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Female Identity in Autobiographies by Italian Women Writers: 1919-1939

Female literary production abounding in stories about women's lives and personal experiences became a more constant presence in the cultural landscape at the beginning of the twentieth century. Critics of the time perceived such tendency as the manifestation of a bothersome and fruitless autobiographism considered an inferior practice in contrast to the metaphysical and artistic ideal promoted by male texts. Starting with the 1980s, feminist critics began to re-evaluate the work of many female writers, partly attracted by the interdisciplinary richness of autobiography and also because their interest in the female experience and autobiography overlapped with some of the main themes of contemporary feminist thought (i.e., identity, language, body).

In fact, autobiography, as a category of life-writing and a hybrid genre, has become the literary space where women can experiment with the construction of a gendered, sometimes genderless, or feminist identity. It is also the realm where women question gender representations and the boundaries of traditional roles. Last but not least, autobiography, as the "public act of writing a private life," is where female writers grapple with the "contradictory relationship between the role of women in the public and private spheres" (Parati 1996, 3).

In my dissertation, I analyze different types of (narrative) identity that female writers who published their autobiographical novels during the interwar period, construct and project, based on the characters, events and aspects of the self that they select and the narrative devices used for that purpose. Through mainly psychoanalyst and feminist lenses, I propose a critical reading of the following: *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* (1919) by Neera, *Stella mattutina* (1921) by Ada Negri and *Fine d'anno* (1936) by Paola Drigo. Using different theories on autobiography to frame my approach, in particular Eakin's remark that in every autobiography, "the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness" (Eakin 1985, 5), I am particularly interested in how these authors interact with their historical context by creating a specific kind of self-representation in order to enter a dialogue with the ideology of their time (i.e., Feminism, Socialism, Fascism).

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