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Goliarda Sapienza in Context

Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture

Edited by Alberica Bazzoni,
Emma Bond, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi



FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Madison • Teaneck

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Published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
Copublished by The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN: 978-1-61147-916-4 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN: 978-1-61147-917-1 (electronic)

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick, the University of Oxford, and the University of St. Andrews, as well as the Society for Italian Studies, without whose generous financial support the conference and resulting publication would not have been possible. Thanks are also due to Gill Rye and the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies for originally providing the venue and essential administrative support for the event. Thanks to the sponsorship of these institutions we were also able to set up a website dedicated to Sapienza,¹ create a podcast of the conference,² and include a series of events within the two-day program: a reading of the letters of rejection of *L'arte della gioia* from publishers interspersed with Sapienza's written responses; a performance created and read by Angelo Pellegrino and Paola Pace; "Modesta's Monologue," an excerpt from the play *L'arte della gioia*, also by Paola Pace; and a screening of the documentary *L'Anti-Gattopardo: Catania racconta Goliarda Sapienza* by A. Aiello and G. Di Maio. These events added an intermedial richness to the conference and helped to bring the multifaceted dimension of Sapienza's life and works to life, something which we also very much hope that this volume will continue to do.

Furthermore, we would like to thank the contributors and the translators of this volume for their enthusiasm for the project and their patience throughout the editing process. Our gratitude also goes to the anonymous reader for her perceptive comments and suggestions on a first draft of the manuscript, and to Anthony Tamburri and Harry Keyishian for their excellent work and advice throughout the realization of this book project.

Permission to quote from the translation Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, translated by Anne Milano Appel (2013) has been generously granted by Penguin and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, while Angelo Pellegrino, for the Estate of Goliarda Sapienza through Piergiorgio Nicolazzini Literary Agency, has generously granted permission to quote from Goliarda Sapienza, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (2003), *Lettera aperta* (2008), *L'arte della gioia* (2008), *L'università di Rebibbia* (2012), and from Sapienza's letters to Francesco Maselli.

The Editors, October 2015

III

The Italian Context

NINE
Beyond the Canon

*Goliarda Sapienza and Twentieth-Century
Italian Literary Tradition*

Laura Fortini

From the very outset, the life and works of Goliarda Sapienza have been considered to be as excessive, eccentric, and bizarre as those of many other twentieth-century female writers in Italy. These definitions have been brought into focus by critical studies that have addressed the literary works of women who have been associated with excessive lifestyles, texts that are always difficult to position in relation to what literary historiography would consider, and under many aspects still considers, as appropriate to its own constitutive parameters. In the editorial of the monographic number "Bizzarre e birbone" (Bizarre and Naughty Women), the historical Italian women's magazine *DWEdonna woman femme* argues:

The bizarre woman *does not commit* transgressive acts as one would expect from the intentional, predetermined, compulsory and ultimately subordinated traits this entails; *she has a transgressive life* that is modeled with staunch faith on her conception of self: not as a duty but as a choice, for fun and possibly with some gain. Often intolerable in everyday life, unbearable in intimacy, embarrassing in social relations, bizarre women are at the same time figures of lightness. Women capable not only of conveying a strong sense of their womanhood, but also of the oblique and derisive games that they can play with the more codified forms of femininity.¹

After the publication of Teresa de Lauretis's critical reflections dedicated to the eccentric subject in Italy,² the "patterns of dissonance" of eccentric writers have emerged more clearly (Braidotti 1991): these include "the protean character, the disharmonies impossible to recompose, the elusiveness"³ of women's eccentric thinking of the twentieth century.

Starting from a biographic point of view, Goliarda Sapienza embodies such characteristics of dissonance within the canon as have been identified by critics at the highest level. We recognize its features as they are continuously recalled in her works: her childhood in an exceptional, extended family; her extracurricular studies; poverty; her training at the theater academy; her life as an actress; psychoanalysis; the stolen jewelry; her prison sentence; and her writing, which forms a constant feature of her life. Bizarre for her choice of a transgressive life, always oblique and contemptuous of codified forms of femininity, Sapienza emerges as equally eccentric owing to her protean, disharmonious personality, always escaping the given symbolical order. Manuela Vigorita, director of one of the first films dedicated to the author, writes that "everybody remembers her as an extraordinary and unbearable person, honest, rebellious, uncomfortable."⁴

In other words, beyond the canon: it is so obvious that Goliarda Sapienza's life has been characterized as such that in his afterword to *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*),⁵ in the edition that legitimizes its inclusion in the Italian twentieth-century *pantheon* of classics, at least from a publishing point of view, Domenico Scarpa decided to shorten her name to the initials G. S., with one pen stroke erasing the life and the scandalous body of feminine authorship.⁶ This appears to be possible with the life of a female writer more than with a male writer: such an act would have never been committed with authors who are even more scandalous, as, for instance, Louis-Ferdinand Céline and his notoriously anti-Semitic positions, or for Jean Genet, whose homosexual choices and queer life have long been considered an element of scandal. Or, when abbreviations have been used this was done by appealing to the sake of brevity with respect to the risk of excessive repetition, a well-established practice for modern writers; the authority of writers of the classical tradition, however, makes this type of abbreviation exercise impossible (D. A. for Dante Alighieri is unthinkable). But when this did occur, the need for citational simplification and *not* the exercise of a life beyond the canon was invoked, an aspect for which Scarpa has also shown consideration. As he writes: "It is easy to abuse someone's life. And it gets even easier when divulging correct information about it."⁷ In fact, nobody wants to deliberately assume a voyeuristic position over anybody's life, even more so if we are dealing with a much-appreciated writer who also, by contrast, remains much reviled. In any case, this is what happened to Goliarda Sapienza's life, which can indeed be defined as beyond the canon. As Scarpa further

observes, from now on it will be impossible "to forget this centrifugated life, reduced to an inedible bolus."⁸

On the other hand, as much as her life was beyond the canon, her literary work does not appear to have been quite as free, at least superficially, from the experimentations and the literary avant-garde forms contemporary to her, as, for example, those of Gruppo 63.⁹ At least as far as the formal aspect is concerned, in which her work is indeed beyond the canon and the emblem of an unresolved matter, that is the relationship between female writers and critics. In Italy, the debate regarding the admission of female writers into the canon of Italian literature is always open, despite the fact that this matter has been the object of several critical contributions in the past.¹⁰

During a decade that also in Italy was dominated by discussions around Harold Bloom's Western canon,¹¹ in 2000 the *Società Italiana delle Letterate*, founded in 1996 by a group of scholars from different disciplines and therefore deliberately comparatist, including literary critics, readers, journalists, and teachers,¹² organized an encounter dedicated to the literary canon. In fact, if we can consider the presence of Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Christa Wolf as established in European literature, the admission of women writers from the Italian literary tradition appears a lot less certain to the present day, when the only author who breaks through the boundaries established by critics remains Elsa Morante. The canon was a pressing issue in those years, but what emerged during the discussion was—and under many aspects this still is the case—that women writers are, due to their positioning, their writing experience, and their lives, *beyond the canon* rather than above/beneath the canon.¹³

In fact, it is not my intention to promote the entrance of "minor" women writers into Italian literary historiography, but rather to highlight the radically innovative originality of their experience, which is so evident to their women readers, as, for instance, in the case of *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*), which in Italy has circulated almost undercover, essentially by feminine word of mouth. This is documented by a video from the cycle *Vuoti di memoria* by Loredana Rotondo and Manuela Vigorita, dedicated to Goliarda Sapienza in 2002,¹⁴ before the international success of the book in 2005 and the subsequent publication of the Einaudi edition.¹⁵

As Anna Maria Crispino observes in the proceedings from the seminar of the *Società Italiana delle Letterate*, it is indeed the "women writers themselves who, each in her own way, define a substantial 'extraneousness to the value hierarchy of the canon,' mixing genres, dismantling them from the inside, placing themselves voluntarily at the edges, looking for a writing that is relevant for the individual experience and the search for identity and meaning. This is what often makes them experi-

mental and innovative linguistically as well as in their narrative and poetic structure" (Crispino 2003, 9).¹⁶

"LETTERA APERTA" ("OPEN LETTER") BETWEEN MOMENTS
OF BEING AND THE CENTER OF THE CATHEDRAL

"Sperimentare" ("to experiment") is the word with which Goliarda Sapienza initiates her public voice: "E che faccia bene parlare delle proprie cose, ho dovuto *sperimentare* che ha qualche fondamento reale" (and that speaking about one's own issues is beneficial, I had to *experiment* whether it has some real foundation).¹⁷ We are on the opening page of *Lettera aperta*, it is 1967, and the novelty of Sapienza's style is evident from the very first line of the incipit: "Non è per importunarvi con una nuova storia né per fare esercizio di calligrafia, come ho fatto anch'io per lungo tempo; né per bisogno di verità—non mi interessa affatto,—che mi decido a parlarvi di quello che non avendo capito mi pesa da quarant'anni sulle spalle" (AG, 15, emphasis added; It is not to trouble *you* with a new story or to practice my handwriting, as I did for a long time; nor for a need of truth—that does not concern me at all—that I decide to tell you about what I haven't understood and that consequently has haunted me for forty years). The direct address to the reader, which introduces the writing that brings Goliarda Sapienza's voice to life, is a motif that accompanies her works up to *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*), in which the narration is often interrupted by an appeal not to a single reader, male or female, but to a plurality.¹⁸ This work is therefore neither a diary nor an autobiography, at least not in the canonical form as set out by Philippe Lejeune's studies.¹⁹ Instead, and Goliarda Sapienza reiterates this many times in *Lettera aperta*, it is an act of reorganization that does not coincide with any notion of truth:

Anche voi associate la parola "ordine" con la parola "verità," e la parola "intelligenza" con la parola "bontà"? Ho sempre fatto questo errore. Non mi fraintendete, non "verità": ma solo un minimo di ordine in tutte queste "non verità," nelle quali nascendo, o meglio—come diceva mio fratello Ivanoe—cascando da quel cavolo sulla terra, mi sono trovata a strisciare prima, e a camminare dopo. Non vorrei gettare discredito sui morti e sui vivi che ho incontrato, ma visto che mi sono state dette, come a tutti del resto, più bugie che verità, come potrei io, ora, sperare di parlarvi illudendomi di arrivare a un ordine-verità. E no: credo proprio che questo mio sforzo per non morire soffocata nel disordine, sarà una bella sfilza di bugie. (LA, 16)

Do you also associate the word "order" with the word "truth," and the word "intelligence" with the word "goodness"? I have always committed this mistake. Don't get me wrong, not "truth": but only a minimal state of order among all those "non-truths" into which coming to life,

or better—as my brother Ivanoe used to say—falling from that cabbage onto the world, I found myself crawling first, and walking afterward. I wouldn't want to disrepute the dead and the living people that I met, but since I've been told more lies than truths, like anybody else, how could I now hope to talk to you deceiving myself with the idea of getting to an order-truth. No: I really think that this struggle of mine for not dying suffocated by untidiness will be a long list of lies.

And with this statement *Lettera aperta* already reduces to *tabula rasa* a debate that has preoccupied literary criticism over the past three decades, culminating in the fact that, as Monica Farnetti writes in a study dedicated to childhood memory in female writing, it is thanks to women authors that it is now evident that

[t]o narrate life as it is or as it has been lived is impossible. Critics finally seem to be convinced by this simple and ground-breaking premise. Today they discuss how autobiography has abandoned its traditional postulates (honesty, truth, reality, authenticity . . .) to welcome instead, in all its implications, the precondition that experience is not translatable into language. The debate is therefore no longer based on the juxtaposition between life and writing, but it focuses on the transposition from life to invention instead, with the margin of invention that any writing produces taken into consideration; it is on that margin that one works.²⁰

Childhood memories hence constitute "figures of reading,"²¹ that is to say, a predominantly dialogical situation that emerges due to the existing relationship with the reader, and this is exactly what we continue to find in Goliarda Sapienza. It is something that had already been announced in Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* from 1933, and which has been discussed with philosophical acumen in Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives*.²² And it is an aspect that inhabits the autobiographical works of male writers only to a minimal extent, because surely we could never ascribe the Proustian *Recherche* to autobiography, nor the Woolfian "moments of being," with which, however, it shares many aspects.

What is characteristic of writings on childhood by women authors is instead a coming to life themselves through writing, which in *Lettera aperta* is expressed as follows:

Oggi, 10 maggio 1965, compio 41 anni ed ho quasi finito questo mio libro che se riuscirò ad impararlo a memoria—io non so improvvisare: ho fatto l'attrice e devo, per parlare, avere un copione—sarà il mio parlare a voi. Oggi rinasco o forse nasco per la prima volta. (LA, 146)

Today, May 10, 1965, I am turning forty-one years old and I have nearly finished this book of mine that, if I manage to learn it by heart—I can't improvise: I was an actress and, in order to speak, I need a script—will be my words to you. Today I am reborn, or perhaps I am being born for the first time.

One is reborn in relation to a place, Sicily, surely—rather than Rome, which is present, but essentially in the background—which Sapienza portrays as the “essential metonymy, the part for the whole, of childhood itself”²³; in fact, *Lettera aperta* concludes with the departure from the island as from childhood itself: “Ma ero sul treno: avevo fatto il mio primo atto da adulta” (LA, 158; But I was on the train: I had made my first step as an adult). The Sicily of *Lettera aperta*—and, later, also of *L’arte della gioia*—is what Moscow is for Marina Cvetaeva, Sonnenplatz for Christa Wolf, the boulevard of Paris for Simone de Beauvoir, St. Ives for Virginia Woolf, Naples for Anna Maria Ortese, and Majorca for Fabrizia Ramondino: it is a genealogy whose continuity has been traced in a definitive way by Monica Farnetti,²⁴ and it is also a geography that is alternative and different from the Western atlas we are familiar with (Fortini 2011, 115–26). Indeed, it positions itself beyond the canon, in a manner of which the criticism that welcomed *Lettera aperta* at the time understood very little of, rarely grasping its originality, if not by defining it in relation to its Deleddian qualities.²⁵

Previous criticism has, however, failed to refer to the splendid childhood novel *Cosima* and to Nuoro, which lingers in the background as a metonymic part of that cathedral at whose center childhood resides—and just like *Lettera aperta*, *Cosima* ends with the departure from the island toward Rome—but it has identified its common elements in the sensuality shared by Deledda and Sapienza: something that has barely anything in common with works that feature rape, incest, and abortion at the center of becoming women.²⁶

FORMS OF BECOMING: IL FILO DI MEZZOGIORNO

Il filo di mezzogiorno is a work from 1969 that is dedicated to psychoanalysis.²⁷ In a brief yet significant essay, Manuela Fraire has clearly outlined the features of “a writing that is, as far as I know, ‘transfert writing,’ which is absolutely unprecedented.”²⁸ Moreover, she has identified obvious links with the famous Freudian case of Dora,²⁹ all of which require further investigation in light of the circumstantial circulation of Freud’s text and the debate that was beginning to emerge at the time and that would continue to establish itself in subsequent years in the fields of Italian and international feminist thought and practices. A related testimony can, for example, be found in Carla Lonzi’s diary *Taci, anzi parla* (1978), which traverses the 1970s and identifies in the form of “autocoscienza,” a typical modality of feminist groups that lived such a significant decade with tremendous joy but equal amounts of suffering. *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the work following the debut novel *Lettera aperta*, which could already have been a self-sufficient work involving one of the themes that are dearest to the author—that is, “il dover tornare indietro

per andare Avanti” (FM, 15; having to go back in order to go forward)—inaugurates and in many ways anticipates a new period of her writing. While already dealt with in the childhood narrative *Lettera aperta*, if in an alternating and discontinuous form, here the process of *emergence* as a continuous form of analytically revisiting her own experience reaches a masterful stage of elaboration that will powerfully merge into *L’arte della gioia*.

The novel of emergence is Bakhtin’s definition. In an essay dedicated to the novel of education and its significance in the history of realism, he proposes a historical typology of the novel that would have the “image of man in the process of becoming”³⁰ as its founding principle: as opposed to the static and motionless shaping of the hero, what differs in the novel of emergence is the ever-changing image of the protagonist, which acquires its own dynamism—one of the examples advanced by Bakhtin is Rousseau’s *Émile*. Adriana Chemello³¹ adopted Bakhtin’s definition in a seminar held by the *Società Italiana delle Letterate*, because it is more suitable for women than the *Bildungsroman* form as defined by Franco Moretti, for example. The latter critic observes how modernity is made up by young heroes who, in marriage (in other words, by becoming adults) complete their formation to contribute—or at least to attempt to contribute, which amounts to the same—to society, as well as to its progress and improvement.³² Having created themselves, they have to create the world: this is how Moretti could be read. This is not what happens in women’s writing, for which it is rather difficult to speak of a well-accomplished *Bildung* in spite of the attention and predilection of many women writers—beginning with childhood novels—to the *Bildungsroman*, among which we may also count *L’arte della gioia*. These narratives, however, are condensed into forms that are different from those of the Italian and European literary tradition by male writers, from Ugo Foscolo to Moravia’s *Agostino*, to provide some long-term coordinates.

The novel of emergence of a woman, which progressively evolves from the candor of childhood to the consciousness of maturity, generally unfolds in enclosed spaces, in an *intus* that often has the characteristics of the inner journey and putting oneself to the test amongst the conflict between the norm and rebellion; beside the protagonist there are other women, who are the mothers, teachers and companions of the undertaken path. It is characterized by a continuously repeated beginning, the accomplishments and the evaluation of oneself in the subsequent years of which the writing constitutes a moment of clarification as well as an organizing element.³³

This is the definition provided in the volume dedicated to the novel of emergence, and it fully corresponds to *Il filo di mezzogiorno*: it features the enclosed space of the encounter with the analyst, the *intus* of the analysis itself, and the acute conflict between norm and rebellion; also, there are

the other women, starting with Nica, in whose name the narration starts with the words of the narrator declaring that "solo se mi starai accanto potrò ripercorrere carponi il vicolo buio e tortuoso che si spalancò davanti a me sette e sette e sette e ancora sette mesi fa alla notizia che il mio analista era impazzito" (FM, 16; only if you are next to me will I be able to travel again, crawling, through the dark and tortuous alley that unfolded in front of me seven and seven and seven and again, seven months ago when I got the news that my analyst had gone mad) and lastly also Giovanna (FM, 182–83). It is a process of becoming that shifts the focus of the narration from Sicily to Rome, but in an alternate way—which is enhanced by the italics in the text that, differently from *Lettera aperta*, also physically underline the passage between two geographic realities, as well as between past and present. Precisely because, in contrast to the *Bildungsroman* and the coming-of-age novel of the literary tradition, the novel of becoming that we owe to women writers features a persistent self-reflection and self-awareness: there is no other goal but death, Modesta's *Certa* (Death), here already prefigured by the utterance "non solo tendo ma aspiro alla morte come nutrimento, pienezza raggiunta in gioia. Sì, morte per gioia"³⁴ (not only do I lean toward death, but I aspire to it as a form of nourishment, a state of completion reached in joy. Yes, death by joy). The becoming, or "to become," is one of the words that recurs in the text: "Volevo e voglio diventare un'attrice e col tempo incominciare a scrivere" (FM, 47; I always wanted and still want to become an actress, and sooner or later start writing); "Per diventare forti, luzzza, bisogna mangiare e soprattutto dormire" (FM, 53; to become strong, luzzza, one must eat and above all sleep); the therapist tells her that "lei non voleva morire, voleva solo cambiare" (FM, 59; she didn't want to die, she only wanted to change). Above all, there is a splendid passage dedicated to the protagonist's rebirth, which is dated May 10, 1966:

Ancora una volta sono nata, ancora una volta crescerò fra gridi e pianti, devo spezzare il cerchio sigillato oggi intorno a me dalla tua assenza, devo crescere, camminare per i corridori sotterranei del mio passato . . . devo camminare, correre, cascare, rialzarmi, ripercorrerli tutti fino alla fine, dove riincontrerò ancora una volta il viso senza tratti dagli occhi di corallo della mia morte . . . quante volte c'è dato morire e rinascere fra l'alba e il giorno di questa nostra breve ora carnale? (FM, 143)

Once again I come to life, once again I'll grow in between screams and tears, I must break the circle that was sealed around me by your absence, I have to grow, to walk through the subterranean corridors of my past . . . I must walk, run, fall, pick myself up again, traverse them again until the end, where I'll meet once again the featureless face with the coral eyes of my death . . . how many times are we allowed to die and come to life again between the dawn and the daytime of this brief carnal hour?

PRISON LITERATURE AND ITS ANTIPHRASTIC FORM: L'UNIVERSITÀ DI REBIBBIA AND LE CERTEZZE DEL DUBBIO

That Goliarda Sapienza's beyond-the-canon life has been a continuous process of becoming, like her writing, is demonstrated by two unique and revolutionary works, dedicated to her experience in prison and to the period thereafter, *L'università di Rebibbia* (1983)³⁵ and *Le certezze del dubbio* (1987).³⁶ Concerning the former work, Clotilde Barbarulli observes that "prison literature, amongst which the book at issue would be included, offers an uneven and complex landscape that involves influential political figures and that extends from the case of a Rosa Luxemburg to the intense experiences of antifascism."³⁷ There are, however, none of the associations with the concentration camp universe that still stands, as a representative element, in descriptions of prison life in canonical narrations of Italian literature: from Benvenuto Cellini's experiences, heroically told as also in the memoirs of Silvio Pellico (Panetta 2008), or differently again, in Gramsci and in Resistance literature.

What prevails in *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio* is, on the other hand, "the joy of being together with other women,"³⁸ which allows us to descend into the "well" (pozzo), discussed in exemplary fashion by Natalia Ginzburg and Alba de Céspedes in the aftermath of the Second World War in 1948 in *Mercurio* magazine, which at the time was directed by de Céspedes.³⁹ As Natalia Ginzburg writes, it is a well that women frequently descend into, losing the overall sense of what the world is; according to Alba de Céspedes, this is precisely what places the sense of humanity at the center. Goliarda Sapienza goes further beyond the black sun of depression—and here we ought to refer to Kristeva⁴⁰—paraphrased in the image of the "luna nera" (CD; black moon) personified by Roberta, the cellmate with whom the first-person narrator explores Rome's prison world, which constitutes the background to the *Le certezze del dubbio*:

Alla luna sono cari i cimiteri, i boschi, i colonnati. È su loro che il suo alchemico luore indugia a rivelare segreti mistici a chi sa ascoltare. La mia Luna Nera ancora una volta m'ha trascinato in un'ennesima riser-va, o ghetto, o lager (per saziare la mia fame di conoscenza o per affogarmi nel suo lago di autodegradazione?). (CD, 176)

To the moon the graveyards, the woods, the colonnades are dear. It is on them that its alchemical glow lingers to reveal mystical secrets to who is able to listen. My Black Moon has dragged me once again in an umpteenth reservation, or ghetto, or lager (to satisfy my hunger for knowledge or to draw me into its lake of self-degradation?).

She identifies in prison "una grande università cosmopolita dove chiunque, se vuole, può imparare il *linguaggio primo*" (UR, 130; a great

cosmopolitan university where anyone, if they want, can learn the *primary language*), hence revolutionizing the concept of inside and outside. The "outside," in this way, becomes an "immensa colonia penale" (immense penal colony), an "ergastolo sociale" (a social life sentence) subdivided according to professions, class, and age (UR, 103), to the point that the *nostos* for the separate world of the prison in *Le certezze del dubbio* becomes a recurrent constant.

In the two novels, the joyful, carnivalesque subversion of the norm is tenaciously perpetrated to the point that we could talk about a world upside-down, with picaresque features that at times recall Primo Levi's portrayal of the latter. The character 'Ntoni's return from the lager in *L'arte della gioia*⁴¹ and 'Ntoni's attempted suicide (AG, 457–58; AJ, 600–601) clearly recall Primo Levi's death, to which homage is thus paid. Levi did not have the chance to imagine the world differently and other as Goliarda Sapienza, a deserter by subtraction and revolutionary of the patriarchal symbolic order conceived of, planned, and pursued instead with subversive determination. This is something that Levi, even in his infinite, extremely patient meekness, could truly not have done. Instead, there are points of contact with a narration that has the characteristics of an equally powerful sense of *deviation* (*Deviazione*): the homonymous work by Luce D'Eramo published in 1979. After all, the words also feature in Goliarda Sapienza's writing:

ma la mia persona appare di poco interesse in questo calderone di personalità, destini, *deviazioni* nella quale sono immersa. Qui dentro noi privilegiati dalle famiglie, dagli ambienti fin dalla culla, protetti fin da bambini dal bisogno vero restiamo larve anemiche, né buoni né cattivi, né onesti né disonesti, a confronto di questa masnada di bucanieri che in un modo o nell'altro non s'è piegata ad accettare le leggi ingiuste del privilegio. (UR, 72, emphasis added)

but my persona appears of little interest in cauldron of personality, destinies, and *deviations* in which I am immersed. In here, those of us who have been privileged by our families and our environment from the cradle, protected since childhood from real need, remain anemic larvae, neither good nor bad, neither honest nor dishonest, in comparison to this gang of buccaneers that, in one way or another, has refused to budge to the unjust laws of privilege.

What moves both writers, Goliarda Sapienza and Luce D'Eramo, is an analogous yet different, stubborn, and tenacious determination for narrating and for reflecting on experience through narration. D'Eramo recounts in her writing her choice of volunteering to work in a concentration camp in Germany at the young age of eighteen, and all the consequences that followed. They both arrive at the very same thought:

La società del K-Lager non faceva che portare al parossismo la selezione del mondo esterno, *non era un'altra realtà ma soltanto un'esasperazione inaudita dell'ordine di fuori*.⁴²

the K-Lager society would only take the selection of the external world to the state of paroxysm, it was not an altogether different reality but just an inconceivable exasperation of the order that was found outside.

La differenza di classe vige qui come fuori, insormontabile: il carcere è lo spettro o l'ombra della società che lo produce, è noto. (UR, 156)

The difference in social class is in force here as it is outside, and insurmountable: prison is known to be the spectre or the shadow of the society by which it is produced.

For both narratives, the lager or prison represents the realms of excess as well as of moderation, of the body, of its absolute predominance. Equally central for both are the relations of the first person narrator with other women; they also share the same narrative modalities that do not appear particularly innovative with respect to literary tradition but that are nevertheless joyful in their own way, shameless, irreverent, and capable of truth like not many other forms of writing are.

DIFFERENTLY EPIC: *L'ARTE DELLA GIOIA*, THE MODERN, THE ANTIQUE, THE TOPOS OF THE WELL

In the meantime, the writing of *L'arte della gioia* consistently flows underground and parallel to the other works, with a stream of quotes, internal references, and cross-references between two works that never lack originality, nor, least of all, are forms of plagiarism. Sometimes those are self-citations: here and there the title of another work appears, or a character reappears a number of times, even if with apparently different characteristics and features. As if it was a great open-air laboratory, every work recalls another one thanks to the inexhaustible industriousness of the writer, who is certainly not the author of just one single book. Each one of her works has indeed got its own *facies*, an independent and original specific aspect that *L'arte della gioia* resumes and appropriates while at the same time rendering them other and different in the way of Dante's *Commedia*, which was foreshadowed by the *Vita nova* and circulated in the same period as other Dantean works ranging from the *Convivio* to the *Rime petrose* and the *Rime*.

Emblematic, in this regard, is the figure or better the *topos* of the well, which has an antecedent in the correspondence between Natalia Ginzburg and Alba de Céspedes, but, going even further back, in *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall from 1928. Moreover, in addition to the two

works just analyzed, it is present also in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*: "Dal pozzo di quegli anni senza memoria quei foglietti ammicchiati mi parvero un regalo impensato e favoloso" (FM, 78; From the well in those years without memory those little piled up pieces of paper appear to me an unexpected and fabulous gift); and further repeated and varied: "Dal buio di quel pozzo senza ricordi una fiumana ridente di acqua limpida mi travolgeva" (FM, 79; From the darkness of the well without memories a delightful stream of clear water crushed me). Lastly, it returns in *L'arte della gioia* to determine the rhythm of the narration each and every time the theme of the death and resurrection of the protagonist is featured, when she throws herself into it in order to escape the destiny that awaits her in the convent by census and social class (AG, 35–40; AJ, 47–55); when wounded by Mattia's gunshot that cannot tolerate her independence, she is reborn to herself, giving birth to herself again as new and different (AG, 263–64; AJ, 350–52). It is the image that underpins the "ennesima metamorfosi" (AG, 509; AJ, 668; another metamorphosis) upon which the novel ends, when the protagonist falls asleep during a party at Villa Suvarita, which celebrates the end of the war, her son Prando, and a new start: Modesta's love for Marco and the possibility that turning fifty does not signify the death of a woman to herself, but rather presents an occasion of being born once again to a different and new life. One of the great writers of the twentieth century, Thomas Mann, dedicated the extensive opening words to the first volume (published in 1933) of the tetralogy dedicated to the stories *Joseph and his Brothers* to the figure of the well: Joseph, as in the biblical tradition, falls into the well many times throughout the story of his rise and fall, and Thomas Mann turns the well into a symbolic figure of the epic purification of truth.⁴³

The epic sense of Goliarda Sapienza's words has been noted on several occasions, but in different contexts: by Luigi Baldacci with reference to *Lettera aperta*⁴⁴ and by the Wu Ming collective, which has listed *L'arte della gioia* in the catalog of works of the New Italian Epic for its multitudinous character.⁴⁵ Yet even though Sapienza writes that her narration is not "viziato dall'epicità" (UR, 70; ruined by epicism), her work does exhibit epic features, even if these are very different from those transmitted by tradition. As for all great works of literature, there are many potential interpretations for this novel, but here I would like to recall the critical reading of a volume⁴⁶ dedicated to the epic writing of women. While the latter centered on the different and diverse context of languages and transnational horizons, the two share the variation of a genre that tradition brings to us as an object of broad and varied debates and that belongs, generally speaking, to the past centuries. Epic poems by women do feature here, though it is not my intention to further elaborate on this occasion.

Instead, I would like to focus on the motivations for choosing to award the Nobel Prize in Literature to Doris Lessing in 2007, for being an

epic cantor of women's experience: "That epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny."⁴⁷ The reference is to the situation of South Africa, but it is possible to recognize the classic elements that define "epic" as a literary form, in relation to what Aristotle noted in his *Poetics*, which is that "epic" can recount what tragedy cannot represent: the impossible (24, 1460). The narrator of *L'arte della gioia*, in fact, recounts what has until then seemed impossible, the continuous metamorphosis of becoming women and men in another and diverse way compared to what patriarchy has consigned to us as apparently and undoubtedly universal, neutral, and absolute. While Modesta's society, just like Doris Lessing's, is the kind of society divided between men and women, north and south, and different social classes and ages, these are nonetheless investigated and narrated with "scepticism, fire and visionary power," as the Nobel Prize in Literature motivation underlined. Moreover, the elements of classic epic in the novel, even if metaphorical, are multiple: the invocation of the Muse of experience, the continuous and repeated appearance of the dead modeled on book 6 of the *Aeneid*, the continuously varied and repeated references throughout the four parts of the narration, and the physical duels including male and female characters that are represented as antagonistic lovers—Beatrice, Carmine, Carlo Civardi, Mattia, Joyce.

Because, surely, we would not expect an epic cantor of the female experiences to be a delicate writer of little domestic joys. Modesta and Goliarda Sapienza, together with other epic writers of the Italian twentieth century,⁴⁸ have enabled us to see other ways of being differently epic, other possibilities of coming out of the well, of everyday death and resurrection for each one of us. This may occur through symbolic murders, like those of the women killed in the course of the novel because they inhibited the freedom of the female character⁴⁹; or the failed killing of the father, who stands for a tradition that can be dismissed without this turning into a parricide, an act that is substantially no longer needed.⁵⁰ It may also involve the framework of the historical novel of a century that revolves around one woman only, even if she is defined as multitudinous by the New Italian Epic. Or it might occur through the combination of different genres, like the tales of childhood or self-analysis, the taunting and carnivalesque subversion of the commonplace—the prison as a descent to hell subverted in its common significance—and of the entire literary tradition of the twentieth century apparently observed in its novel form, in reality continuously exceeded in its constitutive foundation: the index that is not an index, the novel that is not a novel but a theatrical score, a diary, something so powerful that it results differently epic, beyond the canon.

This is why Goliarda Sapienza's books are part of a library that is profoundly carved into the memory of each one of its readers: if this corresponds to the canon in Bloom's terms, the canon of memory, Goliarda

da Sapienza and her works fully belong to it. But, together with her, we also are beyond the canon.

—Translated by Sarah M. Perruccio

NOTES

1. DWF 1997, 2.
2. de Lauretis 1999.
3. Botta 2003, 13.
4. Vigorita 2011, 19.
5. Sapienza 2008 (1998); hereafter AG.
6. Scarpa 2008, 515–17.
7. Scarpa 2008, 516.
8. Scarpa 2008, 517.
9. Balestrini 2013.
10. Fortini 2010.
11. Bloom 1994.
12. Società Italiana delle Letterate, 2014.
13. Ronchetti and Sapegno 2007.
14. Rotondo and Vigorita 2002; Rotondo 2011; Vigorita 2011.
15. Scarpa 2008, 533–36.
16. Crispino 2003, 9.
17. Sapienza 2008 (1967), 15, emphasis added. Hereafter LA.
18. Fortini 2011, 113–14.
19. Lejeune 1975; Ortu 2011; Andriago 2012; Langiano 2012.
20. Farnetti 2002, 9.
21. Locatelli 1998.
22. Cavarero 2000 (1997).
23. Farnetti 2002, 14.
24. Farnetti 2002, 15, *passim*.
25. Scarpa 2008, 523–24.
26. LF, 29, 132–33; Fortini 2007, 43–52.
27. Sapienza 2003 (1969); hereafter FM.
28. Fraire 2011, 127.
29. *Ibid.*, 129–31.
30. Bakhtin 1986, 21.
31. Chemello 2007.
32. Moretti 1987.
33. Bono and Fortini 2007, 11–12.
34. FM, 96; Arena 2012.
35. Sapienza 2006 (1983); hereafter UR.
36. Sapienza 2007 (1987); hereafter CD.
37. Barbarulli 2011, 134.
38. Barbarulli 2011, 137.
39. Ginzburg and de Céspedes 1992.
40. Kristeva 1987.
41. AG, 448–49; Sapienza 2013b, 588–89; hereafter AJ.
42. D'Eramo 2012 (1979), 282.
43. Mann 1978.
44. Scarpa 2008, 524.
45. Wu Ming 2009, 125.
46. Bono and Sarasini 2014.
47. Nobel Prize in Literature 2007.
48. Fortini 2014.

49. Farnetti 2011.

50. Fortini 2011.