

Diebstahl/Furto: ein *casus literaris* aus Genderperspektive

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Stealing Words: The Re-appropriation of Language in the Work of Grazia Deledda, Anna Maria Ortese and Goliarda Sapienza

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“Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it.”
Hélène CIXOUS, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Introduction

What does it mean to speak and write, when words do not belong to you, but to those who use them to oppress you? This article explores the construction of female authorship in literary works by three 20th-century Italian women writers – Grazia Deledda’s *Cosima* (1937, posthumous), Anna Maria Ortese’s *Il porto di Toledo* (1975), and Goliarda Sapienza’s *L’arte della gioia* (1998, posthumous). Each in their own way, these authors articulate the challenge of appropriating literary discourse and tradition within a deeply male-dominated context, configuring their own speaking act as ‘theft’.

The notion of theft is inherently linked to that of property, and therefore to the very structure and distribution of power within a social order. If language and narrative have the performative power of organising our world by giving it a name, a structure, and a set of roles and rules, to occupy a speaking position entails enormous power – the power to give a name to reality and to define oneself according to one’s own interpretation and desire. Who owns words, stories, the power to represent oneself, and to define the other? In the subject-object economy of a patriarchal social order, the speaking position belongs to men (and to dominant subjects more broadly), while women have been shaped, constructed, and controlled by men’s words and excluded from self-representation. As Panizza and Wood note, “[u]p to World War II, women needed heroic determination first to learn, then to write and then to persist.” (PANIZZA/WOOD 2000: 3). By accessing a speaking position, taking a pen in their hand and becoming producers of discourse, women writers fatally crossed a boundary, ‘stealing’ a role with respect to language that was not meant for them.

The act of writing is thus from the outset connoted as transgressive, as opposed to entitled, a feature that leaves a deep mark on the writers’ self-fashioning as authors and on their texts. The representation of writing as theft by women writers thus takes place within a tension between norm, transgression and subversion of the social order. As such, it provides an insightful key to interpret women authors’ attitude towards language and literary tradition, as well as towards the role of writing within their own personal trajectory of subject constitution as women, as writers, as women writers.² By appropriating words and literary tropes, women writers not only re-signify them, they also challenge the very social system that excluded them from representation in the first place. The notion of stealing shifts from a transgressive act to the re-appropriation of a world – language, the symbolic, desire – that had in fact been first taken away from them.

The notion of theft concomitantly interrogates the relationship between women writers and literary tradition, for it prompts the question of who owns, or does not own, a place in the national literary canon and the keys to grant access to it. Systematically excluded or marginalised from that mnemonic and normative device that is the literary canon, literary works by women unsettle the very notion of canonicity, blurring and displacing genres, hierarchies, and aesthetic values. As an act of re-appropriation of representation, writing plays a crucial role in the process of subject constitution for women, individually and

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² On the relationship between autobiography, subjectivity and gender see SMITH 1993 and ANDERSON 2011; for a fresh investigation of this topic in the context of modern Italian literature, see FANNING 2017 and GAMBARO 2018.

collectively. In the works here considered, writing is inextricably linked to an autobiographical journey towards self-expression and subjectivity.

Taking into consideration the multiple dimensions that the notion of theft interrogates, this article explores the articulation of writing as theft under three main aspects: a material dimension, i.e. physically stealing in order to be able to write; an existential and philosophical dimension, where writing is seen as a transgressive and/or subversive appropriation of a speaking position, with a potential to redefine the representation of the self and the world; and finally, a literary dimension, exploring theft in relation to literary tradition and its creative displacement and reinterpretation.

“Scende in cantina e ruba un litro d’olio”: Grazia Deledda’s *Cosima*

Works by Grazia Deledda show a prominent fascination with transgression, the crossing of boundaries, thresholds, and the perturbing force of desire, especially sexual desire. As Deledda narrates in her autobiographical novel *Cosima*, a sense of transgression impended on her since adolescence, when she experienced two forms of desire that put her into conflict with her surrounding environment: the desire to write and erotic desire. Sharon Wood points out the importance of this transgressive drive in Deledda’s work

The centre of her work is neither social criticism nor psychological pathology but an investigation of the conflict between different ethical orders. If transgression is the crossing of a boundary, it is the moment when the individual reaches that boundary that interests her. (WOOD 1995: 63)

Deledda was born in Nuoro, in a rural area of Sardinia, in 1871, into a family of landowners in tragic decline. Following an almost unimaginable trajectory given the circumstances in which she grew up, Deledda succeeded in publishing some short stories on a Roman magazine, married a man from continental Italy and moved to Rome, where she rapidly became one of the most prolific and appreciated Italian writers, winning the Nobel prize for literature in 1926 (the second Italian writer who achieved that recognition, and the first and only woman in Italy).

Cosima, published posthumously in 1937 by Treves (Deledda died in Rome in 1936), is Deledda’s thinly fictional autobiography. Narrated in the third person, it retains nonetheless a close relationship with the author’s own life. *Cosima* was also Deledda’s third name, and the first edition, published as a serial novel in *Nuova Antologia*, was entitled *Cosima, quasi Grazia*. The novel, which was left unfinished, recounts the protagonist’s childhood and adolescence, her first steps in writing, her family’s vicissitudes, her social environment in the little town of Nuoro, and the material and cultural challenges to her desire to write as well as the repercussions she faced for doing it. In a repressive and deeply patriarchal context, a girl’s wish to become a writer was seen as a threat to her chances of getting married, which was the only sanctioned path for a woman, and brought dishonour to her family. From the start, in *Cosima* writing is inextricably linked to the girl’s ownership of her own body, which belongs to the community and which she claims back by voicing and enacting her own desire. As Hélène Cixous argues, “[b]y writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her” (CIXOUS 2009: 419). The representation of writing in the novel brings together the material conditions that makes it extremely difficult for a girl to write, in line with what Virginia Woolf eloquently argues in *A Room of One’s Own*, and the symbolic level of erotic desire, bringing a powerful physicality into the text:

Ma ancora ci sono, per lei, momenti nei quali il cielo torna a spalancarsi, e un tepore primaverile le scalda il sangue. Ella scrive: piegata sul suo scartafaccio, quando le sorelle tengono a bada la madre, e Andrea è fuori in campagna, e Santus dorme uno dei suoi soliti sonni d’ubriaco, ella si slancia nel mondo delle sue fantasie, e scrive, scrive, per un bisogno fisico, come altre adolescenti corrono per i viali dei giardini, o vanno a un luogo loro proibito; se possono, a un convegno d’amore. (DELEDDA 2012: 108)

In this passage, Deledda describes the practical conditions that need to be in place for *Cosima* to be able to write, which include all her family members being satisfied and busy with themselves. Only then she can carve out a space for herself, a temporary room of her own, in which the sky opens and her blood warms up. Writing is then described as prompted by a corporeal drive and equated to running towards a forbidden

space, an erotic encounter. As Ursula Fanning points out, “Deledda links the erotic and writing insofar as both provide her protagonist with a potential means of escape. [...] Cosima’s writing is presented as absolutely essential to her; there is an urgent physicality in the process of writing, which further links it to the erotic” (FANNING 2017: 159). It is the connection with the erotic sphere that plunges writing into the realm of transgression and “misappropriation”, for through the act of writing Cosima posits herself as a desiring subject instead of subservient object in the community’s patriarchal system.

Interestingly, the inherently transgressive feature of writing is narrated in *Cosima* in connection with a material act of theft. Having no money, the girl steals and sells a litre of olive oil in order to buy a stamp and mail her short story to a magazine in Rome.

Anche lei, nelle sue scritture, combina convegni di amore: è una storia, la sua, dove la protagonista è lei, il mondo è il suo [...]. Il plico del manoscritto è accuratamente involto in tela e carta, con una rete di spaghi che deve resistere al lungo viaggio di terra e di mare: ed è anche raccomandato: tutte spese che Cosima non può sopportare col suo scarso bilancio personale composto dai pochi centesimi che la madre le dà ogni domenica. Ma poiché è necessario andare avanti a tutti i costi, ecco che la scrittrice, la poetessa, la creatura delle nuvole, scende in cantina e ruba un litro d’olio: è facile questa ladroneria. [...] Cosima riceve la somma, in piccole monete d’argento da mezza lira l’una [...]; ha scrupolo, ha paura, anche un po’ di vergogna; ma poi pensa che il fratello Andrea non esita a intascare metà del fitto del bosco e del provento delle mandorle, per sprecarlo col gioco e con le donne, e divide anche lei le monete: metà alla casa, metà alla gloria. È vero che poi rivelò il peccato al confessore, dicendo di aver rubato, senza però riferirne il motivo: e per penitenza digiunò il venerdì e il sabato. (DELEDDA 2012: 108-110)

Theft is here not only a metaphor for appropriating a forbidden role, space and subjectivity, but also a very concrete action that Cosima needs to perform as she has no property of her own. And this theft is placed at the very beginning and core of Cosima’s career as writer, as its enabling condition. Material and symbolic levels converge in the act of theft, a transgressive re-appropriation that allows the young woman to redefine her field of action and expression. In later years, writing will in turn become the main source of sustenance for Deledda, as it was notably for other women writers from the same period, such as Sibilla Aleramo and Matilde Serao, further strengthening the connection between writing and appropriation of an independent position. In this passage, the interconnectedness of material and symbolic levels is represented, ironically, in the contrasting of Cosima’s elevated spiritual purposes and the downward movement of stealing olive oil from the basement, “ecco che la scrittrice, la poetessa, la creatura delle nuvole, scende in cantina e ruba un litro d’olio”. Playing with romantic depictions of genius and inspiration, Deledda is portraying a very concrete situation, showing full awareness of the way in which material and economic conditions dictate a woman’s space for action. Irony also permeates Deledda’s reference to her sense of guilt and her confession to a priest; while she confesses her sin, stealing, she keeps her much more scandalous motives – writing, publishing – for herself. She pays her tribute to social conventions, but she nonetheless re-appropriates what she feels that rightfully belongs to her, with no guilt: the possibility to become a writer. As an old woman and successful writer, Deledda goes back to her past, finally the protagonist and narrating subject of her own story, so that, as Dino Manca notes, *Cosima* “può essere considerato il suo romanzo-testamento, l’opera della rivisitazione e della riappropriazione insieme” (MANCA 2019: 51).

If transgression plays a crucial role in Cosima’s formation as a writer, the novel also showcases the repercussions that befall on the woman who transcends her boundaries. When news of Cosima’s published short stories reach her family and spread in the small town, she is harshly reproached for jeopardising her chances to marry and bringing shame to the family. Furthermore, when Cosima’s romantic affair with Fortunio, a young man, is discovered, her brother Andrea beats her up: “E un giorno Andrea [...] a Cosima somministrò una dose di schiaffi e pugni che oltre le membra le pestarono l’anima come il sale nel mortaio” (DELEDDA 2012: 127). The parallel between writing and erotic desire also continues through the punishment endured by the girl. If Cosima was shamed and punished by her family and community as a young woman, Deledda herself suffered from punitive repercussions as a successful writer. She was not forgiven by her native town Nuoro and was never fully accepted by the male-dominated literary establishment of her time, actually attracting harsh criticism and satire. A notable example is the novel *Suo marito* by Luigi Pirandello,

in which the author provides a satirical portrait of a woman writer, Silvia Roncella, behind whom is Deledda herself. Pirandello uses stereotypical sexist tropes of the time, representing women writers as vain, unmarried yet “provate a bastanza e sperimentate nel mondo”, and commenting satirically and bitterly on the emergence of “innumerevoli giovani scrittrici italiane, poetesse, novellatrici, romanzatrici (qualcuna anche drammaturga)” (PIRANDELLO 2014: 1). Pirandello’s satire is in line with several male writers’ and critics’ derogatory judgement of women intellectuals as deviating from their natural social role and appropriating a male position.³ For example, Giovanni Verga defines Matilde Serao an “ermafrodita”⁴, while Italo Svevo undermines the female character of Annetta Maller in *Una vita* by negating her identity as a woman who is invested in literature: “Non era una donna quando parlava di letteratura. Era un uomo nella lotta per la vita, moralmente un essere muscoloso” (SVEVO 1993: 99). In front of women’s appropriation of a male-dominated intellectual sphere, men respond punitively by stripping women of their female identity, in the impossibility of conceiving intellectual sphere and female identity together where the intellect is intrinsically understood as male. Whereas this was stated explicitly in the first half of the twentieth century, women writers are still systematically excluded or marginalised from the literary canon, as is the case with Deledda up to today.⁵ Despite being translated and read all around the world, and despite achieving the highest international literary recognition, Deledda’s work barely features in contemporary Italian literary histories, which keep reproducing patriarchal hierarchies and values.

“A favore di una letteratura come reato”: Anna Maria Ortese’s *Il porto di Toledo*

While for Deledda the theme of transgression plays a central role in the construction of authorship, a defining aspect of Anna Maria Ortese’s is the appropriation of the means of expression, and, through them, the act of giving voice to neglected, repressed and oppressed domains of reality. Ortese’s life was characterised by poverty, displacement, mourning, as well as an absolute dedication to writing. She was a prolific author of novels, reportages, short stories and poetry, and her work engages with the genres of documentary realism and the fantastic, often inhabiting a liminal or blended space between the two. Her appropriation of literary discourse challenges the very epistemic and political foundations of the social order, as it aims to bring an entirely different world to life.

Similarly to *Cosima*, *Il porto di Toledo*, first published in 1975, is a fictional autobiography narrated in the third person. Set in Naples (the real city under the name of Toledo), it recounts the childhood and adolescence of the protagonist, Damasa, her literary apprenticeship and her first experience of erotic desire. Compared to *Cosima*, however, the text departs from realism to delve into an oneiric, poetic and fragmented narrative. Furthermore, it incorporates several texts – poems and short stories – from Ortese’s past, which in the novel are attributed to the protagonist, Damasa, and for which the novel provides a commentary in the style of Dante’s *Vita nova*.

In the 1998 preface to the Adelphi edition of *Il porto di Toledo*, entitled *Anne, le aggiunte e il mutamento*, Ortese dedicates the novel to Anne, an English girl who was convicted of theft, and advances her poetic view of literature as crime:

Un giorno, la sua mente, forse indebolita dal buio, cercò la salvezza. Era il denaro. Non lo aveva, s’ingegnò a fabbricarlo. Al processo, non si difese mai. Sapeva di avere offeso irrimediabilmente la Legge che la voleva nel buio, come suo luogo naturale. E non aveva voce per difendersi. Stette semprezitta. [...]

Fin dall’inizio questo libro è stato dedicato a Anne. [...] Fu, dal mondo, derubata della sua piccola vita. Bisognava restituirla qualcosa, una forma di giustizia, anche se lei non rispondeva più alle voci del mondo. Pensai, forse solo sentii, che bisognava starle vicino, portare il suo carico. Come? Un reato – anche per me – *di aggiunta e mutamento* era indispensabile. Il luogo non poteva essere che quello dei libri. Avrei scritto qualcosa a favore di una letteratura come *reato*, reato di aggiunta e mutamento. Cominciò così il mio senso di sfida nei

³ On Italian critics’ judgements and patriarchal values, see BARBARULLI/BRANDI 2015.

⁴ Giovanni Verga, “Lettera a Paolina Greppi”, cit. in BARBARULLI/BRANDI 2015: 102.

⁵ On the Italian literary canon and women writers, see CRISPINO 2015; RONCHETTI/SAPEGNO 2007; COX/FERRARI 2011; BAZZONI 2021.

confronti dei possibili lettori di *Toledo*. Avevo dato il via a una falsa autobiografia, ma questo era il meno. Avevo, soprattutto, impiantato una discussione *sul mutamento e le aggiunte*. (Questa era la parte con Anne). La vecchia natura delle cose non mi andava. Inventai dunque una me stessa che voleva un'aggiunta al mondo, che gridava contro la pianificazione ottimale della vita. Che vedeva, nella normalità, solo menzogna. Che protestava contro il soffocamento del limite, esigeva pura violenza e nuovo orizzonte. (ORTESE 1998: 3)

In this dense and rich preface, Ortese articulates several interrelated points that make up her vision of literature as salvific and subversive, again linking material and symbolic aspects of theft. Anne, an emblematic figure of subalternity to whom Ortese dedicates her novel, lives in poverty and silence, in the place where the Law wants to keep her, but in order to survive she steals. Having no language to resist and denounce the injustice of the Law, she is robbed (“derubata”) of her life by society. Ortese’s writing is therefore configured as a reparatory and subversive act, which challenges the social order by giving voice to an oppressed world that cannot speak. Ortese’s writing parallels Anne’s theft, but by appropriating language it also strives to transform the representation of reality. Writing is conceived as a subversive crime of “aggiunta e mutamento”, an addition to and transformation of an unjust, oppressive and violent social and symbolic order. The process of appropriation of discourse is described in violent terms that equal the violence of oppression, as a powerfully disruptive and imaginative action. Throughout the novel, the protagonist Damasa tenaciously looks for a new language, one that is capable of bringing to light effaced elements of reality and of giving voice to the voiceless, as Ortese does throughout her whole *oeuvre*. In engaging with writing, Ortese also claims a space for self-expression and reappropriation of her own life, establishing a close relationship between writing and the construction of subjectivity.

One of the structures that *Il porto di Toledo* transforms creatively is that of autobiography as a teleological narration of a knowable self, and its logocentric premises.⁶ The novel is in dialogue with literary autobiographical tradition and especially with the model of Dante’s *Vita Nova*, also a form of autobiographical reconstruction of the author’s initiation in love and language through a self-reflexive commentary on poems from the past. However, the teleologically ordered structure of *Vita Nova* is disrupted in *Il porto di Toledo*, as Damasa does not speak from a position of achieved understanding and maturity, and ultimately does not compose her past emotions, experiences and literary production into any crystallised final meaning. As Cosetta Seno Reed points out,

L’identità e la scrittura sono alcuni degli argomenti su cui Ortese riflette a proposito della sua storia *toledana*, e non a caso, in quanto essi delineano l’identità della stessa pratica autobiografica, ma anche in quanto è attraverso questi temi che si può giungere a compiere un’operazione letteraria altamente originale il cui risultato, sebbene non programmato, consiste in ultima analisi nello scardinamento dei dogmi della tradizione logocentrica. (SENO REED 2017: 159)

Dedicated to the little and voiceless thief Anne, *Il porto di Toledo* is thus also an operation of theft from literary tradition which produces a subversion of the order on which that tradition rests, a “crime of addition and transformation” through which the author can create “uno ‘spazio’ nuovo in cui costruire la sua nuova espressività” (SENO REED 2017: 152).

“Erano sue, solo sue. Le aveva rubate”. Goliarda Sapienza’s *L’arte della gioia*

Goliarda Sapienza was born in Catania, Sicily, in 1924, daughter of Maria Giudice, a feminist and socialist activist and trade union leader, and Peppino Sapienza, a socialist lawyer. Before becoming a writer in the 1950s, Sapienza trained as an actress in theatre and cinema, went through depression, two suicide attempts and electroshock therapy. Her major novel, *L’arte della gioia*, written in the 1970s, was rejected by several

⁶ In this, Ortese joins a large body of texts by women writers which engage with the autobiographical genre in order to give voice to a subjectivity in the making, rather than providing a retrospective account of a fixed self. See for example the notion of “novel of becoming” elaborated in FORTINI/BONO 2007, and that of “constructing subjects” in FANNING 2017.

publishers as it was considered too subversive or impossible to place on the editorial market.⁷ It was published by Stampa Alternativa in a small print-run after Sapienza's death, meeting popular success and critical recognition in France, Germany and Spain, and only later in Italy, with the Einaudi edition in 2008.⁸

Having been raised in a socialist and feminist environment in the context of deeply Fascist and Catholic Sicily, to Sapienza the social order has the face of oppressive normativity and patriarchal power. Such an anti-normative position and predilection for the margins are not only professed by Sapienza on an intellectual level but are also experienced first-hand in her own life. In 1980, frustrated at her failed attempts at publishing *L'arte della gioia* and verging on poverty, Sapienza steals jewelry from a wealthy friend and is convicted of theft, spending a few days in prison. That experience forms the basis of two novels dedicated to prison and its inhabitants, *L'università di Rebibbia* (1983) and *Le certezze del dubbio* (1987). In her life as much as in her writings, Sapienza voices a radically anti-normative stance and shows a clear preference for marginalised spaces and identities, including LGBTQ+ people, political dissidents, drug addicts and outlaws – that “masnada di bucanieri che in un modo o nell'altro non s'è piegata ad accettare le leggi ingiuste del privilegio” (SAPIENZA 1983: 72).

L'arte della gioia is Sapienza's major novel. Narrated mostly in the first person, but occasionally switching to third-person narration, it is the fictional autobiography of Modesta, the protagonist, who was born in Sicily in 1900. The novel recounts Modesta's life, from her first experiences of poverty, rape and sexual pleasure as a child, to her upbringing in a convent, her rise to power within an aristocratic family, and her experience of love, sex, intellectual discovery, politics, prison and mourning as an adult woman. The whole novel is centred on Modesta's search of “the art of joy”, an ethics of freedom, pleasure, relationships of care and anarchism that rests on a constant exercise in self-reflection and the rejection of any normative structure. Unlike Cosima and Damasa, Modesta as a character does not make writing and language the very centre of her life; however, as Modesta is also the narrator of her own story, writing and language are an equally central element of subject formation. This is particularly evident in the way in which Modesta's discovery of written language as an adolescent in a convent is narrated:

Ma dopo, la voce di madre Leonora, ricomposta nella sua dolcezza di sempre, avrebbe ricominciato a dire parole belle, come infinito, azzurro, soave, celestiale, magnolie... Che belli i nomi dei fiori: gerani, ortensie, gelsomino, che suoni meravigliosi! Ora poi che le scriveva le parole lì sul bianco della carta, nero su bianco, non le avrebbe perdute più, non le avrebbe dimenticate più. Erano sue, solo sue. Le aveva rubate, rubate a tutti quei libri per bocca di madre Leonora. (SAPIENZA 2008: 21)

In this passage, as in Deledda's and Ortese's works, the appropriation of language by a young woman is described as theft, as Modesta steals words from the world and makes them her own, with a nourishing and empowering effect. Furthermore, once again the appropriation of language takes place concomitantly with an experience of erotic desire, for Modesta feels attraction and love for Mother Leonora, and also rediscovers the pleasures of masturbation. Later in her life, when Modesta is an adult woman, her relationship with language deepens and transforms. Emphasis shifts from stealing words, taking their meaning for granted, to their deconstruction and resignification, as Modesta draws a clear connection between language and the oppressive, normative world it represents.

Il male sta nelle parole che la tradizione ha voluto assolute, nei significati snaturati che le parole continuano a rivestire. Mentiva la parola amore, esattamente come la parola morte. Mentivano molte parole, mentivano quasi tutte. Ecco che cosa dovevo fare: studiare le parole esattamente come si studiano le piante, gli animali... E poi, ripulirle dalla muffa, liberarle dalle incrostazioni di secoli di tradizione, inventarne delle nuove, e soprattutto scartare per non servirsi più di quelle che l'uso quotidiano adopera con maggiore frequenza, le più marce, come: sublime, dovere, tradizione, abnegazione, umiltà, anima, pudore, cuore, eroismo, sentimento, pietà, sacrificio, rassegnazione. Imparai a leggere i libri in un altro modo. Man mano che incontravo una certa parola, un certo aggettivo, li tiravo fuori dal loro contesto e li analizzavo per vedere se si potevano usare nel “mio” contesto. (SAPIENZA 2008: 135)

⁷ See PELLEGRINO 2016.

⁸ See HERNÁNDEZ 2012.

As for Ortese “normalità” is “menzogna”, for Modesta conventional language is a lie, in that it enforces a normative vision of reality and masks it as objective. In her appropriation of language, Modesta claims the right to challenge its alleged neutrality and objectivity, specifically in relation to the semantic field of traditional ethical duties and virtues. Similarly to Ortese, Modesta seeks to disrupt an established social and symbolic order, giving voice to another vision of reality that is anchored to her own positionality, her “own” context.

Modesta’s deconstructive approach to language exemplifies Sapienza’s own take on language and literary tradition in *L’arte della gioia*. In addition to experimenting intensely with language, narrative structures and genres, the novel contains several literary ‘thefts’, which produce a subversive and often ironic effect. An example of such an ironic reuse of literary tradition is Sapienza’s multiple references to Dante.⁹ Dante is cited explicitly and referred to implicitly throughout the novel, as one of Sapienza’s fundamental models. A reference to Dante, the irony of which is hardly lost on the reader, is the use of the name “Beatrice”, Dante’s object of love and theological mentor in *Paradiso*, and, in *L’arte della gioia*, the young woman with angelic features who acts as a guide to Modesta when she arrives in the Brandiforti’s villa. Playing with the role of Dante’s Beatrice as the poet’s guide towards divine love, in *L’arte della gioia* Beatrice is the young woman who initiates Modesta in the paradisiac experience of lesbian sex:

Così, per la prima volta in vita mia, fui amata amando, come dice la romanza. [...] Abbandonandomi a lei, uscivo da quell’inferno di dubbi e bende e muri di lava. Il convento s’allontanava quando la fissavo negli occhi, sprofondava dietro di me e rivedevo le stelle. Che fosse quello il paradiso, l’amore? Non sapevo cosa significasse quella parola: “Amor che muove il sole e l’altre stelle”. (SAPIENZA 2008: 80)

The passage refers to Dante’s *Commedia*, and specifically to the poet’s departure from hell in the closing line of *Inferno*, “E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle” (Dante, *Inferno* XXXIV, 139), paralleled by Modesta’s progressive liberation from oppressive life in the convent. It also cites Dante’s most famous description of God, “Amor che muove il sole e l’altre stelle” (Dante, *Paradiso* XXXIII, 145), which Modesta steals from its original context and applies to interpret her own experience, her sexual and romantic relationship with Beatrice. Tradition is here appropriated and playfully subverted by Sapienza, who through such a displacement and recontextualisation of Dante’s words, is able to convey new meaning, one that creates an ironic friction with the values and worldview of that tradition.

Conclusion

In the course of the twentieth century, women writers emerge prominently on the Italian literary scene. Such a presence, however, is profoundly conflictual, and remains so to this date. This article has investigated the construction of an authorial voice and the representation of the relationship with language in three works by female writers, Grazia Deledda’s *Cosima*, Anna Maria Ortese’s *Il porto di Toledo*, and Goliarda Sapienza’s *L’arte della gioia*, evidencing how all three authors show a sustained fascination with the theme of theft and conceptualise their own writing in terms of transgression. Their appropriation of the means of expression is a subversive act that puts them in conflict with social norms. Within the context of existing scholarship on authorship and gender, the notion of theft thus proves to be a particularly productive one, in that it highlights the initiatory transgression involved in the act of writing and the writers’ conflicting relationship with their social and symbolic order. It also serves to foreground the unequal distribution of access and entitlement to the production of discourse, which is configured as the property of men. As Sharon Wood notes, “[w]omen have until very recently had to do battle with the view that writing is not a suitable occupation for a woman, and that the work they produce is necessarily different – hence lesser in value – to that of men” (WOOD 1993: 1).

In constructing their own authorial position, Deledda, Ortese and Sapienza engage with a language and a cultural tradition that have constructed women as silent object of discourse, and they challenge and subvert its normativity. An example is the authors’ engagement with the model of Dante. Ortese adopts the structure

⁹ The relationship between Sapienza and Dante is still uncharted territory that would arguably deserve closer attention.

of Dante's *Vita Nova*, assembling texts from the past and framing them within an autobiographical commentary. However, the same model is undermined by Ortese from within, as she does not subscribe to any final understanding or attribution of meaning to her past, and creates instead "[u]n nuovo genere letterario che le consente, contemporaneamente, di sfidare il canone e di porsi in relazione con il futuro." (SENO REED 2017: 154). Sapienza also steals names and lines from Dante, ironically displacing the poet's words from the context of divine love to that of homoeroticism. Finally, the article has also pointed out a recurring link between writing and erotic desire, as all three authors portray the discovery and appropriation of language in connection with an experience of eroticism. Subjectivity, language and self-expression go hand in hand with women's re-appropriation of their own bodies and the possibility to experience and express erotic desire. Stealing words, the three young women represented in these texts, Cosima, Damasa and Modesta, all defiantly take back what had been first stolen from them: their voice, their bodies.

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