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Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction (review)

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contenuti storico-ideologici; magari collegandolo allo studio di Florian Mussgnug su teorizzazione e sperimentazione neoavanguardistica con una scrittura che tende a dissolvere le differenze di genere tra prosa e poesia.

Ulteriore attenzione avrebbe forse meritato l'esperienza poetica femminile per approfondire doverosamente i rapidi cenni di Moroni ed ampliare, anche provocatoriamente, il contesto di riferimento per l'analisi testuale che Daniela La Penna propone di *Serie ospedaliera* della Rosselli—unica donna poeta a cui sia stato dedicato un saggio—per dimostrare come inter- e intra-testualità siano il frutto di una sofisticata strategia compositiva ed espressiva grazie alla quale la Rosselli ridefinisce nel tempo la propria identità poetica.

Per concludere, il lettore può divinare quali relazioni abbiano originato uno scambio di opinioni più o meno vivaci tra relatori e pubblico; al lettore di fatto è domandato il compito di seguire le tracce interpretative lasciate dai singoli interventi per continuare la ricerca con il senso, purtroppo, di una dispersione di energie critiche che forse una più attenta compilazione avrebbe potuto evitare.

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Susanna Scarparo. *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction*. Leicester, UK: Troubador, 2005. Pp. xv + 189.

The title of this book, an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study of four fictional biographies, echoes the frustration of the biographer in pinning down the subject of her work, but also the elusiveness of recording history, the main link among the works considered. The author—who has ties to Italy, the United States, and Australia—examines two classical Italian fictional biographies: Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947) and Maria Bellonci's *Rinascimento privato* (1985), along with *L.C.* (1986), by American author Susan Daitch, and *Poppy* (1990), a biography of the mother of the author, the Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska.

Scarparo claims that the purpose of her book is the presentation of a theory of biography as shaped by a metafictional dialogue between biographers, who are writers of fiction, and their subjects. Her intention is to shift the focus of biographical writing from the biographer's tale to the subject who is being represented.

To this end, in her introduction, Scarparo revisits the relationship between biography and fiction. She discusses Woolf's feminist reconceptualization of

history and then focuses on the degree to which the authors of fictional historical biographies make use of both fictional and biographical material in their reinterpretation and/or invention of history. Scarparo begins with a reference to Virginia Woolf's essay "The New Biography," in which Woolf argues that the challenge of writing a biography consists in finding a means to respect both facts and invention, before concluding, in *Orlando*, that only "those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it—the poets and the novelists—can be trusted" to give any truthful account of the past.

In chapter 1, Scarparo examines the three parallel stories that are woven into the fabric of Banti's *Artemisia*: the story of the life of Artemisia the artist, the struggle to remember the lost manuscript, and the relationship between the character of Artemisia and the persona of the narrator. While these stories have been explored before, Scarparo rereads them from a unique perspective, often making connections with other writers. For example, Scarparo equates the lost manuscript of Artemisia's life with the loss of the histories of countless women of the past. The despair for that loss becomes the despair—addressed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*—for the loss of women's history. Italianists will find of particular interest this chapter's review of the critical literature regarding Artemisia as an artist and as a woman, and the discussion of the recent controversy about Artemisia's depiction in the film of the same name by French director A. Merlet.

Chapter 2 is equally interesting to Italianists. Here, as in her discussion of *Artemisia*, Scarparo considers the metafictional nature of Maria Bellonci's *Rinascimento privato*. While in *Artemisia* this is very clear because of the dialogue between author and subject, Bellonci proceeds in subtler ways. Since Isabella d'Este did not keep a diary, Bellonci chooses to fabricate d'Este's fictional biography as a first-person narrative, taking care to alert the reader to the fact that the subject's reflections, as well as references to her personal and emotional life, are a re-creation. Moreover, in the interpretation of facts offered by the fictional character Robert de la Pole in his letters to Isabella, Bellonci also stresses the metafictional dimension of biography.

In *Artemisia* and *Rinascimento privato*, Scarparo revisits the question of whether exceptional women can be seen as emancipatory role models for women. The examples that she selects from Isabella's life lead Scarparo to the conclusion that they cannot, since their success is ultimately based on the oppression of other women. The invalidation of models for women's emancipation is also found in Scarparo's reading of *L.C.*, in which the protagonist, Lucienne Crozier, tries unsuccessfully to emulate the exceptional

female figures of her time, Madame de Staël and George Sand. Indeed, Lucienne concludes that much of de Staël's and Sand's extraordinary achievements depend not so much on individual behavior, but on the availability of favorable sociopolitical alliances.

*L.C.*, the fictional biography explored in chapter 3 of *Elusive Subjects*, differs from the first two works considered by Scarparo because Lucienne Crozier, who may or may not have lived, was not exceptional enough for her name to be recorded by history. A middle-class woman caught in the French uprising of 1848, Lucienne flees to Algiers when in danger of being arrested and she eventually disappears. Susan Daitch imagines that the manuscript of Lucienne's life—with the exception of the last chapter—falls in the hands of an independent scholar who translates it from French. After the scholar's death her assistant retranslates the manuscript, along with the final chapter that had ended in her possession. This new translation, which is dramatically different from the first, creates an alternative epilogue for Lucienne and indicates how in *L.C.* the metafictional dimension is at the core of the narrative. The process of translating is portrayed as unreliable, colored by the translators' life experiences and biases, so that it is impossible to ever know what truly happened.

The fourth chapter of this study examines *Poppy*, Modjeska's biography of her mother. *Poppy* is especially effective in showing the elusiveness of the subject of a biography. Modjeska knew her mother well throughout her life and was familiar with the places and the historical time in which she had lived, the people she loved, the family history, and the significant events of her life. Yet, the book is an unnerving and ultimately futile search for the "real" Poppy, who remains elusive to the very end.

Scarparo proceeds to discuss how *Poppy*, like the other biographies, exhibits a crossover of genres, whereby biography slides into the realm of autobiography. Scarparo notes the frequent intrusion of the author's own life in that of her subject and argues that they are indicative of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*—that is, the encroachment of the present into the past. With regard to the other three fictional biographies, Scarparo makes analogous claims in the dialogues between Artemisia and the persona of the narrator; in the narrative structure of *L.C.*, where the life experiences of the two translators intrude in their reconstruction of L.C.'s life; and in the coinciding reflections of Isabella d'Este and Bellonci that occur as Isabella contemplates the fate of her own grandmother, Isabella di Chiaromonte. Besides being indicative of the permeability between the genres of biography and autobiography, these

intrusions of the present in the past challenge, according to Scarparo, any notion of historical completeness.

In conclusion, Scarparo's book is a worthy study. Italianists, in particular, will appreciate the extensive bibliography and the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach that Scarparo brings to her examination of *Artemisia* and *Rinascimento privato*.

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Grace Russo Bullaro. *Beyond Life Is Beautiful: Comedy and Tragedy in the Cinema of Roberto Benigni*. Leicester, UK: Troubador, 2005. Pp. xiii + 324.

The field of Italian cinema studies has seen an upsurge of scholarship on Roberto Benigni and his opus ever since his movie *La vita è bella* was awarded three Academy Awards in 1999 (Best Actor, Best Foreign Movie, Best Original Score). Since then, Benigni has become a *cause célèbre*, as critics have praised or taken him to task for his depiction of the Holocaust in that movie, but also as they have revisited the rest of his cinematic career to unearth its origins, its depths, and its shortcomings. Grace Russo Bullaro's new edited volume manages to add some welcome insights to this already crowded field of study. Like many edited works, the volume has peaks and valleys in the quality of the work submitted; but, especially in the second half, the contributions show fresh perspectives in the discussion of the Tuscan actor and director's work.

Russo Bullaro's decision to divide the articles into two sections, "The Foundation" and "A Prismatic Look at *Life Is Beautiful*," works well. The essays are thus grouped together in two phases: those that discuss Benigni as actor and director in works *other* than his most celebrated movie, and those that revisit *Life Is Beautiful* through new approaches and insights. While it is difficult to see the "beyond" of the title emerging from either section (since most contributors focus on Benigni's work before or during *Life Is Beautiful*), the book succeeds, as the editor suggests, "to look more closely not only at *Life Is Beautiful*, but also at the fundamental theoretical, thematic, conceptual and structural elements that have characterized the Benigni signature style since the beginning" (23). Indeed, the contributions are varied enough to discuss the majority of Benigni's work as an actor and director, both on Italian television and in the movies, from *You Upset Me* (1983) all the way to the international cinematic flop *Pinocchio* (2002).