolini came to power in 1922, there was no indication of the hostility which would become such a defining characteristic of the Fascist regime. Indeed, the first Fascist programme of June 1919 had advocated full voting rights for women, Mussolini promising 'suffragio universale [..] con voto ed eleggibilità per le donne' in an attempt to secure widespread female support.<sup>2</sup> However, during the course of the twenties, the regime

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Cited in Eia, Eia, Eia, Alalà! La stampa italiana sotto il fascismo, 1919-1943, ed. by Oreste Del Buono (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), p. 13.

developed an increasingly hostile attitude towards women as Mussolini pursued his opportunistic approach to policy-making and reasserted his conservative view of women's role in society. 'Il vero posto della donna nella società moderna, è attualmente, come in passato, nella casa', he declared in an interview with the journalist Hélène Gosset (cited in Meldini, p. 35). It was the launch of the demographic campaign in May 1927 which signalled the most significant step in the politicisation of the female role. Having consolidated his power base during the mid-1920s, Mussolini's focus shifted from protecting the interests of his supporters to increasing the nation's military strength, the key to which he believed lay in population size. Launching his pronatalist policy in his Ascension Day speech of 26 May 1927, Mussolini stated his intent to increase Italy's population from forty to sixty million and, over the course of the following decade, a series of coercive and punitive measures were introduced to encourage women to fulfil their duty as reproducers of the nation: financial incentives were offered to prolific families; loans of 2,000 lire were awarded to newly wed couples, the repayment of which was reduced with the birth of each child; while contraception was outlawed and abortion made a crime against the state.3

The close correlation between womanhood and motherhood posited by the regime echoed the position of the Catholic Church. In February 1929, these two ideologies came together with the signing of the Lateran Pact, which consolidated the regime's power and signalled the increased influence of Catholic doctrine in Fascist policy. The encyclical *Casti connubi*, issued in December 1930, came to symbolise the official view of womanhood: subordination and servility were the destiny of women and the female role was rooted firmly in motherhood. This narrowly defined view of womanhood was reaffirmed in the rhetoric of the regime. Women were to be, in the words of the Fascist ideologue Manlio Pompei, 'mamme, tre, cinque, dieci volte mamme', and they were to embrace their 'nobile e santa missione' as childbearers and custodians of the hearth, a role which was afforded a quasi sacred status as Fascist discourse adopted the language of Catholic teaching.<sup>4</sup> This sacred female mission was deemed to be at risk, however, for, in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For an analysis of Fascist pronatalist policies, see Lesley Caldwell, 'Reproducers of the Nation: Women and the Family in Fascist Policy', in *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, ed. by David Forgacs, pp. 110-41; and Chiara Saraceno, 'Redefining Maternity and Paternity: Gender, Pronatalism and Social Policies in Fascist Italy', in *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States*, 1880s-1950s, ed. by Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 196-212.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Manlio Pompei, 'Donne e culle', *Critica fascista*, 15 March 1930, pp. 106-07 (p. 106).

the eyes of both the Church and state, traditional gender roles were being undermined by female employment. The first two decades of the century had witnessed a significant rise in female employment, particularly during the First World War when large numbers of women had entered the labour market to replace the men who had gone to the front. Although many women lost their jobs to veterans at the end of the war, those who had acquired a taste for financial independence sought alternative employment, often as shop or office workers, and further opportunities were created by the Sacchi law of 1919, which granted women equal access to public office. This increase in female employment was greeted with alarm by the Church and with growing resentment by male white-collar workers, who represented a core group of Fascist supporters. Deemed 'una corruzione dell'indole muliebre e della dignità materna' by the Casti connubi (cited in Macciocchi, La donna 'nera', p. 49), female employment was perceived as a significant threat to the established order for it not only undermined male authority but deflected women from their maternal mission and cultivated individualism, which was contrary to the altruism required of the exemplary wife and mother.

In an effort to limit female employment, the Fascist government passed a series of laws restricting female access to the public sector: in 1923, women were barred from acting as head teachers in middle schools, and this was followed in 1926 by legislation excluding women from teaching posts in core subjects in grammar schools; the focus shifted to other areas of the public sector in 1933, with strict limitations imposed on the number of women allowed to compete in civil service examinations, and a ten per cent quota placed on female employment in state administration. This repressive legislation was accompanied by a vigorous propaganda campaign. Extra-domestic work was vilified in the right-wing press for corrupting a generation of young women, who were labelled 'silk-stocking workers' and charged with frittering away their salaries. 'Sapete [...] perché una parte del sesso femminile va [...] al negozio, all'ufficio?' asked the editor of the Catholic women's periodical Alba. 'Per vestire meglio, [...] per comperare un cappello di più, un paio di scarpe all'ultimissima moda.'5 The belief that work masculinised women was also widely promoted in the press. The female body and mind were thought ill-equipped to deal with the physical and mental demands of work, and this view was supported by pseudo-scientific studies of the day, the German medic Heinz Graupner arguing that not only were women at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Angela Sorgato, 'Amore alla famiglia', *Alba*, 30 November 1930, p. 2.

risk of damaging their uterus through over-exertion but, by pursuing an intellectual career, they would lapse 'nell'apatia, nel pessimismo e perfino nell'isterismo'.<sup>6</sup>

The only professions deemed suitable for women were those which drew upon their feminine propensity to care for others, such as nursing or elementary teaching. However, rather than promoting careers in these professions, the regime encouraged women to enrol as visitatrici fasciste under the aegis of the Fasci femminili, a role which encompassed teaching, social work, and healthcare within a framework that promoted Fascist doctrine. A mass organisation founded in 1921 and given official recognition a decade later, the Fasci femminili was assigned the task of moral and social welfare in the new Italy, its work ranging from assistance in soup kitchens to the promotion of government propaganda. This work was performed by legions of visitatrici, trained female volunteers who received little remuneration for their efforts but who readily sacrificed their time for the sake of the nation, and their efforts were applauded by the Fascist press, which promoted the new Fascist woman as a donna attiva who took an active role in shaping the nation's future. Yet, while being encouraged to participate in civic life as visitatrici, women also faced constant reminders that their social duties came second to their child-bearing role. 'Il Fascismo vede nella donna, innanzitutto e sopratutto, la sposa, la madre', affirmed Luigi Gozzini.<sup>7</sup> The new Fascist woman was thus to play an active role in shaping the future of the Italian nation whilst never losing sight of her role as mother and guardian of the hearth, and women who combined these qualities were held up for others to emulate, as in the case of Luisa Federzoni, a leading member of the Fasci femminili, who was hailed as '[una] donna italiana intelligente, attiva, capace di conciliare le obbligazioni di un'alta posizione sociale con le cure della famiglia, rimanendo sempre squisitamente donna' (Almanacco della donna italiana, 1933, p. 5).

The regime's contradictory attitude towards female employment, whereby women were urged to participate in state initiatives but vilified for undertaking paid employment, also underscored its attitude to female education. The most vigorous opposition to women's education came from the sociologist Ferdinando Loffredo. In *Politica della famiglia*, his misogynistic tract of 1938, Loffredo claimed that an academic education fostered 'l'indipendenza intellettuale' in women and he proposed in its place educational

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Heinz Graupner, Lo specchio della donna, trans. by Spina Vismara (Milan: Bompiani, 1943), p. 31.

Luigi Gozzini, 'La donna nel quadro del regime', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1939, pp. 39-45 (p. 42).

programmes based on home economics, 'in modo da impartire alla donna un'istruzione intesta a fare di essa un'eccellente madre di famiglia e padrona di casa' (pp. 351 and 361). Loffredo's belief in a separate female education system was supported by the Fascist theoretician Nicola Pende, who advocated the creation of a separate university faculty for women on the grounds that the female brain was incapable of understanding intellectual subjects and the pursuit of such an education caused masculinisation: 'Una cultura [...] intellettuale che pareggi la donna all'uomo [...] finisce con l'alterare questa femminilità, ora atrofizzandone i lati più necessari alle funzioni di sposa e di madre, [...] ora deformandola in senso maschile.'8 This separate female education system was never realised, however. The closest it came to being put into practice was the 1939 Schools Charter, which proposed the creation of female institutes that would prepare women for their roles as wives and mothers, but the proposal was never implemented due to wartime mobilisation and the belief of Giuseppe Bottai, the Minister for National Education, that women should be allowed to decide their own educational path. Bottai, who served as minister from 1936 to 1943, symbolised the ambivalent attitude of many leading Fascists towards female education. On one hand, he was responsible for the Schools Charter, which defined female education in terms of domestic training, and on the other, he valued his own daughter's education, sending her to a girls' private school, the Parioli Institute in Rome. Mussolini acted in a similar manner, sending his daughter Edda to one of the country's most exclusive finishing schools, the Poggio Imperiale in Florence, while, at the same time, asserting that women's role was in the home.

A similar ambivalence underscored the regime's attitude towards higher education. During the *ventennio*, only two attempts were made to curb the number of female students, the first in 1929, when women's tuition fees were raised to double those of male students, and the second in 1932, when a clause was introduced into the new school statute excluding women from the *Scuola Normale Superiore* in Pisa. Neither piece of legislation was effective in reducing student numbers, however, with the percentage of women in the university population rising from nine per cent in 1919 to seventeen per cent in 1935. Yet, despite proving reluctant to bar women's access to higher education, the regime nonetheless sought to define its purpose along strict lines. Women were to pursue academic studies that reflected their natural inclination towards the arts and teaching, and this firm

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Nicola Pende, 'Femminilità e cultura femminile', *Gerarchia*, May 1941 (repr. in Meldini, pp. 49-50 (p. 49)).

cultural foundation would enable them to perform their role as educators in the home with a greater degree of proficiency. 'La cultura femminile [...] non è rivolta allo sviluppo di un cerebralismo sterile, ma invece intesa a creare nella donna una armonia spirituale. Soltanto se così orientata, essa farà [...] della madre la illuminata consigliera dei figli', declared the Fascist activist Maria Castellani (*Donne italiane*, p. 69).

The regime's response to women's education thus echoed its ambiguous attitude to female employment. Although attempts were made to steer girls away from academic subjects towards activities deemed more suited to their temperament, the desire of Fascist leaders to see their own daughters well educated resulted in few restrictions being placed on female education. Also, despite warnings by Fascist ideologues of the dangers associated with academic study, women were encouraged to secure a well-rounded education in the belief that it would enhance their abilities as wives and mothers. The regime thus both applauded and condemned female education for it sought to create a generation of mothers, whose educational abilities would contribute to the nation's strength, while remaining fearful of the independence which such opportunities conferred on women. In its desire to nurture women who were intelligent but not free-thinking, academically enquiring but accepting of Fascist doctrine, it placed a series of contradictory demands on women, demands which were echoed in contemporary society. In the words of Maria Maggi:

L'uomo in sostanza vuole e non vuole la donna colta. [...] Se tenta di conciliare tutti gli estremi, dirà forse che tollera la donna che lavora [...] ma che per principio la donna troppo esperta di libri, scaltra, arguta, pronta a servirsi dell'arma della propria intelligenza, gli mette una certa paura.

# 2.3 THE REGIME'S ATTITUDE TO FEMALE CULTURE

#### 2.3.1 The campaign for repression

The debate on women and culture, like that on women and education, gave rise to widely differing views within the Fascist party. A small but vocal minority, headed by Gherardo Casini, advocated the repression of female cultural production, proposing that women should be restrained in the fields of art and literature in the same way that they had

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Maria Maggi, 'La donna del nostro tempo deve essere colta?', *Giornale della donna*, 15 January 1934, p. 5.

been in politics. 10 At the opposite end of the spectrum stood Giuseppe Bottai, who opposed all moves to limit literary and artistic freedom. A highly cultured man, who viewed culture as the highest expression of the dignity of the individual, Bottai opposed repression not only on the grounds that it would impoverish people's lives but also that it would weaken the power of the state, for he believed that it played an important role in forming national identity and harnessing popular support. 'L'arte è un valore essenziale ed attuale della personalità nazionale', he asserted in Critica fascista, the cultural review he founded in 1923, and he argued that state support for cultural enterprise was an important element in the politicisation of national life: 'Una politica, che voglia essere veramente l'organizzazione della vita nazionale [...] deve curare il fatto arte in tutte le sue manifestazioni.'11 Whilst cautioning that state intervention in the cultural sphere should be carried out 'con molta saggezza e prudenza', he advocated 'tutela economica degli artisti, sia eccellenti, sia mediocri' in order to create a supportive climate in which the new Fascist culture could flourish. 12 Opposed to the mass mobilisation of writers on the grounds that it would stifle creativity, Bottai argued that true art resulted from 'la libera espressione dello spirito', and artistic independence was a prerequisite for producing a creative culture that would express the Fascist vision.<sup>13</sup>

While holding little of Bottai's interest in cultural matters, Mussolini shared his belief in the value of culture to the regime. Following the murder of the socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 and the subsequent crisis which threatened to dislodge his government, Mussolini realised that he needed to strengthen Fascism's hold over Italian society in order to remain in power, and he saw culture as a means by which to consolidate his rule. He also looked upon culture as an important vehicle for creating a favourable impression of Italy abroad for, as he noted in a speech given to the Society of Authors in 1926, a book or play was a far more effective method of engaging with a mass audience than a political speech:

Writing under the pseudonym "Il Doganiere", Casini asserted, 'sarà merito nostro se il catenaccio che abbiamo applicato alle donne in politica, potremo estenderlo in altri campi e soprattutto nell'arte e nelle lettere' ('Donne a casa', *Critica fascista*, 1 October 1929, p. 378).

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, 'L'arte nel patrimonio della nazione', Critica fascista, 15 July 1938 (repr. in La politica delle arti: scritti 1918-1943, ed. by Alessandro Masi (Rome: Editalia, 1992), pp. 148-50 (p. 149)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, 'Risultanze dell'inchiesta sull'arte fascista', *Critica fascista*, 15 February 1927, pp. 61-64 (pp. 62-63).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, 'Il nuovo ordine artistico', Critica fascista, 1 August 1927, pp. 80-83 (p. 81).

Il libro ha qualche volta il valore di una ambasciata; qualche volta il successo di un'opera teatrale all'estero ha un grande valore, forse superiore a quello di un discorso politico. Perché? Perché sono queste le forme che vanno alle grandi masse [...] e fanno conoscere l'Italia.<sup>14</sup>

Writers thus came to be regarded by the regime as a valuable national resource, who could be called upon to promote Fascist ideology at home and champion a positive image of Italy abroad. Female writers represented an important element of this resource for not only did women's traditional role as educators and moral guardians make them highly suited to the task of instructing the populace in Fascist values but the international acclaim won by writers such as Grazia Deledda and Sibilla Aleramo was seen as instrumental in establishing Fascist Italy as a nation of cultural standing. A limit on female cultural production thus not only risked lessening the efficacy of government propaganda but it also risked diminishing the glory of Italian cultural achievements and tarnishing the positive image of Italy which the regime was seeking to promote abroad. Repressive legislation in the cultural sphere was also held unnecessary on economic grounds for the arts were considered different from other professions in that they functioned outside the main economic sphere. Although the increased presence of women in the cultural sphere provoked anxiety in the literary establishment, the regime did not regard their growing numbers with concern since they did not pose a threat to male employment. Nor were the arts thought to lead to economic independence or foster a spirit of materialism in women for writing was still regarded as a dilettante pursuit among women, which brought little financial recompense. Although reservations were felt about women pursuing cultural activities for they were believed to foster ambition which was contrary to the selflessness demanded of the new Fascist woman, these reservations did not constitute grounds for limiting women's cultural production. Rather they prompted the ever closer scrutiny of the conduct of female writers and the imposition of guidelines on suitable modes of behaviour.

The campaign to repress female cultural production thus remained largely discursive and did not translate into action. The regime made no attempt to restrict the publication of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Benito Mussolini, 'Per la sede romana della Società degli Autori' (repr. in Giuliano Manacorda, *Letteratura e cultura del periodo fascista* (Milan: Principato, 1974), pp. 112-13 (p. 113)).

As Denis Mack Smith observes in *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), the Fascist leader was eager to give the impression that he was a man of culture and he allowed stories to circulate about his vast cultural knowledge. However, in reality he showed little interest in such matters, preferring popular romance to highbrow fiction and avoiding the company of intellectuals because they made him feel inferior (pp. 131-32).

women's work. Female writers figured prominently in the lists of publishing houses and even the pro-Fascist firm Vallecchi included women in its stable of writers, publishing Margherita Cattaneo's Io nel mezzo alongside works by Giovanni Papini and Curzio Malaparte. Nor did the regime curtail the circulation of women's fiction; the romantic novelists Mura and Carola Prosperi were among the period's best-selling authors and the work of leading female writers, such as Ada Negri and Grazia Deledda, appeared on the shelves of school libraries and on the list of approved books to be sent to Italian soldiers overseas.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Mussolini himself showed a keen interest in women's fiction and endorsed works personally, his favourable response to a novel by Annie Vivanti resulting in Mondadori printing a special wrap to go round the book with the words "Mi piace" -Mussolini' (cited in Forgacs, Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, p. 55). The regime also made no attempt to prevent women's receipt of literary awards: Bianca de Maj was awarded the Premio dei Trenta in 1928, Fausta Cialente the Premio dei Dieci in 1929, and Maria Bellonci the *Premio Viareggio* in 1939. Bellonci's victory in particular signalled the extent to which the regime tolerated female achievement, for the fascistisation of the award in 1935 resulted in all nominated works having to pass through the Ministry of Press and Propaganda for approval.

While exempt from repressive legislation, female writers nonetheless found themselves the target of a sustained campaign not to neglect their maternal duties. As in other professions, great emphasis was placed on motherhood. Writers were encouraged to reject the stereotypical image of the female intellectual who had sacrificed her femininity to her intellect and women who combined a literary career with their maternal role were held up as examples for others to emulate, as in the case of Elda Bossi, who founded the publishing house La Nuova Italia in 1926:

Si potrebbe pensare che si tratti di [...] una specie di suffragetta occhialuta. È invece una giovane sposa ed ha due bei bambini. [...] Ed è questo uno dei più brillanti esempi di come una donna [...] dotata di un bell'ingegno, possa svolgere un'attività sua propria, senza cessare di essere una buona moglie e una buona madre. <sup>16</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> A list of the novels acquired by a representative sample of school libraries during the *ventennio* can be found in Mario Isnenghi, *L'educazione dell'italiano: il fascismo e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1979), pp. 247-318.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> 'Attività intellettuale femminile', Almanacco annuario della donna italiana, 1936, pp. 184-89 (p. 187).

Women who pursued a literary career were advised not to allow their work to detract from their femininity, a term which denoted modesty and submissiveness. Meekness rather than triumphalism was to be shown in the face of success and this was exemplified by the poet Ada Negri, who was commended for being 'libera da ogni narcisismo che sarebbe stato comprensibile in lei, altissima', on the occasion of her election to the Academy of Italy (*Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1940, p. 213). Indeed, Negri was widely regarded as the role model for others to follow, her combination of modesty and national pride symbolising the qualities demanded of the female writer in the new Italy. In the words of Stanis Ruinas:

La grandezza di Ada Negri è pari alla sua modestia. [...] È buona con tutti come una madre. La sua arte rispecchia meravigliosamente queste sue qualità di donna e fa onore all'Italia. (*Scrittrici e scribacchine*, p. 83)

The pressures exerted on female writers were thus similar to women in other professions, with great emphasis placed on the need to preserve their femininity and maternal instinct. However, in contrast to white-collar workers, writers were not targeted by legislation limiting their numbers and they enjoyed considerably more freedom than their counterparts in teaching or administration. While their position in the cultural hierarchy did not improve under Fascism, for, as I will discuss in the next section, the regime perpetuated the prevailing anti-female bias in Italian culture by excluding women from the cultural elite, neither did it suffer a decline as a result of repressive legislation. Indeed, for many women writers, the *ventennio* represented a period of increased opportunity. Viewed as important players in the effort to establish Fascist Italy as a nation of literary achievement, they were urged to take an active role in the cultural formation of the country and their cultural production was supported by the government in an effort to enhance the cultural prestige of the nation.

# 2.3.2 The campaign for a separate female cultural sphere

While a small minority of Fascist theoreticians called for repression, a far greater number supported the relegation of women's cultural production to a separate sphere. One of its main advocates was Nicola Pende, who argued that in culture, as in education, women required a separate sphere geared to the feminine traits of patience and intuition because they lacked the necessary powers of invention to excel. As he noted in *Gerarchia* in May 1941: 'Molto di rado la donna è capace di assurgere alla celebrità in quei campi del pensiero che richiedono potenza di pensiero astratto e di senso di proporzioni od invenzione

originale.' (cited in Meldini, p. 49) Separate male and female cultures were also held important in confirming gender roles, as Giovanni Gentile noted in his essay 'La donna nella coscienza moderna' (1934). Claiming that gender difference was a cultural formation rather than a biological given, Gentile argued that, in order to maintain the division between the sexes, society needed to respect the social and cultural factors which influenced the development of gendered identity and that, by confining female writers to a cultural ghetto, their difference would be confirmed and they would be encouraged to reflect their feminine nature in their work.

Despite wide support among the Fascist intelligentsia, this cultural apartheid was never adopted as official policy. However, it did inform the regime's attitude towards the female role in the cultural sphere by reinforcing the view that women should occupy a subordinate position in the cultural hierarchy. A two-tier system emerged whereby women were allowed to participate in the official cultural arena but were excluded from the cultural elite, which was deemed the preserve of men. This discrimination was symbolised by the Academy of Italy, the most important institution of official culture, which was founded in January 1926 as a means of promoting intellectual activity in the arts and sciences, and formally inaugurated in October 1929. Consisting of sixty members, each of whom received a monthly stipend of 3,000 lire, its rules did not explicitly ban women from joining but there was a tacit bar on female membership. 'Le donne non saranno ammesse', as Mussolini informed Sibilla Aleramo in 1931 in response to her request for official recognition of her contribution to Italian culture.<sup>17</sup> Even Grazia Deledda, whose Nobel Prize of 1926 had greatly enhanced the cultural prestige of Fascist Italy, was barred from the institution whose foundation had been partly inspired by her achievement, and it was not until 1940 that this bar was lifted when Ada Negri was enrolled as the first and only female member.

A similar cultural hierarchy was evident in the press, with publications which served as official vehicles of Fascist culture, such as *Gerarchia* and *Critica fascista*, rarely publishing or discussing the work of women, and, with the exception of Margherita Sarfatti, employing no female staff writers. Those women who wished to take part in official debate were confined to the women's periodical *Giornale della donna*, which became the official organ of the *Fasci femminili* in 1929. However, by dealing with 'tutte le questioni che

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Cited in a letter from Aleramo to Gabriele D'Annunzio, 21 November 1937 (repr. in *Sibilla Aleramo e il suo tempo*, ed. by Bruna Conti and Alba Morino (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), p. 229).

interessano la donna', the periodical served only to confirm the disparity between the sexes and reinforce women's marginalisation in the official cultural sphere. The regime also put pressure on the directors of leading newspapers to exclude women from permanent posts, although a systematic policy was never introduced. The director of *La Stampa*, Alfredo Signoretti, was one of the first to be targeted, Mussolini warning him against employing '[le] gonnelle' prior to assuming his post in 1932. A close adherent to the regime, Signoretti respected Mussolini's wishes and reduced the number of female staff writers, although he did make exceptions for Carola Prosperi, whose women's page 'La donna italiana' attracted a large female following, and Margherita Sarfatti, who wrote a weekly column for the *terza pagina*. 19

Sarfatti's inclusion within the cultural elite derived from her close relationship with the Fascist leadership. The editor of *Gerarchia* and the best-selling biographer of Mussolini, to whom she acted as friend, adviser, and lover, Sarfatti was a formidable figure in the cultural arena. One of the only female journalists to work on *Il Popolo d'Italia*, she served on numerous committees, including the jury for the literary prize of *La Stampa* of which she was made president in 1930, and she wielded great influence in the cultural establishment, persuading the Academy to award the *Premio Mussolini* to her friend Ada Negri in 1931. Yet, despite her influence in political and cultural circles, Sarfatti still found herself denied membership to the Academy, an institution which she herself had helped found. Her anger at such a blatant example of Fascist sexism was great but not even she could circumvent the bar on female membership. Nor was she ever to see this bar lifted for, by the time that Negri was elected to the Academy in 1940, she had been forced out of the country by the newly introduced anti-Semitic laws.

Negri was the only woman other than Sarfatti to be exempt from this officially endorsed discrimination. A close friend of Mussolini, Negri had allied herself with his Fascist movement after the war when the death of Sarfatti's son in action in 1918 caused her to turn against her socialist friends and give her backing to the movement for a strong Italy. She continued to ally herself with the regime throughout the *ventennio*, signing the manifesto of Fascist intellectuals in 1925 and supporting the regime through periods of

<sup>18</sup> Cited in an advertisement for Giornale della donna, Almanacco della donna italiana, 1932, p. 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Cited in Giovanna Bosi Maramotti, 'Margherita Sarfatti: appunti per una storia della letteratura femminile nel periodo fascista', in *Il pensiero reazionario: la politica e la cultura dei fascismi*, ed. by Bruno Bandini (Ravenna: Longo, 1982), pp. 101-12 (pp. 102-03).

crisis, from the murder of Matteotti to the turbulent months of the Salò republic. Her loyalty was rewarded with a series of honours: as well as being elected to the Academy, she was presented with the *Premio Mussolini* in 1931, the *Premio Firenze* in 1936, and a gold medal by the Ministry for National Education in 1938. She also benefited from other forms of state patronage, receiving a bursary of 25,000 lire and obtaining the commission to write the state reader for the third year of primary school. Negri's allegiance was of great value to the regime, for she not only lent cultural respectability to the Fascist movement when it had appeared to be little more than a group of violent *squadristi* but, as a writer who enjoyed a wide following, she was in a position to wield considerable influence over public opinion, *La Donna Italiana* hailing her as 'la poetessa italiana più cara, più amata, più popolare'.<sup>20</sup>

With the exception of Negri and Sarfatti, female writers were confined to a position of subordination under Fascism, with their access barred to the higher echelons of cultural power. Yet, the effect of this subordinate position on women's writing was less significant than might be supposed, for the discrimination they endured during the ventennio was not unique to Fascism but represented an official endorsement of the prevailing anti-female bias in Italian culture, women having long been marginalised by the cultural establishment and their work considered of inferior quality. As a result, the regime's attempts to bar women from the cultural elite had little impact on their literary production, for they were accustomed to working on the margins of the official cultural arena and, unlike their male counterparts, knew they could not rely on state patronage and so were used subsidising their novel-writing through journalistic work. Exclusion from the cultural elite, although regrettable, was thus not considered a cause for concern by the majority of female writers. Even Maria Castellani, who championed the prominent role of women in Fascist Italy, was not aggrieved by the bar on women's membership to the Academy, regarding parity in mainstream culture as a suitable compensation. 'L'Accademia d'Italia non ammette le donne, ma non vi è distinzione dei premi', she declared (Donne italiane, pp. 83-84). Indeed, marginalisation within the cultural sphere may even be seen as beneficial to women, for it meant they had little to gain from supporting the regime or celebrating its achievements in their work. In contrast to their male colleagues, whose allegiance was rewarded with public commissions and high-ranking positions, women did not stand to further their careers by allying themselves with the regime. While this did not mean they could express open

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Edvige Pesce-Gorini, 'Ada Negri', La Donna Italiana, May 1931, pp. 293-97 (p. 293).

dissent in their work, for censorship prevented them from speaking out, it did result in them feeling less compunction to support Fascism. Thus, while many notable male writers were obliged to express sympathy with the regime in return for keeping their high-ranking positions, women had far less to lose by remaining aloof from political engagement.<sup>21</sup>

# 2.3.3 The role of women writers in the new Italy

Despite relegating women to a subordinate position in the cultural hierarchy, the regime nonetheless envisaged an important role for them in the cultural life of the country. Mussolini saw the task of writers as creating a modern national culture, which glorified the new Italy and rivalled the glories of past achievements. 'Noi dobbiamo creare un'arte nuova, un'arte dei nostri tempi, un'arte fascista', he declared in a speech to the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia in October 1926 (Bottai, *La politica delle arti*, p. 20). The exact form which this new art should take was the subject of heated debate in the pages of *Critica fascista*, Curzio Malaparte arguing that it should reflect the virile Fascist spirit and reject the outmoded liberal tradition, while Lorenzo Guisso emphasised the need for Fascist literature to re-establish 'i grandi valori etici'.<sup>22</sup> There was, however, a general consensus that political disengagement, or *agnosticismo*, was no longer to be tolerated in the cultural community and that writers were to place themselves at the service of the state. 'La civiltà fascista non ammette che gli artisti costituiscano un gruppo separato moralmente dal complesso della società nazionale', affirmed Bottai (15 February 1927, p. 63).<sup>23</sup>

Writers were thus not only to perform a creative role in the new Italy but were also to serve as propagandists, promoting Fascist ideology through their work and championing a positive image of Italy abroad. Their task, as Mussolini noted in his speech to the Society of Authors in 1926, was to act as 'portatori del nuovo tipo di civiltà italiana', and to spread 'imperialismo spirituale' through their books and lectures (cited in Manacorda, *Letteratura e cultura*, p. 113). Women were to perform a key role in producing and promoting this new culture. As the traditional guardians of the nation's morals, they were considered suited to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> In *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), Ruggero Zangrandi describes how respected critics such as Emilio Cecchi emphasised their alignment with the regime despite their lack of ideological commitment to Fascism, Cecchi highlighting his role as the special correspondent for the *Corriere della Sera* during Mussolini's visit to Libya, an act which Zangrandi suggests was motivated by his desire to secure membership to the Academy (p. 398).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Lorenzo Guisso, 'Letteratura fascista', *Critica fascista*, 1 July 1926, pp. 247-48 (p. 248).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the debate on the role of culture in Fascist Italy, see 'Selections from the Great Debate on Fascism and Culture: *Critica fascista* 1926-1927', ed. by Jeffrey Schnapp and Barbara Spackman, *Stanford Italian Review*, 8 (1990), 235-72.

the task of imparting Fascist values in their writing and, at a time when many women were thought to have fallen victim to the corruptive influence of foreign culture, the task of producing a national literature, which re-educated the female populace in Catholic values, was considered of great importance. Women's writing was to be 'sana [e] nobile', and act as a spiritual guide 'che eleva l'uomo in una sfera superiore', and writers were urged to follow the example of the novelist Ada Anau Supino in producing 'libri sani, quali soltanto deve creare la donna italiana: la vera donna dell'Italia nuova'. The female writer was thus to act as a *donna attiva*, promoting moral values and enhancing the cultural strength of the Italian nation; her role, in the words of Stanis Ruinas, was to 'far conoscere nel mondo la voce nuova della Patria fascista' (*Scrittrici e scribacchine*, p. 101).

Yet, despite seeking to engage women writers as propagandists, the regime made no attempt to mobilise them on a mass scale as it had done in the field of social work. In contrast to the *visitatrici*, whose work was closely monitored by the *Fasci femminili*, women writers had no such regulatory body controlling their work. Although women's cultural organisations did exist under Fascism, the majority were independent of state control and were designed to provide women with a sound cultural foundation rather than to control female cultural production.<sup>25</sup> The organisation most closely linked to the regime was the *Associazione Nazionale Fascista Donne Professioniste e Artiste Laureate* (ANFAL), which was founded in 1929 and given official backing a year later. ANFAL quickly established itself as one of Italy's leading female cultural organisations, with sixtytwo local groups and ten thousand members by 1932. However, membership was not a prerequisite for obtaining state bursaries or participating in national competitions nor did it entail submitting to formulaic styles, for the organisation did not seek to impose cultural conformity on writers. Its remit was rather to support the development of '[una] sana

<sup>24</sup> Silvio Bonuzzi, 'Il problema della natalità in Italia', Corriere delle signore, 22 April 1928, p. 4.

<sup>&#</sup>x27;A. Anau Supino: Tacere', La Rassegna nazionale, June 1934, pp. 490-91 (p. 491).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The most notable women's cultural groups which existed under Fascism were the *Lyceum* and the *Società pro cultura femminile*. Founded in 1908, and with branches in Florence, Rome, Milan, and Genoa, the *Lyceum* hosted talks for its audience of 'colte gentildonne e valorose professioniste', and it provided valuable support for women's writing, the Genoese branch awarding a prize of 2,500 lire in 1935 for a new work of women's literature (cited in Paola Benedettini Alferazzi, 'L'opera assistenziale della donna in regime fascista', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1933, pp. 309-22 (p. 328)). Founded in 1912, the *Società pro cultura femminile* of Turin appealed to a broader group of women, its 1700-strong membership made up of 'donne di buona educazione, ricche o povere [che] aspirino a [...] elevare la propria cultura intellettuale e morale', and a particular emphasis was placed on reading, with a 12,000-volume library open to its members (cited in Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Attività intellettuali femminili', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1933, pp. 319-36 (p. 326)).

attività culturale femminile' by way of talks and exhibitions, encouraging women to embrace a national culture which imparted moral values and to promote a positive image of Italy abroad through international conferences and lecture tours (cited in *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1934, p. 338). The leading members of ANFAL served as tireless propagandists for the regime: its general secretary, Anna Maria Speckel undertook lecture tours of Scandinavia and the Balkan states, and contributed articles to foreign newspapers in which she set out 'le direttive essenziali del Fascismo';<sup>26</sup> while Maria Castellani, who became president in 1933, championed the achievements of Fascist Italy abroad through her role as vice president of the International Professional Women's Organisation. Yet, while ardent Fascists themselves, neither Castellani nor Speckel put pressure on their fellow writers to adopt a position of alignment or use their work for propaganda purposes. The organisation fulfilled a supportive rather than coercive function, encouraging writers' allegiance to the Fascist state by providing financial assistance and fostering a sense of pride in the achievements of Italian women, and, in the support it gave female writers, it reflected the regime's own tolerant attitude towards the literary community.

The regime granted writers a high degree of independence, using persuasion and rewards to gain support rather than demanding conformity. Although denied the same honours as men, women were the frequent recipients of state-sponsored literary awards, which were conferred on writers whose work reflected the Fascist spirit, Ada Negri winning the *Premio Mussolini* in 1931, Renata Mughini the *Premio San Remo* in 1938, and Fanny Dini the *Poeti del tempo di Mussolini* in 1937. Literary competitions were also held by female periodicals and cultural groups in order to increase women's engagement with Fascism, *La Donna Italiana* offering a 500 lire prize in 1932 for a short story which illustrated 'lo spirito della Rivoluzione Fascista', and the *Associazione delle donne per la cultura letteraria* holding a competition in 1930 for a novel to be translated into English, the purpose of which was to 'far conoscere e valorizzare all'Estero le migliori manifestazioni dell'attività femminile Nazionale' (cited in *La Donna Italiana*, October 1930, p. 594).

Mussolini also assumed personal responsibility for gaining the support of leading female writers since he saw their adherence to the regime as crucial to establishing Fascist Italy as a nation of cultural strength. From the early 1920s, he began courting prominent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Cited in Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Attività femminili italiane', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1935, pp. 187-95 (p. 194).

female members of the literary community and was highly adept at responding to their individual needs with offers of financial assistance or personal support. One of the first writers to turn to him for help was Annie Vivanti, who found in the Fascist leader a willing defender of Sinn Féin, a movement to which she and her husband, the Irish journalist John Chartres, were both firmly committed. Mussolini's willingness to take up the cause of the Irish Republicans was crucial to securing Vivanti's allegiance to the Fascist movement and, although her enthusiasm waned following the murder of Matteotti, she continued to support Mussolini during the 1930s, believing that the country would slide into civil war without him. 'Se oggi qualcuno ammazzasse Mussolini l'Italia diventerebbe un macello. Fiumi di sangue si vedrebbero scorrere per tutta l'Italia!' she declared after a failed attempt on his life in 1931.<sup>27</sup> The image of strength which Mussolini projected was also attractive to Sibilla Aleramo, who, on meeting him for the first time in 1929, was impressed by his commanding presence and self-assurance. 'Dava la sensazione d'una individualità eccezionalmente forte', she recalled in her diary. 'E poi, io così solitaria, così povera [...] come non provare una specie di tenerezza per l'uomo onnipotente che dimostrava di stimarmi?' (Un amore insolito, p. 213). Despite adopting a position of non-alignment through her signing of Croce's manifesto of anti-Fascist intellectuals, Aleramo's mild anti-Fascism derived more from her friendship with liberal intellectuals, such as Piero Gobetti and Giovanni Amendola, than from opposition to the regime on ideological grounds, and she remained blind to the true character of Fascism, believing Mussolini's imperialist dream to be 'vago' and 'inoffensivo' (Un amore insolito, p. 214). As a result, when she found herself in a state of severe financial hardship, she felt no compunction about turning to the Fascist government for help, accepting donations of 10,000 and 12,000 lire in 1929 and 1932, followed by a monthly bursary of 1,000 lire from January 1933. As a sign of her gratitude, she wrote an article in 1930 extolling Mussolini for having returned women to their sacred function as reproducers of the nation, followed in 1934 by a poem celebrating Fascism, entitled 'Visita a Littoria e Sabaudia'. Under the aegis of ANFAL, she also gave a number of lectures abroad on the cultural mission of Italian women, her lecture in Athens in May 1937 concluding with a clear endorsement of the Fascist concept of the donna attiva: 'Oggi che le nazioni [...] tendono ad una nuova e superiore civiltà la donna ha una

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Cited in Barbara Allason, Memorie di un'antifascista, 1919-1940 (Florence: Vallecchi, 1946), p. 110.

eccezionale importanza in questa opera di ricostruzione.' (cited in *Quadrivio*, 23 May 1937, p. 6)<sup>28</sup>

While both Aleramo and Vivanti allied themselves to the regime as a result of the financial and personal support offered to them by Mussolini, the allegiance of Matilde Serao was to result from her friendship with the Fascist leader. Like Aleramo, Serao had initially assumed a position of non-conformity and was one of the signatories of Croce's manifesto of anti-Fascist intellectuals, a position which derived from her belief in the freedom of the press. However, her increasing ostracisation within the newspaper world, combined with a violent attack on her offices by Fascist squadristi in 1922, forced her to rethink her position. By the second half of 1925, Il Giorno had moved away from its position of non-alignment towards one of conformity, and its enthusiastic applauding of the failure of an attempt on Mussolini's life on 6 November signalled the extent to which the newspaper had allied itself with the regime. The change in direction of *Il Giorno* not only reflected the increasing untenability of an anti-Fascist position in the press but also Serao's growing friendship with Mussolini. From their first meeting in 1924, Mussolini had set out to woo Serao, coveting the support of such an eminent member of the literary community. 'Ho letto tutti i vostri libri e vi ho trovato tanta vita! Vi chiedo di essere un poco mussoliniana...', he declared in a letter to the writer in 1924.29 Over the following months, they developed a close relationship, Serao referring to him as 'mio figlio Benito', and the strength of their friendship was illustrated by her steadfast support during the Matteotti crisis when she presented him with a coral horn as an expression of her loyalty.<sup>30</sup>

However, the esteem in which both Serao and Aleramo held the Fascist leader was not to translate into a close adherence to Fascist ideology in their fiction, for their accommodation with the regime resulted from the personal support offered by Mussolini rather than commitment to the Fascist movement. Indeed, Serao's only novel of the 1920s, *Mors tua* (1926), was widely regarded as anti-Fascist due to its critical portrayal of the First

<sup>28</sup> It was not until the late 1930s, with the introduction of the racial laws, that Aleramo was forced to acknowledge the violent character of Fascism. Noting in her diary in April 1942 the anonymous death of Vivanti, whose obituary was banned in the press because of her Jewish origins, Aleramo remarked: 'Eccola vittima della odiosa politica antiebraica.' (*Un amore insolito*, p. 157) With the onset of war, Aleramo's opposition to the regime strengthened and, in the immediate post-war period, she joined the communist party and resumed her social activism, writing articles and lecturing on behalf of the PCI.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Cited in *Matilde Serao: tra giornalismo e letteratura*, ed. by Gianni Infusino (Naples: Guida, 1981), pp. 6-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For a discussion of Serao's relationship with Mussolini, see Wanda De Nunzio Schilardi, '*Il Giorno* e il fascismo', in *Matilde Serao: tra giornalismo e letteratura*, ed. by Gianni Infusino, pp. 75-102.

World War. Her anti-militaristic stance caused widespread anger in the Fascist ranks, Arnaldo Frateili attacking the novel's 'disgustose romanticherie' and belittling Serao's literary talents in his review of the novel in *Critica fascista*, describing her as a writer 'di cui da molti anni non si sentiva più parlare altro che come giornalista e conferenziera' (15 May 1926, p. 198). Even Mussolini was not prepared to defend Serao in the face of such an attack on Italy's military prowess and he blocked her nomination for the Nobel prize, giving his full backing to Grazia Deledda in her place.

By contrast, Aleramo's literary production of the ventennio seems more conformist in tone, the radical feminism of *Una donna* (1906) having given way to the essentialist vision of woman portrayed in Amo dunque sono (1927), in which she defined the female in terms of emotion and the male in terms of reason. However, this espousal of gender-based distinctions did not signal an adoption of Fascist ideology but reflected her new focus on exploring her female essence in her writing, a change in direction which predated Fascist rule by over a decade. Writing in *Il Marzocco* in 1911, Aleramo had rejected the feminist desire for parity, claiming that the feminist movement was 'una breve avventura, eroica all'inizio, grottesca sul finire', and she argued that the time had now come for woman to affirm her difference from man and 'portare nella vita e nell'arte la sua autentica anima'.31 Thus, while espousing theories of sexual difference, Aleramo did not subscribe to the tenet of female inferiority and, indeed, she described Weininger's Sesso e carattere as 'quell'amara e terribile requisitoria contro la mia specie'. 32 Her focus on gendered characteristics stemmed rather from her desire to articulate the female sensibility and encourage women to assert their individuality. Creating an assertive image of femininity in her writing, she countered the passive model of Fascist womanhood and, in her emphasis on the physical as well as spiritual aspects of femininity, she challenged the regime's definition of the female body as a mere instrument of reproduction, as Fiora Bassanese has observed.33

Even Ada Negri, who was the writer most closely associated with the regime, did not readily accept the role of government propagandist. Her 'fascismo in penombra', as it has been termed by Salvatore Comes, stemmed from her gratitude to Mussolini rather than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Sibilla Aleramo, 'Apologia dello spirito femminile', *Il Marzocco*, 9 April 1911 (repr. in *Andando e stando* (Florence: Bemporad, 1921), pp. 55-66 (p. 60)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Sibilla Aleramo, 'Dal mio diario', *Mercurio*, November 1944, pp. 41-52 (p. 43).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Fiora Bassanese, 'Sibilla Aleramo: Writing a Personal Myth', in *Mothers of Invention*, ed. by Robin Pickering-Iazzi, pp. 137-65 (p. 154).

from ideological commitment. Although initially attracted to the Fascist movement in the post-war period when she had regarded it as a means to restore order to a war-torn Italy, she felt no strong affiliation to the party and did not become a member of the PNF until 1940 when admission to the Academy required her enrolment.<sup>34</sup> Nor did the increasingly conservative tone of Negri's work signal a departure from the socialist beliefs which she had expressed in *Fatalità* (1892) and *Tempeste* (1896), but her exaltation of maternity in *Stella mattutina* (1921) and her depiction of noble self-sacrifice in *Finestre alte* (1923) reflected her deepening religious faith rather than an adherence to Fascist values. Moreover, she continued to demonstrate a predilection for social issues in her work, such as class and gender injustice, which were contrary to the political ideology of the regime, while her focus on the personal experience of women living in patriarchal society was at odds with the Fascist conception of literature as triumphalist. Thus, while Negri was undoubtedly an asset to the regime, for her writing exalted conservative values and enhanced the cultural prestige of Fascism, she did not perform the role of official spokeswoman for the regime nor did her work function as a vehicle for government propaganda.<sup>35</sup>

# 2.3.4 Constructing a Fascist female literature

As the cases of Negri, Aleramo, and Serao illustrate, the difficulty for the regime lay not so much in securing the outward support of writers as in translating this support into the creation of a Fascist literature. Bottai had believed that by engaging writers in the political life of the nation, whilst granting them a high degree of autonomy, they would produce a creative Fascist art that would forge a patriotic spirit in the Italian populace and confer glory on the nation. Yet, despite the regime's attempts at politicising the female cultural sphere, it did not succeed in countering the prevailing Crocean concept of autonomous art, the majority of writers subscribing to the belief that art should remain disengaged from politics. Moreover, while much popular female fiction of the *ventennio* served to reinforce Fascist teaching in its close adherence to Catholic values, a subject to which I will return in the next chapter, few female writers sought to reflect the Fascist spirit in their work, even those who served as propagandists for the regime.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Salvatore Comes, Ada Negri da un tempo all'altro (Milan: Mondadori, 1970), p. 102.

Negri's interest in the fate of women in patriarchal society is illustrated in the short fiction she wrote during the *ventennio*, as Robin Pickering-Iazzi has observed, Negri's 'La Capitana', which was published in the *Corriere della Sera* on 17 April 1931, telling the story of a spirited girl whose vitality is crushed by the compromises demanded of her when she enters adulthood (*Unspeakable Women*, pp. 31-37).

This situation is illustrated by the cases of Maria Luisa Astaldi and Ester Lombardo, who acted as important cultural spokeswomen for the regime but distanced themselves from Fascist ideology in their fiction. A respected academic and literary critic, Astaldi wrote and lectured on behalf of the regime, undertaking a lecture tour across Europe in 1933 which was sponsored by the National Fascist Institute of Culture. She was also one of the only female writers to advocate political engagement in literature, asserting in her study of the Italian novel, *Nascita e vicende del romanzo italiano* (1939):

Vogliamo qui riaffermare l'esistenza, per noi, d'un legame indissolubile tra politica e letteratura che non vuol dire letteratura asservita cortigiana [...], ma volta a quegli interessi, legata a quei conflitti, accesa di quel fuoco, fuori dei quali lo scrittore appare sterile e esiliato nella patria.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, despite calling for a creative literature which conveyed 'lo spirito totalitario del fascismo' (p. 283), Astaldi did little to respond to this call in her own fiction, the setting of her novel Una ragazza cresce (1935), which takes place against Fascism's rise to power, representing her only reference to the political climate. Indeed, not only did she favour the representation of modern womanhood over the celebration of Fascist Italy but she also challenged government propaganda in her fiction, countering the view that marriage and maternity represented the apex of a woman's life. Una ragazza cresce centres on the adolescent Marina, who, intent on escaping her authoritarian stepfather, chooses marriage as a means to attain an emancipated lifestyle. Her hope that her own marriage may prove different to that of her mother, who was 'soggetta alla tirannia del marito', soon falters, however, as she discovers that she is expected to devote her life to serving the domestic and physical needs of her husband.<sup>37</sup> Realising that the freedom for which she yearned is still denied her, she searches for fulfilment outside her marriage, embarking on an affair with a former boyfriend but, after being abandoned by both lover and husband, she is left to cope on her own, embittered by her experiences. In the rebellious figure of Marina, who rejects domesticity as antithetical to her desire for autonomy, Astaldi provided an alternative model of femininity to the dutiful donna autentica of Fascist propaganda, while her articulation of female desire and depiction of Marina's anxiety prior to the consummation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Maria Luisa Astaldi, Nascita e vicende del romanzo italiano (Milan: Treves, 1939), pp. 283-84.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Maria Luisa Astaldi, *Una ragazza cresce* (Milan: Ceschina, 1935), p. 134.

of her marriage transgressed taboos about female sexuality and criticised the ignorance in which women were kept about sexual matters.<sup>38</sup>

In La fatica di volersi bene (1933), Astaldi depicts a similarly depressing portrait of marriage and sexual relationships. Narrating the story of Giovanna, who longs to escape the monotony of domestic life and savour the romance promised to her in popular fiction, the novel charts her search for fulfilment outside the traditional marital role, from a temporary post in her father's office to a passionate affair with an artist in the bohemian world of 1920s' Paris. Opposed to marriage on the grounds that it would curtail her freedom, 'sposarmi vorrebbe dire [...] vincolarmi per sempre', she is made aware of how casual relationships can prove equally damaging to women when the typist in her father's office falls pregnant after a brief affair and a friend is left physically and emotionally debilitated after an unwanted pregnancy.<sup>39</sup> Disillusioned by her experiences, Giovanna returns home where she resigns herself to marriage with a former school friend, for whom she feels neither love nor desire.

In both novels, Astaldi depicts the disillusionment experienced by the generation of women who came of age in the post-war period. Seeking escape from traditional female roles and their expectations raised by the new models of behaviour portrayed in popular culture, their desire for autonomy is thwarted by a society which equates female independence with immorality. Hostile to marriage, which represents a curtailment of their freedom, they find no better alternative in transitory relationships, which lack security and are accompanied by the risk of pregnancy. In her depiction of the conflict between women's desires and the roles prescribed to them by patriarchal society, Astaldi distanced herself from Fascist ideology and revealed her affinity with new generation writers such as Fausta Cialente and Alba de Céspedes, who, as I will discuss in the next chapter, portrayed women who sought self-fulfilment outside the traditional familial role. Indeed, Astaldi greatly admired the work of both writers, declaring of Cialente's *Natalia* 'siamo in presenza di qualità narrative di prim'ordine', and praising de Céspedes for portraying 'con semplicità e bravura figure femminili e ambienti differentissimi' in *Nessuno torna indietro* (*Nascita e vicende del romanzo italiano*, pp. 239 and 283). The similarity of her work with that of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> As Victoria De Grazia observes in *How Fascism Ruled Women*, young women suffered from a lack of information about sexuality during the *ventennio*, with schools providing no classes in sex education and many parents reluctant to tell their daughters about the facts of life (pp. 135-36).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Maria Luisa Astaldi, *La fatica di volersi bene* (Milan: Ceschina, 1933), p. 118.

Marise Ferro was also noted by the press, with comparisons drawn between *La fatica di volersi bene* and Ferro's *Disordine* (1932), both novels depicting a new type of female protagonist who pays little heed to her moral conscience in her quest for independence:

La donna di cui il romanzo contemporaneo racconta le vicende [...] è una personalità nuova che, liberata dai vincoli della tradizione e incapace di ubbidire alla arginante severità della coscienza morale, cerca una nuova legge che non sia di rinuncia né di perdizione.<sup>40</sup>

Like Astaldi, the Sicilian-born writer and journalist Ester Lombardo vocalised the aspirations of the modern woman in her writing rather than adhering to Fascist propaganda. A former feminist activist, who had allied herself to Fascism in the belief that 'il movimento femminista fascista sia l'unica immissione di nuove forze nel movimento femminista italiano', Lombardo acted as a diligent propagandist for the regime, reinforcing Fascist ideology from the pages of her periodical Vita femminile.41 'Valorizza ogni foggia il tessuto, il nostro tessuto', she urged in an article supporting the national campaign for autarchy. 'Mai come in quest'ora, [...] c'è bisogno dell'affermazione autarchica!'.42 Yet, while reinforcing the values of self-sacrifice and obedience, Lombardo championed alternative models of femininity in her fiction, her best-selling novels Lettere d'amore (1925) and La donna senza cuore (1928) portraying female protagonists who are determined to fashion their own lives, the heroine of the latter overcoming the death of her lover and betrayal by a trusted friend to pursue a successful career. This image of modern femininity was echoed in Vita femminile, in which Lombardo presented a diverse portrait of female activity, from the exploits of Hollywood stars to the bravery of female aviators, and she encouraged her readership to value their economic freedom, advising a newly married reader: 'Deve seguitare a lavorare per conservare tutta la sua indipendenza economica e morale.'43

With many of the regime's leading cultural spokeswomen proving unwilling to allow their fiction to become a vehicle for government propaganda, the attempt to produce a literature which reflected the Fascist spirit was confined to a small group of writers, whose formulaic narratives symbolised the sterile conservatism against which Bottai had fought.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> "Ellepi", 'Qualche libro', Lidel, June 1933, p. 395.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Ester Lombardo, 'Rassegna del movimento femminile italiano', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1926, pp. 205-21 (p. 212).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Ester Lombardo, 'Praticità e leggiadria di tessuti italiani', *Vita femminile*, November 1939, pp. 38-39 (p. 38).

<sup>43 &#</sup>x27;Chiedete a Luli', Vita femminile, April 1938, p. 6.

The most prominent of these was Margherita Sarfatti, who worked tirelessly to enhance the prestige of the new Italy and spread the Fascist message in her work. 'Contrariamente alla maggioranza delle nostre scrittrici [...] ha vissuto in armonia di intenti e d'ideali con la Patria, ch'ella ha esaltato in pagine limpide e ardenti', as Stanis Ruinas remarked of her exceptional position as a committed Fascist female writer (Scrittrici e scribacchine, p. 101). It was not only through her best-selling biography, Dux (1926), that Sarfatti sought to promote the achievements of the regim but also through her fiction, the image of the 'uomo energico [...] e uomo italiano' which she portrayed in Dux finding a fictional representation in the virile hero of Il Palazzone (1929).44 Focusing on the aristocratic Valdeschi family, the novel explores the relationship of the spirited Fiorella Maggi with the two Valdeschi sons, the egoistic Sergio, whom Fiorella marries and with whom she bears a son, and the determined Manlio, with whom she falls in love after her husband is killed in action. The book ends as Manlio returns from the March on Rome at the head of a group of squadristi, with Fiorella feeling great pride at the loyalty he inspires in his men. Loosely based on Sarfatti's own experiences, Fiorella a self-portrait and Manlio modelled on Mussolini, the novel also represented the new Fascist man and woman in the figures of the two protagonists, Manlio symbolising virility and leadership and Fiorella learning to stifle her independent nature in order to become a compliant wife and mother: 'Ella gustava [...] l'istinto materno, che in fondo all'amore di ogni verace donna sorge a schermo e difesa dell'uomo.'45 Il Palazzone thus served not only to celebrate the Fascist revolution but also to reinforce the new social order, Fiorella becoming 'donna: senza remissione donna!' through her love for Manlio, and complementing his masculine strength with her feminine intuition (p. 238).

The selfless and maternal image of womanhood portrayed by Sarfatti in *Il Palazzone* echoed throughout the work of her Fascist colleagues. In her prize-wining poem *La madre* e il figlio (1937), Fanny Dini described the noble fortitude of a mother who learns of her son's death in Abyssinia, while Renata Mughini's award-winning play, *I figli* (1938), portrayed a mother's resigned acceptance of her son's departure for the Abyssinian war, both writers emphasising the strength of character of the Italian mother who was prepared to endure the loss of a child for the good of the nation. The sacred nature of the maternal role was also explored by Ada Anau Supino. In an article for *La Rassegna nazionale*, she

<sup>44</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, Dux (Milan: Mondadori, 1929), p. 305.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Margherita Sarfatti, *Il Palazzone* (Milan: Mondadori, 1929), p. 147.

emphasised the responsibility of Italian mothers to educate their children according to strict moral and Fascist principles, a sacred task 'che Dio le ha assegnato e che a Lei sola spetta', and she underlined these qualities in her novel *Tacere* (1934), in which the heroine is presented as a symbol of maternal devotion.<sup>46</sup>

The overriding image of women presented in Fascist female writing was one of passivity, their identity defined by their maternal and marital role. Rather than the modern donna attiva, the archetypal protagonist of Fascist female fiction was the dutiful donna autentica, who devoted her life to serving her family, a two-dimensional stereotype with little scope for emotional development. Staid and formulaic, it was hardly surprising that this female interpretation of the Fascist spirit generated little enthusiasm among the public or critics. Fanny Dini and Renata Mughini were ignored by the majority of critics and received no more than a passing mention in right-wing periodicals, while mainstream publications dismissed the majority of Fascist women's writing as lacking in literary merit. The popular novelist Maya, who portrayed her heroine's boyfriend as a Fascist in Gli umiliati (1930), was criticised for introducing politics needlessly into the storyline, Maria Maggi declaring: 'Questo elemento [...] non serve, danneggia, fuorvia, forse irrita.'<sup>47</sup> The highly moralistic Dora Felisari fared even worse. A novelist who adhered closely to Fascist teaching, presenting an unflattering portrait of the female intellectual in Karma (1936) and an image of chaste femininity in Maria Egiziaca (1938), she suffered criticism from all sides, Daria Banfi Malaguzzi berating her heavy-handed moralism and Roberto Fracassi finding fault with almost every detail of Dono inumano (1934): 'Ecco allora i dialoghi inutilmente concettosi, le pose fatali, gli assurdi accostamenti, le scene patetiche, gli ironici sogghigni.'48

Right-wing critics also proved reluctant to lend their support to writers on the basis of political allegiance alone. Maria Luisa Astaldi dismissed Sarfatti's *Il Palazzone* with the words 'non ci sembra notevole sotto alcun riguardo', while speaking highly of the non-conformist de Céspedes and Cialente (*Nascita e vicende del romanzo italiano*, p. 228), while Astaldi herself was also to come in for criticism, the pro-Fascist *Quadrivio* chastising her for the explicitness of her language while the Fascist academic Teresa Labriola rejected

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Ada Anau Supino, 'Come si pensa e si parla in Italia', *La Rassegna nazionale*, April 1934, pp. 302-05 (p. 305).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Maria Maggi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1931, pp. 181-220 (p. 200).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Roberto Fracassi, 'Dora Felisari: *Dono inumano'*, *L'Italia letteraria*, 1 April 1934, p. 8.

her female characters as shallow and superficial. Regarding modern female narrative as the search for self-identity, the *io profondo* identified by the philosopher Henri Bergson, Labriola held Sibilla Aleramo and Lina Pietravalle to be exemplary in their depiction of female individuality in their respective novels *Una donna* and *Le catene*, while she criticised Astaldi, Lombardo, and Pia Rimini, for focusing on the physical rather than spiritual needs of women:

Non rispondono né punto né poco a questo "io profondo" [...] della donna tipo, le figure femminili di Pia Rimini, di Maria Luisa Astaldi, di Ester Lombardo. Egregie scrittrici, sì, ma prive di afflato spirituale, celebranti o descriventi la donna poliandrica. La "via regia" va da *Una donna* alle *Catene*. Il resto è frammento. (*La Donna Italiana*, December 1933, p. 659)

Not only did a eulogistic tone prove to be no guarantee of public and critical success but it also did not help secure a publishing contract, with publishers signing up writers on the basis of popularity rather than political affiliation. Such was the case with Pina Ballario, a diligent propagandist for the regime, who found that, despite adhering to the regime's call for morally improving literature, she was unable to break the stranglehold which a number of best-selling writers had over the publishing industry. As she wrote to Mussolini's personal secretary, Osvaldo Sebastiani, in 1935 about the difficulties she faced in publishing her work and the disparity between her position and that of Mura:

Il Secolo Sera mi pubblica due articoli all'anno [...] mentre Mura ne pubblica uno alla settimana [...]. Ha pure collaborazione fissa sui periodici Rizzoli, stipendio fisso da Sonzogno. Io sgobbo dalla mattina alla sera [...] per guadagnare 642 lire al mese. È umiliante e disperante.<sup>49</sup>

Her fellow propagandist Pia Rimini fared little better. An ardent supporter of the regime, who, in a letter to Mussolini, declared herself to be 'fiera d'essere una di quell'immenso fascio di cuori e di braccia, pronto a scattare a un Vostro cenno', she suffered a muted response to her repeated calls for state assistance. Between 1939 and 1942, she made ten requests for help in publishing her work, which resulted in two recommendations to *La Gazzetta del Popolo* and *L'Illustrazione Italiana*. However, by January 1942, when it became clear that Rimini's position was not improving, the Ministry of Popular Culture began to express doubts about providing further assistance. 'Questo continuo interessamento ha dato alla Rimini delle collaborazioni più o meno continuative, che non

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Archivio centrale dello stato, Segreteria particolare del Duce, busta 2426, fascicolo 552161.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Archivio centrale dello stato, Segreteria particolare del Duce, busta 1829, fascicolo 527301.

hanno risolto in modo soddisfacente la sua posizione', stated an internal document of 21 January 1942. The Ministry's reluctance to offer additional help was compounded by the negative feedback it received about Rimini's work, as revealed in a Minculpop memo regarding a complaint from *La Gazzetta del Popolo*: 'Il predetto direttore ha però rivelato che la Rimini da qualche tempo [...] manda roba abborracciata e composta in fretta e ciò le nuoce.' As a result, Rimini's subsequent requests for help were met with silence (ACS, SPD, b. 1829, f. 527301).

The only Fascist female writer to generate a favourable response from both the public and critics was Ain Zara Magno, a young novelist from Piedmont. Rather than focusing on the lifeless model of Fascist womanhood, Magno sought to convey the dynamism of the Fascist movement using a male protagonist, her novels Tramontana (1936), Quelli di casa Frari (1937), and Passioni (1938) focusing on young men who find in Fascism a moral direction and certainty. Establishing her reputation with Tramontana, which depicts a patriotic war hero turning to Fascism as a means of restoring order in the turbulent post-war period, and for which she was awarded the Premio Cervia, Magno was praised not only for her skilful portrayal of the contemporary political climate, Ruggero Jacobbi commenting 'non paia cosa da poco, per una donna, affrontare [...] temi così ardui e difficili, per la loro portata politica e sociale' (Quadrivio, 4 October 1936, p. 4), but also for the strength of her characterisation, a strength which other Fascist female writers were deemed to lack. As Daria Banfi Malaguzzi observed of Magno's work: 'I tipi sono tratteggiati con risolutezza e la ricerca interiore è condotta con serietà.' (Donne italiane, 1937, p. 235) Yet, despite being one of the only Fascist writers to achieve both critical acclaim and commercial success, Magno was not to enjoy the same status as her male counterparts within the Fascist literary hierarchy. In contrast to Ardengo Soffici and Giovanni Papini, whose slogan-ridden vision of Fascist literature found great favour with the party elite, Magno, who adopted a more intimate narrative style, was regarded as secondary to the two academicians. Rejecting the triumphalist style of official Fascist literature, Magno worked independently, opting for a narrative style which favoured personal history over public events in a manner that echoed that of her new generation counterparts, and it was this distance from group initiatives which resulted in her being sidelined within the Fascist cultural hierarchy.

The regime's response to women writers who upheld Fascist ideology in their work was thus highly contradictory. On one hand, it offered support to female writers as a means of encouraging them to create a politicised literature, from backing female cultural

associations to establishing literary awards, yet, on the other hand, it did little to coerce women into producing a Fascist literature or support those who championed Fascist ideology in their work. While Pina Ballario and Pia Rimini both received premi di incoraggiamento, state-sponsored awards designed to encourage young writers, their allegiance to the regime did not mean they were favoured over other writers; indeed, such awards were conferred on writers who did not hold party membership, including Gianna Manzini and Anna Maria Ortese. Nor did Fascist writers enjoy preferential treatment in terms of state assistance, as the cases of Ballario and Rimini illustrate, with the regime responding to their repeated calls for help with a weary resignation rather than enthusiastic support. With no obvious advantages to be gained from producing conformist literature, it is not surprising that the majority of women writers resisted the call to create a Fascist literature, despite being tacit supporters of the regime. Excluded from the privileges which conferred financial security on their male counterparts, their livelihoods were dependent on the commercial success of their work with the result that many turned to the lucrative romanzo rosa, as I will discuss in chapter three, a genre which, although highly conformist, was far removed from the creative literature advocated by Bottai.

# 2.3.5 The response to non-conformist women's writing

With Fascist women writers producing works of scant literary merit and propagandists such as Astaldi and Lombardo causing concern with their headstrong protagonists who refused to adhere to traditional moral values, attention was focused instead on the new generation of writers as standard-bearers of the new Italian literature. Hailed for their innovative prose style which signalled Italy's cultural prowess to the outside world, and praised for their rejection of the consumerism which had beset contemporary women's writing, they came to be regarded as *donne attive* of the literary world. 'Riconosceremo subito che la più recente letteratura femminile si è decisamente spostata su un primo piano nazionale, recando un contributo che risulta senz'altro tutto "attivo", declared the *Meridiano di Roma* (6 March 1938, p. 10). Although censorship would become an issue for those writers engaged in anti-Fascist activities during the 1940s, the previous decade saw their work greeted with critical acclaim, and their narratives, which presented nontraditional female models and offered a critique of patriarchal, and implicitly Fascist, society, were praised for their originality and morality.

The tolerance extended to non-conformist female writers during the thirties is illustrated by the case of Alba de Céspedes. A well-known anti-Fascist sympathiser, she was the subject of sustained police scrutiny and was imprisoned for six days in February 1935 for criticising Italian war-mongering in Abyssinia. Yet, despite her close connections with the anti-Fascist movement, she experienced no difficulty in publishing L'anima degli altri in 1935, a collection of short fiction peopled by female characters who, in their infidelity and indifference to their children, countered the Fascist ideal of the dutiful wife and mother. Her second collection Concerto was even bolder in its choice of themes, the final story 'Mi chiamo Regina' focusing on the tragic life of a woman, who, after being abandoned by her lover, turns to prostitution in order to earn her living. At a time when the regime was taking an increasingly repressive attitude towards sexual morality, with female sexual activity equated solely with reproduction, de Céspedes's sympathetic portrayal of an ageing prostitute, who is depicted as a victim of her gender and class rather than as the product of her own degenerate tendencies, not only broke the silence surrounding female sexual exploitation but also served to challenge the popular prejudice that such women were immoral and a danger to society.<sup>51</sup> Given its controversial subject matter, it was perhaps surprising that the story was passed for publication, although its Parisian setting, a city seen as synonymous with decadence and vice by the regime, meant that it avoided the close scrutiny of the censors. Even more surprising, however, was the critical acclaim which the story attracted, Aldo Farinelli of La Stampa singling it out for praise and noting the 'effusa traccia di poesia che schiarisce anche gli stati torbidi dell'animo, le oscure tristezze della coscienza'.52

It was with her best-selling *Nessuno torna indietro* that de Céspedes offered her greatest challenge to Fascist ideology. Charting the lives of eight young women who form a close friendship while boarding at a female college in Rome, the novel examines the difficulties experienced by young women in constructing an authentic sense of self in the face of narrowly delineated images of womanhood. Interweaving history and fiction, de Céspedes sets her characters' lives against the backdrop of contemporary Italy, charting the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and peppering her narrative with details of everyday life

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the regime's campaign to remove illegitimate sexuality from public view, see Mary Gibson's chapter on Italy in *Prostitution: An International Handbook on Trends, Problems, and Policies*, ed. by Nanette J. Davies (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 157-76.

<sup>52</sup> Aldo Farinelli, 'Calepino', La Stampa, 17 March 1938, p. 3.

under Fascism, as when a prospective employer tells Xenia Constantini that she must have a Fascist University Groups' membership card in order to be employed, or when Silvia Custo takes up her first teaching post in the new city of Littoria, a city characterised by state control: 'Nessuno ha una propria vita intima, ancora si sente bisogno della comunità organizzatrice.'53 Even the college where the students board alludes to the regimentation of life under Fascism: from the strict rules which govern the girls' behaviour to the curbs on individual freedom, the Pensione Grimaldi serves as a metaphor for the repressive Fascist state. Cigarettes and make-up, symbols of an emancipated lifestyle, are banned and the girls are encouraged to adopt a sober way of dressing, while their every movement is monitored by the nuns. The authoritarian structure of the college, with the dictatorial Suor Lorenza at its head, further underlines its similarity with the regime and a clear parallel is suggested between Lorenza, and her militaristic running of the college, and Mussolini. Not only does Lorenza's misplaced belief in her role as 'la madre di tutti' parody Mussolini's selfproclaimed role as the father of the nation but, as an all-seeing presence in the college whose window acts as a watchful eye in the dark, she is analogous to Mussolini's selffashioned image as an omnipotent figure akin to God (p. 258).54

Central to the novel is the figure of Emanuela Andori, a wealthy Florentine who arrives at the college posing as a student but who, in reality, is seeking to escape the social stigma of bearing an illegitimate child. Concealing her daughter's existence from her fellow students, Emanuela reinvents herself as a young student so that she can return to a state of innocence in which her reputation is unblemished. Although a sense of duty forces her to visit her daughter on a weekly basis, she refuses to accept the culturally constructed role of mother but reassumes her fictitious identity as soon as she leaves the convent gates, adopting the dress and behaviour of her contemporaries to lend weight to her pretence. Challenging the view that maternity enriches a woman's life, de Céspedes shows how motherhood acts as an unwelcome constraint for Emanuela, hampering the development of her sense of self. 'In casa, al Grimaldi, e con Stefania, ovunque ella aveva una vita diversa. [...] Ma com'era lei veramente?.' (p. 50) From the first stages of pregnancy, when she views the new life inside her as 'un tumore maligno' (p. 261), Emanuela regards her child

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Alba de Céspedes, Nessuno torna indietro (Milan: Mondadori, 1944), p. 423.

Mussolini's mythical status in the minds of the Italian populace is illustrated by the quasi religious terms which the public employed in reference to him, a woman from Legnano addressing him as 'Voi che tutto vigilate e a tutto potete provvedere' in a letter requesting financial assistance (cited in *Caro Duce: lettere di donne italiane a Mussolini 1922-43*, ed. by Giorgio Boatti (Milan: Rizzolini, 1989), pp. 23-24).

as an obstacle to her freedom and, even when her daughter is dying of scarlet fever, she half longs for Stefania's death so that she can be released from maternal responsibility. In the lack of bonding between mother and child and the distaste she feels with regard to her pregnancy, Emanuela counters the belief that maternal love is an innate female emotion. Lacking any maternal instinct from childhood, she realises after giving birth that maternal love is a learned response born of social conditioning. 'Credo che l'amore materno dapprima sia una dovere', she confesses to her friends. 'Si sa che si deve amare quel fagottino di carne, dare la propria vita per lui se è necessario, poi è l'abitudine.' (p. 81)

The selfless maternal ideal is not only undermined in the figure of Emanuela but the myth of motherhood is questioned throughout the novel. From the dangers inherent in childbirth, evoked by Silvia's recollection of a friend's death in labour, to the misery of life dominated by pregnancy as contemplated by Xenia, 'pensava a quante amiche, al paese, avevano sposato uomini di laggiù, che andavano all'osteria, la sera, stanchi rincasavano, le prendevano assonnate: e ogni nove mesi un figliolo' (p. 365), the pain of child-bearing and the burden of child-rearing are continually reaffirmed, while maternity is shown to be far removed from the unconditional love promoted by the regime. From Emanuela's unfeeling mother, who refuses to acknowledge the imminent birth of her granddaughter, to the authoritarian Suor Lorenza, 'la madre di tutti', who revels in the power she has over her students, the maternal figures in the novel show little love for their charges, while the mother-daughter relationship is seen to be fraught with difficulty, signora Andori blaming Emanuela for her own failings as a mother, 'tu non sei mai stata proprio mia, se ti facevi male, anche da bambina andavi da tuo padre' (p. 362), and Xenia feeling a lack of emotional attachment to both parents: 'Noiosi i genitori vecchi; se ai legami affettivi che il tempo logora, non subentrasse il senso del dovere, che rapporti ci sarebbero ancora tra la vita nostra e la loro?'. (p. 195)

Despite challenging those mainstays of Fascist social policy, motherhood and the family, *Nessuno torna indietro* received widespread praise when it first appeared, with de Céspedes applauded for her sharply observed portraits of modern femininity. Writing in *Meridiano di Roma*, Garibaldo Marussi praised the way in which de Céspedes had captured the chameleon-like quality of Emanuela: 'Il suo carattere serpentino, [...] il suo cercare di evadere continuamente da sé stessa per non riuscire a vedere compiutamente nel proprio abisso spirituale sono qualche cosa di molto acutamente immaginato.' (29 January 1939, p. 10) The lack of a moralistic stance in the novel was also singled out for praise, Maria

Maggi applauding the dignified distance which the author kept from her characters and her lack of moral judgements about their behaviour. 'L'autrice è come lontana dalle cose e dai personaggi', she wrote in *La Tribuna*. 'Li vede muovere, li conduce, li osserva: non li blandisce [...] non li condanna.'55 Indeed, not only was the novel commended for avoiding the heavy-handed moralism common to women's writing of the period but it was even considered to have a firm moral foundation, Garibaldo Marussi describing it as 'fresca, originale, sana', the ultimate accolade for a work of female literature by the right-wing press (*Meridiano di Roma*, 29 January 1939, p. 10). It was only following complaints from the public that the novel was finally subjected to the close scrutiny of the authorities. In January 1940, an anonymous letter was sent to the Duce's personal secretary declaring it to be 'un libro [...] contro la maternità' and 'un romanzo immorale che avrebbe dovuto essere sequestrato', and, later that year, de Céspedes was called before a Fascist investigative committee to defend the novel. Taking offence at its critical portrait of Fascist Italy, the authorities banned the novel in late 1940. However, with nineteen imprints published within the space of just two years, such measures came too late to lessen its impact.

A similar fate was to befall her next work, *Fuga* (1940), which was banned in 1941 for being 'contrary to the Fascist ethic'.<sup>57</sup> In December 1940, a copy was sent to the Duce's personal secretary, which he initially received with thanks, writing to de Céspedes, 'lo leggerò con piacere, intanto Vi ringrazio pel gentile pensiero'. However, within a month, Sebastiani had informed Mondadori that the first story in the collection, which detailed a writer's exploitative relationship with his landlady, confirmed the author's reputation as an immoral writer: 'Scrittrice capace ma racconto immorale.' (ACS, SPD, b. 575, f. 200812) Yet, as with *Nessuno torna indietro*, the book's declared immorality did little to damage its popularity or influence critical opinion, with five editions published in four months and the critic Quinto Veneri commending the 'alto sapore morale' of its introspective pieces.<sup>58</sup> De Céspedes herself was unable to capitalise on the book's success, however. During the remaining years of Fascist rule, she was subjected to the full force of government disapproval: her work was banned and a Minculpop directive of August 1941 forbade the press from publicising her name. Forced to abandon fiction, she turned to journalism and

<sup>55</sup> Cited in an advertisement for Nessuno torna indietro, Meridiano di Roma, 15 January 1939, p. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Archivio centrale dello stato, Segreteria particolare del Duce, busta 575, fascicolo 200812.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Cited in Bruce Merry, Women in Modern Italian Literature: Four Studies Based on the Work of Grazia Deledda, Alba de Céspedes, Natalia Ginzburg, and Dacia Maraini (North Queensland: James Cook University, 1990), p. 38.

took up a full-time post with *Il Messaggero*. However, even this limited security was threatened for, in July 1943, she was summoned to appear before the Minister of Popular Culture. 'Lei è come morta', she was told. 'Non può più scrivere su nessun giornale.' De Céspedes was defiant in the face of such hostility. 'Non importa', she replied. 'Sto scrivendo un romanzo. Io impiego molto tempo a scrivere i miei libri: tre, anche cinque anni. Finirà molto prima il fascismo.' (cited in Petrignani, p. 40) Such confidence was justified, for the regime fell just eight days later.

De Céspedes was not the only anti-Fascist female writer to benefit from a surprising degree of tolerance during the 1930s, for Gianna Manzini and Fausta Cialente were also able to publish their work freely, despite their opposition to Fascism. Although not openly antagonistic towards the regime in the same way as de Céspedes, Manzini was nonetheless a firm opponent of Fascism, her resistance stemming from the political radicalism of her father, whose anarchic beliefs she shared.<sup>59</sup> Her father's death in 1925, after being persecuted by the Fascists for refusing to renounce his political views, confirmed Manzini's resistance to Fascism and, while many of her contemporaries opted for the security of party membership, she stood firm, her political beliefs and respect for her father's memory making opposition an easy path to choose: 'Credo anzi di essere fra i pochissimi ad aver rifiutato quella "tessera" che pur procurava vantaggi, apriva strade, metteva al riparo. Era troppo facile per me, così fortemente ancorata a un sentimento.' (Ritratto in piedi, p. 190) Manzini reflected this resistance to Fascist orthodoxy in her fiction, with many of her female characters seeking to escape the prescribed role of wife and mother, which limits their freedom and erases their identity. In 'Notte quieta', Giulia abandons her deaf husband for her lover when she realises that her own life has become a constant cycle of ministering to his needs, her actions prompted by self-preservation rather than physical desire: 'Fu quasi un istinto di conservazione che la portò fra le braccia di un'amante.'60 A similar critique of marriage is found in 'La coperta', in which the middle-aged Anna seeks to escape the constraints of married life through the powers of imagination. Married for twenty years to a domineering husband, who prevents her establishing any sense of self,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Quinto Veneri, 'Alba de Céspedes: Fuga', Meridiano di Roma, 16 February 1941, p. 10.

Manzini revealed her sympathy with the anarchic views of her father in her autobiographical *Ritratto in piedi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1971): 'A proposito degli anarchici, ho preso alcuni libri. Comincio a leggere. Buon Dio, non è che io non entri in quello spirito; figuriamoci; è il mio!' (pp. 36-37).

<sup>60</sup> Gianna Manzini, 'Notte quieta', in Venti racconti (Milan: Mondadori, 1941), pp. 47-55 (p. 52).

Anna uses embroidery to achieve a temporary sense of freedom, the quilt on which she is working serving as 'la finestra della prigione'.<sup>61</sup>

Although Manzini's damning portrait of marriage was to cause alarm among right-wing critics in the early 1940s, Aldo Capasso claiming in *Quadrivio* that the protagonist of 'La coperta' led a life that was 'anormale, eccessiva e pericolosa', during the thirties her work was praised for its originality and its moral lead in steering women's fiction away from eroticism (22 September 1940, p. 4). Writing in the same journal four years earlier, Ruggero Jacobbi commented:

Gianna Manzini [...] viene davvero a portare un filo d'aria nell'atmosfera chiusa e viziata di tanta letteratura femminile d'oggi. [...] La Manzini s'è dimostrata sempre assai diversa da tutte le altre scrittrici, preferendo puntigliosamente una introspezione attenta, trasfigurata da una fantasia accesa ed un descrittivismo [...] immaginoso alla vuotaggini sentimentali od agli erotismi morboisi e puerili di troppe consorelle. (23 August 1936, p. 8)

Manzini's critical portrayal of marriage and her radical political views also did little to diminish her status in the eyes of the regime, who viewed her as a model of female literary achievement and supported her work accordingly. In 1935, she was awarded a *premio d'incoraggiamento* and, from 1942, received a bursary of 2,000 lire per month once the Ministry of Popular Culture had confirmed that she was 'ariana e cattolica' and that neither she nor her partner Enrico Falqui had any 'precedenti sfavorevoli'. 62

While Manzini's opposition to the regime took the form of personal resistance to Fascist ideology and party membership, Fausta Cialente was an active opponent of the regime, albeit from a distance, her expatriate life in Egypt affording her 'la possibilità di trascorrervi tutto il vergognoso periodo fascista' (Petrignani, p. 86). From her home in Alexandria, Cialente took a leading role in resistance activities, using her house as a base for anti-Fascist operations, founding an anti-Fascist newspaper which was distributed in Italian prison camps, and broadcasting for the resistance on Radio Cairo, an opportunity presented to her by the British in 1940 which she welcomed with great enthusiasm: 'Con quell'arma, astuzia aiutando, sul fascismo avrei finalmente sparato anch'io.'63 While the regime was unable to quash such opposition easily – 'il solo pericolo che potevamo temere era che ci togliessero il passaporto, ma non osarono mai farlo', as Cialente noted – it was

<sup>61</sup> Gianna Manzini, 'La coperta', in *Rive remote* (Milan: Mondadori, 1940), pp. 11-42 (p. 40).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Archivio centrale dello stato, Segreteria particolare del Duce, busta 2024, fascicolo 534645.

<sup>63</sup> Fausta Cialente, Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), p. 222.

nonetheless capable of punishing her dissent by preventing the publication or distribution of her work in Italy, and yet no such measures were taken (Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger, p. 209). Throughout the 1930s, Cialente was one of the most fêted of the new generation writers, winning both the Premio dei Dieci and the Premio Galante, and hailed for instigating 'quel sensibile e profondo risveglio e rinnovamento della letteratura femminile italiana' (Quadrivio, 4 October 1936, p. 4). Although her work did fall victim to censorship, with the second edition of Natalia blocked for its depiction of a lesbian relationship and its allusion to Italy's inglorious defeat at Caporetto, it was targeted by the censors for its challenge to Fascist morality and for its attack on Italian military prestige rather than for the political views of its author. Indeed, the novel only came to the attention of the censors following Cialente's receipt of the Premio dei Dieci and the resulting complaints from right-wing critics about its frank depiction of female sexuality, Ercole Rivalta denouncing the female protagonist as 'una fanciulla di notevole depravazione sessuale e intellettuale'.64 Yet, once media interest in the novel had died down, the censors paid little attention to Cialente's subsequent work, with both Cortile a Cleopatra and Pamela o la bella estate passed for publication despite the fact they represented a much greater challenge to Fascist values. In contrast to Natalia, which ended on a conservative note with the protagonist returning dutifully to the marital home, Pamela and Cortile a Cleopatra refuted the notion of the home and family as symbols of security, the oppressive familial situation in the former leading to Pamela's mental instability and the repressive societal rules portrayed in the latter resulting in Marco's abandonment of his adopted home town and the suicide of his lover Eva, who, unable to live with the shame of her affair with Marco, slits her throat. The reason for this disparate response to Cialente's work lay, as with de Céspedes, in the geographical setting of her novels: Natalia, which was set in contemporary Italy, was interpreted as an attack on Fascist morality and the honour of the armed forces, whereas Cortile a Cleopatra and Pamela, whose events unfolded against the backdrop of Egyptian society, were not considered a threat to Italian values.

In the same way that the censors ignored those works by Cialente which did not represent a blatant attack on Fascism, so Paola Drigo's novel *Maria Zef* (1936) met with a lack of opposition from the authorities, despite its critique of poverty and abuse in rural Italian society. The myth of the countryside was a powerful one in Fascist ideology.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Ercole Rivalta, 'Quattro premi letterari', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 20 February 1930, p. 3.

Stemming from the need to increase both grain production and the birth rate, which were threatened by continued urban growth, the regime launched a series of initiatives in the late 1920s to reruralise Italy, among them a propaganda campaign which portrayed the countryside as a locus of health and productivity and the rural population as the guardians of true Italian values. A particular focus was given to rural women, who had maintained high rates of reproduction and were believed to have retained the feminine qualities of dutifulness and moral fortitude lacking in their urban counterparts. This idealised image of rural life was countered by Drigo in Maria Zef, in which she depicted the poverty and misery of the rural underclass, particularly that of women, who not only endured hard physical labour and the constant burden of child-bearing but who were also subjected to violence and abuse. Set in the austere landscape of the Friuli region, the novel recounts the tragic tale of Mariutine and her sister Rosute, who are sent to live with their paternal uncle, Barbe Zef, after the death of their mother. The backdrop of the forbidding mountains forms a parallel with the austerity of the girls' lives as they eke out a meagre existence on the mountainside, their days a continuous cycle of household chores, with Zef a brooding presence whose latent violence manifests itself with drink. A cycle of abuse begins after Mariutine is attacked by the drunken Zef, which results in her contracting syphilis, and when she learns that her mother's untimely death was caused by the same condition, she plies her uncle with drink and kills him in order to save her sister from a similar fate.

While portraying the abuse suffered by women at the hands of men, Drigo does not seek to apportion blame but rather she presents each character as the victim of a poverty-stricken and miserable existence. Emphasising the sanctity of life and the respect owed to each individual, Drigo underscores the novel with a deeply moral tone, justifying the killing of Zef by showing how he violated this respect through the abuse he inflicted on the women he was charged with protecting. Rather than being condemned for its graphic depiction of rape and venereal disease and for its challenge to patriarchal authority, the novel was widely acclaimed for its compassion and morality, the *Illustrazione italiana* praising its ability to 'far risplendere sulla più sordida materia una luce segreta di umanità', and Ettore Allodoli hailing it as 'un autentico capolavoro [...] che scopre luce di umanità e compassione anche negli effetti del vizio e del delitto'.65 Even the conservative Luigi

<sup>65 &#</sup>x27;Paola Drigo: Maria Zef', Illustrazione italiana, 3 January 1937, p. 5.

Ettore Allodoli, 'Letteratura femminile dell'anno XV', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1938, pp. 87-97 (p. 87).

Tonelli acknowledged the merits of the novel, declaring it to be 'un'opera singolare, che merita il più sincero rispetto', and official approval was conferred on the novel in 1939 when it was included in an anthology of Italian literature for foreign readers, which was designed as a showcase for Italian literary achievement.<sup>66</sup>

While the work of the non-conformist de Céspedes, Manzini, and Cialente, enjoyed widespread critical acclaim during the 1930s, it was the fiction of Paola Masino, the writer with the closest links to the regime, which was to provoke the greatest controversy. The partner of Massimo Bontempelli, whose enthusiastic support of Fascism during the 1920s had earned him membership of the Academy and a position at the head of the National Fascist Syndicate of Writers, Masino did not share Bontempelli's allegiance to the regime but their relationship ensured her close association with the Fascist cultural elite and resulted in her writing being subject to close scrutiny. The work which aroused the greatest controversy was Periferia (1933). Focusing on a group of ten children, the book depicts their abuse at the hands of insensitive parents within the setting of contemporary Italy, the action taking place in the suburb of an unnamed Italian city between October 1931 and October 1932. United by the common bond of suffering, the children resort to role-play in order to seek refuge from the harsh reality of their lives, Ella and Carlo living in perpetual fear of their abusive mother and Lisa suffering from a lack of self-worth due to the coldness of her parents. Maternity is similarly equated with suffering. 'A tutte le donne gli piace soffrire e per quello fanno i figli', observes Luca, while Anna regards motherhood as an opportunity to inflict suffering on others: 'Voleva bambini. - Per sentire che male fa a farli.'67 In such an environment, where mothers are either abusers or the abused, the prospect of maternity holds little appeal for the girls and they show no inclination towards a nurturing role. 'Io non voglio avere bambini', states Fulvia. 'Cascano e si fanno male, come le bambole.' (p. 68)

In its harsh portrait of childhood and motherhood in contemporary Italian society, the novel represented a clear challenge to Fascist ideology and provoked an angry response from the PNF, who were particularly outraged that these children were not subject to the discipline of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, the organisation responsible for regimenting children's after-school activities. How was it possible, asked the Fascist deputy Leandro Gellona, for a writer to depict 'all'anno XI dei bambini italiani contemporanei senza che,

<sup>66</sup> Luigi Tonelli, 'Paola Drigo: Maria Zef', L'Italia che scrive, 1938, p. 43.

<sup>67</sup> Paola Masino, Periferia (Milan: Bompiani, 1933), pp. 85 and 69.

almeno di riflesso, sentano l'influenza dell'ONB?'68 Masino also faced charges of benefiting from nepotism, *Il Secolo fascista* attributing her success in the 1933 *Premio Viareggio* to the favouritism of the jury, of which Bontempelli was a member: 'Tale giuria ha sperato di assegnare l'agognato peculio ad una pseudo scrittrice, inesistente dal punto di vista artistico, ma solida e vistosa amante di uno dei suoi membri.' (1 October 1933, p. 351) Yet, despite its hostile reception from Fascist activists, the novel did not fall victim to censorship but was allowed to circulate freely, winning acclaim as it did so. Hailed by *Quadrivio* as '[un] libro premiabilissimo con tutto onore dei giudici', it was described by Aldo Modica as 'un ottimo libro', which served as 'una affermazione di più che in Italia esiste anche della buona e concreta letteratura femminile'.69

The resistance which Masino displayed in *Periferia* was to translate into open dissent in Nascita e morte della massaia (1945), a novel she began in March 1938 and whose motives she made clear in her diary: 'La mia "Vita di massaia" darà anche un colpettino nella schiena alle care consuetudini famigliari e alla schiavitù della donna.' (Colloquio di notte, p. 19) Designed to parody the sposa e madre esemplare of Fascist propaganda, the novel charts the life of a woman who is unable to establish a sense of identity in the face of prescribed models of womanhood; her lack of a name signalling her lack of identity, she is defined simply in terms of her domestic role and her relationship with others, from la figlia to la massaia. Neglected by her parents and denied an education, her growing sense of individuality is quashed when she is forced to conform to socially accepted definitions of female beauty and, once married, her fragile sense of self vanishes beneath her role as the buona sposa: 'Il mio mestiere sia allora quello di essere compita, far piacere a ognuno senza distinzioni e discussioni, a costo di me stessa.'70 On the few occasions she seeks escape, she finds herself surrounded by images which confirm the female domestic role, 'ecco il vero nostro volto, cibo, lavori forzati, colloquio eterno con l'ignoranza, l'imbroglio e la necessità quotidiani', and, by the end of the novel, she has been reduced to a shadow of her former self, who aspires only to death (p. 85).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Cited in Maria Vittoria Vittori, 'Introduzione', in Paola Masino, *Colloquio di notte: racconti*, ed. by Maria Vittoria Vittori (Palermo: La Luna, 1994), pp. 11-37 (p. 17).

<sup>69 &#</sup>x27;A Viareggio è andato così', Quadrivio, 18 August 1935, p. 4.

Aldo Modica, 'Paola Masino: Periferia', La Rassegna nazionale, August-September 1933, pp. 138-39 (p. 139)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Paola Masino, Nascita e morte della massaia (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1982), p. 58.

Masino's criticism of the two-dimensional role imposed on women by the regime was accompanied by an attack on the cherished ideals of nationhood and autarchy. In the massaia's refusal to accept her husband's offer of domestic help, claiming 'la casa, come la patria, va difesa contro ogni logica e ogni possibilità' (p. 213), she mocks the notion of the home symbolising the nation in microcosm, while the drive for self-sufficiency is parodied in her depiction of the massaia hosting a dinner party in an ill-fitting dress made from a sack, which is described by her approving guests as '[un] fulgido esempio di rinuncia, simbolo dell'indefessa attualità della Moda Nostra' (p. 219). The reaction of the authorities to such a blatant attack on Fascist ideology was surprisingly muted. First published in serial form in Tempo between October 1941 and January 1942, the novel provoked the strongest reaction from the publishing industry, with Mondadori and Bompiani both vying for publication rights. Although the authorities intervened before the novel went to print, ordering certain revisions to be made, such as the removal of the words 'maresciallo', 'prefetto', 'patria', and 'nazione', which were thought to be sullied by the disrespectful tone of the book, it was nonetheless passed for publication, despite being labelled 'cinico' and 'disfattista'. Fate, however, was to take a different course. The warehouse storing the newly printed copies was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid and it was not until 1945 that the novel was published in book form.<sup>71</sup>

### 2.3.6 Censorship

As the cases of Masino, Cialente, Manzini, and de Céspedes illustrate, the regime had no clear censorship policy with regard to literature and rarely meted out punishment to dissenting writers. In contrast to Nazi Germany, where conformity was demanded of professionals working in the cultural sphere through a system of permits operated by the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Fascist Italy showed far greater leniency towards its intellectuals, tolerating non-membership of the party and even bestowing awards on writers and artists who were not PNF members. As Palma Bucarelli,

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, 'Un'ideale genealogia', in Masino, Colloquio di notte, pp. 5-9 (p. 7). The muted response of the authorities to Masino's work was all the more surprising given its harsh reaction to her other manifestations of dissent. In 1938, Bontempelli had been suspended from the Academy for refusing to take up the chair of Italian Literature at Florence University, after its previous incumbent, Attilio Momigliano, was dismissed for being a Jew, and following a speech in November 1938 in which he criticised the regime, his party membership was withdrawn and both he and Masino were forced to leave Rome. Moving to Venice, they became involved in anti-Fascist activity and, in September 1943, the regime issued a deportation order for Masino and a death warrant for Bontempelli. It was only after receiving a warning by Enrico Falqui that they managed to evade arrest and flee to a safe house.

director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, recalled of the surprising degree of leniency which existed in the cultural sphere: 'Se eri un artista, senza tessera non ti facevano accademico d'Italia, ma ti lasciavano vivere e potevi anche vincere dei premi.'<sup>72</sup>

The Fascist regime was also far less systematic in controlling literary production than its Nazi counterpart, with book censorship falling under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior until the mid-1930s and book production controlled through a system of precensorship and sequestration, the former representing the rejection of a book at manuscript stage and the latter the withdrawal from circulation of published copies of a book. By putting local prefects in charge of these matters, many of whom were police officers with no cultural knowledge, the system operated in a highly erratic manner and targeted only the most openly subversive writing. The criteria used for censorship were the same as for plays and films: any work which criticised the regime directly was banned, as was material which showed a lack of respect for the armed forces, the monarchy, and the Italian state. The category which was the least well defined, and the most difficult for prefects to judge, was opposition to Fascist morality, and, as a result, only books which mentioned Fascism or were set in contemporary Italy were targeted by the censors. Thus, while Cialente's Natalia, a novel set in post-war Italian society, was deemed immoral and returned to the author for revision, both Cortile a Cleopatra and Pamela o la bella estate, which were set against the backdrop of Egyptian society, provoked no reaction from the censors.

Following the example of Nazi Germany, a more systematic attempt to control cultural production was introduced in 1934 with the founding of a Secretariat for Press and Propaganda, which became the Ministry of Popular Culture in 1937. With censorship centralised in one department, stricter controls over literature were introduced. From 1937, editors were obliged to include bibliographical information when presenting their books to the ministry, and greater surveillance operated over a wider range of titles, documents from the *Archivio centrale dello stato* showing that almost 11,000 titles were examined by the ministry from April 1937 to June 1938, although only 93 titles were subsequently banned.<sup>73</sup> However, the increasingly anti-Semitic direction taken by the regime during the late thirties, together with its focus on cultural autarchy, meant that the efforts of the ministry

<sup>72</sup> Cited in Sorelle d'Italia, ed. by Sandra Artom and Anna Rita Calabrò (Milan: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 94.

Cited in Philip V. Cannistraro, La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media (Bari: Laterza, 1975),
 p. 117.

were directed towards eliminating works by Jewish and foreign writers rather than stamping out anti-Fascist sentiment.

The partial and episodic control which the regime employed over book production thus allowed women writers to voice far greater opposition to Fascism than was possible in other fields. Moreover, the preference of women writers for an introspective narrative style, which focused on personal history over political events, resulted in their work being less open to interpretations of anti-Fascism than that of their male contemporaries, who favoured a realistic style of narrative and set their work within a clearly defined historical framework. Elio Vittorini, who was greatly influenced by the social realism of Faulkner and Steinbeck, had his novel Il garofano rosso blocked for publication after it was serialised in Solaria in 1933, the authorities deeming it critical of the regime despite its portrayal of the author's early attraction to Fascism; while Alberto Moravia encountered difficulties throughout the ventennio, his portrayal of the corruption and cynicism of the middle-classes in Gli indifferenti (1929) resulting in the novel's repeated rejection by publishers, while his unflattering portrait of Mussolini in La mascherata led to its sequestration in 1941. The new generation of women writers, by contrast, who made little reference to the contemporary political situation in their work, enjoyed a relatively high degree of freedom, their criticism of patriarchal hegemony provoking little response from the regime.

## 2.4 THE RESPONSE BY WOMEN WRITERS TO THE REGIME

Despite countering Fascist ideology in their fiction, the position taken by the new generation of writers towards the regime was not one of constant and determined resistance, however. Just as established writers such as Serao and Aleramo had displayed a contradictory attitude towards Fascism, opting for a position of alignment with the regime while refusing to act as government propagandists in their fiction, so their younger colleagues responded to the regime with a decided ambiguity. While many of them held strongly anti-Fascist views, they nonetheless published their work in pro-Fascist periodicals: Masino contributed to *Quadrante*, de Céspedes to *Quadrivio* and *La donna fascista*, Ortese to the GUF magazine *Nove Maggio*, Banti to the expansionist *Occidente*, and Morante to *Il Selvaggio*, a review which served as the cultural cradle of left-wing

Fascism. For a number of writers, this association with the regime went even closer. In 1939, the nationalistic journal *Antieuropa* dedicated an entire issue to the anti-*lei* campaign, a word which had been denounced by the regime as 'straniero e servile' and ordered to be replaced with the more virile *voi*, and among the list of writers who contributed to the issue were Elsa Morante and Maria Bellonci.<sup>74</sup> Neither writer possessed Fascist leanings and, indeed, both were to condemn Fascist repression in the immediate post-war period, Morante denouncing the violent annexation of Ethiopia and the violation of Jewish civil rights, and Bellonci speaking out against female oppression and lamenting 'il guasto che tanti anni avevano fatto in noi'.<sup>75</sup> Yet, despite their lack of ideological commitment to Fascism, both were prepared to back official propaganda.

Another surprising proponent of Fascist ideology was Alba de Céspedes. In 1936, her novel Io, suo padre (1935) was chosen to represent Italy in a literary competition at the Berlin Olympics and, although she was later to deny any responsibility for submitting the novel to the selection committee, 'non è stata una mia scelta', she told Piera Carroli, 'è l'editore che l'ha mandato', she was nonetheless responsible for producing a work which was little more than a propaganda exercise (Carroli, p. 136). Written as the precursor to a film script which would showcase the talents of the boxer Erminio Spalla, the novel focuses on the relationship between a former prize-fighter, Romolo Tonelli, and his son Masetto, whom he is training for the national boxing title. Images of youthful masculinity echo throughout the novel, Romolo regarding his son as '[il] vero rappresentante della rinnovata giovinezza italica', and his fellow sportsmen displaying the strength and patriotism prized by the regime: 'Tutti insieme levarono il braccio in alto nel saluto romano. [...] Erano belli così i ragazzi di Mussolini, la sua generazione prediletta.'76 While being confined to the background, the female characters are depicted in similarly stereotypical terms. Romolo's wife Amalia represents the sposa e madre esemplare of Fascist propaganda: 'Era la compagna ed era la moglie, era la madre, era tutto senza farsi notare, sorridendo.' (pp. 40-41) Ignoring his father's advice to find 'una dolcissima creatura fragile' (p. 40), Masetto turns instead to Eva, whose artificial appearance and hedonism signal her affinity with the donna-crisi reviled by the Fascist press: 'Sembrava non avere nulla di vero. [...] Le unghie rosse come lamponi, [...] e la bocca unta di rossetto.' (pp. 69-70) When Masetto proposes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Cited in Francesco Flora, Ritratto di un ventennio (Bologna: Alfa, 1965), p. 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Maria Bellonci, 'Frammento di confessione', *Mercurio*, December 1944, pp. 303-06 (p. 303).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Alba de Céspedes, *Io, suo padre* (Lanciano: Carabba, 1935), pp. 28 and 105.

marriage, Eva is momentarily attracted by the prospect of maternity, 'mamma... come non si era mai accorta dell'infinita dolcezza di quella parola?' (p. 123), but, realising that materialism and motherhood are incompatible, she declines his offer and resigns herself to the emptiness of her consumerist lifestyle: 'Gli oggetti non avevano vita, erano oggetti di lusso senza anima.' (pp. 129-30)

This apparent contradiction between a writer's political views and the themes portrayed in their work was not unusual among women writers of the period. In the same way that pro-Fascist writers shied away from using their fiction as a propaganda vehicle, so many women who opposed the regime followed a more conservative path in their fiction in order to ensure their financial security. Such was the case with Barbara Allason and Flavia Steno. A highly respected academic writer and vociferous opponent of the regime, Allason took a leading role in anti-Fascist activity during the ventennio, from her involvement with the Giustizia e Libertà group to her support for Benedetto Croce in his sustained opposition to the regime. Yet, in her fiction, she allowed her narrative ability to be obscured by the tired clichés of romantic literature, her novel Risblancheda (1926) characterised by a cloying sentimentality. 'Peccato che Barbara Allason sciupi molte belle, istintive qualità di narratrice per abbandonarsi talvolta a episodi banalissimi che costituiscono il vieto bagaglio di molte commediole a lieto fine', as Mercede Mùndula observed.<sup>77</sup> Flavia Steno took a similarly active role in opposing Fascism, her outspoken criticism of the regime resulting in her removal from the editorship of the Genoese newspaper La Chiosa in 1927, and her role in the resistance leading to an order for her arrest. Yet, as with Allason, her political views did not result in a fiction of dissent but she continued to produce her successful brand of popular romance throughout the ventennio, which was highly conformist in its adhesion to traditional models of female behaviour.<sup>78</sup>

The risks associated with adopting a non-conformist position were even greater for writers at the start of their careers. Without a network of contacts within the literary world or a fixed contract on a periodical, young writers found themselves in a precarious financial position and were reluctant to do anything which might jeopardise their careers, as exemplified by the conformism displayed by de Céspedes in *Io, suo padre*. Written in 1935,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Mercede Mùndula, 'Barbara Allason: Risblancheda', L'Italia che scrive, 1926, p. 237.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> For a discussion of Flavia Steno in the context of romantic fiction of the *ventennio*, see Silvana Ghiazza, 'La letteratura rosa negli anni venti-quaranta', in *I best seller del ventennio*, ed. by Gigliola De Donato and Vanna Gazzola Stacchini, pp. 129-51.

the same year she had been imprisoned for criticising the regime, the novel represented a commission which she could not afford to turn down, both on financial grounds and in order to divest herself of the anti-Fascist label which threatened to stifle her career in its infancy. As she commented of the period following her imprisonment: 'Da allora fu come se un'altra persona abitasse in me, segreta, muta, nascosta, alla quale non era neppure permesso di respirare.'<sup>79</sup> However, once she had become more established as a writer, with *Prigionie* and *L'anima degli altri* warmly received by the critics and a fixed contract at *Il Messaggero* giving her a degree of financial security, she could afford to take greater risks and this resulted in the greater resistance to Fascist ideology displayed in *Concerto* and *Nessuno torna indietro*.

Financial concerns also lay behind Maria Bellonci's support for Fascist ideology. Throughout the 1930s, she and her husband, the journalist Goffredo Bellonci, experienced constant financial hardship, with Maria dependent on her husband's income while she completed her first novel and Goffredo relying on regular commissions to make ends meet. 'I denari in casa erano pochi', as she recalled of their lives under Fascism. 'Goffredo ed io abbiamo sempre avuto l'incomodo privilegio di vivere sul ramo.'80 Anxious to maintain a steady income, the Belloncis found themselves obliged to adopt a position of outward conformity as can be seen in their support for the anti-lei campaign. Similar concerns also prompted Anna Maria Ortese to align herself with the regime. In 1939, she entered the first female Littoriali, the national university cultural contest, and beat twenty-four contestants to win first prize in the poetry section. She repeated her victory the following year, winning 700 lire in the prose competition, and that same year she received a premio d'incoraggiamento from the regime, which totalled 3,000 lire. Like Bellonci, her motives were personal rather than political: at the Littoriali, her board and lodging was paid by the Fascist student organisation, the GUF, and she used her prize money to pay off her debts.

While many young writers assumed a position of conformity because of financial constraints, it must also be remembered that the border between conformity and non-conformity in the cultural sphere was not clearly defined. As Lino Pertile has observed, the *ventennio* witnessed a lack of demarcation between Fascist and non-Fascist periodicals and it was common for writers to contribute to a broad spectrum of publications, the non-conformist *Solaria* featuring the work of the academicians Antonio Baldini and Riccardo

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Alba de Céspedes, 'Il 1946 di Alba de Céspedes', *Mercurio*, November-December 1946, p. 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Maria Bellonci, Come un racconto: gli anni del premio Strega (Milan: Club degli Editori, 1976), p. 6.

Bacchelli, while the Fascist *Primato* published work by Montale and Gadda ('Fascism and Literature', p. 180).<sup>81</sup> By contributing to pro-Fascist periodicals, female writers were simply following a well-trodden path rather than declaring their support for Fascism. Similarly, their participation in state-run competitions, as in the case of de Céspedes, did not necessarily signal allegiance to Fascism but young writers and artists would use such contests as a springboard for their careers. In the words of Barbara Giuranna, commenting on her winning composition in the 1937 contest of the National Fascist Syndicate of Musicians: 'Non mi sono mai interessata di politica, anche se mi hanno accusato di essere fascista. Avevo composto quel poema eroico che volli chiamare 'Decima Legio' [...] per prendere parte al concorso.' (cited in Artom and Calabrò, *Sorelle d'Italia*, p. 156)

A further factor determining the reluctance of writers to voice dissent in their fiction was the continued influence of the Crocean concept of pure art. Despite the concerted efforts of Fascist ideologues to counter agnosticismo, many writers continued to subscribe to the belief that art should remain disengaged from politics, as exemplified by Montale, who, despite refusing membership to the PNF, was vehemently opposed to the idea of an anti-Fascist literature. 'Io non sono stato fascista e non ho cantato il fascismo ma neppure ho scritto poesie in cui quella pseudo rivoluzione apparisse osteggiata', he stated in a radio interview of 1951. 'Certo, sarebbe stato impossibile pubblicare poesie ostili al regime d'allora; ma il fatto è che non mi ci sarei provato neppure se il rischio fosse stato minimo o nulla.'82 The desire to remain aloof from political engagement was shared by many of his female contemporaries, Elsa Morante representing perhaps the most extreme example of a writer who believed in the complete separation of the political and cultural spheres. During the ventennio, Morante refused to adopt a political position and, while her passionate desire for social justice seemed to lead her naturally towards anti-Fascism, she rejected a position of non-conformity and took an almost perverse pleasure in resisting categorisation, supporting the anti-lei campaign and contributing to the misogynistic journal Il Selvaggio. Although her hatred of totalitarianism was revealed in the post-war period, when she condemned Italian society for colluding in the regime's atrocities, her most vitriolic attack was reserved for Mussolini's lack of cultural appreciation and his blundering attempts to

<sup>81</sup> For a list of writers who contributed to periodicals across the political spectrum, see Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, pp. 387-89; and Marina Addis Saba, *Gioventù italiana del Littorio: la stampa dei giovani nella guerra fascista* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1973), p. 40.

<sup>82</sup> Cited in Giuliano Manacorda, *Montale* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969), pp. 2-3.

politicise the cultural sphere. Describing the Fascist leader as '[un] uomo mediocre, grossolano, fuori dalla cultura' in her diary in May 1945, she went on to claim: 'Non capisce nulla di arte, ma [...] cerca di corrompere gli artisti.'83

## 2.4.1 Challenging Fascist ideology

In contrast to left-wing male writers, such as Vittorini and Pavese, who used their fiction to rebel against the stifling conservatism of Fascist society, as I will discuss in chapter four, left-wing female writers did not regard their work as a vehicle of political resistance. Rather than a fiction of dissent, which offered an explicit challenge to Fascist ideology, theirs was a critical examination of the oppression wrought by patriarchal society, a fiction which gave a voice to those excluded from power. However, in their criticism of patriarchal hegemony and of the social structures which imposed conformity, they offered an indirect critique of the regime and its suppression of individuality, while their depiction of insular communities, in which personal freedom is curtailed, exposed the oppressive nature of Fascist society where the individual was subordinate to the state and strict controls placed on personal freedom and autonomy. This can be seen in Cortile a Cleopatra, in which Cialente depicts an insular community where strict social rules order the lives of its inhabitants. Into this highly ordered existence comes the rebellious Marco, whose nomadic childhood means that he lacks any sense of community and is therefore resistant to the regimentation he encounters. As an outsider, his non-conformity is initially tolerated but, after becoming engaged to the daughter of the local furrier, he finds his freedom and individuality suppressed as he is forced to assume the role of the fiancé. Obliged to abandon casual work and take up a position in his future father-in-law's fur business, he feels a growing sense of imprisonment, the workshop taking on the aspect of a tomb with its overpowering smell of death emanating from the animal skins. Overcome by the need to escape, Marco turns to his future mother-in-law, 'Eva! [...] aiutatemi voi! Non ne posso più, non ne posso più!', but, misinterpreting his emotional outburst as a declaration of love, she responds in kind, abandoning herself to the passion that has been denied her in marriage.<sup>84</sup> Frightened by the savage and stifling power of Eva's love, Marco runs away, leaving behind Eva, who, alone and consumed by guilt, takes her own life.

<sup>83</sup> Repr. in *Paragone*, February 1988, pp. 4-6 (pp. 5-6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Fausta Cialente, *Cortile a Cleopatra*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1953), p. 279.

The stifling community which Cialente portrays in the novel serves as a portrait of Fascist society in microcosm. The claustrophobic nature of the cortile is constantly reiterated, the oppressive heat serving to highlight Marco's sense of imprisonment and Eva's suffocation within her loveless marriage, while an undercurrent of menace pervades the text, from the opening scene in which a knife-grinder sharpens blades in the town square to the ritual slaughtering of a ram whose blood runs through the dusty streets. Challenging the view that society performs a nurturing role, Cialente paints a damning portrait of its oppressive nature and, by showing how Marco resists assimilation, she champions the rights of the individual over those of the collective, a highly controversial stance at a time when individualism was deemed contrary to the Fascist ethic. A similarly stifling community can be found in Nessuno torna indietro, in which de Céspedes invests the traditionally supportive environment of a convent with a prison-like quality, revealing how the convent-turned-college curbs the freedom of the students. From the initial description of the forbidding building with its barred windows to the portrait of the strict regime which exists within its walls, with its curfews and withdrawal of privileges for disobedience, the college serves as a symbol of confinement, the nuns acting as prison warders in their patrol of the rooms: 'Suor Prudenzina [...] osservava attentamente nella camera cercando di scoprire qualche cosa di anormale, di colpevole.' (p. 17) The boarders themselves are highly conscious of their imprisonment. 'Mi sento chiusa, imprigionata', confesses Emanuela, while the lack of fresh air and natural light serves to increase their sense of incarceration (p. 24). The constant references to imprisonment in the text serve to underline the limits on women's freedom in Fascist Italy. Although the female boarders attend classes at the university, their access to the public sphere is controlled and they enjoy little independence under a regime which regulates their appearance and behaviour. The college thus functions, as Victoria De Grazia has observed, as a metaphor for the Fascist state, its status as 'a halfway house with fixed hours, closely watched group routines, and the strictures of newly internalized conventions' symbolising the limited freedom granted to the female populace by the regime, which had opened up new opportunities for women while seeking to control their behaviour (How Fascism Ruled Women, p. 233).85

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> In describing the convent school in terms of a prison, de Céspedes was also drawing on a common metaphor in Italian literature, which derived from the fact that 'many penitentiaries in Italy were at one point convents', in the words of Ellen Nerenberg ("Donna proprio... proprio donna": The Social Construction of Femininity in *Nessuno torna indietro*', *Romance Languages Annual*, 3 (1991), 267-73 (p. 267)). The close association between convents and prisons was further strengthened during the *ventennio* when women's

It is not only insular communities which are seen to repress individuals but the family is also portrayed as a locus of suffering. Neglect is shown to be commonplace within the family unit, Ortese depicting in 'Valentino' the psychological damage caused by parental disinterest and de Céspedes describing in 'Tempo della madre' an elderly mother's abandonment, who, confined to a room at the top of the family home, is forgotten by her children. Systematic violence and abuse are also shown to be a frequent part of family life, Banti describing in 'Il coraggio delle donne' (1940) the atmosphere of fear which exists in a household presided over by an abusive alcoholic, whose threatening behaviour makes the lives of his wife and children a misery, a situation echoed in de Céspedes's 'La sposa', in which Maria cannot reconcile the misery of her family life with the domestic ideal promoted by the Church:

Da bambina Maria credeva che la famiglia, così com'era rappresentata [...] nei sermoni del parroco, fosse qualcosa di astratto come la coscienza o la poesia; giacché suo padre, sua madre e lei non assomigliavano affatto a ciò che il prete e i libri descrivevano.<sup>86</sup>

At a time when the family was regarded as 'la cellula madre della società fascista', such depictions of the family as a locus of oppression struck at the heart of Fascist social policy.<sup>87</sup> By undermining the sanctity of the family unit, women writers not only challenged this cult of domesticity but they also struck a blow at Mussolini himself, who had sought to carve out a paternal role for himself as protector of the Italian people.

The notion of the home as a safe haven was also to come under attack. Portrayed by Fascist ideologues as a protective space, which shielded the family against the rigours of urban life, this image was championed in popular fiction of the period, with writers such as Milly Dandolo and Carola Prosperi creating an idealised portrait of *il nido*, a term which reinforced the association between domesticity and motherhood.<sup>88</sup> However, in the work of the new generation, this protective female space was shown to be an illusion, with the home

prisons were commonly staffed by nuns, a practice chronicled by Barbara Allason in *Memorie di un'antifascista*, in which she recalls her imprisonment in the *carceri nuove* in Turin, where the sisters demanded payment for a mattress and blankets (p. 161). By likening the nuns to prison guards, de Céspedes was both reflecting the experience of her contemporaries and underlining the collusion between Church and State.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Alba de Céspedes, 'La sposa', 1942 (repr. in *Invito a pranzo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1966), pp. 14-51 (p. 27))

<sup>87</sup> Manlio Pompei, 'La famiglia e il fascismo: un'inchiesta da fare', *Critica fascista*, 1 May 1933, pp. 163-66 (p. 163).

For a discussion of the image of the home in romantic fiction of the 1930s, see Pietro Cavallo and Pasquale Iaccio, 'Ceti medi emergenti e immagine della donna nella letteratura rosa degli anni trenta', *Storia contemporanea*, 15 (1984), 1149-70 (pp. 1156-59).

assuming a sinister aspect. In Cialente's Pamela o la bella estate, the airless basement where Pamela and her husband live during the summer months takes on the aspect of a prison, while the family home in Natalia is portrayed as a hostile environment for the protagonist after the death of her son, and she lies awake at night, waiting to be engulfed by its oppressive silence. It is in Masino's Monte Ignoso (1931) that the home is seen at its most menacing, for it assumes the role of protagonist and sets in train a tragic sequence of events which engulf the family. Initially regarded by Emma as a protective shell, the family home at Monte Ignoso soon becomes more prison than refuge as the portraits on the walls watch Emma's every move and the Biblical scenes in the living room emphasise the violence which can take place behind closed doors, from Judith slaying Holofernes to Ammon raping his sister Tamar. Trapped within its walls, Emma becomes fixated on her maternal role, throwing all her energy into raising her daughter whom she rarely allows to venture beyond the confines of the house. Realising, however, that the house has a malicious hold over her daughter, she sends her away to school, a decision which results in tragedy when Barbara dies of diphtheria. Determined to avenge her daughter's death, Emma channels her rage into the persecution of her mentally unstable husband, turning the house into a prison for him in the same way that it has incarcerated her in marriage: 'Voglio torturarlo fino alla morte. A Monte Ignoso. Monte Ignoso che finora è stata la mia prigione diventerà la sua.'89

Through their images of confinement and oppression, the new generation writers offered a harsh critique of patriarchal hegemony, revealing the repressive nature of the family unit, whose protective appearance belay its abusive character, and the damage wrought by insular communities which demanded conformism. By avoiding temporal references in their work, they sited their work outside the historic moment to address issues of universal significance, while in their focus on those mainstays of Fascist ideology, the family and home, they struck at the very heart of the regime.

<sup>89</sup> Paola Masino, Monte Ignoso (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1994), p. 144.

### 2.5 CONCLUSION

The relationship between women writers and Fascism was a highly complex one. In the cultural sphere, as in the fields of employment and education, the regime displayed a contradictory response to women: on one hand, it relegated them to a position of inferiority, blocking their access to the higher echelons of power and affirming the primacy of reproduction over cultural production, while on the other, it enlisted their help as propagandists and applauded their achievements which conferred glory on the Italian nation. In turn, female writers demonstrated an ambiguous response to the regime for, although Fascist rule signified the increased repression of women, it also represented greater opportunities in the literary sphere, with access opened to state-sponsored prizes and competitions and a new importance assigned to the female role in Italian culture. Januslike in its imposition of conservative female models but support for female culture, the regime symbolised both patriarchal repression and benevolence and, as such, it elicited both dissent and allegiance in women writers, with many expressing in their fiction a clear resistance to Fascist female models while readily turning to the state for financial assistance.

However, while female writers did not adopt a position of sustained opposition to Fascism, few supported Fascist ideology in their work, for they had little to gain from adhesion to the regime. Excluded from positions of privilege, they did not face the same pressures as their male counterparts to secure Fascist approbation and were therefore less likely to endorse the regime's achievements or promote government propaganda in their work. Moreover, the fact that women were excluded from official debate resulted in the revolutionary rhetoric of left-wing Fascism, which had seduced so many of their male contemporaries, holding little interest or appeal for them. In contrast to writers such as Vittorini and Pratolini, who were drawn to the dynamism of the early Fascist movement and its struggle to achieve radical change, female writers showed no similar predilection for the violent style of Fascist political action or its fervent nationalism. Indeed, even those writers who were sympathetic to the regime revealed a notable reluctance to engage with Fascism in their work, their failure to respond to Mussolini's call for a politically engaged literature infuriating Fascist activists such as Stanis Ruinas. 'In Italia le donne in generale e

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> For a discussion of Fascism's appeal to male youth, see Bruno Wanrooij, 'The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism as a Generational Revolt', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22 (1987), 401-18.

le scrittrici in particolare non si occupano di politica', he declared. 'Non comprendo [...] che dei vitali problemi del Paese si disinteressino le scrittrici serie e autentiche.' (*Scrittrici e scribacchine*, p. 97)

Far from witnessing the silencing of the female voice in the literary sphere, the ventennio represented a period in which women expressed themselves as never before. Less constrained by political concerns than their male counterparts and supported by a government which viewed female literary achievement as a symbol of Italy's cultural prowess, the new generation writers became a significant force in Italian literature, their experimentation with new forms of expression and the originality of their narratives earning them a position at the forefront of Italian narrative. Although their work was not politically motivated but focused on issues of universal significance, their condemnation of patriarchal oppression and their championing of the individual over the collective provided a clear challenge to the authority of the regime and its attempts to stifle individual freedom, while their creation of a new discourse on female identity offered women a valuable alternative to Fascist rhetoric, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

# Chapter Three Constructing a Female Identity

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The thirties were characterised by an acute gender consciousness. Perhaps in no other period were femininity and masculinity so clearly defined and the boundaries between them so strictly enforced as the regime sought to reimpose traditional gender roles which had been undermined by far-reaching social change. While masculinity was cast in terms of virility and associated with the public sphere, femininity was redefined according to patriarchal thinking and located within the realm of the domestic. Championing the model of the *donna autentica*, who was the antithesis of the modern emancipated woman, the regime equated femininity with subordination, self-sacrifice, and, above all, the capacity to reproduce. Motherhood was portrayed as the apex of female self-fulfilment, combining as it did woman's innate maternal tendencies with her desire to perform her patriotic duty as a reproducer for the nation. This narrowly cast vision of the female role precluded women from either agency or autonomy. Confined to fixed roles within the family as dutiful daughters or exemplary wives and mothers, they were defined by their familial and procreative roles and reduced to the status of passive subjects whose fate was predetermined.

The Fascist model of womanhood was not the only one to inform female behaviour during the thirties, for women were also being bombarded by quite different images emanating from the new commercial culture that was reaching out to the young female public. While advertising cast femininity in terms of high fashion and immaculate grooming, Hollywood equated modern womanhood with sexual freedom, creating female protagonists who were motivated by sexual rapaciousness. Caught in this maelstrom of disparate images, in which traditional notions of femininity clashed with consumer-driven models of female behaviour, young women who came of age during the thirties experienced a great uncertainty about their role and identity. Enjoying a high degree of personal and economic freedom on one hand due to the new opportunities opened up to them in education and employment, they found themselves castigated on the other for breaking free from the prescribed role of subservience and passivity assigned to them by

the Church and state. Struggling to reconcile their personal aspirations with the pressures placed on them to conform, they felt trapped by conflicting images and expectations, unwilling to return to traditional roles and yet unable to pursue a wholly independent life.

In this chapter, I will discuss the configurations of femininity which were current during the 1930s and the ways in which women writers responded not only to Fascist formulations of femininity but also to the other dominant female models promoted by the mass media. In the first part of the chapter, I will examine the new models of womanhood which had emerged with the increased commercialisation of Italian society, and I will discuss how the regime sought to counter the emancipatory and consumerist tendencies of the modern woman with the figure of the donna autentica, the ideal of Fascist femininity who symbolised the prolific mother and angel of the hearth. The second part of the chapter will challenge Alexander De Grand's assertion that the Fascist image of womanhood 'was accepted by the majority of female writers'. Beginning with an analysis of romantic fiction, I will show that while popular novelists continued to uphold traditional female stereotypes, they also incorporated elements of the new consumer culture into their work, creating female protagonists with a taste for economic freedom. I will then go on to discuss how the myths about womanhood, which were encoded in Fascist doctrine and perpetuated in romantic fiction, were challenged by the new generation of writers, who revealed that femininity was not a naturally occurring essence but the product of social conditioning. In the final part of the chapter, I will examine the new models of female subjectivity created by these writers, who sought to strip away the trappings of culturally constructed femininity and create a new female subject that accorded with their own experience, and I will discuss how their work voiced the concerns of a generation of women who had grown up under Fascism and whose lives were a disconcerting mixture of freedom and constraint.

# 3.2 THE CONFLICTING IMAGES OF FEMININITY

# 3.2.1 The maschietta and the movie star

The Great War ushered in a period of profound social change. As women took over the positions in industry and agriculture vacated by men who had gone to the front, so many

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In 'Women under Italian Fascism', De Grand states: 'The basic tenet of the regime that women were destined for the family was accepted by the majority of female writers.' (pp. 961-62)

enjoyed their first taste of financial freedom, while the high level of war casualties limited their marriage prospects and forced them to look beyond their traditional destiny of marriage and motherhood. By the early twenties, the established route for middle-class girls from cloistered adolescence to the seclusion of the marital home was at an end. Under less pressure to marry, they began to nurse ambitions beyond the domestic and looked to education and employment as a means to acquire independence, the number of female students rising from nine per cent of the university population to thirteen per cent between 1919 and 1926, while the rapid commercialisation of Italian society created new posts for women in shops and offices, with female office workers increasing from 117,000 in 1921 to 190,000 in 1931 (De Giorgio, p. 44). In this 'epoca di transizione', as it was termed by the sociologist Gina Lombroso, young women looked beyond their familial role to their own intellectual and emotional development, and, although the family remained an important part of their life, it no longer represented the fulcrum of their existence.<sup>2</sup> In the words of Silvia Bemporad: 'La donna completa di oggi [...] svolge le sue energie per la famiglia e fuori della famiglia e vive una intensa vita interiore alla ricerca del proprio io.'<sup>3</sup>

With increased access to the public sphere and greater freedom from familial constraints, the women who came of age in the post-war years enjoyed a level of independence far greater than that of their mothers' generation, studying away from home, going out unchaperoned, and socialising with friends after work. Taking full advantage of the newly emerging leisure industry, they flaunted their freedom in a variety of pastimes, from going to the cinema and shopping in the new department stores to indulging in traditionally masculine pursuits, such as driving and aviation, the latter enjoying an unprecedented degree of publicity following Amelia Earhart's successful transatlantic flight in 1933.4 This new-found freedom was also to have a significant impact on relationships between the sexes, for not only did women meet potential partners whilst out with friends or mixing with work colleagues but their independent social life meant that they were able to conduct their relationships away from the watchful gaze of their family. In contrast to the pre-war period when courtship had entailed the close supervision of a couple, the post-war

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Gina Lombroso, La donna nella società attuale (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1927), p. VII.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Silvia Bemporad, 'Prefazione', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1925, p. VII.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For a discussion of female leisure pursuits during the interwar years, see De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, pp. 202-10, and De Giorgio, pp. 253-59.

years were characterised by greater freedom as parental authority diminished and women were able to pursue relationships in private and with a variety of partners.

The easing of the strict codes governing sexual morality was also to affect relationships: chastity was no longer considered a prerequisite for marriage and young women were more inclined to embark on pre-marital sexual relationships, as the high level of illegitimate births attests, a figure which stood at eleven per cent of all births in 1930 (De Giorgio, p. 83). Although the Catholic Church strove to reaffirm the sanctity of female purity, even Catholic periodicals were prepared to acknowledge that innocence was a quality confined to early childhood. 'L'"innocenza" oggi non l'hanno che i bambini di quattro anni', as a letter published in La Fiamma viva declared in a debate on the teaching of personal hygiene to children.<sup>5</sup> The newly emerging mass culture, in the form of the cinema, popular fiction, and mass-market periodicals, further contributed to the increased sense of sexual freedom. Magazine advice columns instructed their readers in the art of flirting, while American films made female desire visible through a profusion of sexually emancipated heroines. Glamorous stars, such as Jean Harlow and Mae West, became the new role models for post-war women, Harlow's provocative behaviour in films such as Hell's Angels (1930) and Platinum Blonde (1931) symbolising the power of female sexuality, while the voluptuous West, with her wisecracks and innuendo, exuded a selfconfident sensuality. The early 1930s represented the heyday of overt sexuality on screen as the Depression gave rise to tales of women of easy virtue, who used their sexuality to buy their way out of economic hardship. In a series of films dubbed 'sin and succeed' movies, leading female stars played women who sold themselves in order to achieve social and economic advancement, Greta Garbo playing the title role in Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise (1931) in which she becomes the mistress of a politician before falling for Clark Gable, while in I'm No Angel (1933), West starred as a circus performer who gets engaged to one of society's most eligible bachelors, played by Cary Grant.6

The influence of Hollywood was pervasive. With over seventy per cent of films in circulation coming from the United States, a figure which decreased only after the regime restricted the operations of American film companies in 1937, Hollywood had an enormous

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Cited in Bruno P. F. Wanrooij, 'Il 'casto talamo': il dibattito sulla morale sessuale nel ventennio fascista', in *Cultura e società negli anni del fascismo*, ed. by Gabriele Turi (Milan: Cordani, 1987), pp. 536-47 (p. 536).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For an overview of American cinema of the thirties, see Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society 1929-1939* (London: Routledge, 1996).

hold over Italian youth, as De Grazia has noted, and its popularity was evident not only in a growing appetite for magazines devoted to show-business gossip, such as Rizzoli's Cinema-illustrazione, but also in the realm of women's fashion, where it served as a defining influence (How Fascism Ruled Women, p. 132).7 With their peroxide hair and scarlet lips, West and Harlow ushered in a new fashion for overt make-up and dyed hair, while the trouser-clad Greta Garbo and Katharine Hepburn popularised an elegant style of masculine attire. The glamorous images projected by these Hollywood icons were not only idolised on screen but rising levels of disposable income meant they could be emulated by women across the social spectrum, with office and factory workers coveting silk stockings and lipstick and beauty products becoming an overriding passion for many women. Indeed, not only was elegance deemed desirable for women but it was thought to be an inextricable part of femininity. 'Faccio dell'eleganza una questione vitale per la donna', declared a reader of the Corriere delle signore. 'Dico che se la donna non è elegante, donna non è.'8

This preoccupation with beauty was exacerbated by advertising. A by-product of the growth in mass manufactured goods, advertising drew on prevailing constructions of femininity when targeting its audience, the most pervasive of which was the identification of femininity with beauty. During the 1920s, magazine advertisements bombarded women with advice about how they could be made more beautiful by face creams and cosmetics, and this pressure intensified as foreign brands such as Coty and Palmolive entered the market and brand rivalry increased. 'Valorizzate la vostra bellezza!' urged an advertisement for a cosmetics company in *Vita femminile*. 'Bisogna saper essere eleganti [...] e ciò è possibile soltanto sapendo scegliere [...] quella cipria, quel rossetto che [...] dia risalto alla vostra naturale bellezza.' (September 1937, p. 1)9

As consumerism increased and women were seen to become increasingly intent on materialistic pleasures and ever more removed from their traditional roles as wives and mothers, a strong backlash developed in the Catholic press, which accused women of abandoning their homes and instigating a culture of decadence. 'La donna che vive per il lusso [...] cagiona danni irreparabili non solo a se stessa, ma anche alle persone che la

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> The popularity of the cinema among Italian youth is attested by a study conducted by the sociologist Maria Diez Gasca in 1937 into adolescent female behaviour, which revealed that over fifty per cent of teenage girls in Rome went to the cinema at least once a week ('La professione di Madre', *Difesa sociale*, November-December 1937, pp. 1117-26 (p. 1124)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 'Perché amate l'eleganza?', Corriere delle signore, 15 October 1927, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the increasing commoditisation of beauty, see De Giorgio, pp. 174-77.

circondano', declared the Catholic women's periodical Alba (8 June 1930, p. 5). The greatest criticism, however, was reserved for the giovinotta or maschietta, whose boyish look was influenced by Parisian fashion and the new trends in female sportswear of the 1920s. With her slim figure, short skirts, and cropped hair, this female androgyne challenged all traditional notions of femininity, while her refusal or inability to bear children, for the curveless female physique was commonly associated with sterility, was considered an abdication of her female nature. 'È nato un nuovo tipo [...] in perfetta antitesi con la giovanetta buona, cortese, intelligente, [...] l'antiestetico, l'antipatico e il volgare tipo della maschietta', remarked the Almanacco di Cordelia, a view echoed by Daria Banfi Malaguzzi in her study of contemporary womanhood: 'La donna tipo mascolino è evidentemente una mancata. Come donna è falsificata e come uomo è, in via di logica, incompleta.'10 That Banfi Malaguzzi, who was a great champion of women's culture, should launch such a scathing attack on the maschietta is a telling indication of the hostility which existed in Italian society towards this symbol of modern womanhood. Thus, when Fascism sought to turn the maschietta into a figure of national contempt during the early 1930s as part of its effort to reimpose traditional gender roles, it met with little resistance for it was tapping into deep-rooted prejudices about femininity.

# 3.2.2 The Fascist definition of femininity

In a period that was widely considered to be marked by moral decline, Fascism presented itself as a new moral force which would reimpose the values eroded by materialism. 'La società è permeata da materialismo', declared the Fascist intellectual Teresa Labriola. 'S'ha da lottare contro questo materialismo, [...] in antitesi con la missione ricostruttrice dello Stato Fascista.' Contemporary society, Fascist ideologues argued, was stricken with the twin bourgeois vices of consumerism and individualism, which were particularly prevalent in the modern woman. Female emancipation was seen to lie at the heart of the problem and it was blamed not only for individualism but also for corrupting women and leading them towards a culture of decadence and sexual deviancy. 'I movimenti femministi non hanno mai esercitato un'azione benefica e incivilitrice, e hanno invece

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Contessa Morozzo della Rocca, 'La signorina in casa e fuori', *Almanacco di Cordelia*, 1930, p. 40. Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, *Femminilità contemporanea* (Milan: Alpes, 1928), p. 135.

The label *giovinotta* came from the title of Victor Margueritte's best-selling novel *La Garçonne* (1922), which was translated into Italian in 1923.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa Labriola, 'Parlando con le lettrici', La Donna Italiana, February 1931, pp. 69-73 (p. 72).

sempre accelerato la decadenza', stated the Viennese professor Ehrhardt Eberhard, while Ferdinando Loffredo combined fears about the erosion of patriarchal authority with anxieties about racial superiority, claiming that female emancipation would lead to the demise of white civilisation: 'La emancipazione della donna [...] costituisce il più certo pericolo di distruzione per tutto quanto la civiltà bianca ha finora prodotto.' (*Politica della famiglia*, p. 369)<sup>12</sup> Not only was Italian culture under threat, Lombroso argued, but also the future of the Italian race for the selfish desire of the emancipated woman to escape her maternal responsibilities was causing a decline in the birthrate and an erosion of the family structure: 'L'emancipazione femminile, come è contraria agli interessi della famiglia è contraria agli interessi della razza.' (p. 370)

The regime's opposition to feminism lay not only in its cultivation of individualism in women but also its blurring of gender distinctions. Fascism was a movement predicated on the theory of sexual difference; for patriarchal authority to be reimposed and the imperialist dream realised, women were required to return to the home and their reproductive role. Feminism threatened this new social order for it encouraged women to take control of their own lives and bodies. As Riccardo Korherr remarked in his study of demographic decline, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli* (1928): 'La donna emancipata vuole essere "padrona del suo corpo e del suo destino". Essa o impedisce il concepimento o si libera del suo frutto con l'aborto.' (cited in Meldini, p. 151) With traditional gender divisions disintegrating as women emulated men in both appearance and dress, it was feared that sexual anarchy would ensue, resulting in widespread sterility and the emasculation of men. In the words of the Fascist writer G. A. Fanelli, discussing the frightening prospect of a society in which feminism had taken over:

La casa [...] abbandonata dalla donna, decade. Gli uomini si aggirano con una fatuità effeminata che è indice della perduta autorità. [...] I soggetti si scambiano i sessi; lo scambio dei sessi trascina agli amori omosessuali e alla sterilità.<sup>13</sup>

The most visible sign of this impending sexual anarchy was the figure of the *maschietta*, who challenged all traditional notions of femininity. As Fascism adopted a fervent pronatalism during the late twenties, so the *maschietta* became demonised by the regime, labelled the *donna-crisi*, and redefined as a decadent and sterile woman whose

<sup>12</sup> Ehrhardt F. W. Eberhard, Femminismo: decadenza. Gli aspetti sessuali della lotta per l'emancipazione femminile (Milan: Universum, 1933), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> G. A. Fanelli, 'Demografia e femminismo', Il Secolo fascista, 30 April 1932, pp. 112-16 (p. 115).

moral turpitude was the result of her materialism and libertinism having gone unchecked. The official campaign against the *donna-crisi* was launched in 1931 when the head of Mussolini's Press Office ordered all images of this antidemographic female model to be eradicated from the press and, in order to combat the emancipatory and consumerist tendencies of the modern woman, a new female model was introduced, the *donna autentica*, who was to be 'un ideale di donna fisicamente e moralmente sana [...] combattendo ogni deviazione che tenda a farne o poco più di un animale di lusso o [...] un'arida professionista'. Born from the regime's conception of womanhood as a combination of fertility and domesticity, the Fascist female ideal was the exemplary wife and mother, a figure of selfless devotion, who channelled all her energies into serving the family and nation. In the face of post-war uncertainties, she remained sure of her role and mission, while her innate altruism meant that she derived complete self-fulfilment from serving others. In the words of Margherita Sarfatti, writing in *Augustea* in 1933: 'Le gioie della donna sono sopratutto le gioie altruiste, riflesse in altrui, dell'amore, del matrimonio, della maternità.' (cited in Meldini, p. 229)

This domesticated image of womanhood championed by the regime closely echoed Catholic teaching about the female role. Based on the theology of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, for whom the subordination of women corresponded to the order of creation, Catholic education stressed that women should perform their auxiliary function within the confines of the home and in the procreation of children. A woman's duty was to serve her husband, deferring to male authority at all times, and raise her children according to strict moral values, and in both tasks she was to look to the well-being of others rather than to her own needs. This image of woman as a figure of unblemished virtue and selfless devotion was symbolised by the Madonna, who represented not only a paragon of virtue but also the unattainable twin ideals of motherhood and virginity. In direct opposition to the Virgin stood Eve, a figure who epitomised unbridled sexuality and social chaos, and the dangers of anarchic female sexuality were encoded in Pauline-Augustinian doctrine, which emphasised that, as descendants of Eve, women were inherently more sinful than men. This image of woman as both saint and sinner was replicated in Fascist discourse. Venerated as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ester Lombardo, 'Rassegna del movimento femminile italiano', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1928 (cited in Emma Scaramuzza, 'Professioni intellettuali e fascismo: l'ambivalenza dell'Alleanza muliebre culturale italiana', *Italia contemporanea*, September 1983, 111-33 (p. 127)).

For a discussion of the conflicting models of the *donna-crisi* and the *donna autentica*, see De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 73.

angels of the hearth, women were also regarded as anarchic figures whose sexual desire needed to be tamed, G. A. Fanelli arguing in *Il Secolo fascista* that male egoism and authority were required to impose discipline on women and keep their immorality in check: 'L'uomo nel suo egoismo è autoritario, [la donna] nel suo altruismo è anarchica; l'uno è moralissimo, l'altra è tendenzialmente immorale, sempre amorale.' (30 April 1932, p. 115)

The privileged place of the Church in Italian society not only confirmed the notion of women as reproducers but also contributed to the regime's increasingly conservative attitude towards women's appearance. As hemlines rose during the 1920s and women's fashion borrowed from the male wardrobe, the Church mounted a vigorous campaign against the dangers of modern dress, which it believed had fostered a culture of licentiousness. The Comitato nazionale per la correttezza della moda, founded in 1927, received the full backing of the Church, while the clergy impressed upon women the importance of adopting sober clothing. 'La moda scorretta diminuisce il rispetto che le donne debbono a se stesse e ispirano agli altri', declared the Bishop of Livorno in 1929.<sup>15</sup> The regime responded to the pressure to legislate against immodest dress by enforcing article 794 of the Rocco Code, which made acts against public decency a criminal offence, and by ordering the press not to publish pictures of women wearing short skirts or low-cut swimming costumes. Further legislation was introduced in 1935 when the Minister for National Education forbade teachers from wearing make-up and required them to wear black as a sign of their morality, and this was followed in 1941 with a strenuous campaign against the wearing of trousers. A directive was issued to the press banning photographs of women in trousers, and fines were imposed on women who flaunted themselves in masculine attire, as in the case of Maria De Rossi, who was reported by the Corriere della Sera to have been fined 200 lire for wearing men's trousers in her own back yard. 16

The regime's concern about women's appearance was closely linked to its fears about demographic decline. Noting that the fall in the birthrate was particularly marked in urban areas, it ascribed this trend to the artificial images of female beauty emanating from Paris and Hollywood, which fostered vanity in women and deflected them from their maternal mission. 'La mania di tutte è di parere, l'essere non conta più', observed Manlio Pompei in *Critica fascista*. 'Il genere giovane-femminile che esce è unico e standardizzato: sfoggio di

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Alba, 26 May 1929, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Cited in Miriam Mafai, Pane nero: donna e vita quotidiana nella seconda guerra mondiale (Milan: Mondadori, 1987), p. 112.

truccature, di cosmetici, di capelli finti biondi o finti ricci, di occhi finti-larghi.' (15 March 1930, p. 107) Further evidence that the demographic campaign was being undermined by the obsession with beauty was provided by a study on the correlation between female appearance and reproductive rates, conducted by Carlalberto Grillenzoni in 1931. After examining 1,500 women, Grillenzoni concluded that 'l'eleganza è nettamente sfavorevole alla fecondità', and the ideal Fascist wife and mother was plain and shabbily dressed. 17 In order to counter the antidemographic model of femininity which held sway, the regime set about redefining female beauty, promoting the concept of natural beauty based on exercise, a sober lifestyle, and the close adhesion to traditional female roles. As the Almanacco della donna italiana informed its readers, 'per diventare donne belle è indispensabile essere bimbe sane, giovanette robuste, spose promettenti, madri prolifiche'.<sup>18</sup> This campaign was accompanied by an attack on beauty products, with the wearing of cosmetics deemed not only a sign of moral laxity but also a lack of patriotism for it signalled an adhesion to foreign models of beauty which originated from decadent societies. As one ardent young Fascist declared in Il Giornale d'Italia in June 1939: 'Noi giovani dai diciannove ai ventitré anni, convinti che il trucco è contrario al nuovo spirito d'italianità voluto dal Duce, vogliamo bandire una lotta contro questa importazione parigina.' (cited in Aspesi, p. 146)

The Church was not the only major influence in constructing the Fascist notion of womanhood but biological determinism was also to play a significant role in fashioning the patriarchal model of the *donna autentica* and confirming the belief in female inferiority. The two most influential tracts in Fascist misogynist thinking were those of the turn-of-thecentury social theorists Paul Julius Moebius and Otto Weininger. First published in German in 1898 and translated into Italian six years later, Moebius's *L'inferiorità mentale della donna* reaffirmed the inferiority of women, comparing them to animals in their lack of original thought and instinct to emulate: 'Come gli animali, da tempo immemorabile, [le donne] agiscono sempre alla stessa guisa.' (p. 12) Defining women as a species rather than as individuals, he reduced them to the status of woman-mother and branded as degenerate any woman who denied her natural maternal tendencies: 'Una donna, la quale non vuole aver bambini, oppure, dopo il primo, dice: uno solo, e basta, dimostra indubbiamente una natura degenerata.' (p. 89) Moebius's views were echoed by Weininger. Published in 1903,

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Natalia Aspesi, Il lusso e l'autarchia (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982), p. 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> "Emmegidi", 'Estetica femminile senza cosmetici', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1937, pp. 331-36 (p. 331).

Sex and Character drew on the theory, expounded by the criminologist Cesare Lombroso in La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale (1893), that women were condemned by their gender to a lesser moral and intellectual development, Weininger arguing that woman's determining component were her reproductive organs, which made her entirely focused on motherhood and the family. Passivity was another key ingredient in women's biological make-up. 'Woman does not wish to be treated as an active agent', Weininger asserted. 'She wants to remain always and throughout purely passive, to feel herself under another's will.' (p. 292)

First published in Italian in 1912, Sesso e carattere met with an appreciative audience in Italy and was reprinted twenty-six times over the next fifteen years. Attracting a wide following, the book numbered Mussolini among its devotees, the Fascist leader stating in an interview with Emil Ludwig: 'On the whole I am of Weininger's way of thinking. I learned a great deal from Weininger's book.'19 Mussolini's support of Weininger's arguments was echoed throughout the male establishment, a sign that misogyny ran deep and was not merely a product of Fascist propaganda. In her diary in 1940, Sibilla Aleramo described her surprise at hearing her doctor express admiration for Weininger's theories. 'Devo confessarvi', she reported him as saying, 'che in un quarantennio di esercizio [...] la mia opinione sulla donna non s'è fatta più benigna di quella che aveva Weininger.'20 Even well-known anti-Fascists, such as Benedetto Croce, were susceptible to Weininger's influence, Joyce Lussu recalling how Croce was highly dismissive of women's intelligence, stating, 'la donna ha un intelletto inferiore a quello dell'uomo'. It was only when Lussu challenged his views and argued in favour of women's intellectual capabilities that Croce was forced to admit that Lussu herself disproved the theory of female intellectual inferiority.21

In constructing its female model, the regime thus drew on a combination of Catholic teaching and turn-of-the-century scientific discourse, together with contemporary fears about demographic decline and female emancipation. However, while the misogynistic views promoted under Fascism were by no means unique, it was under Fascist rule that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Emil Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini*, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 183.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Sibilla Aleramo, 'Dal mio diario', *Mercurio*, November 1944, pp. 41-52 (p. 43).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Joyce Lussu, *Portrait: cose viste e vissute* (Bologna: Transeuropa, 1988), p. 41.

For the reception of Weininger's work in Italy, see Marziano Guglielminetti, 'Le scrittrici, le avanguardie, la letteratura di massa', *Empoli: rivista di vita cittadina*, 1 (1983), *Atti del convegno: la donna nella letteratura italiana del '900*, ed. by Sergio Gensini, pp. 11-26.

these views were used to form the basis of a repressive social policy, which reduced women to the status of wives and mothers and confirmed their inferiority. Gender became the means by which the regime controlled women and ensured their subservience: rather than a cultural construct, it was presented as a biological fact, which confirmed women's mission in life as breeders and nurturers, and the words *donna* and *femminile* echoed throughout Fascist discourse as bywords for fertility and domesticity. Women who conformed to this feminine ideal were hailed as *veramente donna* and *squisitamente femminile*, whereas those who defied these stereotypes were derided as deviants, who had sacrificed all claims to womanhood: the spinster and the feminist were denounced as *donne-uomini*, while the *maschietta* and fashion-conscious urbanite were branded *donne-crisi*, whose materialism had stifled their modesty and selflessness.

#### 3.2.3 The new Fascist woman

While the passive, domesticated *donna autentica* represented the dominant female model promoted by the regime, it was not the only image of Fascistised femininity to hold sway. During the twenties, an alternative image of Fascist womanhood had emerged, a figure who demanded full participation in the public sphere but remained obedient to the dictates of the state, and it was this figure which provided the basis for the *donna attiva*, the dynamic, patriotic female model who would shape the regime's response to female cultural production. This image of the new Fascist woman was championed by female party activists with strong feminist convictions, who were seeking to widen women's influence in the political sphere while maintaining that women's greatest contribution to the nation lay in motherhood.<sup>22</sup> Rather than fighting for equality between the sexes, these practical feminists, as they came to be known, underlined gender difference and emphasised women's contribution to the nation in a complementary rather than confrontational role. 'Il movimento femminile [...] non mira a fare della donna un'antipatica imitazione dell'uomo, [...] vuol portare nell'ordinamento sociale un po' del suo previdente e affettuoso intuito materno', affirmed Paola Benedettini Alferazzi.<sup>23</sup> Distancing itself from the Anglo-Saxon

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the primacy of motherhood within the Italian feminist movement of the 1920s, see Annarita Buttafuoco, 'Motherhood as a Political Strategy: The Role of the Italian Women's Movement in the Creation of the Cassa Nazionale di Maternità', in Maternity and Gender Policies, ed. by Gisela Bock and Pat Thane, pp. 178-95 (pp. 178-81).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Paola Benedettini Alferazzi, 'Il Congresso di Roma dell'Alleanza Internazionale "Pro Suffragio Femminile", *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1924, pp. 41-51 (p. 51).

suffrage movement, which was deemed individualistic and unfeminine, this 'sano femminismo italiano e fascista' emphasised those qualities which were deemed typical of the Italian female character, namely devotion to the family and the state. Yet, despite stressing the need for women to subordinate their individual aspirations to the greater good of the nation, practical feminism exalted the position of women in the new Italy and viewed gender difference not in terms of female subordination, as did the Fascist male hierarchy, but as an equal partnership between men and women. 'Il concetto fascista della missione femminile innalza la donna', declared Maria Castellani, 'la quale non deve essere [...] schiava dell'uomo [...] ma compagna, collaboratrice, amica.' (Donne italiane, p. 13)

The desire for greater participation in national life was one of the driving forces behind the new Fascist woman, who looked beyond the domestic realm to a more visible role on the public stage. Education and employment were hailed by prominent members of the Fasci femminili as central to the development of women in Italian society and equal employment rights were deemed a necessity, Maria Luisa Astaldi declaring: 'Vogliamo condizioni di lavoro pari a quelle degli uomini. Il lavoro femminile è una necessità sociale.'<sup>24</sup> Sport was also regarded as a suitable activity for forging a new breed of strong, disciplined Italian women, 'l'abitudine di questi esercizi sportivi [...] non risana soltano il loro corpo, ma influisce beneficamente sul loro spirito', affirmed the Giornale della donna, although women were cautioned not to allow sporting success to overshadow their feminine modesty, as exemplified by the Italian female Olympic team of which the Almanacco della donna italiana declared: 'Le nostre ragazze latine [...] restano anche nella gara così squisitamente donne!.'25 Characterised by her dynamic spirit, the new Fascist woman was active in work, sport, and culture, and she belonged to a new generation of educated women, who were 'colte e di forte, virile, sostanziosa mentalità' (Vita femminile, August 1937, p. 42). Active in the public sphere but without advocating suffrage, and possessing a dynamism that was tempered by an awareness of her femininity, the new Fascist woman trod the middle ground between feminism and traditional notions of femininity, functioning, in the words of Marina Addis Saba, as 'una sorta di terza via fascista tra la

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Maria Luisa Astaldi, 'I nostri diritti civili e politici', Giornale della donna, 15 December 1928, p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> 'Lo sport femminile e la formazione del carattere', Giornale della donna, 1 February 1926, p. 2. Clara Valente, 'La donna e lo sport', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1937, pp. 221-31 (p. 223).

femminista consapevole, che viene coperta di disprezzo e di ridicolo, e la femmina debole e sentimentale'.<sup>26</sup>

## 3.2.4 The female response to the Fascist ideal

The extent to which women resisted or conformed to official models of Fascist womanhood has been the subject of much recent debate. In her controversial study La donna "nera": "consenso" femminile e fascismo (1976), Maria Antonietta Macciocchi argued that women were coerced into submission by Fascism, which drew on their natural tendency towards self-sacrifice and masochism, and they willingly accepted a return to subordination and domestic servitude in exchange for the symbolic love conferred on them by Mussolini. Macciocchi's theory of widescale female consensus to the regime is not upheld in more recent examinations of the period, however, for the oral testimonies of working-class women collected by Luisa Passerini, together with the survey of women's magazines of the period carried out by Elisabetta Mondello, and the research into changing female behaviour by Victoria De Grazia, reveal a far greater resistance to Fascist models of femininity than Macciocchi would have us believe. They show that, far from heeding Fascist propaganda and conforming to prescribed roles, a large number of women pursued their desire for independence under Fascist rule and asserted their right to control their own lives and bodies. Not only did women enter higher education and the employment market in growing numbers but they resisted their patriotic duty as prolific mothers. Indeed, not only did the birth rate fail to rise during the thirties but it continued its steady decline, dropping from 29.3 births per 1,000 inhabitants in 1927, the year in which the demographic campaign was launched, to 22.8 in 1937 (cited in Noether, pp. 75-76). The reasons for this decline were both economic and social: while economic insecurity obliged less well-off couples to limit the size of their family, the new opportunities available to young women in education and employment meant that many chose to postpone marriage and motherhood for as long as possible, as De Grazia has observed (How Fascism Ruled Women, p. 49). For those who did fall pregnant accidentally, a common occurrence in a period when both contraceptives and information about birth control were banned, abortion was considered a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Marina Addis Saba, 'La donna "muliebre", in *La corporazione delle donne: ricerche e studi sui modelli femminili nel ventennio* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1988), pp. 1-71 (p. 34).

viable option, with an estimated thirty per cent of all pregnancies ending in termination, despite it having been made a crime against the state.<sup>27</sup>

The image of the prolific mother, who stared up from the pages of newspapers and down from the cinema screen, also did little to generate enthusiasm in motherhood. Aimed at instilling a sense of patriotic pride in women, this maternal ideal, with her sombre black apparel and numerous children, was regarded with scorn by the working class, who believed that women should be capable of self-control, and with ridicule by the middle classes, for whom she represented 'una creatura tranquillamente imbecille con le mani posate in grembo e circondata da una ventina di figli'.<sup>28</sup> Rather than the donna-madre, the image of femininity to which young women aspired was the Hollywood star. Although curvaceous, the screen sirens of the thirties such as Mae West and Jean Harlow did little to confirm the image of florid femininity desired by the regime. Sexually provocative rather than reassuringly maternal, they created a fashion for brash behaviour and overt make-up. Despite warnings from both the state and the Church about the danger of cosmetics, young urban women refused to heed these admonitions and, although only the most daring dyed their hair, many used lipstick on a daily basis, Maria Diez Gasca describing crimsoncoloured lips as '[un] ormai necessario complemento alla toletta giornaliera usuale' (Difesa sociale, 1937, p. 1122).

In the same way that the regime's efforts to replace American models of beauty with the natural look of the *donna autentica* were widely ignored by young women, so its attempts to repress the fledgling women's movement and demonise its supporters did little to perturb the urban middle classes. Indeed, the majority of women who had come of age during the 1920s had already distanced themselves from feminism, dismissing it as old-fashioned and unfeminine. In the words of Silvia Bemporad, writing in the first edition of the *Almanacco della donna italiana*: 'Noi non siamo femministe nel senso aspro di rinuncia alla femminilità, che taluni dànno a questa parola; crediamo necessario che la donna rimanga e sia essenzialmente donna.'<sup>29</sup> By disassociating themselves from feminism, women were not abandoning their desire for greater freedom, for they continued to infiltrate the public sphere in ever greater numbers, but rather they nursed personal aspirations which were no longer tied to the movement for the vote. 'I sogni

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Cited in Denis Mack Smith, Mussolini: A Biography (New York: Vintage, 1983), p. 160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Cited in Le confessioni di una piccola italiana: memorie anonime (Verona: Essedue, 1983), p. 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Silvia Bemporad, 'Prefazione', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1920, pp. V-VI (p. V).

dell'emancipazione assumeranno [...] la forma di un bastoncino di rossetto [...] o di una racchetta da tennis o di un volante d'automobile', noted Silvio Pellegrini.<sup>30</sup> This new definition of emancipation was discussed by Paola Drigo in her article 'Femminismo e Femminilità' of 1931. Arguing that feminism as a political concept was now dead, she noted the emergence of a new form of emancipation, one which was supported not only by young women but also by their fathers and brothers: 'Gli uomini, quelli stessi che alla teoria e alla parola voltaron le spalle con disprezzo [...] i padri, i fratelli, mandano le figliole o accompagnan le sorelle al ginnasio, al liceo, all'Università.'31 Countering the view that female employment endangered the family unit and detracted from a woman's femininity, Drigo argued that any attempt to return women to the home as custodians of the hearth would be of little use in the face of economic hardship, 'che è il focolare senza un ceppo che vi bruci?' (p. 399), and rather than turning women into 'zitelle sfiorite immalinconite', emancipation had fashioned a new breed of self-confident women in whom the desire for marriage still burned bright: 'Queste del 1931 [...] sollecitano ed aspirano al marito, e non ce n'è una sola, lo giurerei, che non preferirebbe di gran lunga rammendare i calzini dell'amato sposo al tener la contabilità in una banca.' (p. 399)

Drigo's description of a self-confident generation of women, who demanded the right to participate in the public sphere yet whose long-term future lay in the domestic sphere, was echoed by the findings of Maria Diez Gasca. Displaying 'la sicurezza di sé [...] e il desiderio di comandare, non quello di ubbidire', the girls whom she interviewed for her 1937 survey were eager to get a good education and secure a well-paid job but viewed employment as an intermediary stage in their lives before marriage and motherhood: 'Considerano la professione come uno stadio intermedio [...] da oltrepassare, appena le circostanze lo permettano, per entrare nella famiglia.' (pp. 1122 and 1121) Diez Gasca's findings illustrate the mixture of modernity and tradition which characterised women's lives during the 1930s. Although it had become increasingly acceptable for young women to work and study, traditional attitudes about the female role still prevailed and women who had not married by the age of thirty were labelled spinsters and fell victim to pity or ridicule. 'Una donna non poteva correre il rischio di invecchiare senza aver trovato marito,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Silvio Pellegrini, 'La letteratura femminile nell'Italia odierna e Grazia Deledda', in *Appunti di storia letteraria e civile italiana* (Turin: Gambino, 1939), pp. 81-90 (pp. 84-85).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Paola Drigo, 'Femminismo e Femminilità', *Nuova Antologia*, 1 August 1931, pp. 396-403 (p. 398).

e vent'anni cominciavano già a essere molti', observed the anonymous author of *Le confessioni di una piccola italiana* (pp. 109-10).

The importance of marriage was reinforced by popular culture of the period. Women's magazines publicised the dangers of spinsterhood, Grazia cautioning an unmarried reader 'ventotto anni non sono un'enormità, ma tu ogni giorno perdi una speranza' (cited in Mafai, p. 30), while mass-market entertainment was dominated by romance and the happy ending. In the words of Irene Brin: 'Si esige che i film siano a lieto fine, che i romanzi abbiano conclusioni consolanti.'32 Not only did romantic fiction portray marriage as the apex of female fulfilment, as I will discuss in the next section, but a new moralism took hold in the cinema during the mid-1930s following the establishment of the Hollywood Production Code Authority in 1934, a conservative regulatory body which approved all new releases, and by the latter part of the decade, the sexual comedies of Mae West had been supplanted by the sexually innocent world of the romantic comedy, populated by actresses such as Carole Lombard in My Man Godfrey (1936). This trend towards escapism was followed by the Italian film industry during the 1930s, which produced a genre of comedies known as the 'white telephone' films, which, like the Hollywood movies they sought to emulate, confirmed the desirability of marriage and reinforced the message that virtue would be rewarded with happiness.33

For women who came of age during the thirties, the difficulties they experienced in entering adulthood were thus compounded by the conflicting messages they received about the female role. Encouraged by their families to enter higher education and the labour market, they discovered that, having gained a degree or secured a job, they were urged to abandon their new-found independence in order to marry. Forces outside the home offered an equally confusing message: the burgeoning consumer culture promoted an image of femininity built on beauty and sexual desirability, while the Church and state demanded frugality of women and tolerated female sexuality only in the context of procreation within marriage. Even the regime did not promote a consistent message. While preaching the importance of traditional gender roles, it encouraged women to participate in activities outside the home through organisations such as the *Fasci femminile* and GUF, and, indeed,

<sup>32</sup> Repr. in *Usi e costumi 1920-1940* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1991), pp. 130-31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the conservative ideology underpinning the white telephone comedies, see Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'The Italian Cinema Under Fascism', in *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, ed. by David Forgacs, pp. 142-61 (pp. 150-51).

its efforts to increase female involvement in national life led many people to believe that it was responsible for increasing rather than restricting women's independence. In the words of Marco Cesarini, writing in *Omnibus*:

Il fascismo [...] ha lasciato fare alle donne, in campo femminile. Le ha organizzate, ha aperto tutte le porte e le ha messe in grado di vivere come desideravano. [...] Le studentesse hanno studiato e [...] hanno provato a correre sulle piste degli stadi; le operaie hanno scoperto [...] che lo sport femminile non è riservato alle donne vestite di bianco sui campi geometrici del tennis.<sup>34</sup>

The lives of young women during the 1930s were thus shaped by a mixture of freedom and constraint. Never before had they enjoyed so many opportunities in the fields of education, employment, and leisure, and yet never before had their destiny as wives and mothers been so clearly stated. More self-confident and independent than their mothers' generation, they were also more uncertain about their role and identity. With increased independence had come a desire for self-knowledge, which could not be fulfilled by marriage and motherhood alone, but, at the same time, their desire for autonomy was frustrated by the restrictions imposed on them by a regime alarmed at the prospect of a headstrong female population which was unresponsive to patriarchal authority.

#### 3.3 WOMEN WRITERS AND FEMALE STEREOTYPES

# 3.3.1 The representation of women in the work of romance writers

This mixture of freedom and constraint which characterised young women's lives was reflected in female fiction of the period, and it was the romance novel where these ambiguities were particularly prevalent. With its depiction of the new opportunities available to women, the *romanzo rosa* portrayed a series of modern, emancipated heroines, who sought to fashion their own lives and relationships. Yet, at the same time, the genre remained governed by a conservative ideology, portraying marriage as the only means by which women could gain fulfilment and relating cautionary tales of women who were punished for deviating from accepted female behaviour.

The immediate post-war period had witnessed a boom in popular romance. In a world that had been brutalised by war, romance symbolised the restoration of order and hope, and the uncomplicated world of romantic fiction, in which problems were always solved, was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Marco Cesarini, 'Ragazze d'oggi', *Omnibus*, 18 September 1937, p. 1.

used as escapism by many women. In Italy, this new brand of romance was popularised by Salani, who founded the first series devoted to romance at the beginning of the 1920s and whose stable included the best-selling Baroness Orczy and Delly. The collective name of two Breton siblings, Jeanne-Marie and Frédéric Petitjean de la Rozière, Delly created a narrative model based on love triumphing against all the odds, which served as a prototype for Italian romantic fiction throughout the ventennio. The heroine was an innocent young woman of a humble background, whose purity and sweet nature were denoted by her beauty and who possessed such nobility of spirit that she could attract the most aristocratic of men despite her lowly birth. Proud and independent at the outset, she renounced her independence to become the docile companion of the aristocratic hero, who, although brusque and authoritarian, revealed a hidden tenderness.<sup>35</sup> Building on the success of Delly, novelists such as Carola Prosperi and Mura fashioned a brand of home-grown romance during the twenties, which was based on the conservative principles of the Delly model but was more attuned to contemporary women's lives. In contrast to the aristocratic Dannunzian heroine or the domesticated heroine of late-nineteenth-century fiction, these new female protagonists mirrored modern women's lives. Strong-willed and independent, they demanded the right to forge their own lives outside the confines of the home, whether studying at college, in the manner of the eponymous heroine of Térésah's Sergina (1923), or embarking on a career, like the heroine of Mura's Mary, Mariù, Maria (1930), who works as a typist. Educated and financially independent, the new protagonist represented, as Pietro Cavallo and Pasquale Iaccio have observed, the donna comune, who took the tram to work and socialised with friends after work (Storia contemporanea, 15, 1153-54). A figure with whom readers could easily identify, she reflected their social aspirations and inspired hope through her good fortune. In the words of Anna Banti:

La dattilografa a cui sta per capitare la grande avventura [...] si cuocerà due uova al tegame, coi gesti e le parole di ciascuna delle lettrici: le quali, risalendo da quel controllato verosimile al delizioso rischio del romanzesco, assimileranno se stesse all'eroina con un'approssimazione piena di speranza.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> For the history of the *romanzo rosa* during the *ventennio*, see Silvana Ghiazza, 'La letteratura rosa negli anni venti-quaranta', in *I best seller del ventennio*, ed. by Gigliola De Donato and Vanna Gazzola Stacchini, pp. 129-51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Anna Banti, 'Storia e ragioni del "romanzo rosa", *Paragone*, 38 (1953) (repr. in *Opinioni*, pp. 75-83 (p. 80)).

This new type of protagonist is exemplified in Mura's Mary, Mariù, Maria. A provincial eighteen-year-old, Maria Mariani comes to work in Milan, her notions of femininity gleaned from her weekly visit to the cinema: 'Era giunta a Milano con qualche gesto alla Greta Garbo e il muover degli occhi fatale della Pola Negri.'37 Freed from the frustrations of parental supervision by her work as a typist, Maria takes great delight in her new-found independence and to mark her new identity she changes her name to the anglicised Mary, which she thinks sounds more sophisticated. Within a few weeks, her name has changed once again as the office manager takes to calling her Mariù and this second change in her name signals her transformation into a streetwise giovinotta after she is taken under the wing of the seasoned Signorina Bini and encouraged to wear make-up and date young men. Mariù's increasingly consumerist lifestyle brings her into conflict with her parents, who express dismay at the growing waywardness of their daughter, and her position in the middle of two conflicting forces, 'una che tira avanti, una che richiama indietro', in the words of the Almanacco della donna italiana, make her a potent symbol of the modern Italian woman who desired modernity but who was constrained by the weight of tradition (1931, p. 184).

Mura, the nom de plume of Maria Nannipieri Volpa, represented the undisputed champion of this new brand of Italian romance. One of the most popular novelists of the period, whose novels regularly sold between 20,000 and 50,000 copies, she was adept at reflecting her readers' lives in her fiction, her novels featuring a profusion of typists and shop workers who valued their independence but saw marriage as their only means to achieve social and economic advancement (figures cited in Giocondi, p. 23). Mura was also responsible for introducing an erotic undercurrent into the romance novel. Taking her lead from both Guido Da Verona and Hollywood, she invested her heroines with an erotic charge, portraying their attempts to better their lives using their sexuality, as can be seen in *Mary, Mariù, Maria* in which the protagonist flirts with her boss in the belief that it will further her career. Unlike their Hollywood counterparts, however, Mura's characters controlled their desire, Mariù indulging in mild flirting but never allowing her reputation to be compromised, for the romance novel subscribed to the belief that happiness was the reward of virtue and not sin.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Mura, Mary, Mariù, Maria (Milan: Sonzogno, 1930), pp. 15-16.

The romance novel not only mirrored the changes in women's lives through its depiction of female employment and growing sexual awareness but it also reflected the increasing importance attached to beauty in modern notions of femininity. Beauty was portrayed as an essential part of a woman's character for not only did it symbolise her worth as a potential marriage partner but it also imbued her with self-confidence, as Daisy di Carpenetto's protagonist Isabella confirms in Paura (1926): 'Le donne ottengono una sensazione di forza soprattutto dalla sicurezza della loro bellezza fisica.'38 Although heroines were often plain at the outset, romance writers revealed how they could be transformed into beautiful women through the judicious application of beauty products and a flattering style of dress, and they implied that every woman was able, and indeed dutybound, to change her appearance in such a way. Such a transformation is illustrated in 'La bellezza è un dovere', a short story published anonymously in Vita femminile in September 1937. Focusing on a plain woman who pays no attention to her appearance, the story details her rejection by a potential suitor, who finds her unkempt and unattractive. Alarmed by his reaction, the woman undergoes 'una vera trasformazione' through trips to the hairdresser and the careful application of creams and make-up, and as a result she is reconciled with the man who had spurned her (p. 44).

Yet, while the romance novel of the thirties reflected modern womanhood in its portraits of feisty heroines, it remained true to its conservative roots, perpetuating traditional prejudices about the female role and character. Focused as it was on women's eternal quest for love, it did nothing to dispel the belief that love was the guiding principle in women's lives. The romantic heroine, even if strong and ambitious, was shown to be a slave to her emotions, the protagonist of Carola Prosperi's *La donna forte* (1935) abandoning her artistic career for marriage to her art teacher, declaring herself to be 'una donna buona, amorosa, votata al sacrificio'.<sup>39</sup> The greatest aspiration of the romantic heroine was marriage and, once engaged or married, she willingly cast aside her headstrong nature in order to become a dutiful wife, the protagonist of *Mary, Mariù, Maria* renouncing her consumerist lifestyle and reverting to a state of submission after meeting her husband-to-be, her return to her 'true' character marked by her adoption of her original name, Maria, with its connotations of selflessness and piety.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Daisy di Carpenetto, *Paura* (Milan: Mondadori, 1926), p. 128.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Carola Prosperi, *La donna forte* (serialised in *Il Secolo illustrato*, 5 January-2 March 1935 (5 January 1935, p. 3).

Conformity was also required of women and those who sought to determine their own lives faced a life of solitude and suffering, as the work of Daisy di Carpenetto illustrates. Paura recounts the story of Isabella Varini, who represents, in the words of the Almanacco della donna italiana, 'l'espressione della fanciulla moderna in un periodo di transizione in cui essa si dibatte ancora tra le catene della vecchia educazione e l'aspirazione ad ogni affrancamento che le dà la nuova'. 40 Believing that marriage represents her only route to freedom, the seventeen-year-old Isabella plans to elope with Enrico D'Arena but abandons her plans at the last moment, realising she cannot live with a man she does not love, and, six years later, she comes to a similar conclusion when she rejects the marriage proposal of a rich banker: 'Ebbe la sensazione esatta della nuova catena. [...] Dominò una violenta tentazione di fuggire per riconquistare la sua libertà.' (p. 137) Reduced to a state of nervous exhaustion, Isabella goes to Switzerland to convalesce but, having made up her mind to lead an independent life, she returns home only to be killed accidentally during a workers' demonstration. The modern outlook of the novel is thus tempered by an underlying conservatism. While reflecting the concerns of the modern woman who wanted more from life than marriage, it revealed the risks associated with independence, the tragic demise of the protagonist serving as a clear warning about the dangers of pursuing autonomy.

This underlying conservatism was to become the dominant characteristic of the romance novel during the 1930s as the genre reflected the new moral impetus in Italian society. 'Le scrittrici d'oggi sono preoccupate quasi tutte della moralità', as Maria Maggi noted in her survey of women's fiction for the 1931 Almanacco della donna italiana (pp. 181-82). Although romantic fiction had always functioned as a means of educating women in moral values, the romanzo rosa of the thirties encouraged women to conform to a strict moral code: a woman was required to be pure and selfless if she wanted to marry and, once married, she was to sacrifice herself completely to her family. In the place of the modern, headstrong woman, a new protagonist came to the fore. Ingenuous and uncorrupted by urban living, dressed in simple clothes and with her face free from make-up, she represented, as Cavallo and Iaccio have observed, la donna-bambina, who corresponded to the Catholic notion of female adolescence rather than to the reality of women's lives (Storia contemporanea, 15, 1160-63). 'Nella letteratura delle scrittrici del tempo nostro vi è un

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> G. S. Gargàno, 'Rassegna letteraria', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1927, pp. 167-99 (p. 186).

brivido nuovo', affirmed Adolfo Giuriato: 'Le creature predilette sono quelle che recano un'ansia desiosa di tramutarsi in bontà giusta e forte.'41

One of the first novels to portray this new type of heroine was Liala's Signorsì (1931). Focusing on the intrepid pilot Duke Furio di Villafranca, the novel charts his search for the ideal woman through a series of amorous encounters. Initially desiring her to be 'bella e dolce, con un viso d'angelo e un corpo d'amore', Furio is attracted to the sensuous Lery Serena, who, although married, has no qualms about embarking on an affair.<sup>42</sup> Lery's possessiveness and mental instability soon prove too much for him and he abandons her, only to meet the equally forward Frilli Devoto, whose fabricated name is matched by her appearance, with her rouged cheeks and scarlet lips. Appalled by the flirtatious behaviour of young modern women, he realises that he wants more in a woman than mere beauty but is looking for 'una donna che sia bella, sana, onesta' (p. 59). He eventually finds such a woman in Renata, whose innocence is contrasted with the worldliness of Lery and whose natural beauty puts the superficial Frilli to shame. 'Che gioia poter baciare un viso pulito, senza trucco!', Furio declares. 'Sei tutta bella, tutta vera.' (p. 184) Although Renata retains many of the elements of the post-war protagonist, possessing a deep sensuality as well as aviational skills that rival those of her husband, her childlike innocence and sweet docility confirm her status as a donna-bambina, and indeed, not only does Furio describe her as 'la più santa bambina del mondo', but, in a clear reference to her childlike status, he renames her Beba once they are married (p. 156).

The increased moralism in romance writing was also to influence the work of Mura, who replaced the modern working woman with the housewife in her novels of the midthirties and laced her narratives with warnings about untamed sexuality, as can be seen in L'adorabile intrusa (1934). Based on the familiar theme of marriage à rebours, popularised by Delly, the novel details the efforts of Manuela to win back the love of her husband, who has been ensnared by the seductive charms of a Slavic beauty. Possessed of a passionate and independent nature, Manuela is shown to jeopardise her marriage, for her husband perceives her in terms of a lover rather than a wife, and it is only when she learns to adopt the submissiveness expected of her as a wife that she is able to win back his love and respect, the act of submission itself bringing her unexpected pleasure: 'Lei che [...] era stata

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Adolfo Giuriato, 'Fantasmi e fantasie', *Almanacco di Cordelia*, 1933, pp. 108-11 (p. 111).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Liala, Signorsì (Milan: Sonzogno, 1945), p. 15.

sempre un essere indipendente [...] provava una specie di voluttà nel pronunziare il sì dell'obbedienza, della sottomissione.'43

The romanzo rosa thus served both to reflect contemporary women's lives and to reinforce the prevailing ideology of the period. Whilst representing modern womanhood in its portraits of headstrong young protagonists who were torn between autonomy and the security of marriage, it urged women to abandon their desire for independence and seek happiness within a marital role and it meted out severe punishment to those who deviated from acceptable female behaviour. The genre also subscribed to common prejudices about the female character, with femininity defined in terms of selflessness and obedience and women judged on their beauty and virtue. Although the heroine was allowed to reveal a sensual nature, a clear distinction was made between the donna pura and the donna perduta, the former having retained her virtue by controlling her sexuality and the latter representing the anarchical force of unbridled sexuality. Yet, while romance fiction acted as a tacit supporter of Fascist ideology in its adherence to a patriarchal system of values, it did not function as an active agent of the regime. Its idealised images of masculinity and femininity may have conformed to Fascist stereotypes, the ideal man being 'pieno di forza' and the woman 'semplice e pura', but this focus on male domination and female submission reflected the conservative nature of the genre rather than an openly pro-Fascist stance.<sup>44</sup> While the image of the selfless donna autentica recurred throughout the romance novel, for she corresponded to a conservative image of womanhood, the new Fascist woman, who was imbued with the spirit of the Fascist movement, was largely absent and, on her rare appearances, she was used merely to throw into relief the docile nature of the protagonist, as can be seen in Maddalena Santoro's Senza amore (1935) in which the sweet-natured Wanda wins out against a donna attiva to secure the hero's affections. 'Noi prepariamo arditamente i figli dell'Italia nuova!' declares her rival in an impassioned outburst, to which Wanda calmly replies, 'Prendi un po' di fiato!' (cited in Ghiazza, p. 140).

Nevertheless, while the *romanzo rosa* did not actively promote Fascist propaganda, it was a deeply reactionary force, which upheld extremes of sexual difference, urged conformism to an idealised image of femininity based on virtue and self-sacrifice, and

<sup>43</sup> Cited in I best seller del ventennio, ed. by Gigliola De Donato and Vanna Gazzola Stacchini, p. 224.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Maddalena Santoro, *Così, donna, mi piaci!* (1926) (cited in *I best seller del ventennio*, ed. by Gigliola De Donato and Vanna Gazzola Stacchini, p. 211).

enforced strict moral codes, the transgression of which met with severe punishment. At a time when women were being freed from the constraints which had previously governed their lives, the romance novel sought to stifle such autonomous impulses and reinforce the belief that marriage represented the only route to self-fulfilment, and its enormous popularity, together with the covert way in which it delivered its message, meant that it enjoyed a powerful and pernicious hold over a wide and receptive female audience.

## 3.3.2 Challenging the myths about womanhood

For the new generation writers, who were seeking to counter the myths about womanhood and create a subject that reflected female experience, the images of femininity portrayed in popular fiction were as damaging to female self-perception as those of Fascist propaganda. Indeed, as writers, they felt the pernicious influence of romantic fiction even more keenly for not only did it perpetuate myths about femininity but it also damaged the reputation of women's writing as a whole for the boom in female-penned romance during the twenties had resulted in women writers becoming ever more closely associated with the genre. In the words of Giuseppe Lipparini: 'La letteratura amena di domani sarà essenzialmente femminile mentre gli uomini si terranno la parte più seria.'45 The new generation were thus intent not only on refuting artificial notions of femininity encoded in Fascist doctrine but also on discrediting the romance novel which upheld its conservative ideology and, by calling into question the morality which popular romance used to contain female independence and attacking the false expectations about love and marriage which it instilled in young women, they distanced their own work from the romance genre and challenged the belief that women's writing was rooted in popular fiction.

The most outspoken critic of the genre was Anna Banti. In her essay 'Storia e ragioni del "romanzo rosa", she condemned romantic fiction not only for its detrimental effect on women's narrative, as young writers such as Giana Anguissola abandoned their innovative narrative style for the financial rewards of the romance novel, but also for the support it lent to Fascist ideology.<sup>46</sup> Accusing the romance genre of having spread 'un tipo di

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Giuseppe Lipparini, 'Uomini o donne domani?', Almanacco di Cordelia, 1930, pp. 137-141 (p. 139).

Despite having made a promising debut with *Il romanzo di molta gente*, Anguissola had moved towards romantic fiction in her subsequent work, her narrative becoming imbued with a heavy moralism. Published in 1935, *La moglie e le altre* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1942) tells the story of the middle-aged Elina, who, tired of being the appendage of her husband, contemplates an affair in order to attain a sense of her own

conformismo ipocrita e dolciastro', Banti condemned its promulgation of Fascist myths, with its portraits of aggressive men and submissive women (p. 81). Such gender casting, she declared, served to stifle women's fragile self-confidence and drive them back into traditional roles, and she cited novels such as Vanda Bontà's *Diario di Clementina*, which portrayed the patient wife awaiting the return of her husband from the front, as having 'più nociuto al nostro costume che una pubblicazione sfacciatamente immorale' (p. 81).

While Banti's attack on the romanzo rosa did not appear until 1953, a decade after the regime had fallen, her narratives published during the ventennio reveal a clear desire to counter prejudice about the female character. Her most savage criticism was aimed at gender stereotyping and, in *Il coraggio delle donne* (1940), she showed how the insidious practice of judging women according to artificial notions of femininity resulted in social exclusion. 'Sofia o la donna independente' depicts the ostracisation suffered by three ageing spinsters, Sofia, Antonietta, and Jenny, whose decision to remain unmarried results in stigmatisation by the local community. Ridiculed by the local men and shunned by the local women, who fear that spinsterhood might be contagious, they turn to one another for company, although remain acutely aware that, as spinsters, they will never be regarded as real women. 'Io non capisco certe cose, io non son mai stata una vera donna', each announces whenever the conversation turns to the subject of love or marriage.<sup>47</sup> The tragedy which results when women are judged according to a strict sexual morality is explored in 'Felicina'. Set in a small Tuscan town in the late nineteenth century, the novel centres on the wife of a rich lawyer, whose lack of participation in community life mark her out as a target for malicious gossip. Rumours of Felicina's suspected immorality increase when the couple take in a lodger, the local teacher Vittorio Ventrella, and the townspeople decide that he must marry in order for civic pride to be restored. When Vittorio becomes engaged to Zoraide Benci, a local woman renowned for her virtue and angelic beauty, comparisons inevitably emerge between Felicina and Zoraide: the dark-haired Felicina is cast as an evil seductress, who ensnared her husband through trickery, while the saintly Zoraide is regarded as 'l'incarnazione di ogni ideale femminile'.48 When Vittorio and

identity but who draws back at the last moment, realising that her duty lies with her husband and child:

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Perché un marito non si stacchi dalla casa, è soprattutto necessario che la moglie viva per lui, pur trovando il modo di far lindi e graziosi i bambini e il suo piccolo regno.' (p. 149)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Anna Banti, 'Sofia o la donna indipendente', in *Il coraggio delle donne* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1940), pp. 97-127 (p. 109).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Anna Banti, 'Felicina', in *Il coraggio delle donne*, pp. 31-96 (p. 57).

Zoraide are discovered to have spent their honeymoon at a house owned by Felicina's husband, rumours of an affair abound and when these rumours reach the ears of Zoraide's brother, he decides he must avenge his sister by murdering Vittorio. The story concludes with Felicina's descent into madness following Vittorio's violent death, while Zoraide is shown to be an equal victim in the tragedy for her reputation as a paragon of virtue imprisons her within an oppressive role: 'Nella testa che spesso le doleva forte, i sorrisi delle amiche si avvicendavano come smorfie e tutta quella gran benevolenza [...] fraterna del paese la opprimeva.' (p. 57)

Like Banti, Paola Drigo also understood the pernicious influence of romantic fiction and she openly distanced her characters from the stereotypes which populated the *romanzo* rosa. 'Le creature che s'incontrano qui non sono quelle che piacciono generalmente al pubblico che dedica qualche ora alla cosidetta letteratura amena', she stated in the introduction to La signorina Anna (p. 7). Drigo's subversion of the romance plot is evident in the first story in the collection, which lends its name to the title of the book. The initial scenario could indeed come from a romance novel: the elderly Colonel De Friours and his daughter Anna come to live in a provincial town and, when the colonel falls ill, he is visited by a local aristocrat, Piero Orsenigo, who falls in love with the sweet-natured Anna. Yet, in Drigo's hands, the story does not develop into a formulaic love story in which the protagonists are united after overcoming insuperable obstacles. When Orsenigo first tries to declare his love, he finds himself tongue-tied and so presents Anna with a copy of a novel in which he has declared his love on the flyleaf. Reddening with embarrassment, Anna refuses to talk about the matter, and his subsequent proposal of marriage is met with a similarly unfavourable response. Hurt by her rejection, Orsenigo demands an explanation and Anna informs him that the age gap between them is too great for, at thirty-eight, she is twelve years older than him. Although this revelation does not diminish Orsenigo's love, both realise that social convention renders any relationship between them impossible. Having given up her youth to nurse her dying father, Anna finds that she must sacrifice any happiness in later life for the sake of propriety and, with the obstacles to their happiness too great to overcome, the romance plot is thus thwarted.

Drigo, like Banti, was also highly critical of the importance which society attached to female morality and, in 'Paolina', she shows how the pressure placed on women to conform to impossibly high standards of behaviour inevitably results in tragedy. The story focuses on Paolina Cecchetto, who is forced to bring up her daughter Annetta alone after the

disappearance of her husband following an accounting scandal. Ostracised by the local community for her husband's crime, and branded 'una disgraziata' as a single mother, Paolina eventually finds employment as a maid with the local female landowner. However, when her employer finds Paolina alone with her grandson, she is convinced that Paolina is trying to seduce him and dismisses her on the spot. Unable to find another job and desperate to feed herself and her daughter, Paolina runs away with a local man, Stefano Servadio, her behaviour confirming her reputation among the townspeople as a fallen woman. Frightened to return Stefano's love, Paolina lives a guilt-ridden existence until matters are brought to a head by the reappearance of her husband. Absolving himself of any responsibility for Paolina's plight, he demands that she and their daughter go abroad with him and when she refuses, he threatens to take their daughter. Torn between her love for Stefano and Annetta, Paolina throws herself into the river and drowns.

The pressure placed on women to conform to an idealised image of chaste womanhood is a theme also explored by Paola Masino in *Monte Ignoso*. In the novel, Masino shows how Emma's guilt about sexuality acts as the driving force in her behaviour, her views having been formed by strict Catholic teaching, whereby sexual desire is a primitive urge to be restrained not gratified. From childhood, Emma has been plagued by a sense of guilt, for she believes herself to be the product of her parents' lust, and, convinced of her status as 'una donnaccia' (p. 21), she acts out her predestined role by embarking on an adulterous relationship with the stablehand and takes pleasure in abusing her own body, even in pregnancy, for she believes that her sinful nature demands that she must suffer: 'Portò quel figlio violentemente, con crudeltà verso se stessa.' (p. 35) In motherhood, Emma achieves a temporary respite from guilt, for she believes that, by giving life to another, she has been absolved from sin and returned to a state of purity, yet her happiness is short-lived, for when her mentally imbalanced husband learns that she has committed adultery and is no longer 'divina, come appunto deve essere una madre', he kills her in order to punish her betrayal of his ideal (p. 156).

While Banti, Drigo, and Masino showed how the false distinction made between the donna pura and the donna perduta rebounded on women with tragic consequences, de Céspedes portrayed young women refusing to be constrained by these categories. In Nessuno torna indietro, not only do Xenia and Emanuela reject the stigma attached to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Paola Drigo, 'Paolina', in *La signorina Anna* (Vicenza: Jacchía, 1932), pp. 103-86 (p. 113).

label of fallen woman but neither does their rebellion against accepted female behaviour meet with punishment as it does in popular fiction. Having run away to Milan after failing her exams, Xenia becomes the mistress of Dino, a corrupt businessman, to whom she sells herself in order to create a comfortable life and, after his arrest, she callously switches her attentions to his wealthy boss, Raimondo Horsch. Although realising that she will be branded a fallen woman, she refuses to feel guilty and derides the hypocrisy of those who condemn her actions while lacking the courage to rebel against strict moral codes themselves: 'Pochi hanno il coraggio di confessare quello che pensano, di passare sopra le tradizioni. Mi va un amante, sí, me lo piglio.' (p. 195) In her desire for social advancement and her willingness to use her sexuality for material gain, Xenia can be likened to a Hollywood heroine of the early 1930s. However, rather than a two-dimensional stereotype in the 'sin and succeed' mould, Xenia is portrayed as a complex character who understands the high price she must pay for her life of material comfort. Horsch is no Clark Gable or Cary Grant but a morally corrupt man whose appearance and character both repulse her, 'le mani di lui, i suoi gesti calmi, [...] l'inorridivano' (p. 368), and, while financially secure because of his generosity, she finds her life marked by an emotional void for, in leaving behind her family and friends for a new life in the city, she must resign herself to a life of solitude: 'Sola, sola sì [...] e intanto la gola le sussultava in singhiozzi secchi.' (p. 304)

The storyline involving Emanuela represents an even more forceful rebuttal of the false morality peddled by the *romanzo rosa*, for de Céspedes subverts elements of the romance plot in order to criticise the idealised image of femininity which it promoted. The relationship between Emanuela and her fiancé at first follows the traditional patterns of the romance novel. Handsome and authoritative, Andrea is the archetypal romantic hero, while Emanuela represents the beautiful heroine who acquiesces to his wishes and tacitly accepts his plans for their future together, regarding him as 'un vero uomo' (p. 274). From the beginning, their relationship is based on the traditional male-female hierarchy, with Andrea adopting an assertive role while Emanuela relinquishes her autonomy for his paternal protection, and the communication between them takes the form of command and compliance: 'Aveva un modo di parlare insieme armonioso e deciso; passava da un argomento all'altro volubilmente e obbligava Emanuela a seguirlo, a dirgli ciò che egli voleva' (p. 137). In Andrea's eyes, the beautiful Emanuela with her 'sorriso infantile' corresponds to his feminine ideal (p. 418). Elevating her to the status of the Madonna, and thereby denying her any measure of selfhood, he prefers to worship her from afar rather

than allowing his idealised view to be tainted by a more detailed knowledge of her character. 'Voglio che tu mi rimanga così, tutta ignota', he declares shortly before their wedding (p. 314). Emanuela, however, does not, and indeed cannot, live up to his ideal. Engaged to a pilot in her native Florence and sent away to Rome after bearing his child, she is not the chaste ideal of Andrea's dreams but a woman who willingly entered a sexual relationship. Although she feels no guilt about bearing a child out of wedlock, her fear that Andrea will brand her a fallen woman prompts her to conceal the existence of her daughter and, when she finally confesses the truth, in a revelation which counters the declaration of love in the romance novel, her fears are confirmed, for Andrea cannot forgive her betrayal. Judging women purely on their sexuality and casting them either as *pura* or *perduta*, he relegates Emanuela from ideal woman to unrepentant whore: 'Sei di quel genere di donne che detesto.' (p. 416)

Yet, despite transgressing the codes governing sexual morality, Emanuela is not punished for her behaviour but, in a subversion of the traditional fate of the rebellious woman, she contemplates throwing herself into the Arno, not in order to kill herself but to rid herself of her unborn child:

Le sembrava quasi che, se si fosse gettata, [...] avrebbe lasciato cadere questo peso nel fiume; ella sarebbe risalita sulla sponda, avrebbe ripreso la sua vita liberata da quest'incubo, dal timore del figlio. (p. 113)

Although realising that society will brand her 'una donna con un passato' (p. 360), Emanuela refuses to feel guilty about her sexual relationship with Stefano and the resulting pregnancy, 'non ho fatto niente di male, niente di male' (p. 20), nor does she display remorse about shattering Andrea's illusions when she informs him about her illegitimate child. The cancellation of the wedding leaves her equally unperturbed; indeed, she is imbued with a sense of freedom as she regains control of her life and is no longer subject to male dictates: 'Era libera, e bisognava prendere un'altra strada, passare il ponte, scegliersi una vita.' (p. 421)

Just as the active woman is not punished for her rebellion so the passive woman is not rewarded for her patience in the novel. Vinca and Valentina both place their lives in the hands of men, the former devoting her life to her relationship with a fellow Spaniard and the latter waiting for her life to be transformed by marriage. A spirited and rebellious girl at the outset, Vinca loses her carefree nature when she falls in love with Luis, a state which she likens to imprisonment for she no longer has the power to decide her own life. After

Luis leaves for Spain to fight with the Falangists, her life turns into an extended period of waiting. Devoting herself to his memory, she dresses in his clothes, surrounds herself with his possessions, and structures her life around the anticipation of receiving a letter from him. Valentina passes her days in a similar state of expectation, waiting for a husband to rescue her from a life of poverty and the tyranny of her uncles. Regarding marriage as her only means of financial security, as well as the ultimate symbol of success for a woman, '1'essenziale è di poter dire alle amiche: "mi sposo" (p. 226), she pins her hopes on Mario, the neighbour of her fellow student Anna, but waits passively for him to make the first move. However, the patience of both women results in disappointment rather than reward. After devoting herself to Luis's memory for over two years, Vinca discovers that he has obeyed his parents' wishes by marrying a girl from his village, while Valentina's hopes of marriage are dashed when she learns that Mario has become engaged to Anna.

In the same way that new generation writers challenged the strict moral codes regarding female behaviour which underpinned women's popular fiction, so they rejected the belief that physical beauty signalled a woman's femininity. In Tempo innamorato, Gianna Manzini shows that the homely Clementina epitomises kindness and generosity, qualities which constitute an inner beauty: 'Per la prima volta s'accorse che esiste un modo d'essere bella oltre la bellezza.' (pp. 172-73) Judged, however, on her external appearance, Clementina is made to feel inadequate as a woman and, when her husband abandons her for the beautiful Rita, she holds herself responsible, believing that her ugliness jars with the conventional image of happy domesticity: 'Non si stupì nemmeno che egli cercasse di comporre una nuova famiglia, tanto era persuasa d'aver tradito le immagini d'un sorridente e facile esistere casalingo, per via di quella bruttezza.' (p. 9) Excluded from traditional notions of femininity, Clementina experiences great difficulty in forming a sense of her own identity and it is only when she leaves her domesticated life and discovers her vocation as a teacher that she finally achieves a sense of harmony, her ugliness mitigated by her caring nature, which is allowed to flourish in her new surroundings. Rita, by contrast, is possessed of a radiant beauty but lacks the warmth of Clementina. Regarding her husband's constant demands for affection as a drain on her own vitality, she is unable to give him the the protection and reassurance he craves, which contributes to his suicide. His son Enzo feels equally abandoned by Rita, believing that her beauty is responsible for her coldness towards him, and, while convalescing from an illness, he throws himself out of a window, thereby compounding the tragedy of Rita's life.

Through her portraits of Clementina and Rita, Manzini refutes any correlation between appearance and character, showing how Rita, while corresponding physically to society's feminine ideal, negates the selflessness and devotion demanded of her as a wife and mother, qualities which are represented instead by Clementina, who proves a devoted wife to Ugo and a loving mother to Rita's sons. In her portrait of Clementina, Manzini also reveals the problems faced by women who are deemed unfeminine because of their lack of beauty. Painfully shy due to the hostile reaction which her appearance provokes in others, and believing herself inadequate as both a wife and woman, Clementina has great difficulty in establishing a true sense of self and it is only when she emerges from the domestic sphere, where she is oppressed by traditional notions of femininity, into the world of employment, where she is judged on her intellect rather than her appearance, that she is able to find her own voice and gain a sense of her own worth.

The difficulty faced by women in a society where their value is defined by their beauty is also examined in Nessuno torna indietro, in which the tyranny of appearance is illustrated by the case of Silvia. Confronted with the painful realisation that she must choose between conformity to a culturally defined female identity and the pursuit of her intellectual aspirations, Silvia chooses the latter, while her femininity is also negated in the eyes of society by her unattractive appearance. 'È brutta, non sembra nemmeno una donna', remarks Emanuela's fiancé Andrea (p. 137), and his opinion is echoed by Dora, the coquettish wife of Professor Belluzzi, for whom Silvia's lack of a clear gendered identity erases her very humanity: 'È come una bestia in casa. [...] È un vecchio cane.' (p. 153) Although Silvia has no desire to emulate Dora, she realises that by cultivating intelligence rather than femininity she has deviated from accepted notions of womanhood and will never be regarded as a real woman by her beloved Belluzzi. With her frivolous nature and 'meravigliosa ignoranza', Dora symbolises true femininity for Belluzzi, 'Dora è molta diversa da noi, un altro carattere, a lei piace la gente, il movimento, le cose inutili; [...] è così donna; donna proprio... proprio donna', whereas Silvia, who acts as his intellectual equal, is androgynous in his eyes (p. 180). Treating her as he would a male researcher and addressing her only by her surname, he is oblivious to her femininity: 'Gli sorrise come una donna. Ma lui [...] non la vide.' (p. 311)

The cult of beauty was also to come under attack in the work of Elsa Morante and Paola Masino. In 'Un uomo senza carattere', published in *Il gioco segreto*, Morante recounts how a woman's misguided belief in the miraculous properties of beauty products

leads to self-delusion and ultimately to tragedy. Candida, a middle-aged spinster who has suffered a miserable adolescence under her tyrannical father, seeks to capture her lost youth after his death and, having been introduced to fashion and cosmetics by her urbane cousins, she goes to live with her aunt in a provincial town, convinced of her beauty. Believing that all the local men are in love with her, Candida lays herself open to ridicule, and when a local student takes pity on her and tells her the brutal truth, she hides herself away in shame, eventually dying from typhoid. The damage caused to women by this equation between beauty and femininity is also depicted by Masino in Nascita e morte della massaia. In a parody of the transformation wrought by beauty products as shown in popular fiction and advertising, Masino portrays the young massaia undergoing a week-long course of beauty treatments in order to conform to a socially approved image of womanhood and thereby assuage her mother's fears that she is not a real woman. 'Perché non tenti, una volta, di apparire una donna come le altre?' begs her mother. 'Una sola volta. Per convincermi che non ho partorito un mostro.' (p. 27) With her individuality erased, the massaia is reduced to a stereotype, a fearful shadow of her former self, and the erosion of her self-confidence challenges the romantic tradition whereby the heroine gains in selfassurance as she becomes more beautiful.

Rather than an expression of support for the conservative backlash against consumerism, such attacks on the cult of beauty served as a critique of the conformity which it encouraged at the expense of individuality. Candida's fate is portrayed not as a punishment for her vanity but as a tragic consequence of her self-delusion, while the transformation of the *massaia* from a spirited girl into a fearful woman reveals the damage caused when women are forced to adhere to prescribed images of womanhood. Moreover, by revealing that femininity was not a naturally occuring essence but the result of women manipulating their appearance in order to conform to social expectations, the new generation writers also countered the Fascist doctrine that female characteristics were determined at birth, a belief parodied in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, when the protagonist's forced assumption of a gendered identity is described by her mother as her 'vera nascita', which marks her entry into womanhood (p. 38).

The doctrine of biological determinism was also to come under fire in the work of Anna Banti, who affirmed that gender was a sociocultural construct rather than a biological given. In 'Il passo di Eva', Banti argues that 'le bambine non nascono donne' but that gendered traits are instilled in young girls by social conditioning: 'Quando cominciano a

camminare [...] c'è qualcuno che per carezzarle, ricorre a una parola: "che donnina!" e crede d'aver tutto detto.'50 Setting her narrative against the backdrop of a confirmation ceremony, Banti examines how young women assume a gendered identity through a series of different pressures and rites, from parental influence to the confirmation ceremony itself, when, clad in long dresses and veils, they are made aware that they must dress differently from men. The complex and often painful process by which girls gradually acquire a female identity is discussed in greater detail in *Itinerario di Paolina*. As a child, Paolina constructs a model of prototypical feminine behaviour by observing common female traits, 'aprir la borsetta, accomodarsi i capelli sulle orecchie, infilare il guanto lasciando il pollice per ultimo'.51 Yet, rather than helping her establish a female identity, such behaviour only serves to increase her confusion. Realising that she is neither 'una donna' nor 'una ragazza', she asks herself 'io, chi sono?', and her response 'io sono una bambina' deepens her insecurity, for the term has no associated gendered characteristics (p. 15).

In the same way that the new generation writers revealed femininity to be a product of social conditioning, thereby countering the theory of biological determinism, so they refuted the belief that marriage was the key to a woman's fulfilment and love the cornerstone of her life, twin themes encapsulated by the romance plot. In common with many of their real-life counterparts, who were taught to regard marriage as a source of personal fulfilment, their protagonists initially embrace marriage, regarding it as a means to escape their dull, provincial lives, as exemplified by Lauretta in de Céspedes's 'Viaggio di notte', who dreams of marrying the businessman who shares her family's compartment on their train journey to Turin and thereby escape her life of domestic drudgery: 'Lauretta stira, Lauretta lavora, poi papà muore, muore mammà, Lauretta stira, Lauretta lavora... c'è da impazzire, il tempo passa, non conosco nessuno.'52 Yet, while seeming to usher in a better life, marriage is shown to impede self-development. Margherita, in de Céspedes's 'Il pigionante', equates her early marriage with the curtailment of her freedom, 'aveva sposato a vent'anni e, da qual momento, come se si fosse rinchiusa in una scatola', a view echoed by Maria, in 'La sposa', who discovers that her role as a wife is no different to her job as a hotel maid, for in both she is treated as a servant with no freedom of expression: 'Si era convinta che servire significava perdere età, sesso, fattezze e sentimenti umani [...]. Adesso

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Anna Banti, 'Il passo di Eva', in *Le monache cantano* (Rome: Tumminelli, 1942), pp. 123-26 (p. 123).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Anna Banti, *Itinerario di Paolina* (Rome: Augustea, 1937), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Alba de Céspedes, 'Viaggio di notte', in Concerto (Lanciano: Carabba, 1937), pp. 128-69 (p. 152).

tornava a provare lo stesso disagio.' (p. 16)53 While the unhappy marriage was not uncommon in romantic fiction, its purpose was didactic: women with marital problems were taught to remain patient in order to attain the happiness which was rightfully theirs, as can be seen in Carola Prosperi's Il secondo amore (1934), in which a young woman, who discovers her marriage was simply a means for her husband to break off an unsuitable engagement, succeeds in winning his heart through her quiet devotion. However, such lessons in the sanctity of marriage and the rewards of patience are undermined in the work of new generation writers, who depict the reality behind these romantic ideals. In 'Canzonetta', Fausta Cialente subverts the romance plot by showing how a teenage girl is robbed of her romantic illusions when faced with the reality of relationships. The impressionable young Ninì, whose view of the world has been coloured by romantic fiction, invents a succession of romantic scenarios for her best friend Angela. However, when Angela falls in love, it is with a fiery interventionist who has little in common with her romantic ideal, 'il giovane era bello su per giù come i principi che sbarcavano nell'isola per sposarla; ma [...] in costui non c'era proprio nulla di romantico', and after being seduced and abandoned by her lover, Angela is quietly removed from school when it is discovered she is pregnant.54

By undermining the moralistic storylines of the romance novel, the new generation distanced themselves from the cautionary tales and female stereotypes offered by popular female culture. Spurning the moralism of the *romanzo rosa* by showing how a woman's behaviour, whether morally reprehensible or commendable, had no bearing on her fate, they countered the trend in women's writing for a work of literature to act as a vehicle of moral instruction. Nor did they countenance the neat solutions offered by popular fiction but reflected the difficulties and confusion inherent in the lives of women, who were caught between the desire for independence and the weight of tradition. 'La narrazione d'oggi [...] non ha mai una soluzione vera e definitiva per nessuno', as Daria Banfi Malaguzzi affirmed in the 1934 *Almanacco della donna italiana* (p. 136). Faced with a sea of different images of womanhood, from the selfless *donna autentica* to the hedonistic urbanite, the new generation sought to dismantle the myths surrounding femininity and provide an authentic portrait of female identity. Countering the belief that feminine traits were biologically

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Alba de Céspedes, 'Il pigionante', in *Fuga* (Milan: Mondadori, 1940), pp. 23-128 (p. 36).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Fausta Cialente, 'Canzonetta', 1937 (repr. in *Interno con figure* (Rome: Studio Tesi, 1991), pp. 55-86 (p. 82)).

determined and that a woman's identity resided in her appearance and her happiness in marriage, they depicted womanhood stripped bare of artifice and embraced a sincere expression of the modern female condition. In the words of Banfi Malaguzzi:

Le donne cercano la vita, vogliono impadronirsene, esserne coscienti e, per ciò, lottano. Quante cose vi sono da vincere, quante posizioni false da superare, quante ipocrisie da buttare da parte! La verità, la realtà, una buona volta dicono le donne, vediamola dunque, esprimiamola, precisiamola.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.4 REPRESENTING MODERN WOMANHOOD

In contrast to romance writers, who portrayed marriage as the only suitable path for women who were grappling with their new-found independence, the new generation sought to voice the difficulties inherent in the modern female condition. Exploring what it meant to be female in a society which allowed women increased freedom but continued to equate the female role with marriage and motherhood, they described the conflict between women's aspirations and the expectations of society, portraying female protagonists who were struggling to affirm their right to self-definition whilst living in a culture which had fixed ideas about the female role. Focusing on the predicament of young, middle-class women whose lives were a mixture of freedom and constraint, they showed how the new opportunities available to women had allowed them to dream of a life beyond the domestic but their desire for autonomy was being progressively stifled by a society which branded as selfish their struggle for selfhood and decreed that a woman's place lay in the home.

The confusion experienced by women who were torn between the desire for independence and the security offered by traditional roles echoes throughout the work of female writers of the period. In 'Le calze di organzino' (1934), Camilla Bisi depicts the anxiety of a university student, Cilli, who is caught between 'il desiderio di tornare a "fare la signorina" e quello di rimanere a "far la studentessa". <sup>56</sup> Suffering from acute homesickness and frightened of the insecurity associated with independence, Cilli longs to return to the warmth of family life and the reassurance of a predetermined future and yet, by returning home, she knows that she will have to 'rinunciare per sempre ai sogni di

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'Rassegna letteraria: scrittrici d'Italia', *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1935, pp. 197-235 (p. 197).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Camilla Bisi, 'Le calze di organzino', in *Essere donna* (Genoa: Masini, 1934), pp. 120-26 (p. 124).

indipendenza' (p. 125). This schizophrenic attitude is echoed in Marise Ferro's *Disordine*, in which Paola is torn between the stability offered by a romantic relationship and the desire to retain her independence, and these conflicting urges result in inner turmoil. 'In me c'era un dissidio sostanziale', she laments. 'Mi sentii legata al martirio della mia individualità, disperata di essere io.' (p. 234)

It was de Céspedes who perhaps best captured the sense of confusion and insecurity felt by a generation of women who, in the words of Daria Banfi Malaguzzi, 'hanno preso posizione d'indipendenza da troppo poco tempo', and for whom 'la [...] libertà le stordisce' (Almanacco della donna italiana, 1933, p. 133). Through her portraits of eight female boarders in Nessuno torna indietro, she represents a generation of young women struggling to come to terms with independence and the changing female role. On the brink of adulthood, their lives are governed by uncertainty for, having abandoned the traditional path of marriage and motherhood in order to pursue their studies, their future is unknown and, having left the security of the home, they no longer have the protection of the family. 'Noi [...] guardiamo all'avvenire come a un vuoto oscuro', Anna tells her fellow students, contrasting the insecurity which governs their lives with the carefree attitude of their contemporaries who have chosen to remain at home: 'Le ragazze che sono in famiglia, non sentono questa responsabilità, si lasciano vivere.' (p. 82) The lives of the students are thus in a state of transition, for not only are they passing from adolescence to adulthood but from the circumscribed space of the domestic sphere to the freedom of the public sphere and, in a key metaphor of the novel, this period of transition is likened by Silvia to a bridge linking the old world and the new:

È come se noi fossimo al passaggio di un ponte. Siamo già partite da una sponda e non siamo ancora giunte all'altra. Quello che abbiamo lasciato è dietro le nostre spalle, neppure ci voltiamo a guardarlo, quello che ci attende è una sponda dietro la nebbia. (p. 122)

Each of the students responds in a very different way to this impending change in their lives. Silvia and Xenia both embrace the idea of independence, despite the insecurity which it entails. Strong and dynamic figures, who counter the belief that passivity is an innate female characteristic, they refuse to accept a predetermined destiny but assert the right to forge their own lives, each affirming the importance of agency over passivity. 'Non si può, nella vita, non fare nulla', Silvia informs Emanuela (p. 288), while Xenia announces: 'Nella vita bisogna buttarsi a capofitto, prenderla pel collo.' (p. 13) As intelligent women, who

have developed enquiring minds through their studies, they challenge established ideas about the female role and character, Xenia rejecting the orthodoxy of marriage and Silvia affirming that self-fulfilment derives not from love but from one's own achievements. 'Ho sempre pensato che l'amore non possa servire di base nella vita', she declares. 'Forse l'essenziale è nel dare a qualcosa tutto di se stessi.' (p. 312) Yet, despite their determination not to return to the restrictions of family life, 'non ci torno, mai più, mai più, piuttosto m'ammazzo!', Xenia cries when asked if she will return home after failing her viva, both women nonetheless feel drawn to the security of traditional female roles (p. 33). While telling herself that 'la famiglia, il matrimonio, ormai non avessero più grande importanza', Xenia harbours a secret desire to lead a respectable life as a married woman, dreaming about 'una borghese passeggiata domenicale, accanto al marito, il figlio per la mano' (p. 195). Silvia finds a similar appeal in this safe, predictable role when she returns home after graduation and watches her sister await the birth of her child. Having cast aside marriage and motherhood for an academic career, she begins to envy the life that Immacolata has chosen, who follows a predetermined path and has no need to struggle against the system, nor even to think:

- Che pensi? - Silvia le aveva chiesto nelle vacanze, quando era a casa; e quella aveva risposto sorridendo: - Io non penso mai. [...] Anche Silvia avrebbe voluto sedersi senza pensare, attendere che la vita maturasse, le si donasse, pronta. (pp. 397-98)

This yearning for security is prompted by the frustrations which both women experience in their struggle for autonomy. Having applied herself diligently to her studies, Silvia discovers that her distinction at degree level offers her little else but the right to teach at secondary level. Xenia is equally disenchanted by employment, discovering that office and factory work represent a life of penury and servitude to the clock: 'È penosa la vita delle impiegate: entrano, firmano sotto l'orologio, campana d'entrata, campana d'uscita, escono in branco.' (p. 303) The financial hardship of working life soon proves too great for Xenia and she abandons her low-paid job for the financial rewards of being a mistress, exchanging her drab rented room for an expensively furnished apartment and sacrificing her autonomy for submission to male authority. From being a spirited and rebellious girl who is determined to set her own agenda, she becomes an obedient woman, who allows herself to be moulded into a male image of desire. Her first lover, Dino, fashions her into a model of elegant femininity, presenting her with a silver fox fur and evening dress on her

birthday, and throughout their relationship he treats her like a child, addressing her in diminutives, such as *piccola* and *bambina mia*. With Horsch, the suppression of her identity is taken a step further, for both her name and past are stripped from her when she is given a fictitious identity as a countess: 'Horsch, senza neppure chiedere il suo consenso, le ricostruiva la vita; s'appropriava del suo passato, lo riduceva secondo dei suoi desideri.' (p. 340) In her willingness to sacrifice her autonomy for the security offered by a male constructed image of womanhood, Xenia illustrates the difficulties faced by women who found themselves frustrated in their attempts at self-advancement. Pushed into low-paid occupations, they found themselves on a meagre salary and with little control over their lives with the result that many were prepared to abandon the hollow dream of independence for the security offered by marriage or concubinage.

In contrast to Silvia and Xenia, who display a proactive approach to life, Augusta assumes the traditional female trait of passivity. Lacking the courage to forge her own path, she waits patiently for her life to change, believing that her patience will one day be rewarded. 'L'essenziale, nella vita, è avere un'attesa', she tells Emanuela, when advising her to arrive late for her rendez-vous with Andrea (p. 35). Unlike Valentina, however, Augusta is not waiting for a husband to initiate her into womanhood. Regarding marriage as institutionalised oppression, she warns her fellow students against taking a husband and pens an angry missive against the injustices of the marital role for women. 'Sarà come lo squillo di una formidabile tromba d'argento', she declares of the work (p. 259). Yet, despite articulating the need for women to regain their independence, Augusta is unable to embrace autonomy herself. Unwilling to leave the protective environment of the Grimaldi, she finds herself trapped in the transition between adolescence and adulthood, caught 'in quella sbadigliante parentesi d'attesa, sospesa in una giovinezza fittizia, senza il coraggio di abbandonare decisamente l'una e passare all'altra sponda' (p. 256). While the pensione functions as a staging post for the other students, it represents a permanent home for Augusta, for just as she is unwilling to progress into adult life so she is unable to return home to her native Sardinia. As she explains to Emanuela, the independence and knowledge she has acquired as a student mean not only would she be unable to assume the submissive role demanded of her but she would also be ostracised by the local community for failing to conform to an accepted image of womanhood:

A casa non tornerei... Non si può tornare. [...] Se [...] torniamo, siamo delle cattive figlie, delle cattive mogli. Chi può dimenticare di essere stata padrona di se stessa? E poi, per i nostri paesi, dopo essere state qualche anno, sole, in città, torniamo con la reputazione di donne perdute. (pp. 159-60)

The impossibility of return, as voiced by Augusta and encapsulated in the title of the novel, is also illustrated by Emanuela. Caught between the desire for independence, the insecurity of which frightens her, and the desire to retreat into prescribed female roles, which she finds reassuring but stifling, Emanuela embodies the confusion experienced by women who were struggling for self-identity. A symbol of modern womanhood, she cultivates a fashionable appearance, arriving at the college 'tutta dipinta', and enjoys a high degree of freedom, wandering the streets of Florence on her own and pursuing relationships without her parents' knowledge (p. 14). She also counters the model of the dutiful daughter and self-sacrificial mother, for not only does she rebel against parental authority, announcing 'ho ventiquattro anni e me ne vado' when her father tries to force her to remain at home while sending her daughter away to school, but she also appears selfish, the lack of affection she received as a child translating into indifference in her relationships, from her coldness towards her parents and daughter to her half-hearted relationships with Stefano and Andrea, which she pursues out of a desire for stability rather than love (p. 46). Yet, while rejecting prescribed female roles, Emanuela is no strong emancipated female model. Unlike Silvia, whose philosophy in life is to 'prendere una strada e seguirla fino in fondo', Emanuela lacks direction and waits for others to take responsibility for her life, 's'accorgeva di andare qua e là, incerta, nel buio' (p. 121). Lacking the confidence to forge her own identity and, desperate for the affection she was denied as a child, she assumes those characteristics which others expect of her, reflecting back an image which they have constructed in order to win their approval:

In Emanuela agiva una facoltà intuitiva rapida e sempre vigile: quella di rivelare e d'illuminare di sé a chi l'avvicinava, l'aspetto che nell'altro poteva suscitare una concordanza di simpatia. Così ognuno vedeva riflessa in questo specchio umano la propria immagine. (p. 156)

This mutability in Emanuela's character, together with the lies she has told to hide her status as an unmarried mother, exacerbates her crisis of identity – 'non sono quella che credete, tutte bugie, falsità' – and, driven by her deep-rooted insecurity, she takes refuge in culturally constructed images of womanhood (p. 20). Adopting a feminine appearance and mannerisms, she is hailed by others as the epitomy of feminine grace, Xenia describing her

as 'una vera signora' (p. 87), and Andrea declaring that, amongst her peer group, she is the only one who can be classed as 'una donna' (p. 420). Emanuela also assumes the feminine trait of submissiveness in her relationship with Andrea, tacitly acquiescing to his demands and adopting his opinions. 'Ha ragione Andrea; neppure sembra una donna', she remarks of Silvia, even though she had earlier defended her friend against Andrea's criticism (p. 139). Even when she speaks, it is often simply to echo his voice, as when she allows Andrea to order for her at a restaurant, responding meekly to his suggestion 'risotto?' with the answer 'risotto' (p. 135).

Yet, while finding temporary reassurance in traditional female behaviour patterns, Emanuela soon rebels against this conservative model of womanhood, realising that she cannot return to the limitations imposed by male authority after the freedom she has enjoyed: 'Augusta aveva ragione, come si può tornare a rinchiudersi dopo aver assaporato la libertà?.' (p. 261) This feeling of constraint becomes even more pronounced after her engagement to Andrea, when she becomes aware that marriage will not give her the sense of identity she desires but merely imprison her within the role created for her by Andrea: 'Temeva il nuovo aspetto di Andrea [...] il quale la voleva elegante, sì, bella sì, ma chiusa là dentro con sua madre, ad aspettarlo, ricamando.' (p. 313) Her confession, on the eve of the wedding, thus comes almost as a relief for, by alienating herself from Andrea through her revelation that she has an illegitimate child, she is freed from the impending confinement of marriage. Although the prospect of an uncertain future prompts her to lapse momentarily into a culturally conditioned female response, experiencing 'una profonda nostalgia di darsi tutta agli altri [...] sacrificare la propria esistenza per il benessere di qualcuno', she soon reveals her willingness to assume responsibility for her own life, removing her daughter from boarding school and embarking with her on a transatlantic cruise, a journey which marks her first step on the path to selfhood (p. 361).

In her refusal to be constrained by traditional female roles and yet her reluctance to depart from set formulae, Emanuela represented a new type of protagonist in women's writing. A protagonist who had first emerged in the work of Marise Ferro and Fausta Cialente in the early thirties, she was, as Daria Banfi Malaguzzi observed, a symbol of the modern woman who had made inroads into the male sphere but was still uncomfortable with her new position. 'In Italia la donna attraversa una crisi sua', Banfi Malaguzzi noted in her review of Ferro's *Disordine*. 'Afferra ora con singolare maturità il campo dell'azione e del guadagno. Le occorre armonia ed equilibrio interiore; essa lo cerca con studio, e con

serietà.' (Almanacco della donna italiana, 1934, p. 157) Reflecting a generation of young women who had benefited from the social change wrought by the war, the protagonists of Ferro, Cialente, and de Céspedes were independent women, whose upbringing and education had led them to expect more from life than marriage and motherhood. 'Sono [...] due donne del dopoguerra', affirms the aunt of Paola and Donata in Ferro's Disordine. 'La maneria di vivere oggi è necessariamente diversa da quella di cinque, dieci anni fa. I valori, le esigenze, le necessità della vita sono capovolti.' (p. 170) No longer content with following prescribed models of female behaviour - 'sono stanca di essere una donna che aspetta, aspetta, aspetta', cries the adolescent Vittoria in Ferro's Barbara – these young women demand the right to behave as they choose and refuse to accept moral censure for their actions. 'Non ho fatto niente di male, niente di male', as Emanuela exclaims with regard to her relationship with Stefano and the resulting pregnancy (p. 20).<sup>57</sup> Motivated by self-interest rather than self-abnegation, they look to their own intellectual and emotional development rather than to the needs of others and eschew the strict moral guidelines governing female behaviour. 'La donna di cui il romanzo contemporaneo racconta le vicende [...] è una personalità nuova', noted the June 1933 edition of Lidel. 'Liberata dai vincoli della tradizione e incapace di ubbidire alla arginante severità della coscienza morale, cerca una nuova legge che non sa di rinuncia né di perdizione.' (p. 395) Yet, despite their rebellion, these young women have no clear sense of direction or identity. Having rejected traditional female roles, they are frightened by the prospect of selfdefinition, and their confusion about which path to take is compounded by the lack of guidance they receive from their parents, who, rooted in pre-war values, are unable to comprehend their daughters' desire for independence.

The earliest example of this new type of protagonist was the eponymous heroine of Cialente's *Natalia*, a novel described by *L'Italia letteraria* as 'il romanzo appassionante di una donna moderna' (19 Jan 1930, p. 6). An independent young woman, Natalia enjoys a high degree of freedom, walking around the city alone and eschewing female modes of dress by wearing trousers around the house. Wary of forming close relationships due to the lack of attention she received as a child, Natalia is reluctant to rely on the support of those around her and this emotional detachment means that she is often immune to the feelings of others. When her family moves house, she shows no sadness at leaving, causing both her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Marise Ferro, *Barbara* (Milan: Mondadori, 1934), pp. 165-66.

cousin Silvia and her close friend Ivan Perlmutter to feel hurt by 'l'indifferenza che aveva dimostrato' (p. 36). She displays a similar insensitivity towards Malaspina, the soldier with whom she begins a correspondence while he is serving at the front, informing him in a matter-of-fact tone that their relationship cannot work, and her cold indifference serves to 'penetrarlo svelta nel cuore e a scavarlo impietosamente' (p. 98). Yet, despite her apparent self-confidence and her rebellion against traditional models of female behaviour, Natalia is beset by a deep anxiety about her identity for, lacking parental guidance and prone to romantic dreams, she has difficulty in establishing a firm sense of self. Waiting in vain for someone to act as her guide, 'si levò ogni mattina con la certezza che fino a sera qualcuno sarebbe venuto, a cui domandare consiglio e conforto', but, finding herself alone and with sole responsibility for her life, she tends to act impulsively, often regretting her decision soon afterwards (p. 163). When she learns that Silvia has become engaged, she mistakenly assumes it is with her brother Jacopo and, believing herself abandoned by both her cousin and brother, she rushes into marriage with Malaspina. Discovering that Silvia is in fact engaged to a cousin in Switzerland, she immediately regrets her decision and her fear that she has chosen the wrong path in life is symbolised by a recurring dream in which she boards the wrong train.

In an attempt to lend structure and stability to her life, Natalia adopts a variety of different guises and roles, in the same manner as Emanuela in Nessuno torna indietro, taking refuge in culturally constructed images of womanhood, from the romantic heroine to the dutiful wife. In her letters to Malaspina, she constructs a highly romanticised persona, presenting herself as '[una] persona civile, educata e innegabilmente romantica' (p. 49). Engagement represents a similar form of play-acting, 'la parola fidanzata [le stava] addosso come il vestito di un'altra persona' (p. 185), while in marriage, she allows her identity to be completely submerged beneath her new role, offering herself to Malaspina as a willing pupil to be tutored in her wifely duties: 'Si svegliava difatti ogni giorno con l'animo d'una scolara obbediente e affettuosa.' (p. 201) Her willingness to conform to traditional female behaviour patterns is also prompted by the expectations of her husband Malaspina and his preconceptions about the female character. Like Andrea in Nessuno torna indietro, Malaspina defines women according to their appearance and behaviour, with the pure, childlike woman representing a suitable spouse while the independent giovinotta symbolises the woman of easy virtue who can be discarded at will. In his eyes, Natalia is an angelic donna-bambina, whose purity is evident from 'quelle sue arie di bambina' (p. 80),

and, although Natalia herself is conscious 'di non aver mai sentito sulla sua pelle la benda fredda della *purezza*' (p. 55), she does not dare disabuse him, for she knows that such an admission would be interpreted as a sign of depravity. Pregnancy initially seems to provide an escape route from the need to dissemble, for it affords her the opportunity to establish a new identity as a mother, an identity based on fact rather than fiction: 'Il bambino era il principio, di un'altra vita, un rinnovamento.' (p. 272) However, when the baby is stillborn, Natalia is reduced once again to a state of inner turmoil, feeling that she has failed as both a wife and mother. Immobilised by grief and unable to communicate her sense of loss to Malaspina, she abandons her husband and runs away in order to halt the erosion of her self: 'Era giunta così ai limiti di ciò che le sembrava l'annullamento di se stessa, ai confini del silenzio e dell'immobilità; [...] e allora domandò di partire.' (p. 237)

While patriarchal prejudice about the female role and character impedes Natalia's search for an authentic identity, her crisis of identity is also exacerbated by the lack of guidance she receives from her parents, in particular her mother. As the psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow has noted, the mother-daughter bond is central to the formation of female identity, the gradual process of self-definition for a woman beginning with an identification with her mother from whom she develops capacities for nurturing, dependence, and empathy. Natalia's lack of an intimate relationship with her mother, who all but abandons her children after her husband's death, thus not only results in an inability to empathise with others but it also contributes to her uncertainty regarding her identity for it deprives her of a female role model at a critical age. Turning to her brother Jacopo for guidance, the adolescent Natalia models herself on male patterns of behaviour, adopting an assertive manner and masculine style of attire, and when she tries to develop a sense of her own female identity, she has no model to follow except traditional patterns of female behaviour, which serve to stifle her true personality.

Natalia's problematic relationship with her mother was symptomatic of the gulf separating the pre and post-war generation of women. Just as older women felt detached from their daughters, whose independence they interpreted as waywardness, so younger women felt alienated from their mothers, regarding them as symbols of regression who continued to adhere to an outmoded model of femininity rooted in duty and submission. This generation gap is explored by de Céspedes in 'Il pigionante', a short story which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 6-7.

charts the troubled relationship between Margherita, a middle-aged widow, and her teenage daughter Donata. Independent and self-confident, Donata is a symbol of modern womanhood, dividing her time between socialising and studying and adopting all the accoutrements of a modern urban lifestyle, from packets of cigarettes to bookshelves filled with the work of Nietzsche and Wilde. From her early childhood when she wanted to be 'una ragazza [...] con un coraggio mascolino', Donata has emulated her father and spurned the female model offered by her mother, regarding feminine qualities, such as open displays of affection, as a sign of weakness (p. 78). As a young woman, she continues to subscribe to a masculine model of behaviour, taking the dominant role in relationships and smoking 'come un maschio, la sigaretta di traverso, sputando il tabacco' (p. 79). Her arrogant manner is in direct contrast with the submissive nature of her mother, who adopts a subordinate role in her relationships and prioritises the needs of others over her own. Having devoted her life to the care of family, Margherita feels hemmed in by marriage and motherhood but, while envious of her daughter's independence, she feels unable to escape from the narrowly defined role in which she has been imprisoned since the age of twenty.

Yet, while young women such as Donata found themselves increasingly distanced from traditional patterns of female behaviour, their desire to emulate male behaviour did not lead to stronger relationships with men but rather it further complicated relations between the sexes. As the characters of Andrea in Nessuno torna indietro and Malaspina in Natalia attest, men remained rooted in traditional prejudice about the female character, while women found themselves either caught up in these false images and unable to assert their true characters or ostracised due to their reluctance to conform to such a narrow vision of femininity. Communication between the sexes also remained problematic, with men continuing to prize the beautiful but mute female ideal, as exemplified in Cortile a Cleopatra in which Marco feels desire for Dinah only when she is silent, whereas women experienced great difficulty in articulating their feelings in the presence of men. Cialente's Natalia is unable to confess to her husband the emotional void which she experiences after the death of their baby, while Silvia in Nessuno torna indietro applauds the ease with which the students express themselves in the all-female environment of the pensione, comparing it with the awkward silence which reigns at home in the presence of her father. 'È bello stare a discutere cosí tra noi, tutte donne', she confides to her friends. 'Se ci fosse un uomo, non avremmo osato parlare, neppure davanti a mio padre io avrei potuto.' (pp. 120-21)

Even physical intimacy is shown to be ineffectual in dismantling this barrier between the sexes. In 'Notte quieta', Manzini reveals how physical relationships do not create a sense of companionship, Giulia finding that her relationship with her lover Vittorio brings with it the same emotional void as that which exists in her marriage. 'Addormentarsi accanto a lui non potrebbe voler dire raggiungerlo', she muses while gazing at his sleeping figure. 'Dormire insieme significa soltanto perdersi nel medesimo tempo.' (p. 49) Neither does a long-lasting marriage break down this emotional distance between a couple, as can be seen in Banti's 'Il coraggio delle donne', in which Amina wonders how she can refer to her husband by his first name when he still remains a stranger to her: 'Si meraviglia del controsenso di chiamar per nome [...] un uomo che dovrebbe, dopo anni di malinteso, esserle estraneo come uno sconosciuto.'59 Indeed, not only are physical relationships seen to bring little companionship but they are also shown to lead to suffering, with young women falling victim to unwanted pregnancy. Emanuela in Nessuno torna indietro succumbs to sexual curiosity, only to find herself burdened with the shame of the resulting pregnancy; while the protagonist in Cialente's 'Le statue' recalls his sister being labelled 'svergognata' by his mother when she falls pregnant.<sup>60</sup>

For women who refuse to conform to traditional models of behaviour the situation is no better for the search for independence is shown to be accompanied by solitude and alienation. As Gina Lombroso observed in La donna nella società attuale of 1927, 'se la donna ha ottenuto oggi posti, onori, ricchezze infinitamente superiori a quelli della donna antica — essa viceversa è sola, desolatamente sola' (p. 148). This link between independence and solitude is prevalent throughout women's writing of the period. In Nessuno torna indietro, Silvia confines herself to a life of solitude when she takes up a teaching post in the Fascist city of Littoria, a city '[che] non accoglie, respinge' (p. 423), and in Ferro's Disordine, Paola is forced to confront the solitude which stems from her search for self-identity: 'Mi sentii legata al martirio della mia individualità, disperata di essere io, e sola di fronte a un nemico che non sapevo combattere: me stessa.' (p. 234) It is in the work of Anna Banti that female solitude is explored in the greatest detail, Banti depicting the ostracisation of women who want to claim their own subjectivity and develop their own talents. This theme is first developed in Itinerario di Paolina, in which the young protagonist resists the traditional prescription for her life and claims the right to decide her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Anna Banti, 'Il coraggio delle donne', in *Il coraggio delle donne*, pp. 1-30 (p. 10).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Fausta Cialente, 'Le statue', 1938 (repr. in *Interno con figure*, pp. 237-50 (p. 249)).

own future: 'Il suo avvenire essa vuol costruirlo da sé.' (p. 17) Paolina's desire to distance herself from prescribed female behaviour alienates her from her peers and sets her on an independent path, which will inevitably lead to solitude: 'Presto questa embrionale dichiarazione di sfiducia in sé [...] fiorisce sotto l'aspetto di rinunzia volontaria, di aspirazione a una vita non comune e diversa dal normale.' (p. 34) This clash between female aspirations and society's rigid definition of femininity is further developed in Sette lune (1941), in which Maria Alessi, an art history student, finds her creativity ignored by an indifferent society. Intent on pursuing an intellectual path, despite societal and familial pressures to conform to a prescribed image of womanhood, Maria doggedly steers her own course only to pay for her rebellion with alienation and solitude. A similar fate is shared by the three spinsters in 'Sofia o la donna independente'. Outcasts in their community because of their unmarried status and artistic pursuits, each woman is regarded 'con diffidenza, talvolta con aperta ostilità' (p. 106), their independence viewed as a threat to the status quo. 'Donna indipendente valeva a quei tempi come termine scientifico: nome di bacillo, di nuovo metallo, di nuova cometa, roba insomma aggressiva, pericolosa', observes Banti of the hostility which existed towards female non-conformity at the turn of the century, and although her comments pertain to the early-twentieth-century climate in which the story is set, there are clear parallels with the repressive climate fostered by the regime (p. 100).

The female subject who emerged in the writing of the new generation was thus far removed from the narrowly cast visions of the female role promulgated by the regime and popular culture. Their protagonist was no two-dimensional construct but an active model of female subjectivity shaped by the conflicting forces in women's lives. Resistant to the prescribed models of passivity and subservience, she asserted her right to independence and self-definition and yet, in so doing, found herself beset by self-doubt, with her femininity called into question and her desire for autonomy deemed selfish. Hers was the dilemma of the modern woman, caught between the desire for self-definition and the security of traditional female roles, and in her constant self-questioning, she voiced the concerns of a generation of women whose lives under Fascism were a mixture of freedom and constraint.

### 3.5 POLITICISING THE FEMALE

In their portraits of independent women, who refuted traditional female roles and asserted their right to self-determination, the new generation provided a model of female behaviour which resisted the Fascist model of the donna autentica, while their depiction of gender as a sociocultural construct challenged the theories of gender difference which underscored patriarchal thinking. Yet, to what extent can their work be read as feminist in intent? For the writers themselves, the label 'feminist' was considered inappropriate and unwelcome, Banti declaring the term feminism to be '[una] parola che lei detestava', and de Céspedes dismissing any link between the issues she dealt with in her work and a feminist agenda. 'Mi ha sempre interessato molto', she commented of the female condition, 'ma non come le suffragette. Io sono una donna, profondamente donna.' (cited in Carroli, p. 140)61 However, such antipathy towards the feminist movement must be considered in the historical context in which the new generation was writing. By the 1930s, feminism had become tarnished as an anti-socialist and anti-democratic movement due to its close alliance with the Fascist movement during the 1920s and, for women with left-wing sympathies who held strong views about freedom and equality, it was seen as an outdated and elitist movement which did not provide a suitable vehicle for their beliefs. In the words of the political activist Joyce Lussu:

Le antenate in cui mi riconoscevo erano le donne [...] delle leghe contadine, del movimento operaio; e non le femministe e le suffragette, strutturalmente antiproletarie, come avevano dimostrato le loro reazioni [...] all'insorgere del fascismo. (*Portrait*, pp. 63-64)

Rather than focusing on the narrow scope of women's rights, these women looked instead to the broad struggle against Fascism and to the defence of democracy, and it was here that the last vestiges of feminism were suppressed for, as Jane Slaughter observes in her study of the relationship between feminism and socialism, women were taught to set aside feminist issues in favour of the 'higher cause' of human liberation: 'Antifascism superseded all other concerns, and emphasis on feminism no longer played a part in practical politics. [...] With war and fascism dominating European politics, it was almost impossible to mention feminist issues.'62

<sup>61</sup> Anna Banti, Un grido lacerante (Milan: Rizzoli, 1981), p. 112.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Jane Slaughter, 'Humanism versus Feminism in the Socialist Movement: The Life of Angelica Balabanoff', in European Women on the Left: Socialism, Feminism, and the Problems Faced by Political

This allegiance to a humanist, as opposed to a feminist, agenda is clearly visible among the new generation writers and it was a viewpoint to which they continued to subscribe throughout their lives. As Anna Banti remarked in her interview with Sandra Petrignani: 'Il mio è più una forma di umanesimo che vero e proprio femminismo. Non sono sempre e comunque dalla parte delle donne.' (p. 106) Banti's reluctance to ally herself with the women's political movement may have seemed at odds with her personal convictions, for she was an ardent campaigner for female participation in the spheres of employment, education, and culture, and she recalled with pleasure the day in June 1946 when Italian women were first able to vote: 'Era un giorno bellissimo [...] quando i presentimenti neri mi opprimono, penso a quel giorno, e spero.'63 Yet, for Banti, feminism represented a repressive movement which stifled independent thinking and demanded conformity to a single ideology and, as such, it had no place in her value system which prioritised individual freedom.

Banti's dislike of feminism was shared by her contemporaries. Maria Bellonci, who was perhaps the most sympathetic of the new generation to the feminist cause, was to make a clear distinction between feminism as the freedom of the individual to pursue their own course and feminism as a politicised movement which fought for the collective rights of women. Writing about the role of Italian women in contemporary society in an Englishlanguage journal, she identified 'a unique type of individual feminism' in Italian society whereby each woman 'follows her road by herself', and she ascribed this diffidence to collective feminism to 'the anti-association spirit of the Italians' and to the fact that 'anglosaxon feminism which has brought about such a clear separation between the two sexes does not attract the Italian woman'.64 This view was echoed by de Céspedes, who displayed a distinct hostility towards the feminist movement whilst acknowledging the beneficial effects of emancipation on women's lives. 'Il lavoro è stato la grande libertà della donna', she affirmed in an interview with Piera Carroli (p. 139). This contradictory view of feminism found a literary expression in the characters of Augusta and Silvia in Nessuno torna indietro. A protofeminist, who believes her mission in life is to warn women against the dangers of wedlock, Augusta is regarded by her fellow students as an old maid who has

Women, 1880 to the Present, ed. by Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 179-94 (pp. 187-88).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Anna Banti, 'Il 1946 di Anna Banti', *Mercurio*, November-December 1946, p. 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Maria Bellonci, 'The Italian Woman after World War II', in *Italy Today: The Yearly Review of Italian Contemporary Life*, ed. by Giovanni Engely (Florence: Barbera, 1951), pp. 333-40 (p. 338).

become masculinised by her work, adopting 'gesti e costumanze maschili' (p. 257). Devoting herself to her vitriolic novel, which she believes will serve as a wake-up call to women in its lambasting of the male sex, Augusta retreats increasingly into herself as her novel suffers constant rejection from publishers and she derives her only comfort from the affection she receives from Valentina, in a relationship which borders on the homosexual. This portrait of Augusta as a failed intellectual, who has become masculinised by her work and retreats into lesbianism, can be contrasted with that of Silvia, the successful blue-stocking, who champions the right of women to enter education and employment but who does not affiliate herself to a political cause, and it is in these two characters that we can see the ambiguity which underscored the female intelligentsia's perception of feminism during the thirties: emancipation, in terms of the struggle for the vote, is portrayed as outdated and contemptible, whereas the desire for increased access to employment and education is seen as a fundamental right which is to be encouraged and supported.

The concept of feminism for writers who were active during the thirties was thus very rigidly defined. Associated exclusively with suffrage, it was regarded as a political movement which no longer had any relevance to the lives of modern women, and it was rejected on both sides of the political spectrum, those on the right having allied themselves with the regime in the belief that it was committed to female welfare, and those on the left having set aside their commitment to women's issues in the interests of a united front against Fascism. Yet, despite expressing hostility towards the feminist movement, the new generation displayed a firm commitment to the notion of emancipation, which they viewed as the individual struggle for autonomy. Echoing contemporary thinking, which branded feminism an outdated movement but championed emancipation as the opening up of new opportunities for women, they used their work to explore issues which were pertinent to women's lives, from the difficulties inherent in motherhood to unwanted pregnancy, and, in their desire to portray the modern female condition in their work, they adopted what Elaine Showalter refers to as a 'female' rather than 'feminist' style, namely the search for self-identity rather than the militant call for freedom from repression.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing, rev. edn (London: Virago Press, 1999).

In her study of British female novelists, Showalter identifies three major phases in women's writing: the first phase she names 'feminine', for it internalises prevailing views on social roles; the second phase 'feminist' as it protests against dominant values and advocates autonomy; and the third phase 'female', for it is a search for identity and involves turning inwards to discover the self (p. 13).

### 3.6 CONCLUSION

The new generation of writers offered a detailed portrait of the changing status of women in post-war Italy, depicting protagonists whose lives were shaped by increased opportunities in education and employment and by the influence of mass culture, which encouraged a relaxation of social and sexual mores. These new protagonists symbolised a generation of independent women who were far removed from the model of the *donna autentica* promoted by the regime; possessing 'la sicurezza di sè', they were more comfortable in the classroom than the domestic confinement of the home and aspired to academic achievement rather than to a life of child-bearing (*Difesa Sociale*, 1937, p. 1121). Yet, at the same time, these aspirations were limited by the pressures of Fascist sexual politics, which cast women in the role of *sposa e madre esemplare* and upheld theories of sexual difference. Caught between their own ambitions and those of the Fascist state, young women experienced confusion about their role and identity, their attempts to pursue an autonomous life plagued by self-doubt and their decision to opt for security in the form of conventional roles accompanied by frustration and regret.

While espousing neither a feminist nor an explicitly anti-Fascist stance, the new generation played an important role in helping women free themselves from these artificial images of femininity and search for a female identity beyond the constraints of familial and marital enclosures. Countering the increased objectification of women in both the Fascist press and the new commercial culture, they addressed women as subjects and gave a voice to the feelings of confusion experienced when caught between the desire for autonomy and the pressure to conform to stifling, but safe, prescribed roles. Through their determined protagonists, they revealed the range of opportunities which women had at their disposal and yet, at the same time, laid bare the risks associated with pursuing an alternate course in life, depicting the solitude experienced by those who opted for an autonomous existence.

This accurate portrayal of contemporary womanhood served an important function to the female reading public during the thirties. At a time when the press was undergoing increased censorship and education was being manipulated for political purposes, literature was a valuable means for women to gain access to alternative images of womanhood. In contrast to romantic fiction, which continued to subscribe to a conservative ideology of conformism, this new female narrative served as a fiction of dissent and helped combat the stranglehold of the romance novel. Subverting the romance plot to challenge the myths about love, marriage, and the ubiquitous happy ending, the narrative discourses of the new generation provided an alternative vision of female identity, which refuted the theory of biological determinism and cast women in the role of autonomous beings. In so doing, they crafted new models of female self-expression and gave voice to a new female consciousness in a manner which echoed the innovative narratives being penned by their European counterparts, most notably Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, in whom, as I will discuss in the next chapter, they discovered a literary voice attuned to their own.

# Chapter Four The Search for a Literary Voice and the Influence from Abroad

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The attempt by new generation writers to portray the changing female condition was accompanied by their search for a literary voice, one which would enable them to convey the lived experience of being female but which was far removed from the confessional register commonly associated with women's writing. Keenly aware of the attendant meanings of letteratura femminile, they sought new methods of narration that would express their female identity but without consigning them to a position of marginality. Taking the form of a personal quest rather than a collective movement, their search for new literary forms was a highly individual response to the challenge of portraying the female consciousness. Rejecting a collective female aesthetic in the same way that they resisted joining other women in a common political cause, each writer crafted their own authorial voice, seeking narrative forms which would convey the female sensibility but without allowing their work to be defined by their gender. Yet, while stressing their independence, their attempt to establish an authentic literary voice resulted in stylistic affinities as they adopted narrative strategies which broke with tradition, moving away from a focus on plot towards an exploration of the human consciousness and the myriad impressions and emotions which compose it. Rejecting the realist aesthetic favoured by their male contemporaries, they turned instead to modernism, finding in its exploration of interiority an appropriate vehicle for self-expression.

The search for a literary voice was accompanied by a concomitant need for literary parentage, a female tradition on which they could draw in their establishment of a literary identity, and this common need was also to lead these writers in a similar direction. Hampered by the lack of a female literary heritage, for Italy was a relative newcomer in the field of women's narrative, and experiencing little support from their immediate predecessors, who, for the most part, demonstrated a deep hostility towards their fellow women, they each turned to the one writer who was not afraid to voice her female identity: Sibilla Aleramo. A model of non-conformity who was defiant in her rejection of socially

accepted female behaviour, Aleramo rejoiced in her identity as both a woman and writer and, for many female novelists who came of age during the thirties, she served as a symbol of female achievement and defiance, who resisted the patriarchal definition of womanhood in both her fiction and personal life. However, while serving as a source of inspiration through her status as an acclaimed female writer who resisted societal pressures, Aleramo did not fulfil the role of literary mentor, her firm belief in biological determinism finding little receptiveness among the new generation, who sought parity with their male peers rather than a confirmation of gender difference. The role of literary mentor was to fall instead to two British writers, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, who were among the leading exponents of modernism.<sup>1</sup>

The choice of foreign writers as literary mothers was driven not only by a lack of home-grown role models but also by a renewed interest in European and American fiction and the rapid growth of the translation market during the thirties. As increasing numbers of Italian intellectuals turned their hand to translation, the Italian reading public was exposed to the linguistic experimentation of modernists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and to a new vein of realist fiction from the likes of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, and the innovatory force of this literature was to have a major influence on Italian literary production of the thirties, with a clear divide emerging between those who found in American realist fiction a utopian vision of the common man and a vehicle to express their resistance to Fascism and those who looked to modernism for stylistic purposes, as a means of conveying the modern consciousness and the fragmentary nature of reality. This divide was characterised not only by poetics but also by gender, with the terse narrative style of the American realists and the masculine society they depicted appealing to male left-wing writers, most notably Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, while the lyric style of Woolf and Mansfield appealed to the new generation of female writers, who drew inspiration not only from their innovative narrative techniques and exploration of the female consciousness but also from their status as literary women who had earned worldwide recognition and respect.

In this chapter, I will discuss the attempt by the new generation writers to develop an authentic female literary voice and their search for mentors who would assist them in this aim. In the first part of the chapter, I will examine the role played by Aleramo in voicing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Although Mansfield was a New Zealander by birth, I have labelled her British for the purposes of this thesis as she resided in Britain during her short adult life and shared many of the concerns of her British contemporaries, including Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson.

the need for a female aesthetic and the influence which she exerted on the subsequent generation, comparing her willingness to embrace her female literary identity with the reluctance of her contemporaries to reconcile their public and private lives. In the second part of the chapter, I will analyse the influence of foreign writers on Italian female literary production of the 1930s. Starting with an overview of the translation market and the growing popularity of Anglo-American literature in Fascist Italy, I will examine the role played by writers and critics in promoting foreign literature and the differing poetics which they supported, from the structured lyricism of Woolf and Mansfield, which was held up by anglophile critics as a continuation of the great European literary tradition, to the terse narrative style of the American realists, which was championed by left-wing male writers. I will then go on to analyse the influence which Woolf and Mansfield exerted on the new generation of women writers through a detailed comparison of their narrative styles, and I will conclude with an examination of their shared concern with the female condition and the representation of female experience.

# 4.2 THE SEARCH FOR A LITERARY VOICE

### 4.2.1 The problematic nature of female literary identity

For women embarking on a literary career during the interwar years who were seeking to develop a literary voice which accorded with their own experience, the road ahead was fraught with difficulty. Women's writing, as I discussed in chapter one, was widely viewed as *letteratura femminile*, a derogatory term denoting a style of writing in which the author's emotions were given free reign at the expense of the structural organisation of the work, a fact of which they were only too aware. 'Naturalmente so benissimo a che cosa si allude correntemente quando si parla di letteratura femminile', remarked Paola Masino in a radio interview of 1951. 'Si allude a una certa sensibilità, [...] a una continua ossessiva introflessione; è un guardarsi al microscopio, fino a credersi il centro del mondo, ad abbandonarsi a un'orgia di "io".' (AA. VV., *Confessioni di scrittori*, p. 64) The female literary voice was viewed as weak and sentimental, lacking in creative force and fuelled by emotion, and female novelists faced constant reminders of how their work was underscored by an acute gender consciousness, which diminished its artistic merit. 'La scrittrice è donna anche quando essa [...] cerca di far sparire la propria personalità', affirmed Adolfo Giuriato.

'La donna prevarrebbe sulla scrittrice e non la scrittrice sulla donna.' (Almanacco di Cordelia, 1933, pp. 108-09) Those writers who did try to defy such stereotypes were considered virile, a term which not only brought their femininity into question but confirmed the belief that the creative impulse was a male preserve. 'Non è facile che in Italia una donna scrittrice possa affermarsi per se stessa liberamente dal mondo maschile che la circonda, raggiungendo una concretezza tutta e esclusivamente femminea', as Carlo Betocchi noted regarding the problems inherent in creating a female literary voice. 'Ogni affermazione artistica femminile subirà sempre da noi la collaborazione forzata di una quantità di pensieri e di sentimenti maschili.'2

A further obstacle in the establishment of a female literary identity was the popular perception of the female writer which held sway at the time. Like her turn-of-the-century predecessor, the donna letterata was still considered an anomaly, a usurper in the maledominated world of mainstream literature. A woman's role in life was considered incompatible with the role of writer; channelling all her energy into her work, she was viewed as ambitious and selfish, whereas the ideal woman needed to be, in the words of the Fascist theorist Giovanni Gentile, '[una] consolatrix afflictorum con la sua materna bontà, che è dedizione di sé, abnegazione fino al sacrifizio'. Any woman who refused to conform to this conservative model risked having her femininity brought into question, with the female intellectual deemed masculine in both appearance and behaviour while the unmarried writer was branded sexually dissolute. 'Una donna che cominciava a scrivere era considerata quasi una puttana', recalled Alba de Céspedes when describing the prejudice she faced in her early career, and she went on to describe how she and her contemporaries were the frequent targets of malicious gossip: 'La donna che scrive [...] richiama sempre il ghigno, il sorriso, e l'idea che c'è l'amante dietro che le ha dato il posto. Certe volte ho dovuto difendere donne che non conoscevo ma sapevo che non era così.' (Carroli, pp. 187 and 184)4

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Carlo Betocchi, 'Scrittrici italiane', Frontespizio, July 1938, pp. 446-48 (p. 446).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Giovanni Gentile, 'La donna nella coscienza moderna', in *La donna e il fanciullo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1934), pp. 3-25 (p. 25).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> As a young divorcée in the public eye, de Céspedes found herself the target of unfounded accusations. In an anonymous letter to the Duce's personal secretary, dated 10 January 1940, she was accused of granting sexual favours to influential journalists and politicians in an attempt to increase the publicity surrounding *Nessuno torna indietro*. Claiming that de Céspedes was '[l']amante di giornalisti e uomini della politica', the writer declared that she was exploiting 'il suo editore e amante per andare a caccia di articoli stamburinanti del suo libro immorale' (Segreteria particolare del Duce, carteggio ordinario, busta 575, fascicolo 200812).

The difficulties in establishing an authentic literary voice in the face of such hostility were further exacerbated by the lack of a female literary tradition in Italy and the resulting paucity of role models who could provide inspiration and guidance. As Virginia Woolf had noted in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with regard to the challenges faced by British women novelists in the early nineteenth century:

Whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon their writing [...] that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty which faced them [...] — that is that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women.<sup>5</sup>

Woolf believed that by thinking back through their mothers, that is acknowledging and drawing on a female literary tradition, writers would develop a new narrative style which reflected their experience as women. However, the search for literary mothers was not an easy task for Italian women. Italy was a relative newcomer in the field of women's narrative and while their female contemporaries in England were able to gain inspiration from the examples of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, or George Eliot, Italian writers of the 1930s had no such rich female heritage. 'Non c'è niente di simile, in Italia, a quella fioritura di scrittrici dal sicuro talento e socialmente aggressive che calcano la scena letteraria in area anglo-americana e francese', as Elisabetta Rasy observes in her study of nineteenth-century women's literature.<sup>6</sup>

The problem was further exacerbated by the fact that those women who had established themselves as respected writers at the turn of the century were openly hostile to the notion of women undertaking intellectual activity. In her collection of essays, *Le idee di una donna* (1904), Neera dismissed the literary ambitions of the very generation of women who would have been inspired by her example, criticising their notion of writing as 'una occupazione piacevole, onorifica e proficua' (cited in De Giorgio, p. 390). Matilde Serao proved equally antagonistic towards women embarking on a literary career, her book of female etiquette, *Saper vivere* (1900), containing an open critique of the proclivity of young women for intellectual pursuits:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), pp. 70-71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Elisabetta Rasy, Le donne e la letteratura: scrittrici eroine e ispiratrici nel mondo delle lettere (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1986), p. 122.

Il tentare studi del tutto maschili, superiori alla media intelligenza feminile, l'intraprendere fatiche mentali troppo forti e troppo alte [...] non conducono a nessuna meta sicura e onorevole.<sup>7</sup>

Such hostility towards the public display of female creative energy can be traced to the deep anxiety which afflicted women writers about appearing unfeminine. As Lucienne Kroha argues in *The Woman Writer in Late-Nineteenth-Century Italy*, the call by writers such as Neera and Serao for women to be submissive and dutiful, and their criticism of female self-assertiveness, was a means of atoning for their own transgression as writers.<sup>8</sup> Weighed down by an acute consciousness of her gender, Neera was unable to separate her role as a woman from her role as a writer and used her essays and fiction to criticise the *donna letterata* in an attempt to defend her own femininity, while Serao's consciousness of being a female writer underscored both her journalistic and literary work, the inner conflict which she felt between her public and her private role manifesting itself in her fiction in the use of the female double, as Ursula Fanning has observed.<sup>9</sup>

Driven by the need to evade the narrow definition of woman writer and the problems it had caused their predecessors, the response of the new generation writers was to reject the label scrittrice and adopt that of scrittore: Banti spoke of herself as a scrittore, together with those female writers she admired, among them Woolf and Mansfield; de Céspedes, in her interview with Piera Carroli, recalled how even as a young girl she wanted to be a poeta rather than a poetessa (Carroli, p. 190); while Morante decried the practice of categorising authors by their gender, declaring 'il concetto generico di scrittrici come di una categoria a parte, risente ancora della società degli harem'. In contrast to Serao, who adopted the term scrittore as an acknowledgement of her masculine profession and nature, the new generation regarded it as a genderless term, its adoption signalling a deliberate attempt to divest their writing of gender consciousness and avoid having their work judged apriori. As Masino noted in Confessioni di scrittori: 'Se prima di dire d'un libro che è importante o

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Repr. in *Le donne possono fumare?: piccola antologia di scritti sulle buone maniere*, ed. by Imma Pempinello (Naples: Flavio Pagano, 1992), p. 77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See, in particular, the chapter entitled 'Neera: The Literary Career of a Woman of the Nineteenth Century', pp. 67-86.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ursula Fanning, 'Angel v. Monster: Serao's Use of the Female Double', in *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 263-91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Cited in *Elsa Morante: opere*, ed. by Carlo Cecchi and Cesare Garboli (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), p. XXVII.

non è, noi dobbiamo fare la riserva "per essere scritto da una donna", questo libro è già condannato a rimanere ai margini della vita della creazione e dell'arte.' (p. 64)

#### 4.2.2 The influence of Sibilla Aleramo

The adoption of a genderless authorial voice was not the only response to the problematic nature of female literary identity and it was Sibilla Aleramo who was to reveal to the successive generation the possibilities inherent in a strong female literary voice. In Italian literary society of the 1930s, Aleramo enjoyed a unique and privileged status: a virtual outcast in the 1920s, she had been reinstated into the ranks of great female writers during the 1930s, as I discussed in chapter one, and the republication of much of her early work during the course of the decade not only allowed a new generation of readers to discover her work but also gave critics the opportunity to reassess their opinion of her oeuvre. She was, as Maria Luisa Astaldi noted in *Nascita e vicende del romanzo italiano*, a writer '[che] ha avuto forse riconoscimenti inferiori al merito' (p. 170), a view echoed by Fausta Cialente in her review of the republished *Il passaggio*: 'Non ebbe l'accoglienza che si meritava. [...] *Il passaggio* è il consolante libro che dopo la ribellione, la fuga e il silenzio di una donna venne ad attestare la sua grande conquista spirituale.'11

It was primarily as the author of *Una donna* that Aleramo was celebrated. Hailed as a seminal work, which marked a radical departure from female literary convention in Italy, Aleramo's use of the confessional genre to voice her own experience opened the way for female self-expression in Italian literature. In the words of Maria Luisa Astaldi:

Si trattò per le prime volte di confessioni di donne. [...] Fu così che gli uomini furono costretti a scoprire attraverso certe pagine arse di passione e di solitudine un essere femminile assai lontano dallo stampino tradizionale che se n'erano fabbricati. (*Nascita e vicende del romanzo italiano*, pp. 172-73)

As Astaldi shows, Aleramo's incisive portrait of a woman who was resistant to the traditional female model challenged the patriarchal definition of womanhood. Her ambition was to write a book 'che mostrasse al mondo intero l'anima femminile moderna' (p. 123), and in her portrayal of a determined woman, who refused to submit her will to others and affirmed her right to independence, she challenged the prevailing view of women as objects

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Fausta Cialente, 'Sibilla Aleramo', *Il Giornale d'Oriente*, 30 November 1934 (cited in Mondello, 'L'immagine di Sibilla nella stampa femminile', pp. 262-63).

incapable of voicing their own desires and presented them instead as articulate subjects who were in charge of their own destinies.<sup>12</sup>

Una donna was also a book about female solidarity. In its lack of specific references to names, places, and dates, it went beyond personal experience to symbolise the story of all women and, in so doing, it came to represent the favoured text of young women who aspired to independence, serving as 'un passaggio obbligato' in the words of Emilio Cecchi, and representing 'una sorta di iniziazione a sentimenti e aspirazioni di libertà morale, di affermazione del destino individuale'. For the generation of writers who followed Aleramo, the influence of her work was considerable. Fausta Cialente described Una donna as 'il libro che [...] avevo sempre considerato una delle più importanti opere sulla questione femminile'. Elsa Morante wrote to Aleramo to thank her for 'l'ansia di Sibilla per comunicare con gli altri e trasmettere il suo fuoco' after reading Il passaggio; while Orsola Nemi expressed her admiration for Aleramo in a letter written to the author on the republication of Andando e stando in 1942: 'Tu sei tanto ricca, il tuo cuore è come queste fontane di Roma che mi piacciono tanto: trabocca sempre e non si inaridisce mai.' 15

The figure of Aleramo was no less inspirational than her work. A symbol of female non-conformity, she represented, in the words of Cecchi, 'una rivendicatrice della parità femminile, [...] una ribelle'. 16 From her willingness to abandon her husband and child in pursuit of her literary vocation to her firm commitment to her profession despite her precarious financial position, Aleramo represented a figure of deep personal conviction and drive, possessing the rare ability to command respect from all those who met her, 'ispirava sempre rispetto; e questa è fra le cose piú difficili che possano riuscire ad una donna', as Maria Bellonci recalled in *Pubblici segreti* (I, 217); and, in her courage and fortitude, she represented an inspiration to all those who followed in her footsteps. In the words of

The innovative nature of *Una donna* has been well documented: see, for example, Fiora Bassanese, '*Una donna*: Autobiography as Exemplary Text', in *Donna: Women in Italian Culture*, ed. by Ada Testaferri (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1989), pp. 131-52; Ann Caesar, 'Italian Feminism and the Novel: Sibilla Aleramo's *A Woman*', *Feminist Review*, 5 (1980), 79-88; and Sharon Wood, 'Gender and Autobiography: The Double Vision of Sibilla Aleramo', *Italianist*, 14 (1994), 50-69.

<sup>13</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Sibilla Aleramo incoronata', 1948 (repr. in *Letteratura italiana del Novecento*, I, 399-402 (p. 399)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Fausta Cialente, 'Sibilla Aleramo mi confidava', *La Stampa*, 19 May 1984 (repr. in *Sibilla Aleramo: coscienza e scrittura*, ed. by Franco Contorbia, Lea Melandri, and Alba Morino (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), pp. 153-55 (p. 153)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Cited in Aleramo's diary entries for 3 December 1940 and 9 December 1942 (repr. in *Un amore insolito*, pp. 16 and 228).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Una donna di Sibilla Aleramo', 1950 (repr. in Letteratura italiana del Novecento, I, 402-05 (p. 404)).

Cialente: 'L'esempio mirabile di questa donna, che [...] ha potuto tener fronte a un suo grave destino spoglio di facili ricompense e irto di ostacoli, questo esempio è per noi più giovani una magnifica lezione di coraggio.'17

Aleramo not only used her fiction to represent the modern female spirit but she was also active in campaigning for a new female style of writing, one which women could use to reflect their own perception of reality rather than imitating male styles. Refuting the belief that female writers lacked originality, she claimed that women copied male modes of writing only because they had not yet learned to express their difference. 'La donna ch'è diversa dall'uomo, in arte lo copia', she affirmed in 'Apologia dello spirito femminile'. 'Lo copia anzichè cercare in sé stessa la propria visione della vita e le proprie leggi estetiche. E ciò avviene inconsapevolmente, perchè la donna non si è resa ancora chiaro conto di sé stessa.' (Andando e stando, p. 57) In order to assert their difference, Aleramo advocated the creation of a new female literary style rather than a separate female discourse, one in which the rhythm of the sentence was altered to capture the rhythm of women's lives. 'Non si tratta, s'intende, di creare un linguaggio speciale per la psiche femminile', she stated, 'ma forse le segrete leggi del ritmo hanno un sesso.' (p. 62) This call for a new narrative form did not stem from feminist thought, 'non parlo di femminismo', she declared, but from her firm belief in biological determinism (p. 60). Espousing the views of turn-of-the-century social theorists, who held that women were psychologically as well as biologically different from men, she believed that women's behaviour was governed by intuition and called for a literary style that would reflect the intuitive way in which they perceived reality:

Il mondo femmineo dell'intuizione, questo più rapido contatto dello spirito umano con l'universale, se la donna perverrà a renderlo sarà, certo, con movenze nuove, con scatti, con brividi, con pause, con trapassi, con vortici sconosciuti alla poesia maschile. (p. 63)

This desire to create a new female literary style would never be realised by Aleramo herself, however, as her own response to the call for women to express their essential difference in their writing was to retreat ever further into emotion. Utilising the theories of biological determinism to re-emphasise the differences between men and women, Aleramo focused increasingly on the emotive world of the female, her autobiographical work *Amo dunque sono* (1927) reinforcing the view that women's creativity lay solely in the sphere of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Fausta Cialente, 'Nota su Sibilla Aleramo', *Occidente*, January-March 1934, pp. 125-27 (p. 126).

love. As Ettore De Zuani noted in a survey of Aleramo's work: 'Dalla nascita del mondo, la donna non ha fatto altro che creare se stessa, per amare e farsi amare.' 18

It was the subsequent generation who would take up Aleramo's call for a new female literary style by creating an aesthetic that championed the female consciousness. Altering the rhythm and structure of the novel, writers such as Manzini, Banti, and Cattaneo shifted the focus from external events to subjective experience in order to represent their own perception of reality. Departing from realist conventions, they showed the multiplicitous truths of consciousness beneath the outward unity of everyday life, using fragmentation and temporal dislocation to reflect their own experience of reality. It was Manzini, in particular, who came closest to Aleramo's vision of a literature which reflected 'le segrete leggi del ritmo', the search for rhythm lying at the heart of her prose. In her work, rhythm is not simply the reordering of words in a sentence but an attempt to portray the visible and invisible worlds with their network of hidden relationships. Believing in the close correlation between the rhythms of the nature and those of the female body, she sought to capture these parallel rhythms, her short descriptive piece 'Rive remote' portraying her body's rhythms operating in tandem with those of the outer world: 'Il sangue è una processione. Io sono un paese. Mi percorre, m'invade, sento il suo passo. È in me, ma s'apparenta con le onde, con la luna, e con l'affanno delle stelle malate.'19

Yet, while assimilating Aleramo's lesson on the need for a new method of representing female experience, the new generation writers rejected her focus on feminine emotion unrestrained by masculine reason. Refusing to subscribe to the tenet of biological determinism, which they saw as the cornerstone of the Fascist belief in female inferiority, they sought to develop a style in which emotion and intellect were equally balanced, seeking a sensitive and intelligent portrayal of the emotional world in which emotional insight was tempered by intellectual analysis and a robust construction. Differing imperatives also lay behind the writing of Aleramo and the successive generation. In contrast to Aleramo, who used writing as a means of self-definition, 'un furore d'autocreazione, incessante' (*Un amore insolito*, p. 21), the new generation novelists looked to writing as a means of understanding the truth about reality, a truth which had

<sup>18</sup> Ettore De Zuani, 'Sibilla Aleramo', L'Italia letteraria, 10 February 1933, p. 7.

For a discussion of Aleramo's move towards essentialist feminism in her work, see Maggie Günsberg, 'The Importance of Being Absent: Narrativity and Desire in Sibilla Aleramo's *Amo dunque sono'*, *Italianist*, 13 (1993), 139-59.

<sup>19</sup> Gianna Manzini, 'Rive remote', in Rive remote, pp. 177-95 (p. 183).

been lost in the chaos of life. 'Io cerco nell'arte ciò che alla vita manca per essere più vera', declared Manzini in *Confessioni di scrittori*. 'Il sempre diverso accento affinché la realtà scritta sia più trasparente e balzante di quella confusa o intorbidata nel giro dei fatti e degli avvenimenti.' (p. 57) Thus, while many new generation writers, among them Manzini, Cialente, and Bellonci, considered Aleramo to be 'il loro precedente più autorevole', in the words of Rita Guerricchio, they did not subscribe to her vision of a literary style which functioned as the pure expression of its author's gender nor in her belief in the primacy of emotion over intellect.<sup>20</sup>

Their search for literary mentors was to take them instead towards two modernist writers, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, the former a novelist and the latter a short story writer, who shared a common concern with depicting the female condition and who developed an introspective form of narrative which privileged the private over the public world. Harking from different backgrounds, Woolf a product of the British upper-middle class who was unashamedly elitist and whose work displayed a certain preciosity, and Mansfield, a native of New Zealand, whose colonial upbringing made her highly critical of class-conscious London society, these two writers appealed to the new generation in differing ways: Manzini and Banti, whose early narrative style, rooted in *prosa d'arte*, was resolutely highbrow, were drawn to Woolf, whereas Morante and Ortese, whose interests lay in depicting the oppressed, were drawn to Mansfield, finding in her work a powerful voice for the weak and marginalised in society.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Rita Guerricchio, *Storia di Sibilla* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1972), p. 263.

Despite their use of different mediums, the names of Mansfield and Woolf were often linked by Italian critics during the 1930s, their impressionistic style and shared interest in depicting the female consciousness causing their names to be cited together. As Carlo Bo remarked in *Frontespizio*: 'Leggendo la Woolf è difficile non ricordare la Mansfield. Oltre a evidenti somiglianze — un'uguale sensibilità critica ed immaginativa, [...] un'uguale sobrietà di mezzi — c'è qualcosa di più che le mette accanto e fa sì che ci riesca difficile segnare fra loro un distacco preciso.' (December 1933, p. 12) It was not until the 1940s that this practice came under attack, Anna Banti emphasising the distance between the two writers in her essay 'L'occhio della Mansfield' of 1949: 'Troppo questi due scrittori, diversissimi per natura e formazione, son stati citati nella stessa pagina critica; il lettore comune [...] è indotto a fonderli nell'immagine di un'unica donna intelligente, tormentata e difficoltosa.' (repr. in *Opinioni*, pp. 118-22 (p. 118))

#### 4.3 THE INFLUENCE FROM ABROAD

## 4.3.1 The growth in the translation market

That Italian women writers of the 1930s should look to foreign writers for inspiration was not wholly surprising. The period represented, in the words of Pavese, 'il decennio delle traduzioni', as a renewed interest in foreign literature, aided by the regime's focus on cultural exchange, prompted publishers to launch new series devoted to foreign literature in translation and distributors to import greater numbers of foreign works, thereby bringing many foreign authors to the attention of the Italian reading public for the first time.<sup>22</sup> Anna Maria Ortese was first introduced to the work of Mansfield in 1934 when Corrado Pavolini, the director of L'Italia letteraria, gave her two short stories to read in translation, 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay', of which she declared 'non avevo mai visto una bellezza simile';23 while Gianna Manzini noted with regard to her first encounter with Woolf in 1932 that, 'il mio primo incontro con Virginia Woolf avvenne in grazia di Mrs Dalloway [...] appena il romanzo giunse in Italia'.24 The late-nineteenth and early twentieth century had been marked by a paucity of highbrow literature in translation, and foreign literature was largely seen as synonymous with popular fiction from the likes of Eugène Sue and Baroness Orczy. The rich vein of literature being produced in Europe was accessible only to a few Italians who were able to read books in the original version or a French translation and the majority of Italians were unaware of the literary movements emerging beyond their national borders. As Lorenzo Gigli noted of the widespread ignorance of European culture which prevailed at the turn of the century: 'All'infuori dei romanzi francesi del periodo naturalista, di qualche romanzo russo tradotto dal francese, non si conosceva nulla o quasi.<sup>25</sup>

The first seeds of change were sown in 1914 by the Florentine journal La Voce, which, under the editorship of Giuseppe De Robertis, drew attention to the work of Apollinaire, Mallarmé, and Dostoevsky, but it was not until the following decade that a sustained interest in contemporary foreign writing developed as writers and critics sought to end the provincialism which had prevailed in the first quarter of the century by exposing Italy to modern European culture. During the mid-1920s, a wave of pro-European literary journals emerged, among them Il Baretti, Solaria, and Novecento, which discussed the work of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Cesare Pavese, La letteratura americana e altri saggi (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), p. 241.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, 'Dove il tempo è un altro', *MicroMega*, 5 (1990), 133-34 (cited in Clerici, p. 64).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Gianna Manzini, 'La lezione della Woolf', *Le tre arti*, 1 December 1945 (repr. in *Forte come un leone e altri racconti* (Milan: Mondadori, 1947), pp. 76-96 (p. 78)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Lorenzo Gigli, 'Compiti della cultura', Almanacco letterario Bompiani, 1935, p. 43.

writers such as Proust, Valéry, and Joyce, and the European outlook promoted by these publications was soon to reach the mass reading public following the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Grazia Deledda in 1926, an event which met with a great outburst of national pride as Deledda was the first Italian recipient in twenty years and only the second in its history.<sup>26</sup> In the years following her victory, the Italian press showed a keen interest in the prize and its recipients, with internationally acclaimed authors, such as the Norwegian Sigrid Undset and the American Sinclair Lewis, brought to the attention of the Italian public by way of the award. Undset, who had achieved fame across Europe with her bestselling trilogy Kristin Lavransdatter (1920-22), was virtually unknown in Italy before her receipt of the prize in 1928 but, following her victory, she was heralded by the Italian press and her short stories appeared in periodicals ranging from L'Italia letteraria to the Almanacco di Cordelia. Lewis was also a well-established writer, having found success with Main Street (1920) and Babbitt (1922), but it was the award of the Nobel Prize in 1930 which finally established his reputation in Italy and elevated him to the status of 'un'autore di prim'ordine', in the words of Lidel (December 1930, p. 21). From 1926, mainstream periodicals began to reflect the public's growing interest in contemporary foreign fiction, the 1926 Almanacco della donna italiana featuring its first pan-European bibliografia femminile, while the 1927 Almanacco letterario Bompiani included sections on English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian literature.

The open-door policy of the regime was also instrumental in increasing the availability and popularity of foreign literature. As the historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat has observed, Mussolini's anxiety to cultivate a more international image in order to increase Fascism's standing abroad created support for a politics of cultural 'openness', which had the twin aims of attracting foreign intellectuals to the Fascist cause and exposing Italian writers to the latest foreign trends so they could fashion a modern culture of international standing.<sup>27</sup> From the late 1920s until 1936, when cultural autarchy was imposed following the invasion of Abyssinia, Italian writers were encouraged to engage in cultural exchange with Europe, while pressure was exerted on the press to adopt a more pro-European character, as can be seen in the cases of *Pan* and *Leonardo*. The former, a popular arts magazine launched by Ugo Ojetti in 1933, displayed a more European focus than its predecessor *Pègaso* after the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The first and only other Italian to have received the award was Giosuè Carducci in 1906.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 34.

conservative Ojetti was persuaded by Giuseppe Bottai to abandon his belief in Italian cultural autonomy; while a similar volte-face was displayed by the latter, whose change in editorship from Luigi Russo to Federico Gentile in 1930 signalled a rejection of the cultural isolationism which the journal had once espoused and an equal emphasis being given to Italian and foreign literature. In the words of Gentile:

Il nuovo *Leonardo* [...] se studierà in modo particolare la letteratura italiana, studierà con egual cura quelle straniere dal punto di vista di un paese come il nostro, che ha altissime tradizioni di gusto e di pensiero da difendere e continuare, e che per mantenerle vive e rigogliose non deve astrarle dal circolo della vita europea e mondiale.<sup>28</sup>

As periodicals devoted increased space to foreign fiction, so publishers sought to capitalise on this trend by launching series devoted to translations, thereby making foreign fiction accessible to the mass reading public. The first publisher to do so was Modernissima, which launched its Scrittori di tutto il mondo series in the late 1920s with fourteen titles, including Thornton Wilder's The Bridge of San Luis Rey and Arthur Schnitzler's Fräulein Else. It was followed in 1929 by Scrittori stranieri moderni of Treves, whose list included Undset, James, and Mansfield; and I Corvi, launched by Corbaccio in 1930, which featured works by Mann, Joyce, and Lawrence. Mondadori and Bompiani were also to enter the translation market during the 1930s and they soon led the field, Bompiani becoming the most prolific publisher of contemporary foreign fiction, with a list that included John Steinbeck and A. J. Cronin, while Mondadori achieved mass penetration through its Biblioteca romantica and Medusa series. Established in 1930, the Biblioteca romantica collection encompassed literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and one of its defining characteristics was its use of well-known authors as translators, from Grazia Deledda for Balzac's Eugénie Grandet to Giacomo Debenedetti for George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss. Contemporary foreign fiction was published under the Medusa imprint, a collection launched in 1933 in order to 'far conoscere le opere più significative dell'alta letteratura mondiale d'oggi', in the words of the 1933-34 Mondadori catalogue.<sup>29</sup> Medusa was aimed at ridding foreign literature of its elitist image and, aided by Mondadori's vast distribution network, it succeeded in breaking

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Federico Gentile, 'Prefazione', *Leonardo*, January 1930, p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Cited in Giovanni Raboni, 'La narrativa straniera negli anni '24-'40', in *Editoria e cultura a Milano tra le due guerre*, pp. 50-56 (pp. 53-54).

down the barriers between highbrow and popular fiction and bringing contemporary foreign fiction within the reach of the mass reading public.

Mondadori's pursuit of a large-scale foreign publishing programme was also aided by its status as the official publisher of the Libro di Stato, while its position as the favoured publisher of leading Fascists, such as Italo Balbo and Giuseppe Bottai, meant that it enjoyed a high degree of editorial independence throughout the ventennio.<sup>30</sup> Despite the regime's imposition of cultural autarchy in 1936 and the resulting ban on the publication of foreign fiction, the authorities exerted only a partial control over books, as I discussed in chapter two, with the result that publishers who enjoyed a protected status were able to continue their foreign publishing programme throughout the 1930s. With the tightening of control mechanisms and the responsibility for censorship passing from regional prefetture to the centrally controlled Ministry of Popular Culture in 1937, publishers began to restrict the scope of their translation programme, as attested by Vittorini, who, in a letter to Bompiani in 1938, lamented the fact that censorship prevented the translation of works by Erskine Caldwell and James M. Caine: 'Ci sarebbero magnifici libri da tradurre di questi due, ma disgraziatamente sono tutti censurabili.'31 Nevertheless, the late thirties represented the most prolific years for American translation, with Bompiani and Mondadori publishing works by Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Caldwell, and the clandestine nature in which these novels had to be obtained resulted in their increased popularity among the young, for whom this fiction signalled a breath of fresh air in the closeted world of Fascism. In the words of Pavese: 'Per molta gente l'incontro con Caldwell, Steinbeck, Saroyan, e perfino col vecchio Lewis, aperse il primo spiraglio di libertà, il primo sospetto che non tutto nella cultura del mondo finisse coi fasci.'32

# 4.3.2 The critical reception of Anglo-American literature

It was not only the growth in the translation market and the regime's policy of cultural openness which secured the popularity of Anglo-American literature but its rapid dissemination was also assured by its reception from a number of key critics. Prior to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the privileged position accorded to Mondadori by the regime, see Giordano Bruno Guerri, 'La Mondadori e la politica del ventennio', in *Editoria e cultura a Milano tra le due guerre*, pp. 87-92; and David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era*, pp. 58-63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Elio Vittorini: i libri, la città, il mondo. Lettere 1933-1943, ed. by Carlo Minoia (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), p. 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Cesare Pavese, 'Ieri e oggi', *L'Unità*, 3 August 1947 (repr. in *La letteratura americana*, pp. 193-96 (p. 194)).

influx of translations in the early 1930s, Anglo-American literature was relatively unknown in Italy. 'La letteratura inglese tra le grandi letterature straniere è forse la meno conosciuta', as Moravia observed in Quadrivio (29 November 1936, p. 8). With the exception of popular novelists and a handful of writers such as John Galsworthy and G. K. Chesterton, the work of British writers had not enjoyed the same profile as that of French or Russian writers during the first three decades of the century, while American writers were virtually unknown. A lack of familiarity with the English language in Italy had rendered the majority of works inaccessible and the problem was compounded by the absence of scholarly works on English literature for the Italian market. The situation began to improve in 1918 with the establishment of the first university chairs in English and the foundation of the British Institute in Florence but it was the work of three leading anglophile critics, Emilio Cecchi, Carlo Linati, and Mario Praz, which was to have the greatest impact on the dissemination of Anglo-American literature in Italy. Responsible for introducing modern anglophone writers to the Italian public and for promoting the innovative qualities of leading female modernists, these three critics succeeded both in establishing Britain as the perceived locus of literary innovation and in raising the profile of women's writing as a whole. In the words of Salvatore Rosati:

Proprio in Inghilterra sono state attuate alcune delle forme più nuove e interessanti di cui lo sviluppo della narrativa si è dimostrato capace. Basti pensare ai nomi di Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce.<sup>33</sup>

Emilio Cecchi had begun publishing articles on nineteenth and early twentieth-century British writers at the turn of the century but it was his *Storia della letteratura inglese nel secolo XIX* of 1915 which proved ground-breaking, for it represented the first major Italian study of English literature aimed at a wider audience than the academic community. In the words of Praz, it signalled 'una data nella storia degli studi inglesi in Italia, qui per la prima volta assurti a importanza internazionale'.<sup>34</sup> Over the course of the following two decades, Cecchi published numerous essays on Anglo-American literature, focusing primarily on nineteenth-century writers but also introducing the work of Conrad and Joyce to the Italian public. Carlo Linati was also responsible for introducing modern Anglo-American literature into Italy. Having started his career as a translator of Irish drama, he began to focus on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Salvatore Rosati, 'La letteratura inglese', L'Italia che scrive, 1939, pp. 121-22 (p. 121).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Mario Praz, 'I grandi romantici inglesi', 1961 (cited in Agostino Lombardo, 'Cecchi e gli scrittori anglo-americani', in *Emilio Cecchi oggi: atti del convegno*, ed. by Roberto Fedi (Florence: Vallecchi, 1981), pp. 86-134 (p. 94)).

Anglo-American narrative in the late 1920s, translating excerpts from Joyce's *Ulysses* for publication in *Convegno* and translating Lawrence's short stories for Treves. Linati was also an influential critic, his essays on British and American authors, which were published between 1924 and 1932, providing many Italians with their first introduction to modern Anglo-American writing. 'Egli [è] stato in parecchi casi il primo a farci conoscere autori nuovi d'Inghilterra e d'America', affirmed Praz. 'Sicchè a distanza d'anni è svanito il sapore di questi articoli [...] che lì per lì avevano la frizzante freschezza della novità.'35

Praz himself was also instrumental in introducing Anglo-American literature to the wider Italian public. A professor of English Literature at the University of Rome, he shared the preference of his friend Cecchi for nineteenth-century literature, translating the work of Keats, Shelley, and Swinburne during the 1920s and breaking new ground with his *Antologia della letteratura inglese e scelta di scrittori americani* of 1936. Targeted at *scuole medie e superiori*, the anthology not only brought Anglo-American literature into the classroom but its critical insight appealed to both schoolchildren and scholars alike. The anthology was also ground-breaking in its treatment of female writers. Novelists such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters were not relegated to a subsection dedicated to women's writing, as was frequently the case in anthologies of Italian literature, but they were treated on a par with male writers and Praz even regarded female emancipation in a positive light, citing the Brontë sisters as early feminists, who had fought for 'l'indipendenza economica e la fama letteraria'.36

The volume was also noteworthy in that it revealed the marked preference of its author for English over American literature. While the book charted English literature from Beowulf to the present day, Praz curtailed his study of American literature with Walt Whitman, excluding modern-day writers such as Hemingway and Faulkner. This preference underscored not only the work of Praz but also that of Cecchi and Linati. Cecchi's essays on nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, collated in *Scrittori inglesi e americani* (1935), were heavily weighted towards British writers, with Americans counting for only four out of the seventeen writers profiled, while Linati displayed a similar European focus in *Scrittori anglo-americani d'oggi* (1932), his discussion of American writers restricted

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Mario Praz, 'Gli studi di letteratura inglese', in *Cinquant'anni di vita intellettuale italiana 1896-1946*, ed. by Carlo Antoni and Raffaele Mattioli, 2 vols (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1950), II, 3-16 (p. 8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Mario Praz, Antologia della letteratura inglese e scelta di scrittori americani (Messina: Principato, 1936), pp. 342-43.

largely to the fuorusciti, poets such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams who had sought refuge from America's materialistic society and turned to Europe for inspiration. Despite writing authoritatively on modern American fiction, all three critics viewed the work of the American realists as representative of the brutality of the materialistic New World and they contrasted its barbarism with the refinement of European civilisation. Nowhere is this more evident than in America amara (1939), Cecchi's study of American life and culture seen from the vantage point of a visiting academic with a faith in his own country's cultural superiority. Believing America to be a society lacking in tradition, he described the American people as '[una] folla mutevole, azzardosa, senza radice', and declared their literature to be a reflection of the violence and amorality which had corrupted all aspects of their lives: 'È curioso notare come questa superiore letteratura, d'una civiltà fondata sull'idea del benessere, della felicità materiale [...] sia la più tetra, la più disperata e sconvolta letteratura del mondo.'37 This view was reiterated in the 1942 edition of Americana, the anthology of American literature in which Cecchi's introduction replaced the censored preface of Vittorini. 'Da un capo all'altro dell'antologia lo spettacolo che della vita ci viene offerto è tragico, orrendo', he declared.<sup>38</sup>

Cecchi's dislike of the terse narrative style of the American realists was not simply a reaction against the perceived barbarism of American society but it also reflected his own preference for the refined language and detailed characterisation of nineteenth-century literature, and this would feed into his response to the modernist experimentation practised by writers such as Proust and Joyce. In an essay published in *La Tribuna* in November 1922, he described Proust as 'tanto minore artista di Meredith e dello stesso James', and criticised the two-dimensionality of his characters; while in an essay published in the same journal in March 1923, he wrote of Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'Nonostante la raffinatezza dello stile e dei pensieri, l'ornamento della più agile cultura, ha qualcosa di funebre e di barbarico.' Yet, despite his reservations about the modernist aesthetic, Cecchi was to act as one of the main proponents of the work of two female modernists, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, and, together with Linati and Praz, he was to play a leading role in securing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Emilio Cecchi, America amara (Florence: Sansoni, 1946), pp. 127 and 54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Repr. as 'Per una antologia', in *Scrittori inglesi e americani*, 2 vols (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1962), II, 241-52 (p. 249).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Cited in Rodolfo Macchioni Jodi, *Emilio Cecchi* (Milan: Mursia, 1983), pp. 218-19.

their reputation within Italian literary society, thereby helping to raise the profile of women's writing as a whole.

## 4.3.3 The critical reception of Woolf and Mansfield

The work of Virginia Woolf was first introduced to the Italian public by Carlo Linati in an essay of 1925, in which he highlighted the author's 'raffinatezza di lingua e di stile', likening it to that of Pater and Conrad.<sup>40</sup> For Linati, Woolf possessed a highly refined style, and, whilst drawing analogies with Joyce, he revealed a clear preference for the measured lyricism of the British writer over the chaotic interior discourse of the Irish novelist: 'È forse un poco il procedimento joyciano che ella usa in queste pagine di introspezione, di visione e di discorso interiore, ma con quanta maggior castità e misura!.'<sup>41</sup> For Praz also, the classic refinement of Woolf's prose was preferable to the unstructured language of Joyce and, in his *Antologia della letteratura inglese*, he contrasted the former's structured lyricism with the latter's unstructured representation of the subconscious, declaring that Woolf's work contained 'una qualità classica la quale la distingue dai caotici balbettamenti di certe trascrizioni joyciane del subcosciente' (pp. 28-29). Indeed, not only did he detect in her work a refinement and subtlety which was lacking in that of her male peers but he also declared her to be one of the greatest contemporary British novelists:

Di nessun autore anglosassone moderno s'apriva con tanta aspettazione un nuovo libro, quanto di Virginia Woolf. Non è solo perché il suo nome a nessun altro è secondo nella non lunga lista dei grandi romanzieri contemporanei; ma v'è in lei una qualità sottile che manca al Joyce, a D. H. Lawrence.<sup>42</sup>

The admiration which Praz displayed for Woolf was shared by Cecchi, who praised the graceful and structured way in which she depicted the chaos of the modern world. As he remarked in his introduction to the 1934 translation of *To the Lighthouse*:

Se l'epoca d'oggi è senza regole, dispersiva, siano almeno misurate, terse, leggiadre le forme in cui cerchiamo di comporre tale dispersione. [...] E sia vigile e sincera l'intelligenza che ne studia il giuoco penoso; e tale da riflettere nella propria purezza almeno un senso d'umana solidarietà e compassione.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Carlo Linati, 'Virginia Woolf', 1925 (repr. in *Scrittori anglo-americani d'oggi* (Milan: Corticelli, 1932), pp. 165-69 (p. 165)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Cited in Giorgio Chiesura, 'A proposito di Mrs Dalloway', Letteratura, 1946, pp. 93-100 (p. 95).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Mario Praz, 'Le onde di V. Woolf', 1931 (repr. in Cronache letterarie anglosassoni, 2 vols (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1950), I, 241-48 (p. 241)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Virginia Woolf', in *Gita al faro*, trans. by Giulia Celenza (Milan: Treves, 1934), pp. V-XI (p. IX).

Cecchi was to detect a similar compassion in the work of Katherine Mansfield, a writer whom he introduced to the Italian public through a series of articles published between 1922 and 1932. Welcoming her lack of ironic detachment, as well as the absence of 'autobiografismo e psicologismo' which had so exasperated him in the work of Proust, he expressed great admiration for the empathy with which she depicted her characters:

La Mansfield aspirava ad una comprensione e ad una pietà profonde. Si effettuava in lei una sorta di purgazione dall'ironia; da quell'ironia che è stata tra i morbi più deleteri nella letteratura europea degli ultimi decenni, ed ha incoraggiato ogni sorta di compromessi e degenerazioni.<sup>44</sup>

For Cecchi, as for Linati and Praz, the work of Woolf and Mansfield represented a continuation of Europe's great literary heritage. Rather than attempting to capture the brutality of modern life in a terse, syncopated narrative style, they were seen as writers who had rejected the corruptive influences of modern fiction, displaying a refined prose and structured narrative, which attested to the superiority of the European tradition.

The praise lavished on Woolf and Mansfield by Cecchi was instrumental in establishing the reputation of both writers in Italy for his standing in literary society was such that his opinion carried great weight both among his fellow critics and the reading public. 'Compravo [...] il *Corriere* quando c'era l'articolo di Cecchi', as Sciascia recalled in *Le parrocchie di Regalpetra* (1956).<sup>45</sup> Cecchi's preface to *Gita al faro* soon established itself as the authoritative Italian work on Woolf, 'molti hanno parlato di questo libro inimitabile, ma nessuno, ci pare, colla sapiente felicità di Emilio Cecchi, questo glorioso capitano della nostra saggistica', affirmed Anna Banti in her 1952 essay on Woolf; while Pietro Pavolini remarked in his review of Giulia Celenza's translation of the novel: 'Quando una traduzione da Virginia Woolf [...] è presentata da un conoscitore della letteratura inglese e critico fine e penetrante quale Emilio Cecchi [...] ben poco resta da dire

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Caterina Mansfield', Corriere della Sera, 10 January 1932 (repr. in Scrittori inglesi e americani, II, 115-20 (pp. 116 and 119)).

Although it may seem somewhat ironic that Cecchi should attribute a lack of irony to Mansfield when it played such a major part in her writing, such as her gentle mocking of a young governess in *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920), whose mistrust of young foreign men results in her becoming the victim of an older man whose gentlemanly behaviour misleads her, Cecchi's praise for Mansfield stemmed from her distance from 'scrittori deboli e viziosi', writers who used irony to confer an air of intellectual superiority on their work. In Mansfield, he saw a writer whose work was not false or pretentious but which strove for the truth: 'Tutti gli scritti della Mansfield insegnano qualcosa. [...] E il loro è un insegnamento sano, che non ci riporta verso effimeri ideali di mode estetiche, ma verso costanti e vitali verità.' (*Scrittori inglesi e americani*, II, 119).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Cited in *La noia e l'offesa: il fascismo e gli scrittori siciliani*, ed. by Leonardo Sciascia (Palermo: Sellerio, 1991), p. 99.

al recensente.'46 Cecchi's work on Mansfield was no less influential. Writing in *Pègaso* in 1932, Vittorini declared Cecchi responsible for introducing the author of *Bliss* and *The Garden Party* to the Italian public during the early 1920s, 'i critici stranieri cominciavano [...] a dedicarle qualche nota, tra questi primo, per l'Italia unico, Emilio Cecchi'; while Sibilla Aleramo bowed to Cecchi's authority in her 1931 essay on Mansfield: 'Emilio Cecchi ha rilevato in lei una grazia degna di Berthe Morisot [...] e finezze umoristiche alla Jane Austen.'47

Aleramo herself was also responsible for promoting the work of Woolf and Mansfield. Between 1926 and 1929, she discussed the work of foreign women writers in her regular column in La Fiera letteraria, confirming her position as an authority on women's writing with essays on Woolf and Mansfield in 1931. Whilst admiring Mansfield's sincerity, it was Woolf who elicited the greatest praise and she hailed the author of Orlando as 'forse in Europa oggi la più alta di tutte', and singled out the novel as a rare female masterpiece: 'Avere in mano un libro di donna, e sentirsi tentati di dichiararlo grande, [...] ecco un'avventura rara.'48 Aleramo's position as a champion of women's literature was shared by her fellow female critic Maria Luisa Astaldi, who played an active role in publicising Anglo-American female narrative at a time when it was still relatively unknown in Italy. Her Scrittrici d'America (1930) represented the first book-length study of American writers to be published in Italy, as well as the first work of criticism devoted to foreign women's writing, and it served both as an introduction to writers such as Stein and Cather as well as confirmation that women had established themselves as writers of international importance. Despite admiring the equality which American women had achieved, Astaldi was nonetheless critical of the society they inhabited, describing the United States as a country rich in contradiction, for it was governed both by hedonism and moral puritanism. Her strong belief in America's cultural inferiority echoed that of Cecchi, and their similarity of opinion was reinforced by her preference for nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers in whom she detected a tenderness which was lacking from the materialistic outlook of contemporary writers. The only modern writer for whom she did express admiration was Gertrude Stein, in whose poetry she saw 'il ritorno alla semplicità, al primitivismo verbale'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Anna Banti, 'Umanità della Woolf', *Paragone*, 28 (1952) (repr. in *Opinioni*, pp. 66-74 (p. 68)). Pietro Pavolini, 'Virginia Woolf: *Gita al faro*', *L'Italia che scrive*, 1934, p. 343.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Elio Vittorini, 'Caterina Mansfield', *Pègaso*, November 1932, pp. 553-72 (p. 553).

<sup>48</sup> Sibilla Aleramo, 'Orlando inglese', L'Italia letteraria, 18 October 1931, pp. 3-4 (p. 3).

(p. 23), and her praise for Stein's attempt to return to the most basic elements of poetry resembled that of Cecchi for Melville, whom he held responsible for returning American literature to its primitive origins.<sup>49</sup>

### 4.3.4 The influence of foreign literature

The greater accessibility of foreign literature during the 1930s and the high profile it enjoyed through sustained media and critical attention was to wield enormous influence over the writers who came of age during the *ventennio*. As Pietro Pancrazi observed of novelists such as Vittorini, Moravia, and Manzini, whose work was shaped by the international literary environment of the period:

Di tutti si può dire che furono aperti e pronti, come non mai prima, agli scambi internazionali. [...] Alcuni degli ultimi romanzi e racconti nostri [...] sembrano nati e nutriti soltanto da un incrociato clima internazionale. (Scrittori d'oggi, pp. IX and X)

These authors not only felt the influence of foreign literature as readers but their work as translators also allowed them to absorb the stylistic experiments of some of the most innovative writers of the day: Maria Bellonci established herself as a translator of Stendhal during the 1940s; Maria Luisa Fehr and Orsola Nemi both gave up writing fiction during the forties to focus on translation, Fehr specialising in the works of Charles Dickens and Nemi covering a range of French and British writers from Balzac to Vita Sackville-West; while Banti and Morante received critical acclaim for their translations of Woolf and Mansfield, the former translating Jacob's Room in 1950 and the latter The Journal of Katherine Mansfield in 1945, followed by the anthology, Il meglio di Katherine Mansfield, later that year.

While female writers established themselves as translators of European fiction, modern American fiction was almost exclusively a male preserve, with the field dominated by Pavese and Vittorini.<sup>50</sup> During the 1930s, Pavese introduced some of the great works of nineteenth and twentieth-century American fiction to the Italian public: starting with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Astaldi also shared Cecchi's disparaging opinion of the American realists and was critical of the exaggerated claims lavished on their work. 'Dopo la predicazione futurista, le parole in libertà, la simultaneità prediletta come maniera d'arte [...], è veramente l'opera di Dos Passos così sostanzialmente rivoluzionaria?' she declared in *Il Giornale d'Italia* (11 January 1936, p. 3).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> The only woman to focus on American fiction during this period was Fernanda Pivano, a Genoese translator who was a close friend of Pavese and Vittorini. She began her career in 1943 with a translation of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, and this was followed by translations of Anderson, Stein, Hemingway, and Faulkner during the 1940s.

Lewis's Our Mr Wrenn for Bemporad in 1931, he worked on Melville's Moby Dick and Anderson's Dark Laughter for Frassinelli, and Dos Passos's A Pile of Farthings and Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men for Bompiani, before moving to Einaudi in April 1938, where he was appointed director of their Narratori stranieri tradotti series and translated Faulkner and Stein among others. Vittorini was no less prolific a translator than Pavese. Having taught himself English by reading Robinson Crusoe with the aid of a dictionary, he cut his translator's teeth on Lawrence but, deriving little satisfaction from the author of St Mawr, whom he described as 'questo balbuziente scrittore', he turned to American literature, translating Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and Faulkner's Light in August before moving to Bompiani in 1938, where he focused on modern American fiction, including Steinbeck's Tortilla Flat and Caldwell's God's Little Acre.51

As well as respected translators, Vittorini and Pavese were also influential critics of American fiction. Vittorini wrote regular articles on modern American writers for Omnibus, Pègaso, and Letteratura during the 1930s, as well as editing Americana, an anthology of American writing. Despite the book's suppression in 1941 and its republication in a censored form the following year, Vittorini's work nonetheless exerted a powerful influence, with uncensored versions of the book and fragments of his prefaces passed round clandestinely in left-wing literary circles. It was Pavese, however, who provided the initial impetus to the intense interest in American fiction, with a piece on Sinclair Lewis which appeared in La Cultura in 1930. The essay, the first of a series of ten on American fiction published between 1930 and 1934, fanned the spark of interest in American writers created by Lewis's receipt of the Nobel Prize and it also acted as a catalyst in the creation of a myth of freedom with regard to American literature, for Pavese claimed that the heroes of modern American fiction were inspirational in their desire for freedom from society's irrational constraints: 'Questi americani hanno inventato un nuovo modo di bere. In fondo, la sete di questi personaggi è una sola: la libertà. Libertà per gli individui di fronte alle catene irragionevoli della società.'52

For both writers, the America of Faulkner and Saroyan came to symbolise a spiritual homeland uncontaminated by Fascist oppression, a mythical world which offered the possibility of escape from a corrupt civilisation. In their eyes, the Old World was symbolic

<sup>51</sup> Cited in a letter to Giacomo Antonini, 20 July 1933 (repr. in Elio Vittorini: lettere 1933-1943, p. 11).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Cesare Pavese, 'Un romanziere americano: Sinclair Lewis', *La Cultura*, November 1930 (repr. as 'Sinclair Lewis', in *La letteratura americana*, pp. 5-32 (p. 5)).

of all that was anti-democratic and morally degenerate, its literary culture stifling and elitist, whereas the New World was filled with the promise of individual autonomy and spiritual renewal, and its literature represented a youthful, primitive arcadia whose heroes embodied the new American Adam. In the words of Pavese: 'Condividemmo la sensazione di quei "giovani americani" di essere dei rinati Adami, soli e risoluti, [...] sgombri di ogni bagaglio del passato, freschi e disposti a camminare sulla libera terra.'53 This vision of a utopian American society was a wholly male domain. The untamed land of the American frontier, from which women were largely excluded, represented a sanctuary from malefemale relationships and a reassertion of the close male relationship, as Dominique Fernandez has observed, from Huck and Jim in Mark Twain to George and Lennie in Steinbeck (Il mito dell'America, pp. 88-89). For Pavese, whose private life was dominated by a deepening resentment towards women as a result of his sexual impotence, modern American fiction served as a mirror for his own misogyny, as well as a world of male companionship in which he could recover his virility. 'Leggete Melville [...] vi sentirete piú vivo e piú uomo', he declared in an essay on the author of Moby Dick (1851), an eighthundred-page novel in which there was no single female character.<sup>54</sup>

The realist aesthetic adopted by modern American novelists was also suited to the literary and political agendas of both writers. As left-wing idealists, Pavese and Vittorini perceived art not as the preserve of the elite but as a vehicle to communicate with the masses and, embracing the notion of political engagement in art, they sought to precipitate social change through their work and create a utopian vision of a mass society. Modernism, with its rejection of political engagement and its focus on the individual in an ahistorical context, was seen as synonymous with liberal bourgeois culture in Fascist Italy, Giuseppe

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Cesare Pavese, 'Maturità americana', *La Rassegna d'Italia*, December 1946 (repr. as 'F. O. Matthiessen', in *La letteratura americana*, pp. 177-87 (p. 177)).

The influence of American literature on left-wing Italian intellectuals of the 1930s has been well documented. See, for example, Vito Amoruso, 'Cecchi, Vittorini, Pavese e la letteratura americana', *Studi americani*, 6 (1960), 9-71; Dominique Fernandez, *Il mito dell'America negli intellettuali italiani*, trans. by Alfonso Zaccaria (Rome: Salvatore Sciasara, 1969); and Douglas Heiney, *America in Modern Italian Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Cesare Pavese, 'Herman Melville', *La Cultura*, January-March 1932 (repr. in *La letteratura americana*, pp. 77-101 (p. 79)).

In his desire to locate a male utopia within America, Pavese focused his attention on novels in which the male was idealised and the female either oppressed or absent. In his essays on Lewis's *Main Street* and Anderson's *Dark Laughter*, he makes no mention of Carol Kennicott or Berenice Dudley, both emancipated women, and in his critical writing he ignored the work of both Emily Dickinson, to whom Cecchi devoted an entire volume in 1939, and Willa Cather, who was regarded as one of the leading American novelists of the day, the critic Enrico Caprile citing her alongside Lewis, O'Neill, and Anderson as one of 'il gruppo veramente rappresentativo della letteratura contemporanea nord-americana' (*L'Italia che scrive*, 1932, p. 53).

Bottai declaring that works which were 'psicoanalitiche, frammentarie, sincopate' were nothing short of 'ribellioni contro la grande tradizione artistica italiana'. <sup>55</sup> Realism, by contrast, allowed the politically engaged writer to depict an idealised portrait of mass society, while its rejection of stylistic devices and focus on content over form signalled a repudiation of the esoteric and elitist prosa d'arte. Just as young Fascist supporters had taken up realism as the dominant aesthetic in the early thirties as a means of renovating Italian culture, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat has observed, so Vittorini and Pavese took this realist aesthetic and translated it into a fiction of dissent during the latter part of the decade, adapting the vision of a moral Fascist society into a vision of a utopian society symbolised by America.<sup>56</sup> In their eyes, realism represented a fresh, modern style capable of bringing about moral and spiritual renewal, the portrait of the individual marking out his territory in an untamed land representing the quest for spiritual freedom in a country unfettered by the strictures of the Fascist dictatorship, while the simple prose style of Hemingway and Anderson symbolised linguistic renewal in the claustrophobic literary environment of 1930s' Italy. 'Lo stile di Anderson!' exclaimed Pavese in a discussion of the revolutionary quality of the American writer's prose style. 'Una nuova intramatura dell'inglese, tutta fatta d'idiotismi americani, di uno stile che non è più dialetto, ma linguaggio, ripensato, ricreato, poesia.' (La letteratura americana, p. 42)

In contrast to their male peers, the new generation of female writers did not embrace modern American literature. In their search for an innocent world uncorrupted by modern civilisation, Morante and Ortese held similar concerns to Pavese and Vittorini, yet neither subscribed to the myth of America cultivated by their male counterparts. While Morante cited Melville as one of her favourite authors and shared the sympathy he had expressed in *Typee* (1846) for primitive societies, and Ortese described Poe as an important early influence, declaring 'non ammiravo: veneravo Poe', neither one found within modern American fiction the primitive arcadia for which they were searching (cited in Clerici, p.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Critica fascista, 15 February 1927 (cited in Ruth Ben-Ghiat, La cultura fascista (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), p. 47).

Italian Review, 8 (1990), 139-64, Ben-Ghiat argues that young Fascist writers turned to realism in the early 1930s as a means of portraying a new society of Fascist men uncorrupted by the influences of the Liberal era. Seeking a cultural counterpart to the political age ushered in by the regime, they embraced the realist aesthetic as part of the effort to create a new Fascist culture based on the notions of collectivism and populism. Vittorini, who had initially been drawn to early Fascism for its revolutionary and anti-bourgeois qualities, would later go on to translate the realist aesthetic he had espoused in the early 1930s into a fiction of dissent during the late 1930s.

64). The America of Faulkner and Steinbeck, which had so attracted their male counterparts, held little appeal for Italian women, for it was a land dominated by violence and misogyny. From Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), women were portrayed as victims of abuse and oppression, their unrepressed sexuality held responsible for the violent fate which befell them. 'Di *Uomini e topi* non parliamone nemmeno, fa schifo, e basta', remarked Irene Brin, voicing the distaste which many of her female contemporaries felt for this aggressively masculine fiction, the lasting image of the novel being 'il collo della donna gonfiato nell'ultimo sforzo di respiro'. 57

Nor was women's writing influenced by the stylistic experimentation of the American realists. The terse prose style of Anderson and Hemingway, which had so impressed Pavese and Vittorini, had no comparable effect on their female contemporaries, Anna Banti expressing consternation at the attempt of her male peers to create sparingly expressive stories in the manner of the American realists, her essay 'Critica e letteratura' echoing the opinion of both Cecchi and Astaldi in its dismay at the way in which the critics had applauded 'quei primi esperimenti di narrativa realistica all'americana [...] di lingua scarna e dimessa' (Opinioni, p. 84). It was not only on aesthetic grounds that the new generation rejected the poetics of realism but also because they did not subscribe to the belief that art was a sociopolitical practice. In contrast to their male counterparts, they did not seek to bring about social and political regeneration through their work but espoused the Crocean notion of the autonomy of art. Their aim was personal rather than political and centered on the quest for self-expression rather than social change and while their male peers were caught up in the march towards a collective national literature, as advocated by Bottai, or the search for a utopian society, in the case of Pavese and Vittorini, they refused to ally themselves with a collective aesthetic but affirmed their independence.

Rejecting the representational function of realist fiction, with its focus on transcribing social reality and its solid rooting in the historical moment, the new generation writers looked beyond the particular to a wider, atemporal view of reality, seeking to capture the underlying nature of human consciousness. In so doing, they were attracted to the poetics of modernism, with its displacement of history for the temporal categories of the moment and eternity, its interest in the structures of consciousness, and its exploration of the rhythmic qualities of language. For many of the new generation writers, Proust and Chekhov

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Irene Brin, 'I libri che ho letto', Almanacco della donna italiana, 1941, pp. 155-63 (p. 161).

represented a major influence in their early literary development, as I discussed in chapter one, the former's impressionistic manner of transcribing subjective reality through memories and sensuous experience and the latter's combination of poetic lyricism with the detail of realism in the psychological short story shaping their early literary endeavours.<sup>58</sup> But it was to be two successors of Proust and Chekhov, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, who were to act as the prime influence on Italian women's writing of the 1930s, their attempts to structure their work through the patterns created by the sensibilities of the central characters, and the affinity of their narrative with the musical and pictorial processes, inspiring a new departure in Italian women's narrative towards the lyric style, in which memories and sensations take prominence over plot and lead to moments of psychological revelation. In the words of Carlo Daddi:

Due donne anglosassoni, hanno aiutato le nostre donne letterate a trovare la via più naturale della loro fantasia. Non so se tutte le donne italiane che scrivono abbiano letto la Woolf e la Mansfield; eppure, anche se non conoscono una pagina di *Una gita al faro* e di *Lezione di canto*, dietro questi esempi hanno saputo trovare qualche nuovo e sincero accento.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4.3.5 The influence of Woolf and Mansfield

The influence of Woolf and Mansfield was to be felt throughout Italian women's narrative of the 1930s. Both were writers who had rejected the realist mode, believing that it offered only a partial view of reality. 'We have to [...] find new expressions, new moulds for our new thoughts and feelings', declared Mansfield (*Letters and Journals*, p. 147); while Woolf remarked with regard to the inadequacies of the realist genre:

Let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life

<sup>58</sup> Woolf and Mansfield were both to acknowledge the seminal position of Proust and Chekhov in modern narrative. In 'Phases of Fiction' (1929), Woolf cited Proust as the first writer to transcribe the relationship between the external world and the inner workings of the mind: 'Our self-consciousness is becoming far more alert and better trained. We are aware of relations and subtleties which have not yet been explored. Of this school Proust is the pioneer.' (cited in Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 264) Mansfield, in turn, viewed Chekhov as the founding father of the modern short story, declaring in a letter to her husband, dated 1 December 1920: 'I would give every single word de Maupassant [...] ever wrote for one short story by Anton Tchekhov.' (*The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by C. K. Stead (London: Allen Lane, 1977), pp. 202-03).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Carlo Daddi, 'Emilia Salvioni: Gli anni migliori', Omnibus, 9 April 1938, p. 7.

or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.<sup>60</sup>

Refuting the tenet that literature had a duty to transcribe social reality, they drew on literary impressionism to develop a fluid style which resisted the male metaphysical world and sought to capture the underlying nature of reality. Finding the model of the integrated individual inappropriate to their experience, they replaced the discursive narrator with a choral narrative in which the unfolding consciousness of the protagonists held sway, and employed a non-narrative structure whose principle of connection was association rather than chronology. Emphasising the importance of personal impression over the accurate representation of reality, they sought to convey the sensory nature of the visual experience, to render an impression of reality filtered through a subjective eye. 'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall', declared Woolf. 'Let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.' ('Modern Fiction', p. 150) Insisting that the 'proper stuff of fiction' was the 'myriad impressions' that make up subjective reality, they sought to free the novel from its dependence on external realism and penetrate instead beneath the massed detail of the material world to reveal the spirit of life itself. In the words of Woolf:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit? ('Modern Fiction', p. 150)

In their adoption of an impressionistic style of writing, which elevated the everyday to the poetic and intensified the affective response, the role of visual perception was key for their fiction was dependent on their ability to imbue external reality with hidden meaning. 'Nessun organo, meglio dell'occhio che afferra e trasmette in un lampo, sembra più idoneo agli scopi di Caterina', remarked Anna Banti of Mansfield (*Opinioni*, p. 119). Attilio Riccio placed a similar emphasis on Woolf's observatory powers, stressing the sensory nature of the visual experience in her work: 'Tutto il carattere dell'artista è [...] intimamente connesso con un certo modo acuto ed emotivo di vedere.' The primacy which both writers attached to the powers of observation, together with the impressionistic quality of their work, lent a highly pictorial quality to their prose and resulted in frequent comparisons

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1919 (repr. in *The Common Reader*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 146-54 (p. 149)).

between their narrative technique and the artistic process. Emilio Cecchi noted Mansfield's 'tecnica impressionista' in a diary entry for March 1922, a comparison which he developed eight years later in *L'Italia letteraria*, in which he likened her to Manet and Berthe Morisot. 62 Banti was also to stress the similarity between Mansfield and the Impressionists. 'Come negare che la Mansfield, attiva fra il 1910 e il '23, si esprima coll'accento "ottico" di chi è cresciuto nel clima dell'impressionismo e del fauvismo?' she affirmed, claiming that Mansfield's narrative was the verbal equivalent to the paintings of Sisley and Bonnard (*Opinioni*, p. 120). The narrative technique of Woolf was also to invite comparisons with the artistic process, Mario Praz describing her style as a form of literary pointillism, her technique of superimposing layers of images and sensations to create an overall impression of reality akin to the artistic process of building up dots of pure colour on the canvas which merge into secondary hues from a distance: 'La tecnica della Woolf potrebbe accostarsi a quella del *pointillisme*. Essa ci sottopone a una doccia d'immagini come la vita ci mette sotto una doccia di sensazioni. 63

The modernist style of Woolf and Mansfield, in which the sensory nature of the impression assumes importance over chronological narrative, was to leave a lasting influence on many of their Italian counterparts. In Margherita Cattaneo's *Io nel mezzo*, a developing narrative is rejected in favour of a series of impressions and vignettes in which observation and sensory impressions play a central role. 'La Cattaneo è tutta occhi, e quasi direi sensi, benché sia l'occhio, in lei, il senso principale', observed Arrigo Benedetti, and he emphasised '[il suo] modo [...] di guardar le cose impressionisticamente'.<sup>64</sup> The first-person narrator who stands at the heart of *Io nel mezzo* relates episodes from her life in terms of memories and sensory experiences, with each episode, from a walk in the garden to a description of the furniture in her childhood home, representing an event or memory whose importance lies solely in the context of her own life, and, in focusing on the personal in this way, she subscribed to what Woolf identified as the woman writer's desire to prioritise private experience over public events: 'When a woman comes to write a novel,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Attilio Riccio, 'Virginia Woolf: *The Waves*', *Occidente*, July-September 1933, pp. 133-36 (pp. 135-36).

<sup>62</sup> Cited in *Emilio Cecchi: taccuini*, ed. by Pietro Citati and Niccolò Gallo (Milan: Mondadori, 1976), p. 351.

<sup>63</sup> Mario Praz, La letteratura inglese dai romantici al Novecento (Florence: Sansoni, 1967), p. 270.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Arrigo Benedetti, 'Margherita Cattaneo: *Io nel mezzo*', *Pan*, September 1935, pp. 146-48 (pp. 146 and 148).

she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values - to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.'65

A subjective perception of reality in which sensory impressions are paramount is also central to the early work of Anna Banti. *Itinerario di Paolina* is a series of impressions rather than a developing narrative, a fact underlined by its definition by Banti as 'prose'; the emphasis is not on plot but on the ability of narrative form to represent reality more accurately. In the words of Goffredo Bellonci:

La Banti non ci voleva illudere con una trama che di pagina in pagina ci conducesse a veder come va a finire [...]: sapeva che [...] lo scrittore deve dar risalto al periodo e alla parola per virtù di tono di accento di ritmo, e per forza di qualificazione che riveli o trasfiguri la realtà. (*Mercurio*, March-June 1948, p. 157)

In the book, the omniscient narrator is replaced by a third-person central consciousness, Paolina, through whose subjective gaze reality is perceived and interpreted. In the same way that Woolf builds up a portrait of Clarissa Dalloway scene by scene through external impressions and the gradual unfolding of her consciousness in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), so Banti uses each episode in the novel to construct Paolina's character, demonstrating how personality is formed from the experiences we acquire throughout our lives, 'mentre la bambina crede di gettar via ogni giorno le scaglie della sua vecchia pelle, le raccoglie invece, accuratamente, e procede colle spalle voltate' (p. 18), both writers revealing the influence of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who held that personality was in a permanent state of flux.<sup>66</sup>

The highly pictorial style of Woolf and Mansfield was also to find echoes in the work of their Italian contemporaries. In 'Tre momenti', Alba de Céspedes describes a beach and its immediate surroundings at three different times of day, with the scenes evoked in similar terms to an Impressionist painting, the narrative highlighting the play of light on the water and the variation in colour of the sea and sand as the sun rises and sets. Colour is used as a linking device throughout the piece: in the first scene, the flame-red kite in the sky is balanced by the red hair of the boy following its progress on the beach, and the colour is

<sup>65</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', *The Forum*, March 1929 (repr. in *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. by Michèle Barrett (London: Women's Press, 1979), pp. 43-52 (p. 49)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> In L'Evolution créatrice (1907), Bergson argued that personality was not fixed but was formed gradually through the accretion of experience: 'Our personality, which is being built up each instant with its accumulated experience, changes without ceasing.' (cited in Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents, ed. by Vassiliki Kolocotroni and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), p. 70).

echoed in the next two scenes by the flame-red geraniums on the window ledge and the path from the beach which seems to burn in the heat, 'il vialetto tra due pinete che odora di coccole in ardore è rosso, di fuoco'.67 The influence of film is also noticeable in the text. From the initial close-up of the kite twisting against the cloudless sky to the narrative equivalent of a pan shot across the empty beach, de Céspedes reveals an awareness of how a moving perspective can be used to juxtapose carefully observed detail with the overall view of a scene. A similar cinematographic awareness is displayed by Mansfield in 'At the Bay'. The linked sequence of images echoes the way in which a film is assembled from segmented scenes, and the opening lines resemble a tracking shot as the focus moves from the hills behind the bay to the gardens of the bungalows, while the wide panoramic shot of the hills smothered in white sea mist is contrasted with the close-up of dew drops on the nasturtium leaves. Anna Maria Ortese was also to reveal a pictorial and cinematographic awareness in her short story 'Solitario lume', which describes the narrator contemplating from her window, as on a screen, the transformatory power of sunlight and moonlight on the distant hills at different times of day. Indeed, Ortese was to acknowledge the similarity of her work with that of Mansfield, 'Solitario lume' being written at the same time as she was introduced to 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay' by Corrado Pavolini. 'Non ricordo se questa scrittrice egli me la fece conoscere perché aveva letto già un mio lungo racconto, Solitario Lume, o se io scrissi Solitario Lume perché avevo letto questi racconti', she later recalled (cited in Clerici, p. 64).68

Of the new generation writers, it was Gianna Manzini who was to display the greatest affinity with Mansfield and Woolf. A highly visual writer, the young Manzini assigned great importance to the power of observation. 'Ero a quel tempo troppo presente negli occhi', she recalled of her early years. 'Occhi sempre desti. Guardavo, divorata da una curiosità inesausta.' Striving to capture the multilayered nature of reality, she adopted a similar artistic technique to Woolf of layering images so that her vision of reality was constructed in an almost post-Impressionistic manner. 'Il suo lavoro [...] consiste [...]

<sup>67</sup> Alba de Céspedes, 'Tre momenti', in *Concerto*, pp. 117-24 (p. 121).

<sup>68</sup> Mansfield and Ortese both shared a love of the cinema: the former developed a first-hand knowledge of the industry after working as an extra on a film set, as Sarah Sandley has observed ('The Middle of the Note: Katherine Mansfield's "Glimpses", in *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margin*, ed. by Roger Robinson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 70-89); while the passion of the latter stemmed from a memorable visit to the cinema in 1937 when she saw Katharine Hepburn in *Quality Street* (1937), a film which possessed 'una verità delicatamente oleografica, [...] una grazia magica, cara alla fantasia di una giovinetta quale io ero allora' (cited in Clerici, p. 108).

<sup>69</sup> Gianna Manzini, Lettera all'editore (Milan: Mondadori, 1946), p. 261.

nell'aggiungere, depositare realtà su realtà, piano su piano, rifrazione su rifrazione', as Geno Pampaloni has noted.<sup>70</sup> Like her British counterparts, the mass of carefully observed detail with which Manzini's work abounded did not merely have a descriptive function but was also used to convey complex inner states. In the same way that Mansfield used external detail to convey the state of mind of her protagonists, such as Robert Salesby's constant turning of his wedding ring in 'The Man Without a Temperament', which suggests his sense of incarceration in his unhappy marriage, so Manzini conveyed mood and emotion through external detail rather than allowing access to her characters' thoughts. In 'Ritratto di bambina', the appearance of a young girl in a tram crowded with commuters eases the boredom of their routine, her beauty acting as a welcome antidote to the brash materialism of city life; for a brief moment, she becomes the focus for the dreams of those around her, her golden hair representing untold wealth and the peace which is missing from urban life: 'Quei capelli davan l'idea d'una ricchezza casta e remota, d'una festa intima senza [...] clamore.'<sup>71</sup>

Woolf was also to use a myriad of domestic detail to gain access to the inner world of thoughts and emotions. From the reddish-brown stocking which Mrs Ramsay is knitting in the opening of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which denotes her desire to bring people together, to the symbolic value bestowed on everyday sights and sounds by the young James Ramsay, 'the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing [...] all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that they had already his private code', the importance of the detailed images in her work resides in the mystery which lies behind them rather than in their ability to offer a faithful depiction of everyday life.<sup>72</sup> The facility with which Woolf used everyday objects to gain access to this larger reality was to have a profound influence on Manzini. 'La forza di questa scrittrice consisteva nel farci accettare tutt'una storia che esorbita dagli elementi della vita cotidiana, eppure è tutta intessuta di codesti elementi', she remarked in 'La lezione della Woolf', the essay in which she revealed her debt to the British writer (p. 78). Taking her inspiration from Woolf, she looked to domestic detail for productive imagery and, in the same way that Woolf used knitting as a metaphor for Mrs Ramsay's attempt to unify a disparate group of people,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Geno Pampaloni, 'Per Gianna Manzini', in *Gianna Manzini tra letteratura e vita: atti del convegno*, ed. by Marco Forti (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), pp. 39-46 (p. 44).

<sup>71</sup> Gianna Manzini, 'Ritratto di bambina', in *Boscovivo* (Milan: Treves, 1932), pp. 3-8 (pp. 3-4).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Granada, 1977), p. 9.

'flashing her needles, confident, upright, she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow', so Manzini used traditional female activities, such as embroidery and lace-making, to symbolise the interwoven threads of experience which form a person's character (p. 39). In 'Casa di riposo', one of the elderly inhabitants of the retirement home is described in terms of an unfinished piece of needlework, for her life history is largely unknown, 'somiglia a certi lavori ad ago che dopo anni ed anni sono appena incominciati'; while in 'La coperta', the attempt to discover the truth about a person's character is compared to unravelling a piece of lace: 'Trovare il punto essenziale in cui si precisa il significato, il messaggio, l'incanto di un viso; e cosí disfarlo, allo stesso modo che si disfà un merletto per sapere com'è composto.'73

It is in 'La coperta' that the metaphor of needlework finds its most complete expression, Manzini equating the protagonist's life with the quilt she is embroidering, while the threads which hold the quilt together symbolise the threads of memory which link the different episodes of her life. The story focuses on Anna, a middle-aged woman who is on the point of finishing a quilt that has occupied her for the whole of her married life and which she is planning to show to her guests at a party to celebrate her twentieth wedding anniversary. Initially, she had wanted the quilt to reflect the wedded bliss she had been led to expect but, as she progresses, each section serves instead as a means of escaping her unhappy marriage, inspiring daydreams in which she seeks refuge: 'Col cuore alto e affrettato, i pensieri le si risolvevano in immagini che la comandavano. [...] Fuggire dalla sua morsa al pari d'un uccello.' (p. 16) On the afternoon of the party, she sits by the window sewing and reflecting on the dreams which she secretly harboured during her uneventful life, and the embroidered patterns on the quilt echo the wave of memories and half-forgotten emotions which rise up into her consciousness. The image of the quilt as a metaphor for her life is reinforced as she pricks her finger and a drop of blood spills onto the fabric, its narrow scarlet trail resembling the embroidery silk with which she is working: 'Come un filo di bava, colava un filo di sangue sulla tela tesa del telaio.' (p. 30)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Gianna Manzini, 'Casa di riposo', in *Venti racconti*, pp. 195-235 (p. 207). Gianna Manzini, 'La coperta', in *Rive remote*, pp. 11-42 (p. 33).

In "Un romanzo con le forbici e l'ago": appunti per una lettura della prima Gianna Manzini', *Empoli: rivista di vita cittadina*, 1 (1983), 119-29, Margherita Ghilardi discusses Manzini's use of needlecraft in her work, drawing attention to the fact that she not only depicts many of her female characters sewing but also uses the language of needlework as a valuable source of metaphor, employing specialist terms such as *orlo*, *ricamo*, *smerlo*, and *merletto* (pp. 121-22).

The affinity of the work of all three writers to poetry lay not only in the manner in which they imbued everyday reality with poeticism but also in the melodic quality of their prose. Cecchi made reference to Mansfield's prose as 'squisitamente ritmata', while Ungaretti described her style as 'perfettamente corrispondente a tali miracoli di poesia' (*La Fiera letteraria*, 6 May 1956, p. 3).<sup>74</sup> In the writing of Woolf, Moravia detected 'una sensibilità poetica e trasognata, di quelle che si attribuirebbero piuttosto ad un compositore del genere di Debussy che ad un romanziere'; while the richly melodic prose of Mansfield was compared by Cecchi to the poetry of Baudelaire: 'Il canarino, Mamma Parker, hanno una purezza di disegno musicale degna dei poemetti in prosa del Baudelaire.'<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Mansfield was to identify this musical element in her own creative process, declaring in a letter to her friend Richard Murry in January 1921:

In Miss Brill, I choose [..] the sound of every sentence. I choose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her. After I'd written it I read it aloud - numbers of times - just as one would play over a musical composition - trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill. (Letters and Journals, p. 213)

Rhythm was to assume a particular importance in the work of both Woolf and Manzini, for they used the pattern of their prose to capture the rhythm of life itself. In *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf allows the narrative voice to move in and out of the consciousnesses of the two central protagonists in a cyclical rhythm, which reaches a crescendo in *The Waves* (1931) as the interior monologues of the six protagonists overlap and blend into one another. Each of the characters is aware of the rhythmic pattern of life which orders their existence, Bernard noting 'the rhythm, the throb', as he contemplates life after Percival's death, and he is struck by the realisation that to withdraw from this shifting pattern is to be left only with silence: 'One day as I leant over a gate that led into a field, the rhythm stopped. [...] I waited. I listened. Nothing came, nothing. I cried then with a sudden conviction of complete desertion.'<sup>76</sup> This rhythmic pattern of passing time serves as the dominant structure in Woolf's work, with time no longer portrayed in terms of linear progression but as subjective experience scrutinised by the perceiving mind. Likened to the cyclical rhythms of the natural world, the passing of time becomes a rhythmic throb, whose

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Katherine Mansfield', *La Tribuna*, 14 April 1922 (repr. in *Emilio Cecchi: i tarli*, ed. by Silvia Betocchi (Rome: Fazi, 1999), pp. 51-54 (p. 52)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Alberto Moravia, 'Virginia Woolf: *The Waves*', *Omnibus*, 13 November 1937, p. 7. Emilio Cecchi, 'Katherine Mansfield', *L'Italia letteraria*, 4 May 1930, p. 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Grafton, 1977), pp. 103 and 191-92.

echoes can be heard in the rhythmic lapping of the waves or the 'fumbling airs' which creep through the empty Ramsay home. 'One had constantly a sense of repetition', muses Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, 'of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations.' (p. 183) In comparison to the rhythmic pattern of subjective time, the historical moment assumes a secondary significance: the death of Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is recorded in parentheses, while the dinner party over which she presides is given far greater prominence; and in *The Years* (1937), the horrors of war are conveyed through a dinner party which takes place in London during the Zeppelin raids of 1917.

A similar focus on subjective time and its rhythmic nature can be seen in the work of Manzini. In *Tempo innamorato*, the word *tempo* is key to the novel, for its polysemous nature denotes both the rhythmic pace of the language as well as the passing of time and its correlation with the cycles of the natural world. Time is no longer regulated by the clock or the calendar but is represented by the transition from day into night and the passing of the seasons, while temporal ordering within the text is replaced by personal reminiscence, as denoted by the introduction to our first encounter with Raffaello: 'Di domenica, anzi proprio la domenica che precede il Natale. Prima del buio; due anni fa.' (p. 37) Temporal boundaries are dissolved as time seems to repeat itself continually; the past, present, and future become indistinguishable and blend into one. Even Rita, who at first seems able to bewitch time, 'che vive in una specie di gara con le ore', cannot halt its progress and she too gives herself up to its passage, abandoning herself to the relentless flux of life (p. 25).

In seeking to capture the rhythm of life in her writing and reveal the flux which lay below the surface, it was to Woolf whom Manzini looked for guidance. 'È sempre vivo nelle sue pagine un moto, un flusso, quasi gorgoglio d'eterna origine, d'eterna domanda, di vita alla sorgente, insomma', she remarked in 'La lezione della Woolf' (p. 93). Hailing the British writer as '[la] più dotata, [...] più esperta, [...] più grande scrittrice nostra' (p. 76), Manzini credited Woolf with enabling her to visualise reality as a unified whole in which disparate fragments are bound by a network of hidden relationships, her moment of epiphany taking place one evening after reading *Mrs Dalloway*: 'S'integravano significati, si rispondevano linee e colori, s'incrociavano cenni di simpatia in un'atmosfera che diventava ferma e cristallina.' (p. 81)

### 4.3.6 Woolf and Mansfield as role models

For Manzini, Woolf represented a highly inspirational figure, who not only had a profound impact on her narrative style but also on her self-perception as a writer. At a time when she had felt uncertain about her literary vocation, Woolf acted as her mentor, inspiring her with the courage to continue. 'In me, il coraggio di non rinunciare si chiama precisamente Virginia Woolf', she affirmed. 'La leggevo e imparavo a raccogliermi l'anima e a tenerla in fronte come la lampada dei minatori.' ('La lezione della Woolf', pp. 77-78) Manzini had first discovered the work of the British writer in 1930 at a time of great personal crisis, her recent separation from her husband, the journalist Bruno Fallaci, having left her emotionally drained and unable to depict emotion in her writing. 'C'è stato un periodo della mia vita in cui ho accantonato la narrativa: niente piú racconti, niente piú romanzi', she confessed in an interview with Lia Fava Guzzetta. 'Scrivevo di "cose", o di vita silenziosa, magari di nature morte.' (Manzini, p. 2) In this period of darkness, the writing of Woolf acted as her guiding light, helping her attain emotional clarity in her work: 'Le cose escono da un'ombra che le preserva, un'ombra fermentante, faticosa, brutta, l'ombra dell'attimo che precede una nascita, per entrare in un cerchio di chiarità.' ('La lezione della Woolf', p. 78)

Anna Banti was also a self-declared admirer of both Woolf and Mansfield. Praising the former for her visual perceptiveness and poetic style, she hailed the latter as 'la gran dama delle lettere',77 declaring her novels to be 'fermi e brillanti nella costellazione dei primi valori del cinquantennio' (*Opinioni*, p. 66). In the same way that Banti sought to capture the rhythms of life in her work, alternating memories and sensations to create a poetic representation of the way in which we experience life, so she found in Woolf's lyrical style an accurate portrayal of life's rhythmic flux, describing the prose of *To the Lighthouse* as 'fluida come la vita usuale', while the opening exchange between James Ramsay and his parents serves as '[un] fragile arpeggio famigliare' (*Opinioni*, p. 68). The admiration which Banti and Manzini expressed for Woolf was echoed by Anna Maria Ortese for Mansfield, a writer to whom she was introduced by way of 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay'. Describing these stories in terms of an epiphany, 'furono vette illuminate dal sole quelle che io guardai', Ortese found in Mansfield, just as Manzini had done in Woolf, a mentor and guide who revealed the beauty of simplicity and truth in writing. 'È una creatura che insegna una cosa

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Anna Banti, 'Saluto a Colette', 1954 (repr. in *Opinioni*, pp. 153-55 (p. 155)).

santa, una verità magnifica', Ortese declared in a letter to Antonio Franchini in March 1941, 'quella della semplicità e della purezza del cuore.' (cited in Clerici, p. 64)

The influence of Woolf and Mansfield was not only felt by Manzini, Banti, and Ortese but their impact was to be felt across Italian women's writing of the thirties. In contrast to turn-of-the-century novelists such as Neera and Serao, who had shown a distinct hostility towards their fellow female writers, the two British writers revealed a keen interest in women's writing. Mansfield displayed a solidarity with her female peers in her critical writing, reviewing the work of Rose Macaulay and Sheila Kaye-Smith with far more leniency than her male counterparts, and expressing deep admiration for Woolf. 'You write so damned well, so devilish well', she declared in a letter to the author in April 1919 after reading her essay on modern fiction (Letters and Journals, p. 133). Woolf, in turn, revealed a strong support for women's writing. In A Room of One's Own, she encouraged women to think of themselves as part of a literary tradition, drawing creative inspiration from their collective female identity, and she underlined the importance of female role models for the aspiring writer. 'It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure', she argued. 'Lamb, Browne, Thackeray [...] - whoever it may be never helped a woman yet. [...] The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully.' (p. 71)

As writers who had secured success both at home and abroad, Woolf and Mansfield offered valuable examples of female achievement to their Italian counterparts, who were striving to win acceptance and respect from the literary establishment. Moreover, as women who had been assigned a place in the literary mainstream rather than being marginalised on account of their gender, they had attained the parity to which their Italian counterparts aspired, forcing critics to acknowledge the strength of the female literary voice. In the words of Carlo Linati, discussing the unique style of Woolf:

Non grandi movimenti d'idee o di persone nei suoi libri, ma spesso un chiaro e delizioso cicaleggio tutto *verve* e acutezza d'intuizioni intime [...]. Tutto questo è donnesco, profondamente donnesco. La Woolf è la scrittrice per eccellenza [...] ma che, al contrario di tante altre che amano mascolinizzarsi, ha perfetta coscienza della sua "unicità" donnesca e se la tien cara.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, despite a strong female trait being identified in the work of both writers, neither one stressed their female identity in their fiction nor did they advocate the development of a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Carlo Linati, 'Virginia Woolf: A Room of One's Own', Leonardo, 1930, pp. 175-76 (p. 175).

feminine prose in the manner of Aleramo. Mansfield referred to herself using the genderless term 'artist' and, in her critical writing, she attacked her fellow writers May Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson for attempting to pioneer a female style of prose. 79 Woolf displayed a keener interest in a female aesthetic for, like Richardson, she recognised the inability of language to convey female experience. Writing of the difficulties experienced by the woman writer for whom the existing literary forms were inappropriate to her perception of reality, she declared: 'The very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use.' ('Modern Fiction', p. 48) Yet, rather than seeking to create a female sentence in the manner of Richardson, a writer to whom she ascribed the invention of 'the psychological sentence of the feminine gender', she focused her efforts on writing from a female perspective.<sup>80</sup> Believing the female sensibility to have a different focus from that of the male for it 'ranged [...] among almost unknown or unrecorded things', she sought to portray this differing focus in her work and challenge the prevailing values that held public events to be more important than personal experience (A Room of One's Own, p. 86). This female perspective was not to be underscored by gender consciousness, however. Like the hypothetical case of Mary Carmichael, who 'wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman' (p. 86), Woolf's aim was to develop a female style in which gender was no longer an issue. 'It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex', she declared. 'The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness.' (p. 97) Arguing for androgyny in art, she claimed that writers should use the male and female sides of the brain in harmony in order to harness their full creative potential: 'A mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine. The androgynous mind is [...] naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.' (p. 92)

For the new generation writers, who were striving to break away from the extreme gender consciousness which had underscored the work of their predecessors, the position of Woolf and Mansfield regarding gender had a profound impact. Just as Mansfield described

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> In *Pilgrimage* (1938), Richardson described her work as an attempt to produce 'a feminine prose [...] moving from point to point without formal obstructions' (cited in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), I, 248).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Times Literary Supplement, 1923 (cited in A Woman's Essays, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 51).

herself as an artist, so many of the new generation adopted the genderless term scrittore, while Woolf's belief in the androgynous nature of creativity was shared by de Céspedes, who, in the title story of Fuga, depicted a genderless creative spirit which frees itself from the confines of the body at night to search for inspiration.81 Both sets of writers also shared common ground in their attitudes towards feminism. For Woolf and Mansfield, as for their Italian counterparts, feminism was associated exclusively with suffrage and, although they displayed concern for improving the female condition, neither one embraced the feminist movement. Woolf was a fervent advocate of female education and employment, arguing for female equality in 'Professions for Women' (1931) and encouraging women to fight against untenable models of womanhood, as embodied by Coventry Patmore's poetic idealisation of domestic femininity, the Angel in the House. Yet, she refused to support the feminist movement, declaring in *Three Guineas* (1938) that the term feminism was now obsolete for the right for women to earn a living had been won and, in her fiction, she took great pleasure in poking fun at feminists, as can be seen in her caricatures of Evelyn Murgatroyd in The Voyage Out (1915) and Julia Hedge in Jacob's Room (1922). Mansfield was similarly dismissive of the feminist movement. As a young woman growing up in New Zealand, she had been an outspoken critic of the subjugation of women, declaring in her diary that women were 'firmly held with the self-fashioned chains of slavery' (Letters and Journals, p. 35); but, following her arrival in London in 1908, she showed little enthusiasm for the feminist movement, ridiculing a suffragette meeting in a letter to her friend Garnet Trowell and announcing to an old school friend that she did not share her pro-suffrage views, an episode which she related in 'Being a Truthful Adventure' (1911). Yet, despite her dismissal of feminism, Mansfield revealed a keen interest in social injustice in her work, focusing on those removed from the centre of power who had no public voice, and drawing attention to the inequality of social divisions, her position as a colonial in classridden London society fuelling her acerbic attacks on class prejudice. In 'Prelude', the servant girl Alice reflects bitterly on her subservient position, resenting the dismissive way in which she is treated by Beryl Fairfield: 'What Alice really hated Miss Beryl for was that she made her feel low. She talked to Alice in a special voice as though she wasn't quite all

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> De Céspedes was fully conversant with *A Room of One's Own*, as shown by her response 'sì sì certamente' when asked by Piera Carroli whether she had read the book (p. 184).

there.'82 A more detailed study of social division is to be found in 'The Garden Party', in which Laura Sheridan is forced to confront the divide which exists between her middle-class family and their neighbours, the working-class Scotts, when her parents refuse to cancel their garden party after the accidental death of Mr Scott. As Laura moves between the two events, the contrast between the sombre funeral rite and the frivolity of the garden party drives home the disparity between the wretched, but dignified, existence of the Scotts and the outwardly beautiful, but artificial, life of her own family.

As a writer who offered a voice to the oppressed and marginalised in society but who did not use her work as a vehicle for advocating social or political change, Mansfield represented an important role model for Morante and Ortese, who shared her concern with depicting the plight of those who had been silenced by society while displaying a marked reluctance to embrace a position of social or political engagement in their work. Just as Mansfield depicted characters whose poverty or low social status marked them out as victims in society, such as the impecunious English teacher Miss Brill who is mocked for her shabby fox fur, so Morante and Ortese focused on the less fortunate and dispossessed, such as the deluded spinster Candida in Morante's 'Un uomo senza carattere', whose poverty and social ineptitude is contrasted with the wealth and sophistication of her cousins, or the poverty-stricken typist in Ortese's 'L'avventura', who realises that she will never fulfil her childhood dreams: 'L'orrore di quella vita sulla macchina, dopo gli angelici sogni della puerizia, mi riassaliva potentemente.'

## 4.3.7 The representation of female experience

As writers who highlighted the female condition but who did not embrace the women's movement, Woolf and Mansfield served as natural role models for the new generation. They wrote about women with compassion, describing the uncertainty they faced in the post-war period and the patriarchal structures which perpetuated their subjugation, and yet their work was not intended as a rallying cry for the feminist movement but as an exploration of the changing condition of women's lives. The belief that the post-war period represented an age of transition was common to both sets of writers, Woolf describing the post-war period when women emerged from the world of domesticity into public life as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Katherine Mansfield, 'Prelude', 1916 (repr. in *Katherine Mansfield: Twelve Stories*, ed. by Jane Miller (London: Folio Society, 1978), pp. 98-151 (p. 140)).

Anna Maria Ortese, 'L'avventura', in Angelici dolori, pp. 117-31 (p. 123).

'the bridge which lies between the old world and the new', a metaphor which resembled that of Céspedes in Nessuno torna indietro (Three Guineas, pp. 19-20). The generational divide resulting from this period of profound social change was also depicted by both sets of writers, the conflict between mothers and daughters portrayed by the new generation echoing the representation by their British counterparts of the gulf separating the pre and post-war generation of women. In Mrs Dalloway, the middle-aged Clarissa, who has devoted her life to running a household and supporting her husband, is contrasted with her eighteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth, who symbolises the new generation of young women who are intent on pursuing a career: 'She might be a doctor. She might be a farmer. [...] In short, she would like to have a profession.' (p. 121) A similar divide can be seen in To the Lighthouse, in which Woolf created, in the words of Adrienne Rich, 'the most complex and passionate vision of the mother-daughter schism in modern literature'.84 The novel focuses on the figures of Mrs Ramsay, who symbolises Victorian ideologies of motherhood, and the independent Lily Briscoe, who looks to the older woman as a surrogate mother but resists her pressure to emulate her role. The first part of the book is dominated by Mrs Ramsay and the values she represents, her nurturing figure regarded as the female ideal by those around her, whereas the final part of the book, which takes place after the war has wreaked its irreparable damage, is devoted to Lily, who has moved beyond the narrow domestic sphere to a world of social independence and artistic achievement.

Similar parallels can be found in their portraits of female oppression, with women shown to collude in their own subjugation as well as participate in the oppression of others. In 'Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding', Mansfield reveals the exploitation of women in marriage as she depicts the Frau being berated by her husband for the condition of his clothes, and she alludes to the impending violence of the husband when he returns home drunk from the wedding party: 'She lay down on the bed and put her arm across her face like a child who expected to be hurt as Herr Brechenmacher lurched in.'85 Yet, despite all the female characters in the story enduring similar abuse in their marriages, there is no sisterly feeling among them: Frau Brechenmacher is preparing her daughter Rosa to take over her role in spite of the physical hardship it has caused her, while Frau Rupp laughs at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (London: Virago, 1976), p. 227.

<sup>85</sup> Katherine Mansfield, 'Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding', 1910 (repr. in *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Antony Alpers (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 43-48 (p. 48)).

Frau Brechenmacher at the party when she sees that her skirt is undone instead of taking her to one side to spare her embarrassment. Morante was to depict the victimisation of women in a similar manner, representing the oppression of women by artificial models of femininity while rejecting the feminist claim that men were the sole perpetrators of female subjection. In 'Un uomo senza carattere', she places the responsibility for a woman's victimisation with the victim herself as well as the local community, depicting the delusion of a middle-aged spinster, Candida, who dresses in fashionable clothes and wears heavy make-up in a bid to be beautiful, and who hides herself away in shame when she learns that she has become an object of ridicule.

The disparity between how Candida perceives herself and how she appears to others was also common to Mansfield's 'Miss Brill'. Focusing on an elderly woman who believes she can act as an invisible observer of life and thereby feel part of the community, Mansfield reveals that the unobtrusive spinster has become the target of a young couple's scorn, who refer to her as a 'silly old mug' and mock the beloved fox fur she wears round her shoulders. Yet, while portraying the unfortunate spinster as the target of public ridicule, she reveals her to be a woman with needs and desires of her own, who wishes nothing more than to be a part of communal life. Mansfield's rebuttal of the widely held view that the unmarried woman was an unfulfilled, asexual creature deserving of pity or ridicule was similarly refuted in the work of Banti and de Céspedes. Rejecting the popular belief that 'una donna che resta zitella è fallita', Banti depicted a world of female companionship and creativity in 'Sofia o la donna independente', the three spinsters escaping the disapproving gaze of society by creating a world unbound by social constraints (Almanacco di Cordelia, 1933, p. 81). The middle-aged protagonists of de Céspedes's 'Porto', Angiola and Masa, lead similarly solitary lives, away from the prying eyes of the local community. Neither has ever had or desired a relationship with a man, for they look to one another for companionship but when Angiola finds herself alone after the death of her sister, she decides to take her fate into her own hands by embarking on a relationship with Bretta, a local fisherman. It is she who takes the initiative, knocking at his door late one evening, and, rather than resigning herself to a life of celibacy and solitude, she reveals a desire for companionship and an awakening sexuality.

This subtle evocation of female sexuality found an echo in British women's narrative. During the 1920s, the subject of female sexuality had become more public in Britain, aided by the publication of Marie Stopes's *Married Love* in 1918, and, although its portrayal in

fiction still met with disapproval, it was through subtly erotic images that women writers succeeded in conveying sexual desire. In *To the Lighthouse*, the scene in which Mr Ramsay interrupts his wife as she is reading a story to her son is shot through with erotic imagery, Mrs Ramsay offering herself to him as a 'fountain and spray of life', into whose fecund sympathy he plunges 'like a beak of brass, barren and bare' (p. 38). Mansfield gives a similarly delicate evocation of female sexuality in 'Bliss', in which Bertha Young is caught by an overwhelming feeling of ecstasy as she walks down the street, an ecstasy which returns as she stands with her friend Pearl Fulton gazing at the pear tree in the garden, the silvery-green bloom of the tree symbolising her newly discovered sexual needs. The bliss she feels in Pearl's company ignites a feeling of desire for her husband but, as she becomes aware of the source of her bliss, her fantasy is shattered for she sees Pearl kissing her husband and she is plunged into despair.

As her depiction of Bertha's loveless marriage suggests, Mansfield does not show the heterosexual relationship to be a fulfilling one for women; indeed, throughout her work, Mansfield emphasised how sexual love for women was equated with the fear of pregnancy and the constant burden of childbearing. Both Linda Burnell and Frau Brechenmacher are worn down by the seemingly limitless capacity of their bodies to generate new life, while the young waitress in 'At Lehmann's' is forced to realise the consequences of sexual desire when she hears the shriek of Frau Lehmann giving birth in the next door room while she is in the middle of an embrace with a customer. The solution which Mansfield suggests for women to avoid this ignominious fate is to abstain from sexual relationships and turn to one other for companionship, as can be seen in 'At the Bay', when the female members of the Burnell family experience a sense of release once Stanley Burnell has left for work: 'Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house. Their very voices were changed [...]; they sounded warm and loving and as if they shared a secret.'86 The liberating power of the female community is echoed in the work of Marise Ferro and Alba de Céspedes. In Trent'anni (1940), Ferro focuses on two friends who move in together after the death of their husbands and who, in the secure environment of one another's company, rediscover their own voices: 'Solo con lei la mia personalità si sfoga intera, e io, libera di freni, sono completamente sincera.'87 A similar sense of liberation is portrayed in Nessuno

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Katherine Mansfield, 'At the Bay', 1921 (repr. in *Katherine Mansfield: Twelve Stories*, pp. 152-95 (p. 161)).

<sup>87</sup> Marise Ferro, Trent'anni (Milan: Garzanti, 1940), pp. 109-10.

torna indietro, in which de Céspedes depicts the students talking openly with one another in the all-female environment of the *Pensione Grimaldi*. Separated from their families, the girls use the tight-knit group as a support network and, given the depressing picture of male-female relations in the novel, the security offered by female friendship is of particular importance, for it offers the young women the freedom to be themselves and find their own voice. In the words of Anna: "Se ci fosse un uomo, non oseremmo essere sincere. [...] Le donne sono sincere soltanto tra loro." (p. 75)

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

For Italian women writers of the 1930s, the work of Mansfield and Woolf offered a thematic and stylistic point of departure. As women who used their work to explore the female condition but without advocating social change, they proffered a literature which was female rather than feminist, while as writers who explored new literary forms to capture the underlying nature of reality, they created a narrative style attuned to the female sensibility. Like Aleramo, both Mansfield and Woolf explored 'le segrete leggi del ritmo' in their work, and indeed Aleramo identified Woolf as a kindred spirit, describing her as 'una grave amante del misterioso ritmo da cui siam nati' ('Orlando inglese', p. 199). Yet, in contrast to the Italian writer, who championed a literary style that functioned as the pure expression of its author's gender, her British counterparts eschewed an avowedly female literature for a female perspective in their work, a position which was far more compelling for the new generation of writers who were striving for a literary voice that expressed their female identity rather than an overtly feminine prose.

The importance of these two writers lay not only in their lyric style and representation of female experience but also in their position as internationally acclaimed authors who had achieved the parity which the new generation were striving to attain. Held up by such influential critics as Cecchi and Praz as the leading exponents of modernism, whose structured lyricism was superior to the amorphous prose of Joyce, Woolf and Mansfield were seen as heralding a new departure in modern European narrative, developing an innovative style in which intellect and emotion were in perfect balance. Indeed, the esteem in which they were held not only inspired respect for the female literary voice but it also

facilitated the reception of their Italian counterparts, who were seen to be following in their wake. In Cecchi's review of *Itinerario di Paolina*, he claimed that Banti used as her departure point 'disposizioni e motivi [...] elaborati da Caterina Mansfield e Virginia Woolf', drawing an analogy with the 'impressionismo magico' of the former and the 'lirismo lievemente allucinativo' of the latter (*Omnibus*, 17 April 1937, p. 6). Manzini was described in similar terms. Hailed by Giansiro Ferrata as the Italian heir to Mansfield, 'quel che la letteratura inglese ha perduto in Caterina Mansfield (morta ancor giovane [...]), la letteratura italiana sembra ben acquistarlo in Gianna Manzini' (*Solaria*, September 1928, p. 72), she was cited alongside Woolf as forging a new female style which favoured intellect over emotion. In the words of Carlo Bo:

Sono scrittrici più soccorse da una presenza invincibile del loro spirito che spinte da un sangue robusto, intellettuali più che *di vena*, secondo i vecchi schemi: e infine nuove di fronte alla pur gloriosa tradizione delle Lagerlöf, delle Deledda.<sup>88</sup>

Yet, while the critics were keen to cite the names of Banti and Manzini alongside those of Woolf and Mansfield, thereby establishing their position as writers of international standing, they were also anxious to stress the originality of the Italian writers and thereby confirm them as rivals to their British counterparts rather than as followers, as can be seen in Cecchi's review of *Itinerario di Paolina*, in which he emphasised the individuality of its author: 'La Banti [...] ha voluto seguire altra strada che quella dell'imitazione.' (*Omnibus*, 17 April 1937, p. 6) Likewise, Carlo Bo made a clear distinction between Manzini and Woolf in his comparison of the two authors: 'Anch'io ho fatto un nome che sembra obbligatorio per la Manzini, quello della Woolf, ma l'ho fatto soprattutto apposta e con l'intenzione di segnarne il più possibile precisamente le distanze.' ('Note sull'arte di Gianna Manzini', p. 83)

This distinction was enforced by the writers themselves. Whilst acknowledging Woolf's role in encouraging her to strive for the truth, Manzini was keen to stress that she had not learnt anything from Woolf in the conventional sense, the British novelist serving as her guide rather than as a teacher whose work she could emulate: 'Non ho imparato quasi nulla. Piuttosto ebbi da lei [...] il permesso d'essere vera.' ('La lezione della Woolf', pp. 87-88) She was to adopt a similar position with regard to the modernist label which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Carlo Bo, 'Note sull'arte di Gianna Manzini', *Convivium*, January-February 1938 (repr. in *Nuovi studi* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1946), pp. 80-87 (p. 83)).

was ascribed to her. Whilst proving avant-garde in her use of an impressionistic style which employed the stream-of-consciousness technique, she shunned all claims that she belonged to the modernist movement, stating that her desire to innovate was simply a means of expressing her own vitality. Writing in *Album di ritratti* (1964), she declared: 'Non tengo alla novità in sé. Essere nuovi, tutto sommato significa essere vivi. Anzi rifuggo dall'avanguardismo inteso come ricerca di formule, o di espedienti, o di clamore.' Banti displayed a similar reluctance to being categorised within a literary school. Whilst looking to Woolf for inspiration, she refused to see herself as part of a cultural trend, describing the climate of interwar Italy, in which foreign influences abounded, as cliquish and oppressive:

Proust, Joyce, Gide [...] la Woolf, e poi Hemingway, Faulkner [...] proponevano a un'Italia rassegnata ai compromessi, modelli di lettura e di esegesi difficoltose o di spregiudicata crudezza; ogni cosa avvolta nel riflesso di una libertà perduta, solo recuperabile nelle onerose strutture di gruppo, di cerchio chiuso, di *clan* snobistico internazionale. (*Opinioni*, p. 83)

In contrast to their male peers, who viewed the clandestine reading of American fiction as a collective political act, the new generation of female writers did not see themselves as part of the modernist aesthetic. Their shared focus on Mansfield and Woolf was not planned or orchestrated in any way but rather each writer, quite independently from one another, found in their work a point of departure for stylistic experimentation and an exploration of female identity. Nor was their interest in British women's writing a political act in the same way that Pavese and Vittorini portrayed their espousal of American realist fiction in terms of an anti-Fascist statement. Although Woolf expressed a hatred for authoritarian societies which glorified war, revealing a virulent anti-Fascism in Three Guineas (1938) in which she linked the oppression of the Fascist state with the patriarchal hegemony in Western society, there is no indication that her political beliefs had any significant influence on her Italian counterparts. The fact that Three Guineas was not translated into Italian during the ventennio and received scant coverage in the Italian press may partly explain the silence with which her anti-Fascist sentiments were met by Italian women writers. Yet, even in the immediate post-war period, when writers such as Banti and Bellonci were speaking out against the regime's oppression of women, no reference was made to the anti-Fascism of Woolf, which indicates that her influence was literary rather than political in essence.

<sup>89</sup> Gianna Manzini, Album di ritratti (Milan: Mondadori, 1964), p. 224.

Nor did the new generation writers embrace the fiction of Woolf and Mansfield with the all-consuming passion that their male peers seized on American fiction. While producing acclaimed translations of English literature, they did not regard translation as a personal crusade nor did they pen essays hailing its exponents as the instigators of a literary revolution. Theirs was a private response rather than a public demonstration of political or literary affiliation. As Gianna Manzini noted in 'La lezione della Woolf': 'Più che un omaggio a Virginia Woolf, il mio è un atto di umiltà, un rendimento di grazie.' (p. 76) Yet, while the influence of Woolf and Mansfield on female writers was not as conspicuous as that of the American realists on their male counterparts, it was ultimately more profound. Not only did they exert a strong stylistic and thematic influence but they also served as important role models for the new generation who were striving to reconcile their roles as women and writers, encouraging them to explore their femininity in their work without recourse to the confessional register. As Claudio Varese noted with regard to Manzini's willingness to explore her female identity in her work: 'Donna, la Manzini non soltanto mostra la sua femminilità nel tono della sua arte, ma direttamente e indicativamente parla di se stessa come donna e della essenza della femminilità.'90 Moreover, in contrast to the American realists, whose impact diminished once the threat of Fascism disappeared and Italy was exposed to the reality of post-war America, Woolf and Mansfield continued to exert a powerful influence on Italian women writers during the post-war period: in *Pubblici* segreti, Maria Bellonci described Woolf as 'una scrittrice a me carissima' (I, 60); in her historical novel Artemisia (1947), Banti's interrelating of story and history reveals a distinct Woolfian influence, Cecchi noting how she rejected the traditional form of biography in favour of the 'impennato e visionario' method pioneered by Woolf in Orlando;91 while Banti herself attested to the continued relevance of Woolf's pioneering ideas about women and creativity in post-war Italian society: 'Io non mi stancherò di ricordare questa istanza di Virginia Woolf, un autore [...] che, se ancora vivesse, sentirebbe profondamente la forza delle nostre preoccupazioni di oggi.'92

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Claudio Varese, 'Poetica ispirazione e struttura in Gianna Manzini', *Letteratura*, 1946, pp. 90-99 (p. 91).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Emilio Cecchi, 'Ha scelto Artemisia perché la oltraggiarono nell'onore', *L'Europeo*, 25 January 1948 (repr. as '*Artemisia* di Anna Banti', in *Letteratura italiana del Novecento*, II, 907-09 (p. 908)).

For a discussion of the parallels between Artemisia and Orlando and the ways in which Banti and Woolf both undermine the objectivity of the biographer, see Maria Carla Papini, 'Artemisia e Orlando', in L'opera di Anna Banti, ed. by Enza Biagini, pp. 119-34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Anna Banti, 'Responsabilità della donna italiana', in *Le donne e la cultura*, ed. by Ada Gobetti and others (Rome: Noi donne, 1953), pp. 89-93 (pp. 91-92).

In contrast to Pavese and Vittorini, whose interest in American fiction was prompted by specific political concerns and confined to a historical moment, the concerns which underscored the work of the new generation women writers were not unique to Fascist Italy. From their search for an authentic female literary voice to the representation of subjective female experience, the issues they explored in their work were not motivated by a political agenda but held a universal significance. Finding in the fluid style of Woolf and Mansfield new forms of discourse which questioned fixed meanings and challenged the patriarchal voice, they used the modernist aesthetic of the British writers as a point of departure from which to pursue their own individual path, the stylistic and thematic resemblances in their work the result of shared concerns rather than a deliberate attempt to create a female aesthetic.

# Conclusion

This thesis has challenged the view that the 1930s represented a hiatus in female literary production in Italy. Through my examination of female literary output of the thirties and its reception by the public, critics, and regime, I have revealed how the decade represented a period of vigorous female literary activity as increasing numbers of women embarked on a literary career and their work met with widespread public success and critical approbation. In contrast to the political arena, in which the female voice was increasingly stifled as the government sought to repress the fledgling feminist movement, the literary sphere saw women express themselves as never before, with new opportunities available in newspapers and periodicals, the new publishing houses signing up female writers and promoting their work to a mass audience, and literary magazines dedicating significant coverage to their work.

This period of vigorous literary activity was accompanied by a notable shift in the perception of women's writing as the female writer shed her image as a scribbler and was embraced as a literary amazon and donna attiva, who was ranked alongside her male peers and hailed for her contribution to the cultural standing of the new Italy. During the course of the decade, female narrative established itself as a vital new force in Italian literature and, although the writers who spearheaded this renaissance would continue to encounter marginalisation throughout their careers, the critical acclaim which greeted their early literary production meant that women's writing enjoyed a significant increase in both profile and status during the thirties, while the practice of relegating female literary output to the subgenre of letteratura femminile all but ceased. By the early 1940s, women had established themselves as important members of Italian literary society: their work was included in major literary series and invited comparisons with leading European writers; they were the recipients of major literary prizes, Bellonci winning the coveted Premio Viareggio in 1939; and they took up important editorial positions, Orsola Nemi co-editing the prestigious Dizionario delle Opere e dei Personaggi in 1941. This position was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The continued marginaliation experienced by women writers in Italy is noted by Anna Banti in her interview with Sandra Petrignani: 'Sono citata nelle enciclopedie, sono presente nelle antologie. Ma una scrittrice, anche se di successo, è comunque emarginata.' (p. 106).

reinforced after the war when the new generation took an active role in post-war cultural life: de Céspedes founded and edited *Mercurio* in 1944, a cultural journal to which writers and artists of the calibre of Moravia and Picasso contributed; Banti co-founded the leading arts journal *Paragone* in 1950; while Bellonci was responsible for fostering a climate of intellectual debate through the weekly meetings she held at her home from 1944 onwards, the group, known as the *Amici della domenica*, bringing together many of the leading writers and artists of the day and resulting in the foundation of the *Premio Strega* in 1947, which was to become one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Italy.

As well as the strengthening of women's position within the literary establishment, the thirties also witnessed the emergence of a new vein in female narrative. As a new generation of women writers came to the fore who had benefited from greater educational opportunities and increased cultural exchange with Europe, so they produced a new type of narrative which was attuned to the female sensibility but far removed from the confessional register. While each writer possessed an individual style and was fiercely resistant to categorisation, they shared a common interest in representing the female condition and, through a close reading of their texts, I have shown how they bore stylistic and thematic resemblances as they employed new techniques to explore the female consciousness and created narratives that depicted the conflict between women's desire for independence and their need to conform to conservative models of femininity. At a time when gender roles were being closely scrutinised and femininity redefined according to prescriptive formulae, these writers offered an alternative vision of womanhood to the official model of the exemplary wife and mother and, although their work was not political in intent, it provided a clear challenge to the regime in its championing of the individual over the collective, its condemnation of patriarchal oppression, and its portrayal of female identity beyond the constraints of familial and marital enclosures.

In their focus on female rather than feminist issues and their search for new narrative forms which would capture the fluid nature of identity, the new generation bore close similarities with their European counterparts, most notably Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, whose poetic narratives, which privileged the private female world over the public male arena, offered them a blueprint for a lyric style which combined a penetrating intelligence with a keen emotional insight. Seeking to convey the fragmentary nature of reality, they embraced the modernist style of Woolf and Mansfield, adopting narrative strategies which broke with tradition, employing a narrative structure whose principle of

connection was association and emphasising the importance of personal impression over the accurate representation of social reality. In so doing, they not only resisted the official Fascist triumphalist style, which was rooted in the contemporary political climate, but they also championed an alternative poetic to the neorealist aesthetic posited by their male peers.

This resistance to the dominant literary trends was to continue in the post-war period and become a defining characteristic of their writing. At a time when political engagement was demanded of writers and neorealism held up as the most appropriate means to portray the social and political hopes of the post-Fascist era, the new generation remained steadfast in their pursuit of an individual literary path that was resistant to political and social engagement, developing themes and narrative strategies which they had first employed in the thirties. Subjectivity, rather than the dispassionate objectivity of neorealism, served as the organising principle of their work, while history was portrayed in terms of the private history of individuals whose lives were touched obliquely by external events. This representation of history refracted through individual experience is evident in their use of the historical novel. Developed by Bellonci in the late thirties, the female historical novel functioned as the subjective recounting of personal experience rather than as fictionalised documentary. Revealing that recorded history was the product of those in power, a viewpoint which echoed that of the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin, for whom the historical flow of facts rendered invisible the lives of the working class, writers such as Bellonci and Banti focused on the private history of individuals, whose lives had been reinterpreted by, or erased from, official history. In Lucrezia Borgia, Bellonci rewrote the life of the Italian noblewoman from a personal perspective to counter the myths surrounding one of the most notorious women in history, and this was a strategy which Banti would adopt in Artemisia (1947), a work which interwove biography and fiction to reveal the forgotten history of a seventeenth-century painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, and her psychological development as she survived the public humiliation of a rape trial to become an artist of repute. Not only is Artemisia seen to transgress traditional roles through her separation from her husband and pursuit of artistic achievement but Banti herself transgressed the traditional boundaries between biographer and subject as the narrator's voice merges with that of Artemisia, thereby undermining the supposed objectivity of biography. This interpretation of history as subjective truth would continue to underscore female narrative throughout the latter part of the century as women writers used historical fiction to challenge official versions of history and make visible the marginalised in society, from Morante's La storia (1974),

whose ambiguous title emphasised her view that history was a form of narrative, to Dacia Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990), which recounted the life of an eighteenth-century noblewoman rendered deaf-mute after being raped as a child but who used her reading and writing skills to communicate with the outside world.<sup>2</sup>

The female historical novel was not the only genre to have its roots in literary production of the thirties but many of the concerns which came to dominate Italian women's writing in the second half of the century, from the suppression of women's creative power to the deconstruction of artificial notions of femininity, were anticipated in thirties' narrative. Although resistant to a feminist agenda, the new generation explored issues in their early narratives which would be taken up in feminist literature of the 1970s: Banti's portrayal of the art history student Maria Alessi in *Sette lune*, who defiantly forges her own creative path despite familial pressures to conform to a prescribed image of womanhood, prefigures Gina Lagorio's *La spiaggia del lupo* (1977), in which Angela pursues an artistic career despite the difficulties and disapproval generated by her status as an unmarried mother; while the themes enunciated by Giuliana Ferri in *Un quarto di donna* (1973), which explores the conflict experienced by women who desire both intellectual and emotional fulfilment, are anticipated in the work of Cialente and Ferro, the eponymous heroines of *Natalia* and *Barbara* experiencing emotional confusion in their simultaneous yearning for independence and security.

Similar comparisons can be also drawn with women's fiction of the 1980s and its exploration of female identity, Fabrizia Ramondino's *Althénopis* (1981), in which the narrator moves from a genderless childhood to an oppressive image of femininity, echoing Banti's *Itinerario di Paolina*, which traces the attempts by Paolina to construct a model of prototypical feminine behaviour by emulating common female traits. The narrative structure which Ramondino employs in the novel, with memory functioning as the linking device as it weaves together the colours, smells, and sounds of childhood in a series of vignettes, finds parallels with the impressionistic style of both Banti and Manzini, while comparisons can also be drawn between Ramondino's poetic language, suffused with

Brooke (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For an overview of the historical novel in Italian female narrative, see Alba della Fazia Amoia, 'The Historical Novel', in *Women on the Italian Literary Scene*, pp. 36-56; Carol Lazzaro-Weis, 'The Historical Novel: History as Female Subjectivity', in *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing*, 1968-1990 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 120-57; and *Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History*, ed. by Maria Ornella Marotti and Gabriella

Neapolitan dialect, and the oneiric prose of Ortese, an author whom she described in *Taccuino tedesco* (1987) as her 'fantasma amato' due to their similar backgrounds and shared concerns, both writers suffering from a profound sense of alienation and anxiety with the corruption of the modern world (cited in Rusconi, p. 13). The influence of Ortese can also be found in the writing of Paola Capriolo, whose novel *Il doppio regno* (1991) blurs the distinction between reality and illusion as she interweaves fantastic and realist elements in a manner which sites her firmly in the European modernist tradition, alongside Ortese and Morante. Set in an isolated hotel, the novel portrays the narrator's attempts to piece together her past through fragmented memories while she undergoes a gradual metamorphosis of her identity as she is assimilated into the routines of the hotel. In a rhythmic prose, which echoes the melodic narrative of Manzini, Capriolo conjurs up the dual kingdoms of reality and dream, the former requiring the painful reconstruction of one's identity while the latter entails the total annihilation of the self.<sup>3</sup>

In their examination of the social construction of female identity and their criticism of women's social and cultural subordination, the new generation anticipated many of the themes which would dominate Italian women's writing in the second half of the century, while their development of a poetic narrative style, which interwove memory and sensory experience, reality and illusion, positioned their work in the European modernist tradition and paved the way for modern-day writers, such as Ramondino, Capriolo, and Francesca Duranti. Sharing many of the interests and concerns of their predecessors, these novelists not only reveal their kinship with European writers, Capriolo citing the influence of Conrad and Mann, and Duranti that of James, but they also display a notable resistance to categorisation, particularly on the grounds of gender, Capriolo rejecting the label *scrittrice* as reductive while Duranti claims that she is *neutro* when she writes (cited in Wood, *Italian Women's Writing*, p. 19).

The new generation can thus be seen as key figures in twentieth-century Italian narrative, whose early literary production not only raised the status of women's writing in the thirties but was also influential in shaping the direction of female narrative in the postwar period and beyond. Launching their literary careers in a period governed by gender

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For an overview of modern Italian female narrative, see *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy*, ed. by Santo L. Aricò; Adalgisa Giorgio, 'The Novel, 1965-2000', in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, ed. by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, pp. 218-37; Carol Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing*; and Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing*, 1860-1994.

politics, they used their fiction to overturn deep-rooted prejudices about women's writing and the female role, creating innovative narratives which combined a sharp intellect with a keen sensibility and portraying female protagonists who refused to conform to prescribed roles but demanded the right to determine their own lives. Establishing the female voice as a vital new force in Italian narrative, they secured a position of new-found respect for the woman writer and opened up female literature to a wide and diverse readership, and it is for this reason that the 1930s deserves to be recognised as an important milestone in female literary production in Italy.

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