TOUCHING ON TABOOS IMAGINING AND RECONCEPTUALIZING MOTHERHOOD IN SOME POST-'68 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES BY WOMEN

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Abstract

This article holds that the theme of the maternal, and of motherhood itself, constitutes a taboo in women's autobiographical writing of the most feminist period in Italy's history, immediately after 1968. In the first part, the article underlines the fact that the voices heard in many of these texts are daughterly discourses, not motherly ones (and this is part of a tendency that extends beyond literature to the fields of sociology, history and psychoanalysis). It suggests, too, that the refusal to evoke the maternal in Italian women's writing is a new phenomenon of the twentieth century, given that the figure of the mother is so important for Italian women writers through the nineteenth century (unlike the situation we find elsewhere in Europe and in the United States). It explains the inherent difficulties in representing the maternal within a feminist context (from a theoretical perspective). In the second section, the article focuses on two writers (Lalla Romano and Lidia Ravera) who confront this taboo of the maternal, investing it with a political dimension, presenting it as problematic and investigating it as a vehicle of self-investigation, of probing the Other within the self, of exploring a diffuse sense of identity. The article proposes, finally, that their work (along with the writings of Gina Lagorio and Clara Sereni) reveals a mode of 'maternal thinking', in the sense that this is defined by Sara Ruddick, and that they offer us a new metaphysics, in the manner elaborated by Adriana Cavarero.

Introduction

Motherhood is a vexed topic in Italian women's writings of the Twentieth century, particularly in those writings that are autobiographical. However, the difficulties around conceptualising motherhood are not confined to Italian women's writings, nor to the realm of creative writing. There is, in most literary representations of the mother-daughter relationship, a proliferation of daughterly discourses. Steph Lawler, in her sociological study of mothers and daughters, makes the point that «the perspective of the mother has rarely been explored […]. The subject of feminist analyses […] has largely been the daughter, against whom the mother is 'other'».[1] In the field of developmental psychology, too, Ann Phoenix and Anne Woollett note «the contrast between the attention given to children […] and the lack of attention given to their mothers».[2] Discussing the history of psychoanalysis' lack of attention to the mother as subject, Garner, Kahane and Sprengnether observe that «psychoanalysis […] has yet to develop a story of the mother as other than the object

[1] Steph Lawler, *Mothering the Self: mothers, daughters, subjects*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 5.
[2] Ann Phoenix, Anne woollett, *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies*, London, Sage, 1991, p. 2.

of the infant's desire or the matrix from which he or she develops an infant subjectivity. The mother herself as speaking subject, as author, is missing from these dramas».[1] History, too, has been surprisingly uninterested in the story of mothering. As Marina D'Amelia outlines, «diversamente da quanto si poteva presumere, l'attenzione degli storici nei confronti del fenomeno maternità è [...] relativamente recente»,[2] and this lack of interest is not, as she goes on to show, confined to Italy. There is, then, a notable silence around the mother as subject in many areas and it should hardly be surprising if some of that silence is mirrored in the area of Italian women's autobiographical writings. Apart from this cultural uncertainty around, or lack of interest in, representing motherhood in general, there is, of course, a particular series of configurations of motherhood in Italian history which might well prove a further disincentive for women writers to tackle the topic, especially in any personal sense. Annarita Buttafuoco discusses what she calls 'the cult of motherhood' that is characteristic of the period from the 1890s to the advent of Fascism.[3] This cult of motherhood proves, in itself, contradictory as it may seem, to be on the one hand, the reason advanced (even by feminists of the early part of this period) for women's right to education and to full citizenship – if women are to raise the next generation, to literally and morally, 'make Italians', then they must surely be adequately fitted by the State to do so, and they must receive adequate recognition for the seriousness of the task they undertake; on the other hand, this cult of motherhood furnishes a one-dimensional and restrictive image of womanhood as motherhood. As Buttafuoco stresses, «in the years following unification, the image of woman that emerged was essentially that of 'mother of the nation'».[4] Indeed, the reaction of women writers in Nineteenth-century Italy to the prescriptions of motherhood and the proscriptions of any other versions of womanhood is fascinating. While it is something of a truism that, in English-language as well as in French women's writings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, «mothers tend to be absent, silent or devalued»,[5] as Marianne Hirsch demonstrates in her wide-ranging study, this is patently not the case in Italian women's writing. Instead, Italian women writers of the late Nineteenth century, in particular, return fairly obsessively to the topics of maternity, motherhood, mothering, the figure of the mother and of the mother-daughter relationship in particular; and this mother-daughter relationship is, fascinatingly, viewed as often from the perspective of the mother as from that of the daughter,[6] so it would appear that there exists a maternal discourse in Italian women's writing of the Nineteenth century at least. Thus, while Margaret Homans can reasonably speculate that, in English fiction,

[1] Shirley N. Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether, *The (M)Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 25.

[2] Marina D'Amelia, ed. *Storia della maternità*, Rome, Laterza, 1997, p. v.

[3] 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: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States 1880s-1950s*, eds Gisela Bock, Pat Thane [1997], London, Routledge, 1994, pp. 178-195 (p. 179).

[4] Ivi, p. 179.

[5] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 14.

[6] See Ursula Fanning, *Gender Meets Genre: Woman as Subject in the Fictional Universe of Matilde Serao*, Dublin-Portland, Oregon, Irish Academic Press, 2002, especially chapters 2 and 5 for ananalysis of the representation of mothering in Serao's writings and Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 2002, for a wide-ranging study of representations of maternity in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries in Italy.

any kind of mother-daughter discourse is «lost to most women writers before the twentieth century»,[1] this is not true of Italian women's writing. In what are often intensely emotionally-charged narratives, Italian women writers of the Nineteenth century tease out the meanings of motherhood in their fictions, and variously see the mother-child relationship as enormously enriching, or potentially threatening, but always transformative. Likewise, the representations of pregnancy in their writings vary from the horrendous and life-threatening to the rewarding and life-affirming. The dilemmas raised in these fictions are sometimes strikingly modern, with their considerations of what mothering means, and what might be considered their anticipation of something akin to what Sara Ruddick terms «maternal thinking»,[2] and even of a kind of 'affidamento' (entrustment) almost as it is understood in the context of late twentieth-century Italian feminist discussions on non-biological 'mothering'.[3]

In the early twentieth century, of course, it is Sibilla Aleramo who first centralises motherhood, to devastating effect, in her autobiographical novel, *Una donna*.[4] The shock waves caused by Aleramo's work, as well as by the critical reaction to it, I contend, contribute to a silence in Italian women's autobiographical writings on the topic for some time. Moreover, the advent of Fascism not so very much later created what becomes nothing less than a taboo area for women writers. Mothering, I suggest, is often off-limits, autobiographically, because of the discourses around it in the Fascist state. As Chiara Saraceno notes, «both the apparent biological formulation of the maternal function, reducing women to producers of the race, and its linking with the interests of the nation are characteristic of fascism».[5] Fascism, thus, builds on tendencies manifested during the period of Unification, as far as motherhood is concerned, but intensifies these. Alessandra Gissi points out that, under Fascism, «maternity was transformed into a duty towards the state».[6] The centrality of motherhood to the Fascist enterprise is stressed by Elizabeth Dixon Whitaker, when she identifies the differences between Italy and other nations, in terms of demographic policies, as residing in Italy's «bringing motherhood to the center of domestic policies».[7] Lesley Caldwell is clear, in her study of Fascist cinema, on the «relentless familialism» of Fascism.[8] Again, it can be hardly surprising if, in a period where to mention mother-

[1] Margaret homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 226.

[2] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* [1980], *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcott, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 1983, pp. 213-30. eadem, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989.

[3] 'Affidamento' is based on a practice begun by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in the early 1980s. See Adalgisa giorgio, *Real Mothers and Symbolic Mothers. The Maternal and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*, in *Sguardi sull'Italia*, eds Gino Bedani, Zygmunt Barański, Anna Laura Lepschy, Leeds, Society for Italian Studies, Occasional Paper no. 3, 1997, pp. 222-241 for a detailed discussion of the process. A version of entrustment is practised, for instance, by the female characters in Matilde Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli*, Milan, Treves, 1884.

[4] Sibilla Aleramo, *Una donna* [1906], Milan, Feltrinelli, 1982.

[5] Chiara Saraceno, *Redefining Maternity and Paternity: gender, pronatalism and social policies in Fascist Italy* in Bock, Thane, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-212, p. 199.

[6] Alessandra Gissi, *Between Tradition and Profession: Italian Midwivesduring the Fascist Period*, in*Gender, Family and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy. 1860-1945*, ed. Perry Willson, Basingstoke-New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 122-138, p. 126.

[7] Elizabeth Dixon Whitaker, *Measuring Mamma's Milk: Fascism and the Medicalization of Maternity in Italy*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 7.

[8] Lesley Caldwell, *«Madri d'Italia»: Film and Fascist Concern with Motherhood*, in *Women and Italy: Essays*

hood at all was to become involved in a political debate, many women writers resort to silence or to obliqueness, especially where they are engaged in self-representation. It is politically problematic to be negative about motherhood, but perhaps even more problematic to be in any way positive about it.

Italian feminism, too, in the latter half of the twentieth century, militates against personal discussions of mothering (despite its focus on the mother and on difference) insofar as its discussions of mothers were often largely negative. Luisa Passerini discusses «the critique of motherhood in the feminism of the early 1970s»,[1] and its possible effects in terms of modifying women's lifestyles in Italy, encouraging them to either postpone or reject childbearing. Motherhood, from being a state most desired by the compromised Fascist State, moves to being an undesirable and unspeakable condition in the late Twentieth century for very different reasons. There is, once more, a real taboo around voicing maternal experience at this time. As Adalgisa Giorgio observes:

> Feminist analyses of women's cultural and social subordination published in the 1970s put the mother on trial for her complicity with patriarchal norms and for being the agent of their perpetuation, for holding back the daughter's process of individuation, for acting as regulator of her sexuality, and generally for hindering her emancipation and autonomy.[2]

That's a lot of blame for the figure of the mother to bear; it may well account, in part, for the prevalence of daughterly discourses in Italian women's narratives of the Twentieth century and it suggests that we might expect to encounter yet more silence around the experience of mothering in late Twentieth-century women's narrative. Fortunately, there are some outstanding exceptions to this silence – writers who really grapple with the complexities of motherhood, sometimes while making explicit reference to the difficult issues raised around motherhood by feminist criticism. Some of their works suggest that women writers, maybe especially feminist writers, much like feminist critics, in the late Twentieth century worry about the essentialist implications in speaking of motherhood (especially in the historically-charged Italian context), about the danger of equating the feminine with the maternal, of collapsing the one into the other. As Patrice DiQuinzio puts it: «motherhood is impossible: it is impossible for feminist theory to avoid the issue of mothering and it is impossible for feminist theory to resolve it».[3]

Even without the problems raised by feminism in relation to motherhood, there is another important aspect to writing the self and writing in the voice of the mother. It seems to me that the representation of motherhood, when writing autobiographically, hinges on a particular representation (and, indeed, a particular experience) of identity. However fashionable the idea of the divided self in post-modernism, motherhood literally entails a particular kind of division of the self, and that kind of self-

on Gender, Culture and History, eds Zygmunt G. Barański, Shirley W. Vinall, Basingstoke-London, Macmillan, 1991, pp. 43-63, p. 50.

[1] Luisa Passerini, *The Women's Movement in Italy and the Events of 1968*, in *Visions and Revisions: Women in Italian Culture*, eds Mirna Cicioni, Nicole Prunster, Oxford, Berg, 1993, pp. 167-182, p. 177.

[2] adalgisa Giorgio, ed., *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*, Oxford-New York, Berghahn Books, 2002, p. 5.

[3] Patrice Diquinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problems of Mothering*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. xx.

division (as well as the representation of it) may be especially fearsome. As Mazzoni puts it, «pregnancy and childbirth, with their challenges to bodily boundaries and to self-definition, physically illustrate the disruptions to the self that are entailed by the encounter with an Other, with difference».[1] The pregnant woman is always-already split and, as such, may be a very disturbing figure for she literally embodies the split self. She is both subject and object of a division-in-process. At least as disconcerting, as we shall see from late Twentieth-century writers on maternity, there is an uncertainty surrounding what happens after childbirth and, often, a question-mark over whether the mother can ever return to what passes for 'normal' in Western culture.

Given all of these factors, the wonder is that we find any accounts of the maternal at all in women's autobiographical writings. There is no cultural framework into which such writing easily fits, and it risks touching on so many taboos (especially in the Italian context) that it is a veritable minefield. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, there is, moreover, a complete «lack of cultural discourses setting forth woman's *subjective* pleasures in mothering (apart from such pleasures taking place under the auspices of the Father or the state)».[2] To voice such pleasures in Twentieth-century Italy (though this is never done by our writers without a concomitant awareness of the problems involved in mothering) is an enterprise fraught with difficulty and open to misunderstanding. Indeed, for critics too, writing the maternal is tricky at best. As Mazzoni states, «whenever the maternal is invoked by a feminist […] paradox and contradictions, leading to implacable (self) criticism, are just around the corner».[3] Nonetheless, the topic is important – crucial, it transpires, to the self-definition of some writers. While addressing it, I want to be mindful of DiQuinzio's salutary admonition that it is impossible to provide any totalising account of mothering,[4] as well as to acknowledge that the impossibility of offering such an account is evidenced by the variety of representations of mothering that our writers offer. What is also clear, though, is that mothering is an important issue for certain women writers, whether as a shadowy part of their self-representation, as a fantasy of another way of being, or as an identity that must, eventually, be explored, teased out, faced up to, however uncomfortable that process might be. Women's writing in Italy in the late Twentieth century, in particular, and some feminist criticism in the field in the Twenty-first century, has begun to undo the long process described by Marianne Hirsch in which «feminist writing and scholarship, continuing in large part to adopt daughterly perspectives, […] [keep] mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility».[5] This leads to the telling of exciting new stories, and to new kinds of self-representation which prove fascinating in their explorations of identity precisely from a maternal perspective. It may be true that, as Margaret Homans suggests, «contemporary women's writing – critical and theoretical, as well as literary – is still playing out the nineteenth century's contradictions»,[6] but this playing out is done in the rather different historical and theoretical context of the Twentieth century, where the topic of mothering is approached from a series of different perspectives and angles.

[1] Cristina Mazzoni, *op. cit.,* p. 100.

[2] E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 4.

[3] Cristina Mazzoni, *op. cit.,*pp. 99-100.

[4] Patrice Diquinzio, *op. cit.,* p. 28.

[5] Marianne Hirsch, *op. cit.,* p. 163.

[6] Margaret Homans, *op. cit.,* p. xiii.

Politicizing and problematizing motherhood: Lalla Romano and Lidia Ravera

What Luisa Passerini refers to as «the critique of motherhood» is met by these two writers in various ways,[1] sometimes obliquely, sometimes head on. Lalla Romano politicizes motherhood obliquely in her 1969 novel, *Le parole tra noi leggere*.[2] She is engaged in writing an unfashionable experience. Beyond this, she is well aware of the possible limitations of motherhood. She would appear to share the view expressed by Anna Scattigno that «proprio la maternità è dunque l'elemento nuovo che connota la definizione moderna di esclusione delle donne dalla individualità e quindi dalla cittadinanza».[3] Very early in this tale of a mother-son relationship, the narrator insists «in verità non ero io la 'madre'»,[4] thus indicating a clear distance between herself and what she perceives as a traditional maternal role. She repeatedly underlines that she is not conventionally maternal, referring to her «scarsa vocazione materna»,[5] and even goes so far as to assert: «non dovevo aver figli io».[6] And yet, in underlining how motherhood is traditionally thought, in rejecting conventional motherhood as something with which she will not, cannot, does not want to be associated, Romano reconceptualizes it, presenting us with a complex, interconnected, conflictual but intensely loving relationship that incorporates both mother and son, as we shall see shortly.[7]

The most overt politicization of motherhood is to be found in the works of Lidia Ravera. Both her 1979 novel, *Bambino mio*,[8] and her later *In quale nascondiglio del cuore*,[9] engage directly with traditional views of mothering and deliberately set out to reshape it. Ravera, as an active feminist, was very conscious of the denigration of motherhood that was part and parcel of the 1970s. She goes so far as to refer to the mere act of thinking of about the possibility of motherhood as «il pensiero proibito».[10] When with her female friends, she literally finds it impossible to voice her desire for a child.[11] When the narrator eventually finds that she is pregnant, her friends are troubled: «Io sono l'oggetto di cure amorose. Mi si invita per lo piú a liberarmi di te».[12] The distrust of feminism for motherhood is writ large here. More than any of the women writers of the late Twentieth century, too, Ravera rejects a particular (traditional) kind of mothering: «nego mia madre, odio il sacrificio [...] sono sradicata, libera».[13] Her own life is lived in deliberate contrast with that of her mother, and of preceding generations of mothers. She struggles with the idea of the mother per se, in terms reminiscent of those used by Aleramo: «una madre non è una persona».[14] What is reflected here is that which Scattigno describes as a

[1] Luisa Passerini, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

[2] Lalla Romano, *Le parole tra noi leggere*, Turin, Einaudi, 1969.

[3] Anna Scattigno, *La figura materna tra emancipazionismo e femminismo* in *Storia della maternità*, cit., pp. 273-299, p. 274.

[4] Lalla Romano, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[5] Ivi, p. 34.

[6] Ivi, p. 33.

[7] The writings of Gina Lagorio (especially *Un ciclone chiamato Titti*, [1969], Milan, Rizzoli (BUR), 2003 and of Clara Sereni (especially *Casal,inghitudine* Turin, Einaudi, 1987) share many of the same characteristics of oblique (and, in Sereni's case, more overt) politicization. I discuss these in my forthcoming monograph on autobiographical women's writing.

[8] Lidia Ravera, *Bambino mio*, Milan, Bompiani, 1979.

[9] Eadem, *In quale nascondiglio del cuore: Lettere a un figlio adolescente*, Milan, Mondadori, 1993.

[10] Lidia Ravera, *Bambino mio*, cit., p. 10.

[11] Ivi, p. 14.

[12] Ivi, p. 40.

[13] Ivi, p. 11.

[14] Ivi, p. 17.

percorso di emancipazione dalla famiglia, dalla società, dalla storia precedente […] la contrapposizione […] forte avvenne nei confronti delle madri e dell'immagine del femminile che esse rappresentavano […] il rifiuto conservava […] i tratti di un'avversione violenta, di un «respingimento» profondo. La madre era tutto ciò che non si voleva diventare nella vita.[1]

In a manner reminiscent of Sereni's *Casalinghitudine*, but even more of Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* which casts a long shadow over *Bambino mio* in the representation here of a miscarriage and in the dialogue with the unborn child,[2] Ravera vents her dislike of the institution of the family: «ho odiato la famiglia, da sempre, la mia, le altre».[3] She also openly addresses Fascist discourses on maternity, just as she mirrors feminist suspicion of it: «andava bene per la propaganda di regime questa cantilena della maternità missione fondamentale […] Serviva per aumentare le forniture di carne da cannone».[4] When the narrator finally gives birth to a son, she adamantly rejects the notion, expressed by some acquaintances, that this act makes her a complete woman: «e prima che cos'ero, a quale confusa categoria appartenevo, per favore?».[5] Ravera takes issue most obviously here with patriarchal constructions of motherhood, as well as with feminism's troubled response to these.

The same issues surface in *Lettere a un figlio adolescente*, where the author looks back at generations of mothers before her, when «sposarsi era un investimento necessario, fare figli un destino di genere».[6] She notes how maternity used to be intimately linked to femininity: «una donna che non aveva figli era una donna mancata».[7] At this point, she sees her generation as different: «ci piaceva molto aver fatto dei bambini, ma non marciavamo nella tradizione […] ci impegnavamo a elaborare una puericultura alternativa, con impeto pari al rifiuto per un mondo che non si era lasciato cambiare».[8] Part of this «puericultura alternativa», for Ravera, has involved making motherhood a central part of her subject matter and writing about its effects on the self, as we shall see below; another part of it relates to what amounts to a formulation of (to draw on Sara Ruddick again) maternal thinking. In her 1993 novel, the narrator is keen to share with her son the ways of thinking that have meaning for her, before he moves away from the family. Interestingly, the nub of her advice to him is to look outwards, to pay attention; «vivere attentamente, in un certo senso, è vivere al presente, attrezzandosi, contemporaneamente, per il dopo».[9] This is a thoughtful, essentially other-directed way of being. Ravera keeps returning to this idea: «Antidoto alla noia è l'esercizio dello sguardo».[10] Looking, outward attentiveness, appears to affect one's way of perceiving oneself too. Ravera advises her son: «Viaggia. Anche senza andare lontano […] l'importante è il bagaglio: alleggerire l'Io, aprire gli occhi».[11] This sounds strikingly similar to Ruddick's view of maternal thinking, with the accent on the thinking, as the extending-out of 'maternal' attention to the human race as a whole; as such it can be considered both profoundly ethical and profoundly political. As Ruddick has it, «the identification of the capacity of attention and the virtue of love is at once the foundation and the corrective of maternal thought».[12] This is not a way of thinking that is necessarily specific to mothers in Ruddick's view, but she derives the idea from

[1] Anna Scattigno, *op. cit.*,p. 283.
[2] oriana fallaci, *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1975.
[3] Lidia Ravera, *Bambino mio*, cit., p. 24. [4] Ivi, p. 35. [5] Ivi, p. 106.
[6] Lidia Ravera, *In quale nacsondiglio del cuore: Lettere a un figlio adolescente*, cit., p. 42.
[7] Ivi, p. 43. [8] Ivi, p. 10. [9] Ivi, p. 127. [10] Ivi, p. 127. [11] Ivi, p. 144.
[12] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* in *Mothering*, cit., p. 223.

the other-centeredness of the maternal experience, occasioned by the breaking-down of ego boundaries often cited by psychoanalysts in discussions of pregnancy and maternity. It is that breaking-down of boundaries that is, in fact, most central to all of these writers' radical reconceptualizations of motherhood.

Mother, Self, Other in Romano and Ravera

The boundaries broken down in these narratives (and here it is most significant that these are, after all, autobiographical narratives) are those between self and other. As Cristina Mazzoni notes, the pregnant woman is «a subject traversed by difference».[1] Romano recognises the presence of the other within the self of the mother repeatedly in *Le parole tra noi leggere*. On the first page of the narrative, the protagonist explores the reasons for the anger she sometimes feels towards her son, and concludes: «io reagivo come se lui fosse una parte di me».[2] Later, as she observes her son, she finds herself standing both outside of him and within him: «sdoppiandomi al solito».[3] She has, she insists, a visceral understanding of him: «dentro di me, vale a dire visceralmente […] lo capivo fino in fondo».[4]Even in the postscript, as she comments on the novel, the authorial voice continues to insist «i due si trovano a essere madre e figlio, vale a dire che il loro rapporto è anche viscerale».[5] We see here that what Mazzoni has defined as the «uncanny, visceral interoception of an otherness within the self» does not easily disappear,[6] even when the child is grown. Romano's narrator admits, mid-story, «so bene che si può dire identificazione».[7] As her son grows, however, the narrator tries to let him go, in order to encourage his desire to live his own life: «quasi dovessi proprio io riportarlo alla vita (partorirlo un'altra volta)».[8] This is reminiscent of what Ruddick sees in attentive love: «a giving up, a letting grow»;[9] it is interesting, though, that Romano conceives of this as another birthing. In the postscript the narrator reflects, citing herself: «avrei voluto 'diminuire perché lui cresca'».[10] It is notable here that the growth of one would seem to necessitate the shrinking of the other, the mother. The interconnection between the two is clearly underlined again here. Reflecting on the novel, the author admits: «il ritratto diventò duplice: mio e suo, di me e di lui».[11] In effect, she admits she never stops identifying with him: «a tal punto mi immedesimavo con lui, da assumere la sua sorte».[12] Romano offers us an extraordinary example here of what Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy term «the double-voiced discourse of maternal subjectivity».[13] Even if their relationship is sometimes described as war-like (Romano employs the term «guerra amorosa»),[14] the sense of otherness within the self here is overwhelming.[15]

Ravera, too, highlights the sense of duality inherent in motherhood; more, she queries the very possibility of returning to some form of singularity (normality?), and equates the whole maternal experience to a kind of madness. In a direct address to the fetus, she asks: «Come si può essere due per nove mesi e dover poi tornare a essere,

[1] Cristina Mazzoni, *op. cit.*,p. 139. [2] Lalla Romano, *op. cit.*,p. 5. [3] Ivi, p. 58.
[4] Ivi, p. 167. [5] Ivi, p. 269. [6] Cristina Mazzoni, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
[7] Lalla Romano, *op. cit.*, p. 181. [8] Ivi, p. 240.
[9] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* in *Mothering*, cit., p. 224.
[10] lalla romano, *op. cit.*, p. 269. [11] Ivi, p. 271. [12] Ivi, p. 272.
[13] Brenda O. Daly, Maureen T. Reddy, eds, *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991. p. 5. [14] Lalla Romano, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
[15] Again, both Lagorio and Sereni explore this theme in detail.

da un giorno all'altro, una sola di nuovo, di nuovo uno? Spiegatemi che cosa c'è di naturale in questa follia?»[1] The encounter with otherness is, indeed, depicted here as a risky disruption to subjectivity, to borrow Mazzoni's terms again.[2] This disruption is repeatedly underlined in the protagonist's experience of childbirth and early motherhood. After her son is born, she reflects: «il mio io […] è finito chissà dove. Forse è rimasto in sala parto».[3] Ravera insists, though, that through this loss of self a new self is created – there is, she holds, more than one newborn involved in the process of birth: «Io, come madre, sono neonata».[4] The self/other encounter intensifies here towards the end of the work. As the protagonist recounts an event to her partner, she says 'I', when she means 'he' (with reference to the baby) – her ego boundaries have dissolved as far as the child is concerned.[5] The novel presents us with an example of what Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy might consider a «maternal story […] where selfhood is constructed, or reconstructed, in more complex patterns».[6]

As Ravera returns to the topic of motherhood some 14 years later, in her letter to her adolescent son, she describes a long, ongoing, incomplete process of maternal detachment. As her narrator looks back at her son's childhood, she repeatedly refers to it as «la nostra infanzia»,[7] – that is, the period in which the son was a child, while the mother was a child in terms of motherhood, where both were infants of a sort. This is an example of what Marianne Hirsch means when she observes that «maternal discourse is necessarily plural».[8] In *Lettera a un figlio adolescente*, indeed, as the narrator's son approaches adolescence, he is conjured up as «una parte di me che si distacca, dal mio corpo, dal mio potere di omologazione, dalla difesa vischiosa della mia protezione assoluta».[9] Mothering is, indeed, envisaged as an ongoing process of letting go, but of letting go of something that is still part of one's self – it is, all over again, another kind of rebirthing. Indeed, the narrator humourously refers to the «patologia dell'eterna gravidanza», admitting «non vogliamo mai partorirvi definitivamente».[10]

It is possible to frame this undoing/doubling of the self occasioned by motherhood as salutary, in that it means, as Ravera would have it, a lightening of the self and a coming-to-terms with Otherness, and with a particular Other, in a way that can be used as a model for interacting with many Others (as we have seen her advocate above). Jane McDonnell notes that the reconceptualization of mothering «as a way of thinking, not merely as an instinctive activity» is central to much recent feminist analysis.[11] It seems to me that this thoughtful reconceptualization of motherhood is precisely what the writers discussed here, and their counterparts Lagorio and Sereni, are engaged in. Julia Kristeva, too, speaks of motherhood in terms very like those used by Ravera as «the slow, difficult and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness […] forgetting oneself.»[12] These writers challenge, in their reconceptualization of motherhood, all notions of sameness, of oneness, of integrity. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests

[1] Lidia Ravera, *Bambino mio*, cit., pp. 43-44.
[2] Cristina Mazzoni, *op. cit.*,p. 98.
[3] Lidia Ravera, *Bambino mio*, cit., p. 100.
[4] Ivi, p. 100.
[5] Ivi, p. 125.
[6] Brenda O. daly, Maureen T. Reddy, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[7] Lidia Ravera, *In quale nascondiglio del cuore*, cit., pp. 12 & 18.
[8] Marianne Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
[9] Lidia Ravera, *In quale nascondiglio del cuore*, cit., p. 5.
[10] Ivi, p. 41.
[11] Jane Taylor McDonnell, *Mothering an Autistic Child: Reclaiming the Voice of the Mother* in *Narrating Mothers*, cit., pp. 58-77, p. 73.
[12] Julia Kristeva, *Women's Time*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp. 187-213, p. 206.

in her analysis of H.D.'s work, «instead of the dichotomous A versus not-A, a formulation as familiar to Western logic as to ideologies of gender, mother and child are more like a continuous A plus B form» which she defines as «a nondichotomous third way».[1] Our writers seem, in varying degrees, close to the elaboration of subjectivity evoked by Adriana Cavarero in «Il pensiero femminista».[2] Mazzoni astutely defines Cavarero's position as

> the philosophical elaboration of a fluid personal identity and self-understanding based on a dynamic interplay of relations to the other – a feminist metaphysics that, through the ethical bond to the other exemplified by birth, aims to avoid the destructive alternative of either the full subject of metaphysics or the fragmented self of postmodernism[3]

This, in essence, is also what Romano and Ravera (as well as Lagorio and Sereni) present their readers with. They provide us with challenging mosaics of identity, in which the intensely personal becomes highly political. All kinds of norms are flouted in these representations of mothering.

[1] Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 75.

[2] Adriana Cavarero, *Il pensiero femminista. Un approccio teorico* in *Le filosofie femministe*, eds Franco Restaino & Adriana Cavarero, Turin, Paravia, 1999, pp. 111-163.

[3] Cristina Mazzoni, *op. cit.*, p. 190.