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**Experimenting with the Unspeakable:
Lesbian Dissimulation in Alice Ceresa's *La figlia prodiga***

Abstract

The article proposes a reading of Alice Ceresa's *La figlia prodiga* (1967) through the lenses of the dissimulation of lesbianism and the subversion of the patriarchal symbolic order. While most critics have so far either ignored lesbianism or rejected its relevance to the interpretation of the figure of the prodigal daughter, I link the text's formal experimentation to the question of the unspeakability of female homosexuality. I take the cue from Teresa de Lauretis' groundbreaking reflections on Ceresa (DE LAURETIS 1996) to argue that, while it may not be necessary to include lesbianism within the concept of prodigality, much of the text loses its potency by not doing so. In fact, the prodigal daughter is not the lesbian, but rather a signifier that becomes available to represent a position lacking representation, which is lesbianism. The article focuses in particular on three elements that shed light on the original poetics of *La figlia prodiga*: first, its metaliterary reflection, which originates in the question of how to say something that cannot be said, or for which no adequate words exist, or which escapes representation; second, the metaliterary reflection is connected to a precise theme, i.e. female homosexuality and the subversion of the heteropatriarchy; and third, in response to the metaliterary question regarding the affordances of literature, *La figlia prodiga* constitutes a highly experimental work, which deconstructs established narrative models also by fragmenting the text through line breaks, which introduce a prosodic element leaning towards orality, opening up a potentiality of expression otherwise denied in the text.

Introduction

In this article, I propose to read Alice Ceresa's *La figlia prodiga* (1967) through the lens of the dissimulation of lesbianism and the subversion of the patriarchal symbolic order, linking the text's experimentation with form and language to the question of the unspeakable.¹ In many respects, Ceresa's own background is that of a «prodigal daughter» – a young woman who deserts the patriarchal order to assert her autonomy. Ceresa manifested an early desire to emancipate herself from her rather conservative and oppressive family, first leaving her parents' home at a young age and then definitively migrating from her native Switzerland to Rome in 1950 to work as a journalist.² She was also partly self-taught, as she saw her own education interrupted by her father, who did not believe women should study. The result was the development of an autonomous cultural growth, outside of canonical paths – a condition not uncommon among 20th-century female writers in Italy – which then reverberated in a subversive and idiosyncratic approach towards literary tradition and the dictates of dominant culture. Such an eccentric position also meant that Ceresa faced significant challenges in getting published, and still today represents a figure outside the mainstream of Italian literary canon.³

In this context, I wish to focus on three elements that shed light on the original poetics of *La figlia prodiga*: first, its metaliterary reflection, which, I argue, originates in the question of “how to say” something that cannot be said, or for which no adequate words exist, or which escapes representation; second, the metaliterary reflection connects to a precise existential, political, and symbolic theme: the subversion of heteropatriarchy, within which lesbianism is inscribed; and third, in response to the metaliterary question regarding the affordances of literature, *La figlia prodiga* constitutes a highly experimental work, which deconstructs established narrative models also by fragmenting the text through line breaks, which introduce a prosodic element leaning towards orality, opening up a potentiality of expression otherwise denied in the text.

1. Metaliterary Reflection: How to Say That Which Cannot be Said?

La figlia prodiga, first published in book form in 1967 after a lengthy gestation and a partial publication in the literary magazine «Il Menabò» (CERESA 1965),

inaugurates «La Ricerca Letteraria» series at Einaudi, winning the Viareggio Prize for a debut work. The text is presented in the form of a pseudo-scientific treatise in the first-person plural, a «noi» which is the expression of both a *plurale maiestatis* and a *vox populi*, an authoritative source and the voice of generic common sense. It articulates a series of reflections, punctuated by corrosive irony, on a potential figure of «prodigal daughter», her upbringing, her characteristics, and her role in a story that, however, never comes to be told. *La figlia prodiga* puts to test the definition of novel, as narration is absent. Moreover, the prose is interrupted by frequent line breaks that disrupt sentences, introducing an irregular prosodic element. Completely devoid of any descriptive, naturalistic, emotional, psychological, or factual elements, the text continuously spirals inward, leaning toward pure logical abstraction.

From the outset, Ceresa raises the metaliterary and intertextual question of how to represent the story of the prodigal daughter, in relation to the well-known Gospel parable of the «prodigal son», the one who, after squandering his wealth, returns to his father's house and is welcomed with mercy. However, as Ceresa immediately tells us, the female declination of the story is not a mere textual fact, devoid of consequences. On the contrary, the change in the protagonist's gender from the traditional parable necessitates a complete rethinking of the narrative, and therefore, of the relationship between character and story. From the very beginning, then, the metaliterary reflection on *how to say it* and the intertextual reflection on *how it has been said* are inseparably linked to gender.

[...] Per poco o molto che noi ne possiamo sapere
 sia per associazione di idee, sia per approssimazione, sia per antica e
 moderna sapienza del mondo, una figlia prodiga non può solo essere la
 trascrizione grammaticale
 in termini femminili
 del suo omonimo maschile. Vediamo male, quando solo tentassimo di
 vederla, la figlia prodiga ricalcare le orme del fratello lungo le vicende di
 quest'ultimo
 non fosse che perché
 quand'anche questa possibilità esistesse o fosse esistita,
 la stessa storia non avrebbe dato

lo stesso personaggio. Si vedono male le figlie sperperare patrimoni paterni, precipitare nella desolazione una casa per via della loro defezione e riguadagnare infine

il posto d'onore
 nella famiglia previamente abbandonata
 per il semplice fatto di avervi fatto ritorno.
 Non con questo si vuole insinuare che esista
 una differenza
 nel trattamento che le famiglie riservano
 ai figli di questo o di quell'altro sesso. Molto più semplicemente e
 funzionalmente nell'ambito della nostra storia
 si vuole mettere in evidenza che a questo mondo,
 indubbiamente,
 oltre che figli e figlie
 esistano prodigalità e prodigalità [...]. (CERESA 1967, 10-11)

Spiral after spiral, Ceresa's deconstructive reasoning proceeds roughly as follows: if the story of the prodigal daughter does not replicate the trajectory of its male counterpart, and if we have no way of knowing what this alternative path actually is, the teleological arc of the narrative breaks. We cannot start from the end, from a shared moral, or from a known script; instead, we must proceed in a tentative way, without a guarantee of meaning and without a guarantee of closure—meaning and closure that will, in fact, be systematically negated.

[...] una storia ha
 per il semplice fatto di esistere
 un principio proprio e una propria fine, essendo il primo situato là dove comincia, e l'ultima là dove finisce. Quale presa questi particolari principi e fini abbiano
 sulla realtà delle cose
 rimane purtuttavia, e questo vale anche e soprattutto per le storie come si deve, sempre arbitrario,
 spostabile di volta in volta e tutto sommato
 difficilmente definibile. [...] (*ibid.*, 13)

The attempt at an alternative narration does not start from an established endpoint, from where it can retrospectively and teleologically retrace the stages of a life ordered chronologically. On the contrary, narration begins with a story that does not work and needs to be disassembled, without knowing what alternative narrative might emerge. In other words, it starts from a

representative burden (the patriarchal script) that needs to be cleared away, and from a representational void (female subjectivity) that requires creative filling.

But what is this story that needs to be deconstructed, what is it that urgently demands representation? The metaliterary reflection and the dismantling of a teleological progression are tied to the formation process of a female self in contrast with the patriarchal order and the consequent subversion of the traditional Bildungsroman. Paola Bono and Laura Fortini have highlighted that a Bildungsroman featuring a female protagonist demands a complete reconsideration of the genre, as it undermines the foundational pillars of the teleological model of male *Bildung* (BONO – FORTINI 2007). Bono and Fortini propose replacing the category of traditional Bildungsroman with the Bakhtinian-derived notion of «novel of becoming», which stresses the open-ended feature of the formative process. The metanarrative stance informing *La figlia prodiga* reveals a conscious operation of «experimentation around the Bildungsroman», as noted by Ardeni (ARDENI 2017, 50).⁴ Instead of a definitive form to be achieved through an orderly sequence of stages, there emerges a concept of continuous deconstruction of predetermined paths and the discovery of ever-evolving forms of subjectivity. The prodigal daughter is primarily a figure of subversion of the established order, representing «the becoming of an unexpected female subjectivity» (FORTINI 2023, 6).

2. Naming Lesbianism

The crucial element, in *La figlia prodiga*, is the process of becoming subject for a woman, namely a process of subjectivation that marks the transition from a predetermined social role that is imposed on her (daughter, wife, mother) to a position of creative self-determination.⁵ This process of subjectivation is depicted as a subversion of the heteropatriarchal social order, of which lesbianism is the most radical realization.

An important consideration needs to be made at this stage. The fact that Ceresa herself was lesbian, while it does not bind us to any deterministic interpretation, it does nonetheless indicate a potentiality of interpretation hidden within the folds of the text.⁶ The first, insightful reading of

homosexuality in *La figlia prodiga* was advanced by Teresa de Lauretis, who identified the connection between «prodigality» and «lesbianism» and highlighted its relationship with the expressive and metaliterary question (DE LAURETIS 1996). Conversely, most critics have either ignored or contested the relevance of the lesbian element in *La figlia prodiga*, omitting it from the analysis. For instance, Laura Fortini never mentions lesbianism in her otherwise rich and precise examination of Ceresa's poetics of prodigality (FORTINI 2020). Ardeni, on her part, challenges de Lauretis' interpretation, stating that «if for de Lauretis, prodigality is homosexuality, such a position is not shared by all critics», and in her article she chooses instead to «consider prodigality more broadly for its expression of difference, whatever that may be» (ARDENI 2017, 54, n. 23).

While it may not be necessary to include lesbianism within the concept of prodigality, much of the text loses its potency by not doing so, resulting in a diminished reading of its subversive and expressive charge. The prodigal daughter is not the lesbian, but rather a signifier that becomes available to represent a condition lacking representation, which is lesbianism. Diluting lesbianism into a generic «expression of difference, whatever that may be», may keep the possibilities of interpretation of «prodigality» open; however, on the other hand, it fails to grasp, and thus implicitly silences, the heuristic value of investigating the «conditions of representability of a character [...] for whom there is no social representation, [...] a historically undescribed and indescribable subject, we may say, socially a non-subject»: the lesbian (DE LAURETIS 1996, 84). If we consider the category of prodigality *also* as lesbianism, indeed, further meanings emerge. These allow us to see in a different light characteristics such as dissimulation, irreconcilability with the order of families, asociality, subversion of the established order, and, finally, the specific unspeakability of all this.

La figlia prodiga belongs to a period, the 1960s just before the student, feminist, and homosexual liberation movements, during which lesbianism was nonexistent on a symbolic level, sanctioned by psychoanalytic and medical disciplinary regimes, and latent like a threatening phantom presence in society.⁷ Lesbianism, in this context, is not merely another expression of female subjectivity; rather, it represents an extreme position that challenges the

heteropatriarchal regime. Adalgisa Giorgio clearly articulates this, drawing on de Lauretis' argument:

The prodigality of which Ceresa speaks in such a roundabout way is a daughter's most extreme transgression, homosexuality, a practice that strikes at the heart of patriarchy. Consequently, the text can only be concerned with the modalities of its non-manifestation within the social institutions and linguistic and literary codes which deny it. (GIORGIO 2008, 733)

Theoretical reflections on the lesbian subject by Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich (both referenced by de Lauretis in relation to Ceresa, to whom we can add the insights of Audre Lorde, Judith Butler, and de Lauretis herself), brilliantly illuminate how the lesbian existence evades a structure of power made by and for men (WITTIG 2002; RICH 2003; LORDE 1984; BUTLER 1990; 2004; DE LAURETIS 1990). While binary and hierarchical sexual difference and compulsory heterosexuality are the conditions of possibility of such a structure, the lesbian existence rests on an economy of mutual recognition among women, undermining the entire patriarchal framework.

Having established that the story of the prodigal daughter requires a new approach due to the gender of its protagonist, Ceresa embarks on an ironic and sharp critique of the family. Her critical investigation, which significantly anticipates the theorizations of Rich, Wittig, and Butler, highlights how binary sexual difference and compulsory heterosexuality are a social institution, not a «natural fact»:

[...] Un conto è la specie
e un altro conto
è la famiglia.

[...] Mentre tutt'altro che semplici
e naturali attitudini richiede, per essere assicurata,
la famiglia. [...] (CERESA 1967, 44)

Since «l'ordine delle famiglie, è risaputo, non prevede le figlie prodighe» (*ibid.*, 20), Ceresa asserts with mocking candor, «il ruolo della figlia prodiga dovette certamente essere quello di negare la famiglia» (*ibid.*, 22).

In the long and tortuous development of the discourse on the prodigal daughter, Ceresa individuates its main features: asociality, autonomy of judgement and action, rejection of norms, dissimulation, and, finally,

insensitivity towards her parents. However, as often in the text, the narrating voice immediately contradicts itself: perhaps such a perception of insensitivity comes from the parents and from the social order, and it does not reflect the protagonist's inner life – about which, in fact, we cannot know anything until she will be the one speaking about herself. The rejection of the social order is complete: «essa da noi non accettò mai proprio nulla, non accettando nemmeno per così dire la nostra stessa esistenza» (*ibid.*, 87); and yet, «che ci possiamo fare, se la morale è una cosa e un'altra cosa è, come sembra dimostrato sia, la realtà dei fatti? Nulla» (*ivi*), the same voice comments ironically. Against common «morality», since she was a child the prodigal daughter is characterised by «una primissima autonomia di pensiero» (*ibid.*, 56), which

corrisponde al proposito deliberato e funzionalmente asociale di occuparsi anzitutto e soprattutto dei fatti propri. (*ibid.*, 17)

Seen from the normative viewpoint of the parents and of society, the autonomy of the prodigal daughter makes her appear «di una rara protervia: quasi avesse costantemente se non proprio qualcosa da nascondere, però qualcosa da non dire, sotto forma di sue personalissime e quietamente accettate e accettabili risorse» (*ibid.*, 57).

Here we arrive at another fundamental point that characterises prodigality and lesbianism, i.e. dissimulation, to which a large section of the novel is dedicated: «la figlia prodiga fu sempre, e fin da bambina, una persona essenzialmente dissimulata» (*ibid.*, 102). The dissimulation of that which society forbids is «un riflesso di difesa» (*ibid.*, 120) aimed at preserving autonomy. More than that, however, dissimulation also responds to silence and incommunicability due to the absence of a symbolic in which to express oneself. The prodigal daughter «viveva fra di noi una vita niente più che perfettamente mimetizzata» (*ibid.*, 112), characterised by «una sua nativa invisibilità» (*ibid.*, 108). And it is interesting to compare the words and concepts used by Ceresa with the history of lesbianism in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century: «A specific characteristic of the repression of lesbianism», writes Nerina Milletti «is to render it invisible or to reduce it to meaninglessness» (MILLETTI 2007, 22; see also ROSS 2017). Invisibility and silence are both the result of

repression, the denial of an imaginary and a voice within a heteropatriarchal order, and a defensive strategy adopted by lesbians in order not distort themselves by naming themselves within a system that does not provide the words to do so:

Even when lesbians identify as such, they do so within a semantic and conceptual system produced by others; and although they may use certain information to name and recognize themselves, they rarely find it adequate to represent them. This can explain, at least in part, the astonishing resistance that still persists today in using the term 'lesbian.' [...] However, ambivalences can also be advantageous: the 'open secret' [...] not only protects against social stigma and sometimes defends life itself but can also bring other effects. [...] Silence [...] would therefore be as performative as speech; secrecy, since the end of the 19th century, is the mark of homosexuality. This defensive system was all the more valid because it was necessary. (MILLETTI 2007, 35)

Dissimulation, invisibility, asociality, incomunicability, are a necessary effect of the social position of the prodigal daughter, and of the lesbian existence:

Non simula dunque chi vuole, né chi vuole dissimula; ma ognuno simula o dissimula senza alcuna libertà di scelta, secondo le sole e semplici possibilità lasciategli aperte dalla sua vera ed effettiva e fondamentale posizione nel mondo. (CERESA 1967, 115)

Adrienne Rich's reflections are particularly helpful here to understand Ceresa's articulation of dissimulation and its place in the heteropatriarchal system. As Rich writes in *Compulsory Heterosexuality*:

The denial of reality and invisibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relation of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other*. (RICH 2023, 34)⁸

In her subversive endeavour, *La figlia prodiga* launches a critical investigation that starts from childhood and the family, that is, from the earliest formative moment of a person and from the primary social structure in which this formation takes place. It is here that Ceresa encounters Freudian psychoanalysis, towards which she shows a keen interest but also voices harsh criticism. Psychoanalysis, indeed, contains two contrasting instances: on one

hand, it unhinges the illusions of normality and control of the sovereign subject, unleashing the desiring perversity of the unconscious; on the other hand, by operating within a disciplining social system, it normatively tries to direct what it has itself revealed as undirectable, transforming the polymorphism of desire into a modelling and teleological heterosexual narrative.⁹ It is the latter declination of psychoanalysis that Ceresa unabashedly rejects:

[...] prendiamo decisamente commiato dalla psicoanalisi
perché risulta del tutto inadatta a seguire, evidentemente, il decorso di
una storia
che tende a procedere proprio al difuori di essa. (CERESA 1967, 77)

As Mario Mieli brilliantly argues, in the 1960s the dominant version of Freudian psychoanalysis, an expression of a heteropatriarchal status quo, cannot see beyond the Oedipus complex nor can it understand female desire, let alone lesbian desire, which it pathologizes.¹⁰ Bent to serve normative and normalizing purposes, psychoanalysis proves to be an utterly inadequate ear to listen to the prodigal daughter's story.

3. Literary Experimentation: Dissimulation, Negativity, and Orality

The invisibility, or rather the invisibilization of lesbianism, resulting from its social repression, leads us to reflect on the relationship between this novel and the impossibility of fully naming what it discusses. Ceresa writes with allusive sharpness in *La figlia prodiga*:

[...] dal punto di vista della scrittura, di cui la letteratura è fatta, quel che è scritto è scritto e quel che è lasciato fuori è lasciato fuori.
[...] questo scegliere fra il dire e il tacere ha il suo non trascurabile peso e significato, e si capisce perché, dato che le cose dette non sono più eliminabili e delle cose taciute si risente comunque la mancanza. (*ibid.*, 28)

If a truth cannot be told, its interdiction can nonetheless be exposed. To denounce a taboo without naming its unspeakable content forces one to tread a fine line between revelations and concealments, half-truths and half-lies. This is what Ceresa does in this work, as she creates a play of veils and mirrors that hide the truth while staging the very act of its concealment. From the start, she

warns the reader that the text they are reading is a multilayered and opaque literary fabrication:

[...] Vi si vedrà
come non sempre quello che è noto è anche conosciuto,
come raramente la vita si orienti secondo la letteratura e la letteratura
secondo la vita,
come di conseguenza
le distanze che vi intercorrono possano difficilmente venire codificate [...].
(*ibid.*, 14)

It is significant to recall here the work of Luigi Pirandello, also cited by de Lauretis in reference to *La figlia prodiga*:

What are the theoretical and narrative materials gathered by Ceresa? They are a collection of reflections on writing as a literary act and as a representation of the world, on the relationship between the writer and the reader [...], between writing and character (with Pirandellian resonances), and between a character and the reader; they are meditations on the incomparability of the time of stories and lived time, on the distance between words and things, the weight of the unsaid, and the choices made in storytelling, literature, and life. (DE LAURETIS 1996, 85)

Pirandello is arguably a reference point for the European experimentalism of the early 20th century, and a genius creator of masks and revelations. In his works, the truth is presented before the eyes only to reveal itself, a moment later, as a deceptive illusion. It may suffice to think of Henry's madness in *Enrico IV* (1921), or of Signora Ponzà's identity in *Così è (se vi pare)* (1917), to mention only some of his most well-known plays.¹¹ Contrary to dominant interpretations of Pirandello's work, as I have argued elsewhere in regard to *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921) and *Vestire gli ignudi* (1922), the mechanism of partial revelation of an inaccessible truth is not only located on a theoretical level, that is, as an abstract reflection on the impossibility of knowing the truth and on the mask that every individual wears because of being implicated in social relations; unspeakable truths have an explosive core in the disciplinary organization of sexuality and in the construction of gender roles, which adhere to a violently patriarchal script (BAZZONI 2020). In naturalizing these roles and concealing violence, the patriarchal script reveals itself as a manipulative rhetorical construction, of which Pirandello exposes the

mechanisms by staging its operations. Most notably, the crucial scene of *Six Characters*, the nearly consumed sexual encounter between Father and Stepdaughter, cannot be represented – it is taboo; but Pirandello makes this unrepresentability the very subject of the scenic representation.

Ceresa approaches her unspeakable subject in a similar way – she encircles it, she evokes it, and then she retreats, leaving on the page the shimmering trace of this movement:

l'unica verità possibile di una storia, che sarà sempre sia poi nell'un
modo, sia poi nell'altro,
solamente ed eternamente
un inganno. (CERESA 1967, 213)

As Adrienne Rich states, within the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, the lesbian existence is «an engulfed continent which rises fragmentally into view from time to time only to become submerged again» (RICH 2003, 26).

La figlia prodiga interrogates the expressive affordances of literature, venturing into a new territory where the construction of an imaginary yet to come goes hand in hand with intense formal experimentation. The experimentation develops in relation to an impossibility, which is not – or is not solely – an abstract impossibility of language to express the self and the world, a general and therefore generic semantic impasse; it is an impossibility linked to an absence of representation, a void of imaginary, an incongruence with a given system of meaning. The result is a fragmented form, in which the reflective and self-reflective element seizes the narrative, deconstructing it, or even vaporizing it.

In *La figlia prodiga*, there is a twofold movement that occurs simultaneously: as the pseudo-philosophical narrating voice discusses the various characteristics of the prodigal daughter, interpreting them through a normative framework to which it appears to adhere, that same voice ironically deconstructs every element of its own discourse, with subversive effects. The narrating voice, that «noi» with objective claims that conducts the investigation into the prodigal daughter with an erudite posture, continuously casts doubt upon itself, generating an ironic erosion of the pseudo-scientific discourse. This opens up the possibility of a different narrative, in which perhaps the heteropatriarchal family is not so natural after all, and perhaps the protagonist

is not so insensitive and ungrateful, and maybe there is no moral deviance, but rather a conscious and deliberate escape from heteronormativity.

On the level of forms, the reasoning rhetoric corrodes the narrative, and irony corrodes the reasoning rhetoric, reaching a ground zero from which a new narrative can emerge. But there is another formal element that contributes to such erosion, a foreign body that already constitutes a departure from the normative discourse that the narrating 'we' stages: that is, the poetic fragmentation of the discourse through line breaks, «a graphic form that, by separating the propositions according to the rhythms of speech, gives its prose the visual appearance of a verbal score» (DE LAURETIS 1996, 82). While the pseudo-philosophical reasoning tends toward abstraction, its fragmentation into 'verses' introduces a prosodic, rhythmic element that leans toward orality. If we follow Adriana Cavarero's foundational reflections on voice, orality is the embodied and relational dimension of language that constitutes the ultimate limit of philosophical abstraction, bringing it back to a finite and shared here and now (CAVARERO 2003). In *La figlia prodiga*, the element of orality infiltrates like a cry through the meshes of rhetorical discourse. From the rhythmic fragmentation rises a voice, not yet articulated in speech: an appeal to break the silence and to give expression to an embodied self that demands to exist and be recognized.

Conclusions

To conclude: what does Ceresa's eccentric and experimental work tell us about lesbianism, and how does the lens of lesbianism contribute to the interpretation of this work? Firstly, from this text it emerges how lesbianism is not just one declination of female sexuality among others, but rather a subversion of the social order based on the heterosexual family and on the binary and hierarchical structure of gender. As a positioning that strengthens women's subjectivation, female homosexuality is repressed, silenced, and misrepresented by every possible means. For these reasons, in the 1960s when Ceresa writes, lesbianism can only be spoken of by telling the story of its denial, simultaneously deconstructing the very discourses that negate it. The metanarrative reflection and formal experimentation are intrinsically linked to the quest for a way of

«undoing gender», to use Butler's words (BUTLER 2004). That is, to deconstruct the heteropatriarchal script and create the possibility of a different story.

At the end of *La figlia prodiga*, Ceresa imagines handing the narrative over to the protagonist, so that she may finally tell her own story firsthand. The prodigal daughter should pick up the objective and objectifying discourse, which has arrived at its end, and turn it into a subjective narrative:

Pare quindi che sarebbe ormai giunto il tempo
in cui noi passassimo la penna di mano.

Poiché, se la scrittura può servire a noi, essa può senza dubbio servire
anche alla figlia prodiga,
[...]. (CERESA 1967, 212)

La figlia prodiga, as Ceresa writes in several letters and unpublished drafts, was supposed to be the first episode of a trilogy: «Ne risulta che bene o male la “Figlia prodiga” è quello che è e che rappresenta perfettamente (sia dal punto di vista delle preoccupazioni letterarie mie che da quello dei pochi argomenti – o del solo argomento? – che mi interessano) la parte iniziale di una trilogia che prima avevo in mente ma che oggi sto effettivamente scrivendo». ¹² The idea of a trilogy expresses the need to craft a new imaginary, which has remained incomplete. However, Ceresa does not go forward with this project. Faced with the lack of an imaginary for lesbianism, she remains in a space of negation, limiting herself to the ironic dislodgment of the existing order. As Adalgisa Giorgio writes,

Ceresa's unspeakable character can only be represented in negative, and only by means of a non-representational metanarrative. Thus the text underscores the usefulness of deconstructive narrative experimentation for the feminist enterprise. Whether deconstructive experimentalism is a permanent strategy, or only a short-term tactic aimed at bringing about the 'coming out' of female prodigality into 'constructive' experimental or representational writing modes, is not clear. Ceresa herself did not move on to tell us stories of female prodigality 'in positive'. (GIORGIO 2008, 733)

The positive narrative of lesbianism is not yet on the horizon, and the story of the prodigal daughter can only be told «magari all'inverso, o per negazione, o per esclusione» (CERESA 2023, 231). However, from this experimentation in the

ALBERICA BAZZONI, *Experimenting with the Unspeakable: Lesbian Dissimulation in Alice Ceresa's La figlia prodiga*, in «altrelettere», (2024), pp. 31-50, DOI: 10.5903/al_uzh-89.

negative, something valuable emerges: a subversive work that resists silence, reinventing it.

Notes

¹ This article is an elaboration of parts of an essay published originally in Italian: Alberica BAZZONI, *Dire l'indicibile: lesbismo e soggettività eversiva ne La figlia prodiga di Alice Ceresa e Lettera aperta di Goliarda Sapienza*, in «Allegoria», 88 (2023), pp. 59-76.

² On Alice Ceresa's biography, see: FORTINI 2020; ZAPPA MULAS 2018.

³ For a detailed account of Alice Ceresa's published and unpublished work, see: CRIVELLI 2008; CORDIBELLA 2013; SCHÜPBACH 2013; STOJA 2016a; STOJA 2016b.

⁴ Translations into English are always mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Ceresa will expand her reflections of female subjectivity, feminism and the heteropatriarchal system in *Piccolo dizionario dell'inuguaglianza femminile* (CERESA 2020).

⁶ Alice Ceresa was openly in a relationship with her life-long partner Barbara Fittipaldi, to whom she also entrusted the editing of her work, and is referred to as lesbian in several bibliographical accounts. See for example: PERROTTA RABISSI 2011; FIOCCHETTO 2012; ZAPPA MULAS 2018.

⁷ While the decades from the Unification to the Fascist regime, and then following the sexual revolution of 1968, are increasingly studied and documented (MILLETTI and PASSERINI 2007; ROSS 2015; BIAGINI 2018; ROMANO 2019), in the 1950s and 1960s the lesbian question in Italy was particularly invisible and still largely unaccounted for (see DE LEO 2021; ROMANO 2023). A recent special issue of «Allegoria», *Rappresentare il desiderio lesbico. Un'indagine sulla narrativa italiana (1930-1967)*, begins to tackle this gap in the literary field (SAVETTERI and SCARFONE 2023). On the methodological specificities of lesbian historiography, see FAMOSO 2021.

⁸ Italics is in the original.

⁹ For an early, brilliant critique of psychoanalysis from a homosexual perspective, see MIELI 2017.

¹⁰ See MIELI 2017. Feminist critiques of patriarchal and heteronormative tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis emerge in the 1970s and intensify in the following decades (see for example MITCHELL 1974; MELANDRI 1977; CHODOROW 1978; RICH 1980; IRIGARAY 1985; BUTLER 1990). For an introductory overview of a first phase of feminist critical readings problematizing psychoanalytic interpretations of female sexuality, see MINSKY 1996.

¹¹ Pirandello's plays cited here are all in PIRANDELLO 1986.

¹² Alice CERESA, Letter to Elio Vittorini, Rome, 17 November 1964 (STOJA 2016a, 20).

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