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## Invisible Sea: Anna Maria Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli*

Lucia Re

*Il mare non bagna Napoli* è una memorabile testimonianza, necessaria a chiunque voglia comprendere qualcosa su Napoli. –Raffaele La Capria, 2008

Elle l'avait toujours pressenti: sa myopie était sa propre étrangère, son étrangereté essentielle. –Hélène Cixous, 1998

L'occhio non vede cose ma figure di cose che significano altre cose. – Italo Calvino, 1972

Written in Naples, “Un paio di occhiali” (“A Pair of Glasses”) is one of Anna Maria Ortese’s most admired and influential short stories. It was first published in the weekly *Omnibus* in May 1949 under the title “Ottomila lire per gli occhi di Eugenia” (“Eight Thousand Liras for Eugenia’s Eyes”).<sup>1</sup> With the new title, “Un paio di occhiali” appeared in 1953 as the opening story of Ortese’s controversial collection about Naples, a volume polemically entitled *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (literally “The Sea Does Not Reach Naples” or “Naples is not on the Sea”). “Non bagna” not only implies that the sea is effectively invisible in Naples, but that the sea’s cleansing and restorative power is also absent. Although often anthologized (along with short stories by other authors) as an example of literary realism, “Un paio di occhiali” is a complex text that reveals its full meaning only if read in the context of *Il mare non bagna Napoli* as a whole. The story is more than just a beginning, constituting rather a kind of musical overture through which some of the major recurrent themes of the book are introduced. And although each chapter in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* is to some degree self-standing, they remain connected to one another via an artful orchestration of leitmotifs that unify the volume. The overall meaning and aesthetic significance of the book can in turn only be grasped, as we shall see, in light of the inaugural story, which, if closely scrutinized, provides an introduction and a hermeneutic key of sorts to what I will call Ortese’s “poetics of nearsightedness.” Before turning to “Un paio di occhiali” and its poetics, I will provide an overview of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, identifying its complex stylistic approach, and discussing its composition, publication and reception in the context of postwar Naples and beyond.

In *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, a second fictional short story entitled “Interno familiare” (“Family Scene”) immediately follows “Un paio di occhiali.” It, in turn, is followed by three “racconti-inchiesta” (a hybrid genre that mixes the short story, the autobiographical essay, and reportage): “Oro a Forcella” (“The Gold of the Via Forcella”), “La città involontaria” (“A City in Spite of Itself”) and “Il silenzio della ragione” (“The Silence of Reason”).<sup>2</sup> Oddly, this

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough account of this story’s publication history and complete bibliographical details, see Luca Clerici, *Apparizione e visione. Vita e opere di Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> All Italian quotations will be from Anna Maria Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (Milan: Adelphi, 1994, henceforth quoted in parenthesis in the text as *Mare*), which includes a new introduction (“Il Mare come spaesamento,” 9-11, and Afterword (“Le giacchette grigie di Monte di Dio,” 173-176). As observed by Monica Farnetti in her bibliographical note to Anna Maria Ortese, *L’infanta sepolta* (Milan: Adelphi, 2000), 173-4, *Mare* is the only one among Ortese’s collections of short texts to have retained its original contents and structure unchanged

hybridization of different genres in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* continues to be considered scandalous (even in the postmodern era) by Ortese's detractors, who invoke standards of purity and factuality that Ortese is accused of having transgressed. Alternately, Ortese's "monstrous" hybridity in *Mare* is condoned by those who see her book as just another work of fiction, mere literary invention and fantasies that have little to do with documentary "reality."<sup>3</sup> Ortese's book may, thus, be included in the list of her literary monsters—strange and "marvelous" creations or creatures—that have become the object of wonder and bewilderment, admiration and reprobation. Yet, as Ortese herself insisted in the 1994 foreword, "erano molto veri il dolore e il male di Napoli, uscita in pezzi dalla guerra" ("they were all too real, the pain and suffering of Naples, which emerged from the war a broken city").<sup>4</sup> Together, the book's chapters provide both a sympathetic documentation of the dark and disintegrating reality of postwar Naples and something like a vast, novelistic fresco of the city that embraces all its social classes, from the poorest and most marginal to the petty bourgeois and middle-class, the "nobility," the clergy, and the intellectuals. Ortese exposes the persistence of the inhuman conditions of life, the everyday practices of abuse and exploitation, and the lingering (in post-Reconstruction, economic-miracle Italy) of a colonialist and paternalistic attitude towards the populace of Naples.

*Il mare non bagna Napoli* was published in Einaudi's distinguished series "I Gettoni," whose editor in chief was the writer Elio Vittorini. Italo Calvino, who then worked for Einaudi, after reading the second chapter ("Interno familiare") and seeing a plan for the fifth ("Il silenzio della ragione") warmly recommended that Vittorini publish the book; both were actively involved as editors in finalizing the order of the chapters.<sup>5</sup> Calvino especially encouraged Ortese to opt for "Il mare non bagna Napoli" (among various options she and Vittorini proposed) as the definitive title, because in his view this paradoxical yet memorable phrase from the chapter "Oro a Forcella"<sup>6</sup> encapsulated the sad reality of the port city, whose once-flourishing harbor was in

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through its various Italian editions (Vallecchi 1967; Rizzoli 1975; La Nuova Italia 1979). Other collections, including the stories of *L'infanta sepolta* (first edition 1950) have been subject to various reshufflings. Most quotations in translation are from *The Bay is Not Naples. Short Stories by Anna Maria Ortese* trans. Frances Frenaye (London: Collins, 1955, henceforth cited as *Bay*). All other translations are mine. *The Bay is Not Naples* includes only a partial translation of the last chapter ("The Silence of Reason"). About twenty pages of the last section are not included, without explanation. However, *The Bay is Not Naples* includes three additional texts which were never part of any Italian edition of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*: "The Sea and Naples" ("Il mare e Napoli") first published in *Sud* in June 1946 and January 1947 under the title "Dolente spirito del vicolo" and republished in *L'infanta sepolta* (1950 and 2000); "Traveler's Return" ("Ritorno fra la mia gente") originally published in *L'Unità*, Milan, 28 March 1954, now included in *Angelici dolori e altri racconti*, ed. Luca Clerici (Milan: Adelphi, 2006); "A Strange Apparition" ("Un personaggio singolare," originally published in two parts as "Due pariglie alla carrozza di passione" and "Sulle case nere splendeva l'arcobaleno," in *Milano Sera* September 8, 1950 and February 6, 1951 and subsequently under the new title in *L'infanta sepolta* (1950 and 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Silvia Contarini, "Tra cecità e visione. Come leggere *Il mare non bagna Napoli* di Anna Maria Ortese," in *Chroniques Italiennes*, 5 (2004): 1-13. For a similar position, see also the first chapter of Nadia Fusini's *Nomi. Undici scritture al femminile* (Rome: Donzelli, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> "Il Mare come spaesamento," Ortese, *Mare*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> It was Vittorini who insisted that "Il mare e Napoli" (cfr. note 2 above) not be included in the volume, on the grounds that it was not "objective" enough, that it was excessively "personal" and that it referred to an episode of the immediate postwar period that was no longer relevant to "today's Naples" (which was his understanding of what the book was meant to be about).

<sup>6</sup> "Qui il mare non bagnava Napoli. Ero sicura che nessuno lo avesse visto, e lo ricordava" (Ortese, *Mare* 67). ("Here, Naples is not cleansed by the sea; for that matter few of these people have seen it or can even remember it" [*Bay* 88]). Ortese published an earlier story entitled "Il mare non bagna Napoli" in *Milano Sera* July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1950, now in *La lente oscura. Scritti di viaggio*, ed. Luca Clerici (Milan: Adelphi, 2004), 406-410.

deep economic crisis, while urban decay was such that the proverbial, beneficial presence of the Mediterranean could virtually no longer be felt. The city seemed suffocating, entirely cut off from the sea.<sup>7</sup> The neo-monarchist (and previously Fascist) shipping magnate Achille Lauro was the mayor at the time and the undisputed populist ruler and “boss” of Naples. He owned the Naples soccer team and the influential newspaper *Roma*. He ruthlessly manipulated the populace through demagogic “gifts” and organized highly popular folk festivals promoting the solar myth of Naples, all while contributing to the further ruin of the once flourishing port. After the war, the port was turned largely into a NATO and US Navy military base and served as a venue for emigration.<sup>8</sup> On his ships bound for Australia and South America, Lauro crowded thousands of Neapolitan migrants, for whom the Italian government paid him the fare. Unchecked by the central government, and with the complicity of the Christian Democrats in Rome, his corrupted and parasitical administration pocketed State subventions destined for urban renewal and economic regeneration. Such practices led to the sack of Naples by corrupt speculators, contributing to the devastation of the city’s landscape and rampant, irrational overbuilding of its environs. Ortese wrote *Il mare non bagna Napoli* at the very moment when the consequences of Lauro’s leadership and the lack of any real opposition to it (from either inside or outside Naples) were becoming clear; the city’s situation, painstakingly documented in the book through its impact on people’s bodies and daily lives, was uglier than ever.<sup>9</sup> Yet Calvino thought and told her that she should feel happy because she had written “un libro bellissimo” (“a very beautiful book”).<sup>10</sup> Traces of her influence on his own writing may, as we shall see, be detected in the tale “Storia di un miope.”<sup>11</sup>

Ortese’s volume grew out of an extended period of intense research undertaken, as Ortese herself explained, in order to “see the reality of Naples” in the postwar era “senza paraocchi” (“without blinders”).<sup>12</sup> But the eye and the gaze for Ortese are not so much a means to gather images of the real, as ways of grasping and establishing relationships.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, some critics have begun to see the book as a masterpiece, and it is now widely considered one of

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<sup>7</sup> Italo Calvino, *I libri degli altri. Lettere 1947-1981*, ed. Giovanni Tesio (Turin: Einaudi, 1991) 93; letter to Elio Vittorini and Anna Maria Ortese, June 16, 1953.

<sup>8</sup> See Antonio Ghirelli, *Achille Lauro* (Napoli: Gaetano Macchiaroli, 1992), 119: “Under cover of attracting tourists in a city lacking even the most basic housing facilities, [Lauro] sets a schedule of festivals ranging from April to October, mixing San Gennaro with the singing tradition of Piedigrotta, literary awards with social parties, beauty contests with fireworks. He constantly looks after his voters’ clientele, no matter which social class and working category they are from, both personally and through his staff: he finds jobs for the unemployed and homes for the homeless, demands bribes from builders in order to replenish the relief fund; he multiplies recruitments, assignments, repayments, contracts and cheats; he systematically combines public and private affairs, upsetting financial balances and bureaucratic procedures in supreme contempt of any law.”

<sup>9</sup> Ortese’s 1950 story also entitled “Il mare non bagna Napoli” contains a pointed critique of the excesses and extravagance of the Lauro family in contrast to the city’s economic crisis, and of the brainwashing of the populace through religious folk festivals and processions. On the irrationality of Lauro’s system, which only fostered chaos and uncontrolled growth, see P. A. Allum, *Potere e società a Napoli nel dopoguerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Anna Maria Ortese, May 21, 1953, in Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940-1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 370.

<sup>11</sup> The optic metaphor of “Un paio di occhiali” resurfaces with variations also in other texts by Calvino, including *La giornata di uno scrutatore* (*The Watcher*), *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*) (whose very title echoes Ortese’s “La città involontaria”), and especially the later *Palomar* (*Mr. Palomar*).

<sup>12</sup> Ortese, *La lente oscura*. See also Clerici, *Apparizione*, 252.

<sup>13</sup> On this way of understanding the eye and the gaze, it is still helpful to read Jean Starobinski, *L’Oeil vivant* (1961).

Ortese's major and most original achievements as well as an outstanding (albeit idiosyncratic) text of the Neapolitan narrative tradition and of the Italian Neorealist season.<sup>14</sup> Yet, although it earned one of the coveted Viareggio awards for narrative in 1953, the book was initially very controversial.<sup>15</sup> According to a polemical review by the Neapolitan journalist Nino Sansone, published in the Communist journal *Rinascita* (then directed by its founder, Palmiro Togliatti), the book was not beautiful, but rather ugly and malicious; according to Sansone, the book gave a negative, degraded image of Naples and its inhabitants. It was, Sansone claimed, a book written to please the "Northern industrialists" who despised the South and the Southerners. It was unworthy, Sansone claimed, of a leftist publishing house like Einaudi, especially the Gettoni series. Publishing it was "un atto di miopia" ("an act of nearsightedness").<sup>16</sup> In the pages that follow, I will discuss briefly the book's role in relation to the Neapolitan narrative tradition, and give a more detailed account of each of its various chapters, and of some of the reasons for its ambivalent reception. I will subsequently focus on "Un paio di occhiali" and on the theme or image of nearsightedness: not the purported publishing nearsightedness of Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino, but the nearsightedness of Eugenia, the young girl who is the protagonist of "Un paio di occhiali," as a metaphoric key to Ortese's tragic poetics.

As a truthful and non-sentimental representation of the inhuman conditions of life in early 1950s Naples (despite the postwar reconstruction efforts), Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli* may be associated with the diverse, abundant (and still thriving) literary production of Neapolitan prose writers. Such writers' books—up to and including Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (an equally controversial work, published in 2006)—focus on the city, seeking not only to portray its dismal reality but also something like the seemingly perennial, intractably tragic condition that afflicts the city behind the cheery myths of *napoletanità* or *Neapolitanness*.<sup>17</sup> Even though not Neapolitan by birth, Ortese adopted Naples as one of her home cities. Anna Maria

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<sup>14</sup> Ortese, like Calvino and others, did not like the label "neorealism," which never came together as a real movement per se, but rather represented a mood and a moment, and a compulsion to narrate in a certain way the tragic experiences shared by Italians during and after the second World War. See my "Neorealist Narrative: Experience and Experiment," *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Andrea Ciccarelli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 104-124.

<sup>15</sup> Reviews appeared in all the major Italian dailies. See Clerici, *Apparizione*, 259-60.

<sup>16</sup> Nino Sansone, "Il mare non bagna Napoli," *Rinascita*, 10, 7 (1953): 443. At the time, Ortese wrote a lucid and firm response that, however, *Rinascita* chose not to print. It appeared only after the publication of the 1994 edition of *Il mare*, in the newspaper *Il Mattino*, November 15, 1995, with the title "Quando la ragione dorme." The text is partially reproduced in Clerici, *Apparizione*, 260-61.

<sup>17</sup> In the postwar era, they range from Domenico and Ermanno Rea to Raffaele La Capria, Michele Prisco, Luigi Compagnone, Fabrizia Ramondino and Erri de Luca (among others). Ramondino is especially critical of the idea of Neapolitanness in her *Dadapolis. Caleidoscopio napoletano* (written with Andreas Friedrich Müller) (Turin: Einaudi, 1989). For a discussion of the stereotypes surrounding Naples and especially the Neapolitan lower classes, see the essays in *Cultura popolare a Napoli e in Campania nel Novecento*, ed. Amalia Signorelli (Napoli: Guida, 2003). See also Antonio Ghirelli, *La napoletanità. Un saggio inchiesta* (Napoli: Società editrice napoletana, 1976). On the deep and long history of the stereotype of "the Neapolitan," see Giuseppe Galasso, *L'altra Europa. Per un'antropologia storica del mezzogiorno d'Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1982), 146-50. On the fate of the romantic myth of Neapolitanità after World War II, see John Gatt-Rutter, "Liberation and Literature: Naples 1944," in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 1.2 (1996): 245-272. See also Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso: 2002), chapter 11, and the essays in Marie Hélène Caspar, ed., *Napoli e dintorni: De Filippo, De Luca, La Capria, Marotta, Orsini Natale, Ortese, Prisco Rea*, special issue of *Narrativa* 24 (2003), and especially Edoardo Esposito, "A proposito della napoletanità," 25-53. Ironically, Esposito's article contains an indictment of Ortese's *Mare* as "implausible" and excessive or "ideologically literary" that appears to be based precisely on her refusal to subscribe to the stereotypes and common places of Neapolitanness.

Ortese was born in Rome in 1914 of a Neapolitan mother; her father was a Sicilian of Catalan descent. She spent her nomadic childhood with her poor and large family (she was the penultimate of six siblings) in provincial towns of Southern Italy and even across the Mediterranean in Libya (which was still an Italian colony at the time). In 1928, she settled in an old and run-down neighborhood near the harbor in Naples. There, she continued to live off and on until the time of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*—a book which became, in many ways, her sad farewell to the city.<sup>18</sup> In 1945-6, Ortese and her family experienced first-hand the poverty, hunger and desperation of a city devastated by war. They lived for a time with refugees in a dilapidated shelter similar to those described in the penultimate chapter of the book.

Between 1950 and 1952 (the very years in which she was working on the book), both her parents died. Ortese had by then already lost all but one sibling; two of her brothers were sailors who died at sea and the other two were lost to emigration to America and Australia. Of the decimated family, only one sister remained, the inseparable Maria, who followed her in her move North. In a perennially restless existence, Ortese gravitated toward her two other “native cities,” Rome and Milan, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Even when transfigured into the imaginary Toledo of the novel *Il porto di Toledo* (1975) or into the fantastic city of *Il cardillo addolorato* (1993), Naples remained for Ortese a central, essential “città dell’anima,” a “city of the soul,” like Rome was for Byron. While Ortese’s contribution to the literature of Naples is unquestionable, her literary vision, which is that of someone who is at once inside and outside the city and its people, tends to transcend the specificity of Naples as a city—even while remaining faithful to it. Through the devices of poetry and tragedy, Ortese transforms il vicolo della Cupa, Monte di Dio, San Biagio dei Librai, and I Granili into dramatic sites capable of encapsulating some of the more painful paradoxes of life in the mid-twentieth century, especially (but not exclusively) for women.

The book weaves in and out of the life of the streets and the life of the home—interiors and exteriors, private and public—in a cinematic way worthy of literary and filmic masterpieces of realism such as Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette*, Francesco Rosi’s *Le mani sulla città*, Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, and Matilde Serao’s *Il romanzo della fanciulla*. Serao’s book in particular, which is structured as a series of interconnected short stories with a strong autobiographical element, is one of Ortese’s structural models for *Mare*. Ortese’s technique may be defined as *spaesante* or uncanny, in the double sense of 1) the Freudian *Unheimliche* (which turns the most familiar and reassuring spaces into the most disquieting and deadly) and 2) in the sense of sheer “spaesamento”—the effect of disorientation, defamiliarization and estrangement that Ortese attributes to Naples and, in the 1994 Forward, to her own book.

In formal terms, *Il mare non bagna Napoli* is also estranging in the Brechtian sense of *Verfremdungseffekt*; by using the devices of the reportage and of the critical essay in conjunction with fictional, dramatic, and realist narrative, Ortese encourages the reader to reflect critically on the stories she tells rather than be caught up in them only emotionally.<sup>19</sup> An estranging representation for Brecht is one that allows us to recognize the object, yet at the same time causes it to appear unfamiliar, making the reader look at it with a critical gaze; the represented object appears not natural and inevitable, but the result of a historical process of interpretation.

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<sup>18</sup> See the 1994 Foreword to Ortese, *Mare*, 9: “Questa condanna mi costò un addio, che si fece del tutto definitivo negli anni che seguirono, alla mia città.” (“This sentence forced me to an exile, which became permanent in the following years, from my city”).

<sup>19</sup> On the Brechtian notion of estrangement, see Ernst Bloch, “*Entfremdung, Verfremdung*: Alienation, Estrangement,” in Erika Munk, ed. *Brecht* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 3-11.

This is indeed a prerequisite for political agency according to Brecht. Nevertheless, the emotional dimension is extremely important to Ortese. She pushes the reader to empathize with her characters like she herself does. For Ortese, one of the more painful and perturbing consequences of the publication was the outraged, aggrieved response to the book by some of her Neapolitan readers; this deeply emotional response had the effect of making her feel unwelcome in a city that she had once, however uneasily, considered home.

In “Interno familiare,” the heart-warming interior of a Neapolitan home turns into its uncanny opposite. Ortese does not invent this strategy but brilliantly refashions in her own way a mode whose antecedents in Neapolitan literary culture include Serao (at her best) and Eduardo De Filippo, for example the play “Natale in casa Cupiello” (1931). “Interno familiare” portrays the tragic disillusionment of a middle-aged unmarried woman in a petty-bourgeois environment, a home in the Neapolitan neighborhood of Monte di Dio. Anastasia Finizio, the daughter of a hairstylist, works hard, owns a successful clothing store and enjoys dressing elegantly. Since her father’s death she has lived what she thinks of as “una vita da uomo” (Ortese, *Mare*, 35) (“a man’s life”). She supports her entire family, including her mother, an older spinster aunt, a pampered younger sister, and two ineffectual, parasitic brothers. The sister and one of her brothers, sickly and only precariously employed, are both engaged to be married. But, along with their spouses, they plan to go on living under the same roof with the rest of the family, relying on Anastasia’s financial protection. To accommodate the new brother-in-law (Giovannino—a mere salesclerk), Anastasia plans to give up her place in the room she shares with her sister, and move into the master bedroom with her mother. The mother is a petty woman who resents her daughter’s difference from her, namely her “masculine” independence and lack of subservience. She misses no chance to humiliate Anastasia, making her suffer with hypocritical reminders that she is still single. Still, the possibility that Anastasia may one day marry terrifies her, for she thinks such a marriage would irreparably undermine the family’s financial stability and her own position. She untiringly drives home to her daughter that she is ugly and undeserving of a man’s love (Ortese, *Mare*, 48). Her mother’s gaze is both envious and entrapping.

Ortese thus subverts the wisdom of the Neapolitan proverb according to which “Ogni scarrafone è bello a mamma soia” (“Even a cockroach looks beautiful to his own mother”). Yet, as we shall see, Ortese does not embrace the notion that the human gaze, in its ocular relationships, is by definition fundamentally envious, jealous, vindictive and entrapping.<sup>20</sup> Anastasia, whose hidden weakness is—Ortese implies—precisely that of seeing herself through her mother’s eyes, seems to accept this verdict along with the idea that “una vera donna serve un uomo” (Ortese, *Mare*, 41) (“a real woman waits upon her man” [*Bay*, 59]). She is a prisoner of both a negative self-image that transforms her into a “non-woman” and of her duty as a breadwinner for the family. Ortese implies that a chronic obsession with material things, financial matters and money poisons human relations among the middle classes and dehumanizes even the natural bond between mother and daughter (a similar vision informs Balzac’s influential masterpiece of literary realism, *Le Père Goriot*, and especially the relationship between the father and his three daughters, tainted by the worship of money and gold).

The relationship between these two fictional Neapolitan women in Ortese’s story is also, more generally, representative of the real predicament facing women in petty-bourgeois families throughout Italy after World War Two and in the 1950s. A new and sterile materialism was grafted onto the misogynous legacy of Catholic culture and of Fascist Italy, when women had

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<sup>20</sup> On the notion of “sguardo invidioso” or “jealous gaze,” see Silvano Petrosino, *Visione e desiderio. Il tempo dell’assenso* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1992).

been defined as naturally maternal, subservient and sacrificial. The mother in “Interno familiare” is ultimately responsible for crushing Anastasia’s dreams of love and for keeping her forever subservient to the family. The mother does this not only for financial reasons, in order to preserve her own thwarted sense of identity and her “feminine” self-image. Like “Un paio di occhiali,” “Interno familiare” is tightly and dramatically structured and takes place in less than twenty-four hours on Christmas day, within the walls of the Finizio apartment, with Murolo’s folksy, proverbially sentimental Neapolitan songs as a musical background throughout the day.

Like “Un paio di occhiali,” “Interno familiare” is tightly and dramatically structured and takes place in less than twenty-four hours on Christmas day, within the walls of the Finizio apartment, with Murolo’s folksy, proverbially sentimental Neapolitan songs as a musical background throughout the day. This setting is mercilessly described (with an exact style worthy of Flaubert’s “Un Coeur simple”), in all its banal petty bourgeois squalor, kitsch furnishings and revolting bric-a-brac. At the center of the house lies an elaborate, horrid *presepio* made by one of the brothers out of cork and cardboard. Containing innumerable figurines and miniature versions of traditional Neapolitan “scenes,” it stands as an emblem of the vacuous sentimentality and superficial religiosity of this Neapolitan petty-bourgeois family (and, by extension, Naples itself). Ortese’s unsympathetic rendering of this kind of Neapolitan religiosity (usually looked upon with condescending indulgence even by non-believers), and her pointed critique of the Catholic Church and of the clergy (evident especially in the third chapter, “Oro a Forcella”), may have contributed to the enduring resentment fostered against her by those who, years later, still considered this depiction a cruel betrayal.<sup>21</sup> There is an uncanny analogy between Anastasia and the plaster Infant Jesus, described as “larger than his parents (for symbolical reasons)” and “like a man,” yet expressionless and dead-like, “passive and congealed,” a mere lifeless simulacrum (74). Anastasia, too, is like a man and has a larger role than her parents, for it is her work that redeems and saves the family; but, at the same time, she is lifeless and mechanical, like an automaton.

The dream to marry the man she once loved, now back in Naples after a long absence, resurfaces on the morning of that Christmas day, suddenly animating Anastasia and interrupting her dull routine. This new hope moves her deeply, humanizing her and making her forget for a few hours her dismal destiny. She longs for a kind of resurrection, or redemption. It is the ability to feel moved by love for another human being (rather than the dubious ideal of a subservient “femininity”) that humanizes Anastasia. By the end of the Christmas day that glimmer of life and hope is all but extinguished as Anastasia obediently answers her mother’s call back to the reality of her “duty.” However, the kernel of hope that lies at the center of this story, and of all the stories of *Il mare*, is like a glint of light that, however illusory, fascinates the reader and persists in her memory long after the book is closed.

In “Interno familiare,” Ortese entirely subverts the traditional myth of the “warm,” affectionate Neapolitan family and of the earthy, nurturing, loving and wise mother.<sup>22</sup> Not only does Anastasia’s mother not love her oldest daughter: she has no sympathy for her (“non aveva nessuna simpatia per Anastasia”) (54).<sup>23</sup> Contrary to Clerici’s claim, surely this (and not “Un paio di occhiali”) must be the story that Ortese wrote inspired by Matilde Serao’s powerful “O

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<sup>21</sup> Erri De Luca, “Cara Ortese, questa non è Napoli,” *Il Corriere della sera*, May 21, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> This undoing of the maternal myth by Ortese has earned her some criticism by Italian feminists who stand by Luisa Muraro’s mother-based thought. See for example Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Spaces. A Cultural Map of Postwar Italy* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002) 133-136.

<sup>23</sup> The translation skips this sentence, rendering it indirectly as “Her love was all for Anna” (Bay 67).

Giovanino o la morte!”<sup>24</sup> The name Giovannino, adopted by Ortese for the fiancé of Anastasia’s sister, points to the connection between the two tales. In Ortese’s tale, there is a similar but even more blatant subversion of the maternal myth and a biting critique of the petty bourgeois obsession with money, whose emblem for Serao is the stepmother’s practice of usury and her theft of the daughter’s fiancé. Usury unnaturally contaminates the family in “O Giovannino o la morte!”, and leads to the daughter’s suicide. A liberating suicide, interpreted by Ortese as an act of real protest of which only some working-class people are still capable, is committed by a young maid later in the last story of *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (“Il silenzio della ragione”). Yet, Ortese tells us, the shocking spectacle of the maid’s corpse on the pavement leaves the famous journalist who is standing next to her, visibly indifferent (Ortese, *Mare*, 152-56). This image is a clear indictment of the callousness of Neapolitan middle class intellectuals, reporters, and writers who have become inured to the sight of poverty and death and selfishly obsessed only with their own careers and income. In “Interno familiare,” even Anastasia’s youngest brother insinuates that Anastasia is cold and indifferent and has no feelings except for money (as we shall see, Serao’s theme of usury will appear, amplified and expanded, in “Oro a Forcella”).

Anastasia lives to support her family yet—with the exception of her fleeting rebirth through her longing for love—she is portrayed as joyless and uncannily dead-like, indifferent and mechanical. This particular aspect of her character recalls the figure of Olympia, the automaton in the story that inspired Freud’s essay on the uncanny: “The Sandman” by E. T. A. Hoffmann, an author Ortese also admired. “The Sandman” is clearly also another source for “Un paio di occhiali.” Hoffmann’s protagonist, Nathanael, suffers from a paralyzing childhood trauma related to his fear of being blinded by the evil Sandman; incapable of love, he becomes fixated on Olympia, ironically the daughter of Coppelieus—a peddler of spectacles, lenses and telescopes—who may be the very same person who had tried to take away his power to see. Freud interprets this man to be a figure for Nathanael’s own Oedipal, castrating father.<sup>25</sup> Ortese’s Anastasia, like Hoffmann’s Olympia, cannot become the object of authentic love because she is not human but, rather, mechanical. But Anastasia’s predicament is doubly complex, for she is also in Nathanael’s position. She is incapable of loving because she cannot see; and she cannot recognize who among those closest to her in her own home is stifling her and blinding her. The text’s final description of Anastasia looking at and fetishistically caressing her elegant blue coat hanging in the wardrobe “come una persona abbandonata” (Ortese, *Mare*, 61) (“like someone abandoned” [Bay 81]), suggests that material things and the need to keep making money like a man in order to satisfy her mother (and the rest of her parasitical family) have impeded Anastasia’s ability to feel love and to be loved. To be incapable of loving or of being loved, in Ortese’s view, is effectively equivalent to an inability to see and live authentically.

In contrast to Serao’s story, where the daughter finally sees the truth about her stepmother and finds release in death, after Anastasia’s reverie and short-lived fantasy of reconnecting with her youthful lover have dissipated there is no further breakthrough, no revelation. Hoffmann’s Nathanael also never recovers his humanity and his lucidity. Overtaken by a blinding vertigo, he dies insane. It is important to note, however, that for Ortese, as for the poet Giacomo Leopardi (one of her principal literary inspirations), dreams, fantasies and reveries—in this case Anastasia’s reverie—are not merely symptoms or deceptive visible signs of a deeper truth to be uncovered; they are, however illusory and dimly lit, the truth itself—or, at least, the only truth

<sup>24</sup> Clerici, in *Apparizione*, 233, claims that Ortese told him that “Un paio di occhiali” was inspired by Serao’s story.

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), 219-252.

that can provide us with the joy of self-recognition. And, as we shall see, Ortese's understanding of blindness, or impaired vision, and their symbolic implications, finally differ substantially from Freud's.

The next story also engages with themes of vision, childhood, the maternal, and of the dehumanizing effect of money and greed in a capitalist world. "Oro a Forcella" plunges us into one of the most crowded and poorest sections of downtown Naples: via San Biagio dei Librai and via Forcella. Here what is defamiliarized is not a family home, but the street itself, stripped of its usual picturesque aura: "non vedevo le lenzuola di cui è piena la tradizione napoletana" (Ortese, *Mare*, 66) ("I saw no sheets hung up to dry, according to the time-honoured Neapolitan tradition" [Bay 86]). This picturesque tradition was alive and well when *Mare* was published in 1953. Vittorio De Sica's film comedy *L'oro di Napoli* (The Gold of Naples) was made that same year, based on Giuseppe Marotta's 1947 best-selling collection by the same title. The operetta-like musical, *Carosello Napoletano*, directed by Ettore Giannini, a triumph of Neapolitan sentimentality and nostalgic picturesqueness, was released in 1954.<sup>26</sup> De Sica's film launched the career of actress Sophia Loren, who also appeared in *Carosello Napoletano*. Like other female stars of post-war Italian cinema, Loren emerged as an icon of desirable femininity, and of a specifically Neapolitan shapeliness and charm. The sexualized and commodified body of beauty queens, film stars and pin-ups, and especially that of Sophia Loren, with her personal rags-to-riches story, became more than ever the object of the male gaze and of a collective escapist fantasy that, during the Reconstruction and the early 1950s, sought to exorcise the deprivations and hunger experienced during the war. The commercialized, commodified body of the female film star became the icon of Italy's and especially of Naples' rebirth, its escape from poverty and tragedy.<sup>27</sup>

In Marotta and in De Sica, "gold" serves as a nostalgic metaphor for the proverbial treasure trove allegedly at the heart of the Neapolitan people's way of life: a common resilience, resourcefulness, and theatricality that helps Neapolitans to survive poverty as well as tragic events all while retaining a warm humaneness. Even Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), whose second episode reveals to the world the war-torn ruins of Naples through the encounter of a Neapolitan street urchin with an African-American GI, is not immune from these stereotypes.<sup>28</sup> Ortese reverses this stereotyped meaning of Neapolitan gold almost entirely, reverting instead to Balzac's dark depiction of gold and silver in *Le Père Goriot* as metaphors for the estrangement and dehumanization of family affections and relations through greed. When scanning the crowded streets, the narrator's gaze is wholly unlike De Sica's and Giannini's objectifying, celebratory, populist, and folkloric cameras. Her attitude also diverges from that of the dandified flâneur and nonchalant aesthete of decadent Romanticism and male modernism—from

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<sup>26</sup> The abundant production in the 1950s of films based on Neapolitan folklore, music and stereotyped images of the city included works such as Camillo Mastrocinque's *Tarantella napoletana* (1953) and *Napoli terra d'amore* (1954) and Armando Grottini's *E Napoli canta* (1953). See the essays in *Napoletana. Images of a City*, ed. Adriano Aprà (New York/Milan: Fabbri Editore, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> On this phenomenon, see Giovanna Grignaffini, "Il femminile nel cinema italiano: racconti di rinascita," in Gian Piero Brunetta, ed., *Identità italiana e identità europea nel cinema italiano dal 1945 al miracolo economico* (Turin: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1996), 357-387, and Stephen Gundle, *Bellissima. Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Chapter 7.

<sup>28</sup> The stereotypical way in which the black GI is portrayed has been noticed by several critics, but the ethnic cliché represented by the thieving Neapolitan scugnizzo, a figure that dates back to the nineteenth century, has received less attention. See Gianfranca Ranisio, "L'immagine delle classi 'pericolose' al volgere del secolo: scugnizzi, prostitute e 'mariouli'," in Signorelli, ed. *Cultura popolare a Napoli*, 85-96.

Baudelaire to Poe, from d'Annunzio to T.S. Eliot. Nor does the city street become in Ortese a vehicle for sensual awakening and feminine fantasy, as it does in Rossellini's 1954 film, *Viaggio in Italia*, which records the uncanny experiences of Katherine (Ingrid Bergman), an English flâneuse in Naples.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Ortese's account is that of a sympathetic observer and narrator "plagued by a burning sense of compassion," and "the passionate intensity of a sorrowful participant in grief."<sup>30</sup> The traditional modernist representation of the crowd as "other," animalistic, monstrous and threatening, which emerges on the first page ("si gonfiava, come una serpe, tanta folla") ("the crowd writhed like a snake") is interrupted by an exchange with an old woman, who, in answering the narrator's question, clarifies that what looks so strange and nightmarish to her is just normal, everyday life.

The narrator realizes that the hallucinatory spectacle of the crowd, seen from afar as an amorphous and revolting mass, will give way, once she moves closer, to recognizable human figures and faces—much as in the observation of a tapestry or fresco. Nonetheless, the spectacle is dreadful and heart-rending, comparable to that in the vestibule of hell in Dante's *Inferno* (3.55-57) and London Bridge in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, when in the "Unreal City" stanza, the last of the first section ("The Burial of the Dead"), the poet exclaims: "I had not thought death had undone so many."<sup>31</sup>

Non avevo visto ancora tante anime insieme, camminare o stare ferme, scontrarsi e sfuggirsi, salutarsi dalle finestre e chiamarsi dalle botteghe, insinuare il prezzo di una merce o gridare una preghiera, con la stessa voce dolce, spezzata, cantante, ma più sul filo del lamento che della decantata allegria napoletana. Veramente era cosa che meravigliava, e oscurava tutti i vostri pensieri. (Ortese, *Mare*, 65)

(I had never seen so many persons together, walking or standing still, bumping or avoiding one another, calling out from windows and shop doors, hinting at the price of something to be sold or shouting a prayer, all in a broken, singsong voice which seemed more a lament than an expression of the celebrated *Neapolitan* joy of living. This tone of voice was so surprising as to overshadow all other impressions.) (*Bay* 86)

A similar hellish effect will reappear, amplified, in "La città involontaria." Here, as also in "Un paio di occhiali" (as we shall see), the sound of human voices carries particular significance and is more revealing than visual perception. The use of the word "meravigliava" is typical of Ortese's poetic vocabulary and, more than signifying "surprising," it comes to evoke the Neapolitan meaning of the word (which first appears in "Un paio di occhiali"): something that is

<sup>29</sup> See Bruno, *Atlas*, 377-99. On Ortese's poetics of *flânerie* in her later works, see Flora Ghezzi, "Chiaroscuro napoletano. Trasfigurazioni fantastiche di una città," in Caspar, ed., *Napoli e dintorni*, 85-104.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Baldi, "Ortese's Naples: Urban Malaise through a visionary gaze" in *Italian women and the city: essays*, ed. Janet Levarie Smarr and Daria Valentini (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 218. See also by Baldi, "Infelicità senza desideri. *Il mare non bagna Napoli* di Anna Maria Ortese," in *Italica* 77.1 (2000): 81-104 and *La meraviglia e il disincanto: studi sulla narrativa breve di Anna Maria Ortese* (Napoli: Loffredo Editore, 2010). On compassion as a key to Ortese's poetics, see Margherita Pieracci-Harwell, "Ambiguità delle tecniche: l'ironia di Anna Maria Ortese," *Paesaggio e memoria. Giornata di studi su Anna Maria Ortese*, ed. Caterina De Caprio and Laura Donadio (Napoli: Dante & Descartes, 2003), 36-90.

<sup>31</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1971), 39.

real but so astonishing that it threatens to confound the mind and interfere with one's sanity.<sup>32</sup> In the midst of unspeakable squalor, the porous street exposes to all an extraordinary exhibition of human misery: grotesquely deformed beggars, dwarfs, stray dogs and swarms of emaciated, semi-naked children with their heads shaved.<sup>33</sup> In uncanny contrast, San Biagio dei Librai is lined with gold shops where, through semi-opaque windows, one can observe, endlessly repeated, the same surreal scene of poor women with tears in their eyes pawning or selling their tiny beloved gold objects and trinkets to indifferent bespectacled dealers with scales in their hands, coldly appraising their customers' possessions.<sup>34</sup> The sound of church bells is the incongruous musical background to this scene. Delicate images of the Virgin Mary, leaning sweetly over the baby Jesus in his gilded cradle, can be seen in all the gold dealers' shops. This loving maternal gaze for Ortese is, to be sure, the antithesis of both the merchants' usurious gaze and the jealous gaze of Anastasia's mother. It is also the ironic emblem of another, opposite kind of vision: a vision entirely secular and non-religious, yet free of the burdens of dehumanizing isolation, deception, envy, reification, and loss that accompany exploitation.

Economic and sexual exploitation, according to Ortese, has profoundly influenced the Western way of understanding the gaze. Many theorists have defined the gaze's relationship to human knowledge as profoundly and irremediably negative, and the desiring subject, by extension, as essentially alienated.<sup>35</sup> Ortese takes the opportunity in this particular story to comment bitterly on the degradation of a culture such as the Neapolitan one that once had made a cult not of gold and exploitation, but of family affections. Merciless exploitation, poverty and greed have irreparably estranged a city where mothers no longer have feelings for their offspring, who are left to their own resources in the streets, all while the population grows out of control in what Ortese calls "the triumph of sex," or dehumanized copulation. As a matter of fact, Naples in the postwar era and under Achille Lauro's rule had the highest infant and child mortality in Italy. Ortese minces no words here in denouncing both the city government's ineffectualness and the Catholic Church's misguided pride and false promises of redemption for the souls of those

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<sup>32</sup> Ortese's writing, here and elsewhere, represents a modernist version of the uncanny as described by Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), in other words, "events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar" (p. 46). Todorov's definition of the uncanny is applied to nineteenth-century stories in which the character or narrator realizes he or she is mad or has just awakened from a dream. In Ortese modernist uncanny, instead, it is reality itself that has become uncanny, defying the limits of reason.

<sup>33</sup> I borrow the notion of a "porous street" and of Naples as a porous city from the 1925 essay by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, "Naples," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 171. See also Ernst Bloch, "Italy and Porosity" (1925) in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 450-457.

<sup>34</sup> De Sica produces a similar effect of dizzying multiplication in *Ladri di biciclette* when the camera pulls back from a close-up of the linen that Maria is pawning to show first a pile of pawned sheets and then a giant backroom filled floor-to-ceiling with pawned laundry.

<sup>35</sup> This tradition, which arguably starts with Plato, is particularly strong in French thought from Descartes to Bataille and Sartre and culminates in the work of Freud and Lacan. See for example Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Moller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: 1981), 103: "When I love, I solicit a look. What is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*. Conversely, *What I look at is never what I wish to see*." For a thorough unpacking of this tradition, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

innumerable unloved children thrown indifferently into a world of exploitation and misery due to the lack (and indeed prohibition) of birth control.

In the closing scene of the story, the action moves to the nearby enormous building, once a Hospice for the poor, now the *Monte dei Pegni*, the great official pawnshop belonging to the Bank of Naples (an institution that was at the time controlled by the Catholic Church and the Christian Democrats). Along with innumerable other women with miserable parcels in hand, Ortese's narrator climbs the majestic staircase to the top of the cold bureaucratic hall. There, she witnesses the commotion caused first by the announcement that the bank has ordered loans to be lowered to the minimum amount and then by the dramatic appearance of a desperate mother with her two young children. The mother pushes her way in, shortly before closing time; she must pawn her gold chain in order to send money along with her husband to faraway Turin, where their son, an *emigrato*, is lying alone on a sickbed. Moved by this exhibition of motherly love, the crowd immediately makes room for her in a display of communal Christian solidarity and selfless compassion. The crowd mumbles in protest at the stinginess of the loan. Yet the narrator makes us wonder if what she has seen is real or not. This might be a Neapolitan *sceneggiata* or farce, for the children have cynical little smiles on their faces, and a guard insinuates that this woman, who rushes away clutching her money, has nobody in Turin, and no husband, though she puts on this act regularly at the *Monte*.

For Ortese, women and mothers do not as such have privileged access to a more authentic vision. Their gaze may be as caught up in the cold mechanism of deception, envy, reification, and loss as men's. But the theatrical situation, and the probable mendacity of this mother who exploits her children as props, do not undermine the narrator's admiration for the crowd's ability to feel compassion, however misguided. That this compassion can still exist in a place like modern Naples (and indeed the modern world that has seen the Second World War, the Nazi concentration camps, and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the displacement of millions of refugees) is a kind of miracle. The poetic symbol of this miracle and of (to paraphrase Ernst Bloch) the "principle of hope" that is always present in Ortese's work is the brown butterfly with tiny specks of gold on its wings that inexplicably appears on the last page. Seemingly careless and happy, the butterfly has made its way fluttering up the stairs, penetrating inside the cold and cavernous hall, and causing the crowd to be distracted and awed for one brief moment. Those tiny specks, Ortese seems to suggest, are the only trace of the gold left in Naples from the old treasure trove. And this butterfly is the progenitor of a lineage of magical animals, all symbols of hope, that will increasingly come to inhabit the world of Ortese's fiction: the little female iguana of her 1965 masterpiece, *L'iguana*, the goldfinch of *Il cardillo addolorato* (1993), and the puma of her last novel, *Alonso e i visionari* (1996).

Ortese's narrator in *Mare* is able to observe from the outside and yet also feel from the inside how "una miseria senza più forma, silenziosa come un ragno, disfaceva e rinnovava a modo suo quei miseri tessuti, invischiando sempre di più gli strati minimi della plebe, che qui è regina" (Ortese, *Mare*, 67) ("Shapeless poverty, working as silently as a spider, had destroyed this wretched human fabric and then rewoven it in a pattern of its own, entangling the lowest of the lower classes, which in this region holds undisputed sway" [Bay 87]). Yet, unlike fellow writers Domenico Rea and Pier Paolo Pasolini, she does not idealize Naples' "plebeian soul" as more authentic.<sup>36</sup> Ortese's narrator has neither the neutral, purportedly objective point of view of the traditional reporter (and this was in fact a flaw in the book, according to Vittorini), nor,

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<sup>36</sup> See for example Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Gennariello" (1975) in *Lettere Luterane* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003) and Pasolini's answer to Ghirelli's 1976 survey about *Napoletanità*, 15-16.

despite her allusions to Dante and Eliot, does she have the detached, superiorly comprehending attitude of the believer, or (as we have seen) the aesthetic detachment and nihilism of the modernist flâneur. She also lacks, in her descriptions of Naples' decay, the morbid and nihilistic complacency of Curzio Malaparte, author of the graphic *La pelle* (1949) (though his work, like Ortese's, caused among Neapolitan intellectuals a highly negative reaction).

Ortese's narrator allows herself to be touched, even contaminated by what she calls the body of "una razza svuotata di ogni logica e raziocinio" where "l'uomo era adesso ombra, debolezza e nevrasenia, rassegnata paura e impudente allegrezza" (Ortese, *Mare*, 67) ("a race devoid of logic and reason . . . man was reduced to a shadow, a bundle of weakness and neurasthenia, alternately a prey to resigned fear and uninhibited gayety" [Bay 87]). For this "weakness" of her narrator, which has been criticized by some as an excessive sensitivity,<sup>37</sup> Ortese paid a high price, first of all that of being mistaken herself for a neurotic, even a hysteric. Even her retrospective explanation in the 1994 Foreword to *Mare* about the real origins of her so-called neurosis or neurasthenia (the same condition indeed that she found afflicting the Neapolitan *plebe*) has been consistently mistaken for an apologetic acknowledgement of a real mental illness, or a psychic condition, while it was instead a metaphor for a philosophical, lucid *prise de position*:

Quella "nevrosi" era la mia. E da dove avesse origine, sarebbe troppo lungo e impossibile dire; ma poiché una origine, seppure confusa, è giusto indicarla, indicherò la più incredibile e meno atta all'indulgenza dei "politici" (che furono, direi, i miei soli critici e contestatori): quella origine, e perfino ascendenza della mia nevrosi, aveva solo un nome: metafisica. Da molto, da moltissimo tempo, io detestavo con tutte le mie forze, senza quasi saperlo, la cosiddetta *realtà*: il meccanismo delle cose che sorgono nel tempo, e dal tempo sono distrutte. Questa realtà era per me incomprensibile e allucinante . . . Aggiungo che l'esperienza personale della Guerra (terrore dovunque e fuga per quattro anni) aveva portato al colmo la mia irritazione contro il reale; e lo spaesamento di cui soffrivo era ormai così vero, e anche poco dicibile—perché senza riscontro nell'esperienza comune—da aver bisogno di una straordinaria occasione per manifestarsi. Questa occasione fu il mio incontro con la Napoli uscita dalla guerra. Rivederla e compiangere non bastava. Qualcuno aveva scritto che questa Napoli rifletteva una lacera condizione universale. Ero d'accordo, ma non sull'accettazione (implicita) di questo male. (Ortese, *Mare*, 10)

(That 'neurosis' was mine. And it would take too long, or it would be impossible, to talk about its origin. But since it is fair to indicate an origin, even if confused, I will pick the most incredible, the least forgivable by politicians (for they, I would say, were my only critics and objectors). That origin, and even ancestry of my neurosis, had a name: metaphysics. For a long, very long time I had been hating, with all my strength, almost unwittingly, so-called reality: the mechanism of things arising in time, and destroyed by time. This reality was for me incomprehensible and hallucinatory . . . I must add that my personal experience of the War (pervasive fear and four years of being on the run) exacerbated my

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<sup>37</sup> Baldi, "Ortese's Naples," 223.

intolerance for the real; and my disorientation had become so true, and also so unspeakable — for it was beyond any common experience — that it needed an extraordinary occasion to manifest itself. That occasion was my encounter with the post-war Naples. To see Naples again and to pity it was not enough. Someone had written that this Naples showed a universal wound. I agreed, but not with the (unvoiced) acceptance of this sorrow.)

Neurosis is thus for Ortese a way of being, an active refusal to accept the real as it putatively is and to be resigned to the supposedly eternal, unchangeable essence of Naples and its people.

Nowhere is Ortese's philosophical, deliberate neurasthenia—chosen as an act of opposition to the modern reality revealed by the war—clearer than in the penultimate chapter of *Mare*. “La città involontaria” is a shocked and shocking, profoundly sympathetic account of the tragic horrors of daily life in the ruined “I Granili,” an enormous Neapolitan tenement where a legion of poor squatters occupies the abysmal lower floors. Ironically, this building was originally an eighteenth-century masterpiece of ambitious, grandiose Enlightenment architecture designed by Ferdinando Fuga; it was meant as an immense arsenal for the storage of weapons in the city, as well as the storage of wheat, ropes and other merchandise near the sea in Portici, at the foot of Vesuvius. The huge building later became a prison, and later yet was turned into military barracks, only to be heavily bombed by the Allies in 1943. Of this dystopian historical palimpsest bearing the visible traces of Enlightenment reason's ruins, only a single long wall is left standing today near via Regia di Portici. Through surreal and often grotesque notations, Ortese turns it into a visionary mid-twentieth-century equivalent of Dante's *Inferno* crossed with Eliot's *Waste Land*, and an anticipation of Calvino's Cottolengo in *La giornata di uno scrutatore* (*The Watcher*), a short novel written between 1953 and 1963. Ortese's “La città involontaria,” evokes her journey as a reporter through the hallucinatory, infernal reality of I Granili, intentionally dismantling even further the proverbial idyllic image of Naples as the city of song, of the sun and the sea.

Yet this is a text that even in its most horrific evocations (and with its utter lack of either stereotypical “local color” or of the populist moralizing that is found in some neorealist and even later Neapolitan prose) is able to create not so much “beauty” as a kind of compelling poetic effect that both stuns and moves the reader. This is surely the beauty Calvino was alluding to in his letter when he called *Il mare* “un libro bellissimo.” As observed by theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch, poetry, including the poetry of prose writing, has in its own aesthetic form the uncanny power to denounce and undermine the unbearable negativity of the real—subverting this negativity by pointing elsewhere, in the direction of hope and of another, more authentic possible reality.<sup>38</sup> Ortese's 1994 foreword asserts: “Mi domando se il *Mare* è stato davvero un libro ‘contro’ Napoli, e dove ho sbagliato, se ho sbagliato, nello scriverlo, e in che modo, oggi, andrebbe letto. La prima considerazione che mi si presenta è sulla scrittura del libro. Pochi riescono a comprendere come nella *scrittura* si trovi la sola chiave di lettura di un testo, e la traccia di una sua eventuale verità” (Ortese, *Mare*, 9). (“I ask myself whether the *Bay* was

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<sup>38</sup> Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (1957) in *Notes to Literature*, Volume One, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature. Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1988). Ortese's fascination with the mode of utopia is spelled out in *La lente oscura*, iii-iv. For an interesting and innovative feminist-utopian reading of Ortese, with particular reference to her travel writing, see Cristina Della Coletta, “Scrittura come utopia: La lente scura di Anna Maria Ortese,” *Italica* 76.3 (1999): 371-388.

really a book ‘against’ Naples, and where was my mistake (if any) in *writing* it, and how one should read it today. My first consideration concerns writing. A few people are capable to understand that writing itself is the only clue to reading a book, and the trace of its possible truth”). The truth that Ortese ultimately discloses through her poetic writing is the specular opposite of the horrific Neapolitan real.

This does not mean that for Ortese writing merely has a consolatory or sublimating function. Through writing, Ortese denounces the real as unacceptable so that we may hope and work towards a different, more humane life. One of the key predecessor texts for Ortese’s *Mare* is in fact certainly the poem “La ginestra” (“The Broom”) by Giacomo Leopardi, a poet whose grave, as Ortese reminds us in “Il silenzio della ragione,” is in Naples’ Mergellina. Leopardi’s encounter with Naples at the end of his life inspired this long poem, a testament of epic and tragic dimensions. In “La ginestra,” a text that seemed to become all the more relevant after the immense catastrophe of the Second World War, Leopardi builds on his own rigorous and radical philosophical pessimism, continuing his merciless indictment of the presumptuous idealism of Enlightenment rationality. Yet, in this poem he comes to see his nihilism as sterile and insufficient. He embraces instead a new positive view of merciful human solidarity, of the heroic value of human emotions and actions, of generous dreams and compassionate efforts, seen as communal life-giving forces. Art and poetry are the privileged vehicles and sources of inspiration for these affirmative forces.

Ortese’s description of “I Granili,” as the narrator first approaches them, recalls the gloomy, devastated landscape of Vesuvius in “La ginestra” and the equivocal, deformed remnants of the ghostly city of Pompei that Leopardi evokes as an emblem of the perennial subjection of humanity to natural and historical catastrophes. The image of the dark cave-like dwellings in “I Granili” also amplifies the theme of darkness that is first introduced in “Un paio di occhiali,” as does the character of the near-blind child, Luigino, whose tragic figure recalls Eugenia, the protagonist of the first story. The question of the gaze, also introduced in the first story and engaged with consistently through the volume, is here elaborated further and reflected on explicitly. The author-narrator-reporter highlights the paradox of the compulsion to look and see and, at the same time, the revulsion and horror caused by doing so. “Guardavo [ma] ritraevo continuamente gli occhi. Non sapevo, d’altra parte, dove posarli” (Ortese, *Mare*, 80) (“I kept looking [but] then quickly withdrew my eyes, without knowing where to direct them” [*Bay* 100]). Here as in the other stories, Ortese inserts a glint of light that reveals the prospect of a different world beyond the horror of the present one.

We see Antonia Lo Savio, a disfigured and deformed woman with incongruously beautiful long hair, give bread to the starving orphan Luigino; hers is a merciful act of mother-like kindness. Antonia acts in fact as the narrator’s guide, her uncanny Virgil *and* Beatrice in this dark Inferno. Humble yet filled with courage, dignity and kindness, she is one of Ortese’s beneficial “monsters” or wonders: “Alla luce di poche lampade, la vedevo meglio: regina nella casa dei morti, schiacciata nella figura, rigonfia, orrenda, parto, a sua volta, di creature profondamente tarate, rimaneva però in lei qualcosa di regale . . . Dietro quella deplorable fronte esistevano delle speranze” (Ortese, *Mare*, 80) (“In the dim light of the corridor I could see her better, this queen of the house of the dead, with her swollen body and flattened face. She must have been the offspring of hideously diseased parents, and yet there was something regal in the way she walked and talked . . . Yes, beneath her pitiable appearance there was hope.” [*Bay* 100]). Not unlike Calvino’s Cottolengo in *The Watcher*, “I Granili” is a place that, despite or perhaps in light of its horror and the spectacle of human abjection, with the seeming collapse of

any order or reason, enables the reader to reflect on the question of what is “human,” and what ethical and biopolitical perspectives may emerge from the nightmarish experiences of the twentieth century.

For the third and fourth chapter (“Oro a Forcella” and “La città involontaria”), originally published as articles in the journal *Il Mondo* between October 1951 and January 1952, Ortese received the 1952 Saint Vincent journalism award. But in addition to its documentary and literary qualities and its utopian/dystopian force, the book also had an impact that was immediately real. The exposé concerning I Granili in particular caught the attention of, among others, the President of the Italian Republic, Luigi Einaudi, who helped Ortese obtain some much needed financial support to put together the book, and was instrumental in leading to the dismantling of the tenement.<sup>39</sup> Few works of literature have left a comparably powerful trace and had a comparable real, positive effect on the city.

Ironically, *Il mare non bagna Napoli* was most controversial among those writers and intellectuals in Naples to whom Ortese was closest; these writers were all involved with the journal *Sud* (*South*) and they were the very ones who originally inspired her to undertake the project. The seven issues of the journal founded by Pasquale Prunas and published over two years (1945-1947) were typical of the idealism of enlightened liberal and left-wing “committed” intellectuals in the immediate postwar period, an idealism and enthusiasm that Ortese in her own way shared. The book’s extended last chapter, “Il silenzio della ragione,” is a story based on conversations and interviews conducted by Ortese in 1952 with, among others, Luigi Compagnone, Domenico Rea, and Pasquale Prunas. It turned into a sorrowful indictment of what Ortese saw effectively as the group’s “selling out.” The group by the early 1950s had largely abandoned its original, generous cultural project and reformist zeal in exchange for what Ortese regarded as the shallow satisfactions of “safe” jobs for the State Radio and Television (RAI), new homes, material goods, literary prestige, and a more secure bourgeois life. It had become self-absorbed and removed from the painful reality of the city and its poor. The story’s title alludes to the Italian phrase traditionally used to translate the title of Goya’s famous 1797 etching, “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos” (“Il sonno della ragione genera mostri”), and is thus one of several allusions to painting in the book.<sup>40</sup>

It is significant that Ortese would change “sonno” or “sogno” into “silenzio.” Sleep and dream in fact always have positive connotations for her, as for Dante, and serve as conduits to a more truthful vision. What the last chapter of *Il mare non bagna Napoli* ultimately deprecates, however, is not the inevitable loss of youthful ideals that she finds among these particular “intellectuals,” but rather their callous and cowardly indifference. She regrets their inability, as bourgeois men, to feel and express outrage and pity and to become aware of their increasing blindness to the reality that Naples reveals to those willing to look at it without fear: “Tutti erano indifferenti, qui, quelli che desideravano salvarsi. Commuoversi, era come addormentarsi sulla neve” (Ortese, *Mare*, 156) (“Here, all those who wished only to survive were indifferent. To feel moved to compassion was like falling asleep in the snow”). In “Il silenzio della ragione,” the narrator is dismayed to discover that her own sense of sorrowful pity for the Neapolitan poor is dismissed by her intellectual interlocutors as a form of feminine emotional weakness. If embraced, such “emotionality” would emasculate them, and threaten their very existence and ability to survive as “rational” men.

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<sup>39</sup> Clerici, *Apparizione* 230-232.

<sup>40</sup> On Ortese’s interest in painting and Goya’s possible influence, see Ghezzi, “Chiaroscuro napoletano,” 86.

The book's release in fact triggered bitter accusations of "betrayal" by some, and claims that it was defamatory, even Fascist. Some of the men and women featured in the last chapter took it, to Ortese's dismay, as an *ad hominem* attack. Each printing caused new protestations. Even the 1994 re-release, whose new Introduction and Afterword reaffirmed Ortese's indebtedness to the *Sud* group (and its original idealism) and spelled out more clearly her motives for writing the book, seemed to open back up an emotional wound that had never really healed.<sup>41</sup> The publication prompted once again polemical comments by Compagnone and La Capria—an indication perhaps that the book had in fact hit the mark and continued to trouble them in a profound way.<sup>42</sup> Among the *Sud* writers portrayed in "Il silenzio della ragione," only novelist Michele Prisco wrote a positive review when the book first came out. Yet Ortese had depicted him as a man isolated in his new house on Naples' aristocratic via Crispi, busy creating abstract literary characters entirely removed from Neapolitan reality. To Compagnone's outrage upon reading the review (another betrayal!), Prisco replied: "my different judgment of Anna Maria's book is due to the fact that you have only read the last chapter, and became infuriated. I on the other hand read the whole book, and at some points I really felt profoundly moved."<sup>43</sup> Prisco's acknowledgement of the book's power to move is a tribute to Ortese's real intentions as well as to the tragic effectiveness of her work as a literary creation. A work is indeed tragic, as Aristotle stated, only if through its poetic narration it moves the spectator to feel fear and pity. Making a reader feel these emotions through narrative involves, as Martha Nussbaum and others have since recognized, not just the production of an aesthetic and cathartic experience, but the fostering, through an awakening of the narrative imagination, of an active sense of empathy and human solidarity. This may help the reader to see others not as undifferentiated and faceless, or as animalistic brutes who are doomed and whose suffering does not concern us, but as uniquely human, and deserving to share in a life of dignity and justice.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> In a 1998 interview, and in other interventions, Ortese stated somewhat ambivalently that she regretted giving in to Elio Vittorini's request at the time of the original publication that the real names of the members of the *Sud* group be included in the story. See Antonio Fiore, "L'abiura della Ortese. 'Rinnego quell libro'," *Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, February 3, 1998. See also Clerici, *Apparizione*, 257 and 276.

<sup>42</sup> Luigi Compagnone, "Tre destini convergenti: Ortese, Incoronato, Striano," in *Il risveglio della ragione. Quarant'anni di narrativa a Napoli: 1953-1993*, ed. Giuseppe Tortora (Cava dei Tirreni: Agliano, 1994), 29; Raffaele La Capria, "Il mare non bagna Napoli 40 anni dopo," *Nuovi Argomenti*, luglio-settembre 1995, 73-78. See also Clerici, *Apparizione*, 240-242. In 2008, however, Raffaele La Capria offered an interesting reappraisal of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, entitled "Napoli alza la voce, ma l'Italia è sorda" (published in *Il Corriere della Sera* on May 30, 2008), finally appearing to come to terms with the book, albeit with the usual gender-inflected qualifications about excessive feeling: "Adesso che quegli amici sono quasi tutti morti e io sono quasi l'unico superstite di quel tempo, posso confermare non solo quel che in verità ho sempre detto, che *Il mare non bagna Napoli* è un libro bellissimo, ma anche che Anna Maria aveva individuato bene il punto dolente della questione napoletana, e l'occulta causa della sua irrisolvibilità. Solo che i colpevoli non eravamo noi, come lei semplificando mostrava di credere, ma era di quel mistero nascosto cui lei stessa aveva accennato. Dopo questa premessa, e cessata ogni polemica, mi sembra che oggi io possa considerare questo libro dal solo punto di vista letterario come un esempio notevole di quel saggismo creativo che si avvale di uno stile misto, autobiografico e narrativo, per raccontare con estrema libertà la realtà che interessa lo scrittore. [...] Lo sguardo impietoso di Anna Maria Ortese ne *Il mare non bagna Napoli* ha rotto un tabù e costretto finalmente la borghesia vedersi e a parlare di se stessa fuori dagli schemi consueti. Ha provocato un trauma? Ha esagerato? Ha semplificato? Si è fatta, trasportare dal sentimento e dal risentimento? Può darsi, ma ha scritto un bel libro, una memorabile testimonianza, necessaria a chiunque voglia comprendere qualcosa su Napoli."

<sup>43</sup> Michele Prisco, "Ortese, la lettera del felice dolore," *Corriere del Mezzogiorno* April 8, 1998, quoted in Clerici, *Apparizione*, 241.

<sup>44</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

Among other early readers and reviewers who were impressed and deeply appreciative of Ortese's achievement were the poet Eugenio Montale and the Neapolitan film director Francesco Rosi, who had been one of the original collaborators of *Sud*. The latter declared to have long pursued the dream of "fare un film su Napoli pescando nell'atmosfera meravigliosa di due racconti inseriti in quel libro stupendo che è *Il mare non bagna Napoli*" ("making a film about Naples based on the amazing atmosphere of two stories included in that wonderful book, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*").<sup>45</sup> One of those two stories was the first one, "Un paio di occhiali"; the other was "La città involontaria." The former was turned into a film only much later, in 2001. It was a sixteen minute short, shot not by Francesco Rosi but by the young Carlo Damasco, and presented at the Venice Film Festival. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Ortese's book helped shape the vision that ten years later led Rosi to create his own Neapolitan masterpiece and impassioned *J'accuse*, the film *Le mani sulla città* (1963).

### *"Un paio di occhiali" and Ortese's Poetics of Nearsightedness*

Let us now briefly examine the characters, setting, plot, and development of the story "Un paio di occhiali," as well as some of its subtexts and implications. It takes place in postwar Naples in "un quartiere di poveri" (a "poor neighborhood"), that of Santa Maria in Portico, a little after "l'anno che il re era andato via" ("the year that the king had gone away" [*Bay* 22]). This is the only historical marker in the story, clearly a reference to 1946, the year of the referendum that abolished the monarchy in Italy. It is also a political marker, as the poorest people of Naples were notoriously still nostalgically attached to the monarchy and resented the postwar Republican government. 1946 is also the year of Teresina's birth; she is the youngest child of Peppino and Rosa Quaglia, and the little sister of the ten-year-old protagonist, Eugenia. The Quaglia family, including Peppino's spinster sister Nunziata, lives on the aptly named "vicolo della Cupa" (based on via Palasciano, the street where Ortese actually resided in 1946 with her family in conditions of dramatic poverty),<sup>46</sup> in the humid and cold basement of a building that belongs to the Marquise D'Avanzo, whose spacious apartment is instead located on a sunny upper floor.

Through the marquise's intercession, the two eldest Quaglia daughters have been sent away to a convent, where they are about to "prendere il velo" ("take the veil"). Rich and avaricious, the marquise extorts a substantial rent of three thousand lire from the Quaglia family for their cave-like basement dwelling. Its dampness is the cause of Rosa's nearly paralyzing rheumatoid pain, as well as of health problems for her children, including Eugenia's extreme nearsightedness. Her condition literally places a veil over her eyes, although different from the one that will soon be drawn over her two sisters in the convent. The building's doors and windows open onto the courtyard, which at its center has a well, the family's only source of water. Ortese organizes our vision of the spectacle of her characters' world in and around this courtyard, as if it were a stage. In the different floors and corresponding social levels of the building, she portrays a microcosm, a stratified cross-section of the vast reality of Naples' infamous *vicoli* or alleyways, focusing on the life of the exploited poor and of those who are,

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<sup>45</sup> Carlo Franco, "Quando sognavo un film dal *Mare*," *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, 12 March 1998, cited in Clerici, *Apparizione*, 259.

<sup>46</sup> See the interview with Dacia Maraini in *E tu chi eri? Ventisei interviste sull'infanzia* (1973) (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 30.

literally and figuratively, above them. With mere pocket change as compensation, the marquise keeps Peppino Quaglia and his wife at her service. They, along with a grotesque dwarfish doorwoman, Mariuccia, with incongruently feminine, beautiful long hair (she is in fact a prefiguration of Antonia Lo Savio in “La città involontaria”), occupy the lowest social and physical levels of this world, and are in constant contact with the mud, junk and general filth of the courtyard.

Cavalier Amodio and the Greborio sisters reside on the middle level with their maidservants, one of whom, Lina Tarallo, as she sweeps everyday carelessly lets the dust and refuse that she has collected fall into the courtyard. “La polvere scendeva a poco a poco, mista a vera immondizia, come una nuvola, su quella povera gente, ma nessuno ci faceva caso” (Ortese, *Mare*, 22). (“Dust mingled with garbage, floated down like a cloud, on those poor people, but no one paid attention”[*Bay 17*]). This daily shower of dust and trash is, it seems, the least of the Quaglias’ problems, and they hardly even notice it. The cloud from the sky in fact ironically evokes a benign, almost beatific image, as in a faded old fresco on the walls of a country church showing humble saints being called up to heaven. But for Ortese the abused and meek protagonists of “Un paio di occhiali,” “quella povera gente” (a phrase that pointedly echoes a key predecessor text, Matilde Serao’s *Il ventre di Napoli*) are more than saintly; she compels us to see them, to “farci caso,” to look at them directly through that cloud of dust, and to see them in fact in a light that is essentially not so much saintly as heroic.<sup>47</sup>

The story begins at sunrise and, like a classical tragedy, takes place in less than twenty-four hours. The drama that the story tells has a precise unity of action, time and place, in accordance with the classical criteria of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In structural terms, the tale has a calculated, truly dramatic and tragic dignity, in striking contrast to its humble lower-class protagonists: not noble heroes, but rather wretched, poor souls. This is not unusual in Neorealism of course. A classic example of this technique is De Sica’s film, *Ladri di biciclette*. Like De Sica, Ortese is able, using a spare, un-emphatic narrative style and a carefully constructed Aristotelian structure, to imbue the story of simple, apparently insignificant and common people with the moving intensity and pathos of an ancient tragedy about noble heroes and heroines. Not coincidentally, the central theme of “Un paio di occhiali” is, as in the quintessential tragedy of Oedipus, the inability and at the same time the need, the imperative to see: blindness in its relation to truth and knowledge. In contrast to the “plebe dall’informe faccia” (“Il silenzio della ragione”) the faceless, anonymous yet despicable and threatening mob—a kind of unspeakable monster—that many still “see” when they look at Naples (even as the rest of Italy is experiencing the optimism of the postwar Reconstruction), Ortese wishes us to look directly at these specific individuals. On them, she throws the spotlight of her powerful narrative eye so that we may see them up close, recognizing their faces and tragic humanity. The sympathetic gaze of the implicit narrator, who sees and shows us what others cannot or would not look at, is a constant focalizing presence through the story.

Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Spectacles” (1844) has been recognized as one of the literary sources for “Un paio di occhiali,” and Poe acknowledged as a beloved master by Ortese

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<sup>47</sup> Matilde Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884) (Napoli: Avagliano, 2003), 105: “Per distruggere la corruzione materiale e quella morale, per rifare la salute e la coscienza a *quella povera gente*, per insegnare loro come si vive—essi sanno morire, come avete visto!—per dir loro che essi sono fratelli nostri, che noi li amiamo efficacemente, che vogliamo salvarli, non basta sventrare Napoli: bisogna quasi tutta rifarla” (emphasis mine) (In order to destroy material and moral corruption, to restore health and conscience to those poor people, to teach them how to live—they know how to die, as you’ve seen!—and to let them know that they’re our brothers, that we truly love them and want to save them, it isn’t enough to gut Naples: the city must be almost wholly rebuilt.)

herself.<sup>48</sup> The analogy between the two tales, however, is only partial. Like some of the greatest modernist writers (Borges and Kafka are major examples), Ortese in fact has a critical, parodic relationship with many of her models. In Poe's comic and highly ironic tale, based on a case of mistaken identity in the tradition of Greek and Latin comedy, an unreliable narrator affected by severe nearsightedness tells the story of how, when he was only twenty-two, he fell in love "at first sight" with a seemingly beautiful young French woman (Eugenie) and came close to marrying her. Only when Eugenie, who mistakenly believes he is actually in love with her young and beautiful friend, makes him a gift of her opera glasses to be turned into spectacles, does he perceive through his new glasses that she is in reality a very old woman; in point of fact, she is none other than his own great-grandmother.

Poe is parodying here the incestuous tale of Oedipus, and Eugenie is a comic composite of the Sphinx and the Medusa, the monster whose task it is to reveal to man his true identity and finally lead him to take on his proper masculine role of "watcher" and "knower." The narrator will in fact marry the young woman in the end. The unreliable narrator's blindness is subtly mocked throughout the story and, through a series of clues and puns, nearsightedness is equated metaphorically with effeminate narcissism, childish fantasies, intellectual impotence, and a lack of virility. Poe's *divertissement*, in spite of its comic tone, is thus firmly entrenched in the Western patriarchal tradition of visual power (even though at the same time expressing suspicious fear of the eye's unreliability), and in the misogynous system of sexuality rooted in the primacy of the male scopic drive.<sup>49</sup> Ortese's Eugenia is in many ways the opposite of Poe's Eugenie. For example, Eugenia is very young but looks like an old woman, while Eugenie is very old but looks young. Additionally Ortese, as we shall see, also reverses Poe's visual metaphor, foregrounding the uncanny advantages rather than the disadvantages of nearsightedness.

The basic events of the story (its narratological *fabula*) are easily summarized. Eugenia, the acutely nearsighted girl, joyously awaits the arrival of her first pair of glasses, generously paid for by her spinster aunt's meager savings. A series of mishaps, however, dispels Eugenia's initial enthusiasm. When the glasses finally arrive at the end of the day, Eugenia puts them on but they cause her to feel a sense of vertigo; a wave of nausea overtakes her and makes her throw up. Curtain. There are a number of nodal points and key episodes in the narrative's structure and in the characterization of its protagonists. In the introductory episode, upon waking in the morning Eugenia reminds her mother that today is the day when her glasses will be ready; she will be able to wear them for the first time and thus put an end to her severe nearsightedness: "Mamma, oggi mi metto gli occhiali" (Ortese, *Mare*, 15) ("To-day I'm getting my glasses!" [*Bay* 15]). The Italian original, with its poetically alliterative sound, subtly emphasizes the auditory dimension in implicit opposition to the visual, thus foreshadowing one of the key themes of the story and of the book. Ortese consistently invites us to listen to the sound of language itself, the

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<sup>48</sup> Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1944* (London: Athlone, 1995), 169-70; Monica Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1998), 45. Farnetti also draws an interesting analogy between the Ortese story and a story by Ingeborg Bachmann, "Ihr glücklichen Augen" ("Eyes of Wonder" or "Happy Eyes") from the 1972 collection *Simultan*.

<sup>49</sup> The most lucid critic of the mutual implications of ocularcentrism and patriarchal phallogocentrism is Luce Irigaray. See for example this well-known passage from her interview in *Les Femmes, la pornographie et l'erotisme*, ed. Marie Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge (Paris: Éditions du Seul, 1978), 50: "Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than any other sense, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations."

play of the signifier in her text. Eugenia eagerly anticipates finally seeing the world after living for so long in a fog, and the joy that this revelation will provoke. The cost of the glasses intensifies and complicates her emotional investment and desire for them. With her modest and mysterious savings, aunt Nunziata has offered to “fare gli occhiali a Eugenia” (16) (“pay for Eugenia’s glasses”—literally “make glasses for Eugenia”). Here Ortese’s lexicon, which retains throughout a subtle literary elegance reminiscent of her earlier highly poetic style (in the Novecento and “magic-realist” modernist vein associated with Massimo Bontempelli and his followers)—a style that will in fact become increasingly more elegant and distinctly poetic in time—typically adopts and adapts a colloquial expression that allows her to evoke the very voices, inflections and linguistic world (and mental landscape) of her characters even when she is not reporting their speech directly.

Ortese’s gaze (unlike the *école du regard*) is never remote and cold, and her visuality is synesthetic, seeking to evoke the sounds, voices and smells of the real along with its appearance. Nunziata “aveva qualcosa da parte” (“had put some aside”) the text states, though she herself depends on the charity of her sister-in-law and brother. She reminds the child that the glasses are very expensive: “Ottomila lire vive vive!” (Ortese, *Mare*, 15) (“Eight thousand lire, hard cash!” [*Bay* 10] literally “Eight thousand living lire!”), as if to say that money is the poor’s own sweat and blood. With its alliterative sound pattern and powerful metaphoric connotations meshing money with life and with the body, this line, which reoccurs several times through the text, becomes a kind of unifying musical leitmotif. In the story, Nunziata is a fragile, all-too-human Neapolitan spinster (the heir to many such characters portrayed in the work of Matilde Serao) who seems almost cut off from life and yet is a mysteriously powerful and knowledgeable figure who seems to play, among others, the archetypical role of the benefactor or “donor,” somewhat similar to the benevolent fairy in fairytales. Or at least, as we shall see, this is Eugenia’s naïve perception of her.<sup>50</sup> As she emerges uttering some of her habitual bitter pronouncements from the cave-like little *sgabuzzino* where she usually hides, Nunziata uncannily resembles the prophetic Cumaean Sibyl (whose ancient cavern was thought to be near Naples). In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the Sibyl warns the hero about the darkness of the underworld that he is about to enter, and the difficulty of ever finding a path back to the light.

After this introduction to the story’s main theme, a brief analepsis in the narrative relates events of the previous week, providing the reader with the necessary background to the current day and the reasons for Eugenia’s feeling of uneasy anticipation. Nunziata, we are told, had taken Eugenia to an optometrist on Via Roma, the main street of an elegant neighborhood in the city center, and there, before proceeding with the order, the child had tried on a pair of glasses for the first time. Eugenia’s joy in being able to look out through the glasses into the street from the entrance of the shop, finally seeing the world clearly for the first time in her life, seemed boundless, making the anticipatory desire for her own pair of lenses all the more powerful, intoxicating and exhilarating. As the French feminist Hélène Cixous observes in her memoir entitled “Savoir,” suddenly being able to see creates the joyful illusion of being born, “the laughter of childbirth” and of the apparition into a world that seems to say “yes.” The supreme happiness is not so much in what one sees, or in seeing itself, but in the “no-longer-not-seeing.”<sup>51</sup> This is why the world appears beautiful to Eugenia. As Cixous’ title implies, the promise that seeing (*Voir*) holds is a promise of revelatory knowledge (*Savoir*). However, this analeptic

<sup>50</sup> The classic definition of the narrative function of the donor is in Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

<sup>51</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Savoir,” in the volume *Voiles* (which also includes a text by Jacques Derrida and drawings by Ernest Pignon-Ernest) (Paris: Galilées, 1998), 11-19 (p. 16), originally in *Contretemps* 2/3 (1997).

preamble in Ortese's story contains another premonition of tragic catastrophe and of the reversal of fortune typical of classical tragedy, for just before she removes the glasses to leave the elegant shop, Eugenia's joy turns suddenly into sorrow. As her aunt complains about their poverty and how it renders the price of the glasses so burdensome, Eugenia catches the salesgirl looking at her.

Eugenia suddenly feels ashamed because that pitiless gaze clearly marks her difference, identifying her as poor and inferior. She immediately takes off the glasses. This is the first occurrence of Eugenia's instinctive refusal to see and to be seen. Seeing, looking, the gaze and its power are crucial themes that inform the entire story and reoccur as a leitmotif throughout the book. As she leaves the store, in a symbolic harbinger of her imminent fall from a condition of elevation and supreme exaltation to one of total prostration, Eugenia stumbles on the doorstep. It is at this point that she hears the sibylline pronouncement of her aunt, who obscurely declares, "Figlia mia, il mondo è meglio non vederlo che vederlo" (Ortese, *Mare* 18) ("As far as this world's concerned, you're better off without seeing it" [*Bay* 13]). It is a dictum that uncannily echoes the dark, despairing words of the blind Oedipus at Colonus, but also recalls Giacomo Leopardi, an important influence, as we have seen, on this book and all of Ortese's work.<sup>52</sup> In Leopardi's poem "L'infinito," the only sea that can give one joy is a sea not seen, but imagined, dreamed as a kind of immense nowhere.<sup>53</sup> Yet Leopardi, like Ortese, ironically never tires of making his reader look directly at the real, no matter how painful, without blinders.

Before the final catastrophe, the story unfolds through a series of narrative sequences and brief episodes, each of which is structurally necessary to the plot and the characters' psychology and motivation. The marquise descends upon the Quaglias to ask Peppino to come up and repair her mattress. Eugenia is struck by the majestic glow of beauty that, to her myopic eyes, emanates from the radiant figure of the marquise, and by her apparent benevolence, for she seems to treat her father with great courtesy, as if he were a "gentleman." In engaging Peppino, however, the marquise introduces an obstacle in the path toward the fulfillment of Eugenia's wish. Rosa (Eugenia's mother) is, indeed, ill that day. Nunziata is unavailable; Eugenia's father is the only one who can conceivably go and collect the glasses. Only the invisible narrator can see and make us see her pain: "Senza che nessuno li vedesse, i grandi occhi quasi ciechi di Eugenia si riempiono di lacrime" (Ortese, *Mare*, 21) (Without anyone's taking notice, tears welled up in Eugenia's nearly blind eyes" [*Bay* 16]). The narrator's role is in fact that of making us see and feel what nobody else sees and feels. The problem is apparently resolved when Rosa promises to go despite her illness and in fact gets ready to leave for Via Roma. This leaves the children under the care of Nunziata, who does not feel up to the task and is actually exasperated by this unexpected burden.

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<sup>52</sup> *Edipo a Colono* (trad. Franco Ferrari) 1225-28: "Non veder mai la luce/vince ogni confronto./ma una volta venuti al mondo/tornar subito là onde si giunse è di gran lunga la miglior sorte." Cfr. Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* 4100: "E però, secondo tutti i principi della ragione ed esperienza nostra, è meglio assoluto ai viventi il non essere che l'essere."

<sup>53</sup> Cfr. this famous passage from Leopardi's *Zibaldone* 4418: "All'uomo sensibile e immaginoso, che viva, come io sono vissuto gran tempo, sentendo di continuo ed immaginando, il mondo e gli oggetti sono in certo modo doppi. Egli vedrà cogli occhi una torre, una campagna; udrà cogli orecchi un suono d'una campana; e nel tempo stesso coll'immaginazione vedrà un'altra torre, un'altra campagna, udrà un altro suono. In questo secondo genere di obbiettivi sta tutto il bello e il piacevole delle cose. Trista quella vita (ed è pur tale la vita comunemente) che non vede, non ode, non sente se non che oggetti semplici, quelli soli di cui gli occhi, gli orecchi e gli altri sentimenti ricevono la sensazione."

In the subsequent episode, Nunziata sends Eugenia on a mission to purchase two sweets to quell one of little Pasqualino's tantrums. The errand turns into an epic journey through a world that to Eugenia is as dark and ominous as the underworld was for Aeneas. For nearsighted Eugenia, the path is bristling not only with dangerous obstacles (she dodges an oncoming handcart and narrowly avoids turning over a neighbor's basket), but also encounters that threaten, even undermine, the fulfillment of her wish. Indeed, discovering that Eugenia will receive her glasses today, one of the neighbor's housemaids (whom Eugenia recognizes only by her voice) reveals a secret that leaves Eugenia perplexed. She says, "Io pure me li dovrei mettere, ma il mio fidanzato non vuole" (Ortese, *Mare*, 24) ("I need glasses myself, but my fiancé won't hear of my wearing them" [Bay 20]). Thus, fundamental notions pertaining to human sexuality and gender difference are introduced to Eugenia along with the connection between vision and sexuality; taken together, they all cast an ominous shadow on Eugenia's sunny state of mind. On a basic level, the exchange with the maid first suggests to Eugenia the idea that not wearing glasses—therefore remaining nearsighted—can be preferable for a female-gendered human being. The text says, however that "Eugenia non afferrò il senso di quella proibizione" (Ortese, *Mare*, 24) ("Eugenia did not grasp the significance of that prohibition" [Bay, 20]) and therefore implicitly invites the reader to decipher it.

In part, it is a reference to the cliché that glasses, traditionally thought to be not very feminine, spoil the appearance of women and must therefore be minimized or eliminated. Beyond this cliché, the reader is led to trace the power structure of the gaze in patriarchal societies like the Italian one, especially in the late 1940s and 1950s, epitomized by fetishized film stars such as Sophia Loren. This power structure that turns woman into a passive object rather than the subject of vision is a cultural construction not innate, but learned *through* the gaze by observing and being observed in a social context. According to this structure, as the critic John Berger stated in his classic 1972 essay, men are the ones who control the monopoly of looking, of the "active" gaze. "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor [or watcher] of woman in herself is male: the surveyed [or watched] female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision."<sup>54</sup> The duty of woman, insofar as she is traditionally an object and not the active subject of vision, is to "enjoy" being observed, not to observe or see (unless as a function of pleasure for the male gaze). Through Eugenia's suffering Ortese, long before the post-1968 critique of ocularcentrism, thus questions the patriarchal structure of the gaze and its cold objectification of woman that is used as a prerequisite for her entrance into "femininity" and sexuality.

Italo Calvino also portrays this system in his tragicomic short story "L'avventura di un miope" ("The Adventure of a Nearsighted Man"), but from a male point of view, that of his nearsighted protagonist Amilcare Carruga. The story was first published in the collection *I racconti* in 1958, and then in *Gli amori difficili*. It is clearly reminiscent of Ortese's masterpiece. Like "Un paio di occhiali," Calvino's story is built on an ironic relationship between vision and desire. But in appropriating Ortese's metaphor, Calvino inverts it. Amilcare experiences his nearsightedness as a lessening of desire, almost a loss of his masculinity. He no longer feels joy in the act of "Guardare le donne per la strada; una volta usava buttare loro gli occhi addosso,

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<sup>54</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 49. The classic feminist critical essay on the patriarchal gaze is Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989).

avido; adesso magari faceva istintivamente per guardarle, ma subito gli pareva che scorressero via come vento, senza dargli nessuna sensazione, e allora abbassava indifferente le palpebre.”<sup>55</sup> (“Looking at women in the street: there had been a time when he would cast his eyes upon them greedily; now perhaps he would instinctively start to look at them, but it would immediately seem to him that they were speeding past like the wind, stirring no sensation, so he would lower his eyelids, indifferent”).<sup>56</sup> Initially, when he decides to wear glasses, it seems that he has recuperated his youthful identity and virility, and when he looks at women “pare già di possederle” (Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, 1143); it seems like he “already actually possesses them” (*Difficult Loves*, 274). Nonetheless, paradoxically yet naturally, Amilcare’s identity as a human being and his identity as a male remain linked to his face. He feels that his true face is the one without glasses, like the face of his youth, and when he returns to his hometown he discovers that people in fact only recognize him without them. So he chooses to wear his glasses only when he wishes or needs to look at something—just as women who fear appearing unattractive conventionally do—despite feeling that reality, specifically the manifold reality of female bodies and faces, partially escapes him because he can no longer control or dominate it as before.

When he tries to put on a nearly invisible pair with very light frames, the result is equally disappointing. Precisely because of their lightness, they are “almost feminine” glasses that again threaten or weaken his gender identity (276). He then chooses a pair with heavy, more masculine frames made of black plastic that evoke the image of horses’ blinders, or even a mask. It is now evident that Calvino’s intention is to show that Amilcare refuses to see reality, attempting to hide it from himself and others. The heavy frames momentarily relieve Amilcare because they are a prosthesis unrelated to his “true identity”: the fully virile, pleasure-hungry, and youthful version of himself whose gaze is powerful. But in returning to the context of his youth (the provincial town where he grew up), he suffers a terrible disappointment. In the culminating scene, an evening walk downtown, he recognizes all of his past acquaintances, particularly a woman he once desired and loved. However, he is wearing his glasses, so his acquaintances do not recognize him, and the woman mistakes him for a nuisance. This underlines the irreconcilable displacement between seeing and appearing; between the identity of the active subject that Amilcare still presumes to incarnate and how he appears as a mere passive object in others’ vision, especially that of his old girlfriend. Fully inserted into the Western patriarchal order of the gaze, Amilcare is nevertheless the victim of it, whereas Anna Maria Ortese’s Eugenia—returning to “Un paio di occhiali”—is still outside of it.

The episode following the encounter with the nearsighted maidservant in “Un paio di occhiali” suggests that Eugenia will remain outside for only a short time. She feels her hand taken by a boy, Luigino, who proposes that they go for a walk and looks at her with a gaze that she does not see or know, and with which she has never looked at herself. Eugenia remains indifferent to the proposition and explains that she is awaiting her glasses. Luigino becomes irritated and maliciously acts as a mirror, substituting his male gaze for, or superimposing it on, her impotent gaze. Scornfully, he reveals to her that she is unkempt and, thus, undesirable to him. Raising a hand to her hair she responds ingenuously, “Io non ci vedo buono, e mamma non tiene tempo” (Ortese, *Mare*, 26) (“I can’t see it, and mother doesn’t have time” [*Bay* 21]) revealing that until now her only mirror has been the loving eyes of her mother, just the person who will

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<sup>55</sup> Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, vol. 2, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 1142.

<sup>56</sup> Italo Calvino, *Difficult Loves*. trans. William Weaver, Archibald Colquhoun, and Peggy Wright (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 272.

soon bring her the glasses. Still, Luigino persists, indirectly affirming the maid's initial insinuation to Eugenia that only old, ugly women wear glasses—the only permissible ones for women are sunglasses for the beach.

Eugenia barely succeeds in escaping this dangerous encounter with faith in her precious glasses still intact. She imagines these glasses with gold rims, or even all gold. Gold thus becomes established as the ironic, ambivalent sign both of dream (or hope) and of despair. Upon her return to the courtyard, instead of her mother and the coveted package, Eugenia encounters her aunt, infuriated by her lateness. Her violent slaps and insults reveal—at least to the reader—the aunt's resentful and malicious disposition, undermining even further the seemingly positive value of her initial gift. Nunziata (who prefigures Anastasia's malevolent mother in "Interno familiare"), wants Eugenia to see the horror of the real and to suffer, like she did, from this devastating experience. This is in fact what will happen.

Turning to the wretched yet compassionate Mariuccia (the building's doorwoman with the uncannily beautiful hair who lives in another miserable *basso* on the courtyard), Nunziata laments time's havoc on her face: her old woman's sunken cheek fill her with rage and resentment (Ortese, *Mare*, 28). Often compared to an old woman, pallid and frail, Eugenia is, in fact, already physically similar to her aunt, but still oblivious to this reality. She has yet to suffer fully the humiliation of the gaze of others. Nearsightedness therefore begins to emerge in the story as a kind of salvation, the forestalling of what would seem a tragic destiny or doom that Mariuccia, in her mercifulness, finds the strength to denounce. "Avranno tempo per piangere" ("They will have plenty of time to cry") she says referring to "le povere creature" ("the poor children") and to Eugenia. "Io quando li vedo, e penso che devono diventare tale e quale a noi. . . mi domando che cosa fa Dio" (Ortese, *Mare*, 28). ("When I stop to think that some day they'll be the way we are now . . . I wonder what God's really up to" [Bay 24-5]).

The last episode before the tragic culmination and conclusion of the story is when Eugenia ascends to the "noble floor" to fetch a dress that the marquise wants to donate to Nunziata. Like the glasses, this gift reveals itself to be hardly disinterested. Even though Eugenia cannot see it, the dress is "vecchissimo e pieno di rammendi" (Ortese, *Mare*, 29) ("mended and patched all over" [Bay 25]) and the Marquise D'Avanzo uses it both to bind Nunziata in a debt of gratitude and to underline—as her name ironically suggests—that women like Nunziata and her family only deserve the leftovers (*avanzi*) of the wealthy—the remnants, crumbs, and rubbish that would otherwise be thrown away. "Ognuno nel suo rango...tutti ci dobbiamo limitare..." (Ortese, *Mare*, 29) ("Each of us in our own rank...we all need to limit ourselves..."). Once again Eugenia hears the marquise repeat in this phrase an epigrammatic summary of the reasons for class difference; this theme is subsequently interwoven with that of gender difference throughout the story.

When she hears that the child is about to receive a pair of glasses that cost eight thousand lire, the marquise is appalled and asserts that for two thousand lire they could have found a pair perfectly suitable for Eugenia's needs. When the child innocently replies that her condition requires the highest quality of glasses, with a look that Eugenia luckily does not see, the marquise asks her, "Che ti serve veder bene? Per quello che tieni intorno!" (Ortese, *Mare*, 29) ("I don't know what good it will do you to see . . . in those surroundings! [Bay 27]). The unnoticed condescending look of the marquise is another version of the gaze of the salesclerk in via Roma: both define, discriminate, and immobilize according to class and wealth criteria. The marquise increases the dosage by insinuating that a poor child like Eugenia needs neither to see well nor to read. Having noticed that Eugenia does in fact know how to read, though with difficulty, the

marquise offers her a “regaluccio,” a little gift in the same vein as the others. It is a book on the lives of the saints, which the marquise hopes will help Eugenia to find the path to the convent, like her two older sisters. If the veil of Eugenia’s nearsightedness is to be removed, the marquise hopes that it will be replaced by the veil of the convent. In her hopeful yet perilous sally to the expensive optician, Eugenia has seen too much of the world forbidden to her by the marquise and by those like her.

At the entrance of the shop on Via Roma, Eugenia had caught a glimpse of a desirable world of well-dressed passers-by, elegant women, affluence, colors, beauty, and joy. This world is denied to her; she should not be able to see or desire it. Gender difference, presented twice in the scenes with the nearsighted housemaid first and then with Luigino, superimposes itself onto class and rank difference. In fact the marquise says, “Non sei bella, tutt’altro, e sembri già una vecchia. Iddio ti ha voluto prediligere, perché così non avrai occasioni di male. Ti vuole santa, come le tue sorelle!” (Ortese, *Mare*, 30-31) (“You are not much to look at, and you look old already. It’s a sign of god’s favor that he should preserve you from temptation. He wants you to be a saint like your two sisters! [Bay 27]).<sup>57</sup> Thus Eugenia is denied, by a malevolent and falsely maternal female figure, not only the rights to see and read freely, but also, like later Anastasia will be, those of eros and pleasure, and any claim to beauty. True to form and rather like a female Perceval, she does not completely understand the meaning of this declaration, even though it disturbs her: “Le parve, per un attimo, che il sole non brillasse più come prima, e anche il pensiero degli occhiali cessò di rallegrarla” (Ortese, *Mare*, 31). (“For a second, it seemed as if the sun were shining less brightly, and even the prospect of the glasses failed to please” [Bay 28]). And yet, before the concluding catastrophe, this scene ends with an illumination, a sublime epiphany that alludes to Leopardi.

From the marquise’s elevated terrace, Eugenia imagines that her weak eyes can see the sea of Posillipo. “Guardava vagamente, coi suoi occhi quasi spenti, un punto del mare, dove si stendeva come una lucertola, di un colore verde smorto, la terra di Posillipo . . . ‘Io pure, una volta, ci sono stata . . .’ cominciava Eugenia, rianimandosi a quel nome e guardando, incantata, da quella parte” (Ortese, *Mare*, 31) (“She stared vaguely, with all the light gone out of her eyes, at a point across the distant water, where the outline of Posillipo lay, like a dull green lizard, against the sky . . . ‘I went there once . . .’ Eugenia said hesitatingly, roused by this familiar name, and staring spellbound in its direction” [Bay 28]). Through this Leopardian manner of looking into an imagined space beyond the horizon, memory, desire, and imagination become intertwined for a brief moment. The mind’s eye reaches that sea whose infinite beauty and soothing power are completely foreign to the poor inhabitants of Naples, as the title of the book, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, implies. The shape of the green lizard in the distance uncannily foreshadows for the reader the tiny woman beyond the sea on an imaginary island in Ortese’s utopian 1965 masterpiece, *L’iguana*, who is, like Eugenia, both young and old. Preparing to descend into the muddy courtyard, Eugenia turns one last time towards “quel punto luminoso” (Ortese, *Mare*, 31) (“that vision of light” [Bay 28]).

In the final scene in the courtyard Eugenia recognizes the familiar silhouette of her mother and joyously runs to her in order finally to receive her glasses. Everyone watches the seemingly blessed scene of the golden glasses’ unveiling and the affectionate motion with which Rosa puts them on her daughter’s face. They all congratulate Eugenia, but her reaction is not the one they anticipated and desired, but rather its exact opposite. It is as if the bewitched glasses, like the maddening multitude of eye-like spectacles, lenses and lorgnettes that the peddler offers

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<sup>57</sup> Translation slightly altered to correct an omission and reflect the original more closely.

to Nathaniel in Hoffmann's tale, made her the victim of an evil spell. Eugenia feels sick and stammers a little, saying in a stifled voice that everything appears very small. Her father Peppino immediately provides the rationale for her reaction: it is normal to feel discomfort and nausea when wearing a pair glasses for the first time. However, Eugenia's discomfort is not caused by the glasses, it is caused by what she sees now, and by what she has glimpsed during that long day.

Like she did in the shop scene, Eugenia goes to the threshold and looks out. But, instead of being carried away by a sense of joy or swept up in contemplation of the external world, she is overcome by a painful vertigo. What she sees are not the lights, beauty, and colors of Via Roma, but a vision that painfully presses upon her and pushes her back into

l'imbuto viscido del cortile, con la punta verso il cielo e i muri lebbrosi fitti di miserabili balconi; gli archi dei terranei neri, coi lumi brillanti a cerchio attorno all'Addolorata; il selciato bianco di acqua saponata, le foglie di cavolo, i pezzi di carta, i rifiuti, e, in mezzo al cortile, quel gruppo di cristiani cenciosi e deformi, coi visi butterati dalla miseria e dalla rassegnazione, che la guardavano amorosamente. Cominciarono a torcersi, a confondersi, a ingigantire. Le venivano tutti addosso, gridando, nei due cerchetti stregati degli occhiali. Fu Mariuccia la prima ad accorgersi che la bambina stava male, e a strapparle in fretta gli occhiali, perché Eugenia era piegata in due e, lamentandosi, vomitava. (Ortese, *Mare*, 33).

(The courtyard was like a sticky funnel, pointed toward the sky, with peeling walls and thickly clustered balconies around it. On the ground, there was a circle of low arches and at one point a statue of the Madonna surrounded by votive lights. The paving stones were marked with streaks of soapy water and littered with scraps of paper, cabbage leaves and other bits of garbage. And in the middle of the scene there stood a little group of sickly, ragged individuals, with the pockmarks of poverty and despair on their faces, staring at her with adoring expectation. Mariuccia was the first one to realize that the child was unwell and to snatch the glasses away. For Eugenia was bent over double and vomiting upon the ground.) (*Bay*, 31)

In the noisy confusion all comment on Eugenia's illness and try to tend to her, pained by "il suo viso di vecchia inondato di lacrime" (34) ("her little old face was flooded with tears" [31]). The compassionate voice of Mariuccia is heard saying with epigrammatic concision: "Lasciatela stare, povera creatura, è meravigliata" (34). "Let her be, the poor child, she's astonished." The use of the Neapolitan dialect version of the word "meravigliata" here to indicate anxious bewilderment (and the uncanny opposite of the "meraviglia" first glimpsed through the glasses on the elegant and prosperous via Roma),<sup>58</sup> foreshadows its occurrence in the chapter "Oro a Forcella," when the narrator is awed and horrified by the spectacle of the miserable crowd (and especially by the children among them), and again in "La città involontaria," when the cripple infant-like toddler girl named Nunzia Faiella sees a light that reminds her of the sun she has seen

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<sup>58</sup> On this use of *meravigliata*, and for a sensitive albeit dark reading of the whole story, see Baldi, "Infelicità senza desideri."

only once in her life.<sup>59</sup> Eugenia's experience in seeing the horror of her world is similar to that of the narrator of the chapter on I Granili, and Eugenia is in fact a figure for the narrator herself as a child, but also as an old woman. When she was nearly eighty years old, Ortese wrote about her book: "dunque, fu visione dell'*intollerabile*" (Ortese, *Mare*, 175) ("this book was a vision of the *intolerable*").

Eugenia's astonishment, we must conclude, is an expression of extreme disenchantment not only because her glasses, contrary to her expectations, nauseate her, but also because the reality that she finally sees is the opposite of what she had glimpsed and desired on the threshold of the optician's shop. As a result, a fundamental point emerges from the very structure of the story, without being didactically superimposed onto it. It is not a matter of a generic, absolute Leopardian discovery, for example, of the pain of living and of the preference for illusions and the pleasures of the "other" life, that of fantasy and the imagination, over the inevitable, tragic disenchantment of stark reality. Nor is it a discovery of Sartre's existentialist nausea, caused by the phenomenon of living itself.<sup>60</sup> It is first and foremost a precise, circumstantial condemnation of the nauseating Neapolitan reality, of the condition of oppression and exploitation of the impoverished in that city where all good and beauty are denied to them, in sharp contrast with the prosperity of the rich neighborhoods and the upper stories, and of the Italy of the "economic miracle" in the north. Eugenia, upon whom the curtain of the story closes, is certainly not a "positive hero" and has no "class consciousness," which partially explains the left's cold and unsympathetic reception of the story. The text's condemnation of this particular "reality," however, is evident even as the story takes on a more universal aesthetic, human and political resonance. The literary richness and profundity of the text does not in fact end here, although many rather nearsighted readers were incapable of discerning its depth of vision, a depth that ironically has to do with Eugenia's very nearsightedness.

Of the stories in *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, this was the one that Elio Vittorini liked the least. He found it both excessively naturalistic and overly influenced by autobiographical elements.<sup>61</sup> As a matter of fact, in a 1993 interview Ortese revealed one of her own experiences to be at the base of the story:

Non ci vedevo bene, forse già da piccola, ma non me ne accorgevo. Poi l'oculista mi disse di mettermi gli occhiali: erano lenti leggere, se mi vedesse adesso che ho le nuvole davanti agli occhi... Dunque, misi questi occhiali e subito fui presa da una nausea violenta: era la disperazione di vedere tutte le crepe dei muri, tutto il lercio, quel che mai avrei voluto guardare: tutto il vecchiume stava lì, nel mio quartiere. Era insopportabile. Poi mi passò, ma fu un impatto grave con la verità delle cose; per questo l'ho ricordato nel racconto.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In this passage we find a dialect variation of the word, "stupetiata": "'guardava ll'aria . . . 'o sole . . . era stupetiata'. Anche adesso, Nunzia Faiella era meravigliata." (Ortese, *Mare* 95; *Bay* 116)

<sup>60</sup> Readings that argue that Ortese's is an utterly desolate, dark, pessimistic vision that rejects the real and the body altogether and privileges fantasy instead include Cosetta Seno Reed, "Anna Maria Ortese: 'Un paio di occhiali' e 'Interno familiare'. Due diversi tipi di estraniamento," in *Rassegna Europea di Letteratura italiana* 20 (2002): 131-142 and Baldi, "Infelicità senza desideri."

<sup>61</sup> Clerici, *Apparizione* 234, 237.

<sup>62</sup> Francesca Borrelli, "Con malinconia e fantasia," *Il manifesto*, 15 maggio 1993.

(I could not see well, perhaps since childhood, and did not realize it. Then the optician told me to wear glasses: they were thin lenses, if he could see me now that I have these clouds in front of my eyes... Well, I put on these glasses and was suddenly seized by a violent nausea: it was the despair of seeing all the cracks in the walls, all the filth, all that I never would have wanted to see: all the old rubbish was there, in my neighborhood. It was unbearable. Then the feeling subsided, but it was a serious impact on the truth of things; that is why I put it in the story.)

I would like to call attention to two expressions in this passage: “now that I have these clouds in front of my eyes” and “the truth of things was unbearable.” “Clouds in front of my eyes” helps us read and understand the profound meaning of Eugenia’s nearsightedness, the metaphoric field of vision in the story, and Ortese’s overall poetics. For most critics, even the well-intentioned and paternalistic ones like Vittorini, the story does nothing beyond “naturalistically” recording an episode in reality—however squalid and painful; and the glasses that allow Eugenia to emerge from her nearsightedness, simultaneously provoking in her an attack of nausea, are merely a mechanical expedient, a simple device to highlight the squalor of the reality that she finally sees with clarity. Everyone (in the real world of everyday life and common sense) presumes that this kind of clarity, this unimpeded vision of the real, however painful and nauseating, is in fact necessary. The realist, naturalistic, and neorealist tenets in particular state that it is indeed essential to look and see reality as it is, in a concrete and objective way.

Eugenia’s nearsightedness, however, performs a more complex metaphoric function. Ortese’s 1993 statement “now that I have these clouds in front of my eyes” certainly makes us reflect and look away from the direction of naturalism, realism, or even neorealism. In other words, it points towards a new interpretation of nearsightedness as metaphor. Nearsightedness, near-blindness, does not represent merely the impairment of an obfuscated or weakened vision, but, as Ortese helps us understand, it is a metaphor for an *alternative* vision that is a deliberate choice. From one perspective, Eugenia’s vague, Leopardian vision is in itself poetic; but from another perspective, in several moments of pictorial inspiration, Eugenia’s imprecise and blurred vision, based more on color spots and light than on form, assumes all of the aesthetic traits of an Impressionist painting. In her nearsightedness, Eugenia is capable of an aesthetic view of reality; she imagines beauty that others are unable to see, beauty that exists because her eyes and imagination create it. Certainly this does not redeem, purify, nor transform the objective horror of the real, but it serves rather to estrange it and defamiliarize it, to let us glimpse at and desire another reality, just as Eugenia does.

But there is also a cognitive reality that supplements the aesthetic one. Uncertainty, doubt, the way Eugenia hesitates when she crosses a threshold and never presumes to recognize or to know: these characteristics make her live in a perpetual state of attention that has a positive value in contrast to an arrogant or hackneyed kind of vision that considers itself absolute, all-knowing and complete—or, simply put, normal. Paradoxically, nearsightedness is therefore a cognitive force. The feminist critic and poet Hélène Cixous nostalgically reflected in “Savoir” on the value of her own nearsightedness, which she compared to a poor fairy’s “gift” discovered only after forever losing her “impairment” through laser eye surgery.<sup>63</sup> Not seeing, and especially

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<sup>63</sup> In Cixous, *Voiles*, 19: “-Ent’ en allant, ma pauvre fée, ma myopie, tu me retires les dons ambigus qui m’angoissaient et m’accordaient des états que les voyantes ne connaissent pas, murmurait-elle.” “-Ne m’oublie pas.

not being able “to see herself seen,” give the myopic woman a lightness, a strength and a “liberty of self-effacement” that she would not have otherwise: “elle vivait dans l’au-dessus sans images où courent les grands nuages indistincts.” (“She lived in the above without images where big indistinct clouds roll”).<sup>64</sup>

One of the positive consequences of Eugenia’s—and implicitly Ortese’s—nearsightedness is that it widens her desire and capacity to listen, to recognize and to know through voices instead of through the eyes. Indeed, the sounds and the voices that identify the characters may be heard through the whole story. Moreover, the way nearsightedness softens edges, merging bodies and shapes normally perceived as distinct, disparate, and different, suggests that everything is or could be joined into a continuum, a single whole. It therefore harkens back to a dimension of non-separation from the mother, to the joy of still being one with her, unable to distinguish between the two bodies; but it also has potentially political and social connotations that are diametrically opposed to Marquise D’Avanzo’s rigid vision of class and social distinction.

A positive implication also emerges from the strictly optic definition of nearsightedness. The nearsighted person usually sees up-close clearly. The word *nearsighted* itself denotes the capacity to see details that are very close, even the smallest blemishes on the face of another or one’s own body, instead of a wider perspective from afar which is by definition more remote, colder and abstract. One of the many pictorial scenes in the story uses an image of faces and bodies dimly illuminated by a lantern or candle to evoke the warm, precisely detailed paintings for which Caravaggio, Georges de la Tour and their schools were famous, thus allowing the veil over the eyes of Eugenia to dissipate: “il viso dei familiari, la mamma specialmente e i fratelli, [li] conosceva bene, perché spesso ci dormiva insieme, e qualche volta si svegliava di notte e, al lume della lampada a olio, li guardava” (Ortese, *Mare*, 19) (“the faces of the family, especially those of her mother and the younger children, were familiar to her, because often they slept in the same bed and when she woke up in the middle of the night, she would examine them by the glare of the kerosene lamp” [Bay 13]). Paradoxically, this close contemplation of the dirty faces of her suffering family inspires Eugenia to think that the world must indeed be beautiful. The nearsighted gaze stands for a vision that, unlike the traumatized gaze of the alienated subject (which is par excellence *the* one and only subject for Freud and Lacan) establishes a relationship of intimate proximity and togetherness with the loved one.<sup>65</sup> Nearsighted vision comes closer to the texture of paintings and the warmth of faces and bodies, becoming almost tactile.

Ortese’s nearsightedness or, with increased age, perhaps cataracts (“now that I have these clouds in front of my eyes”) is not an endured disability, an incurable condition that causes pain and embarrassment and is only worsened by time; it is instead a choice, a deliberate “act” of nearsightedness. Nor is it a refusal to see reality, an attempt to evade it by seeking out dream and illusion. Unlike blindness, traditionally cultivated by male poets and writers (from Homer and Milton to d’Annunzio and Borges), as a privileged condition that generates a visionary or prophetic power to see “inside” or “beyond,” into a transcendent, metaphysical, absolute or, alternately, exclusively aesthetic-literary dimension, Ortese wants to look at the world and make us see it up close.<sup>66</sup> Only this renewed, humble act of looking up close can restore authenticity

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Garde a jamais le monde suspendu, désirable, refuse, cet enchanté que je t’avais donné, murmurait la myopie.”

<sup>64</sup> Cixous, *Voiles*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Elsa Morante uses Ortese’s trope of myopia in this way and greatly expands on it in the novel *Aracoeli* (1982).

<sup>66</sup> Philosophers such as Derrida and Levinas, on the other hand, cultivate a sort of ethics of blindness in contrast to what they perceive to be the inherent violence of vision. But, closer to Ortese’s sensibility, see Valerio Magrelli’s

and humaneness to vision. Eugenia and Ortese's nearsightedness generates the impulse, arising from the spectacle and intolerability of the real (with all of its painful elements of squalor and exploitation), to seek, imagine and envision another world, a different reality. In her afterword to the 1994 edition of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, Ortese declares "Insomma, io non amavo il reale, esso era per me quasi intollerabile . . . Quella [realtà di Napoli] non l'accettavo: l'avevo già vista e respinta altrove" (Ortese, *Mare*, 174). ("I did not love reality, it was for me... almost intolerable... I would not accept [the reality of Naples]: I had caught a glimpse of it and had already pushed it away" [*Bay* 174]). Ortese therefore refuses to be a "realist," not in the sense of refusing to see, but refusing passively to accept reality as it is defined and represented by power.

Ortese's text itself becomes ultimately like a human face, reminding us that the act of reading is inherently "nearsighted."<sup>67</sup> It pushes the reader's eyes to look closely at the pages of the book, the lines on the page and the words in a line. Reading restores to the act of vision the closeness, intimacy and uncertainty or tentativeness of which the powerful mastering or jealous gaze deprive it. Ultimately, voluntary nearsightedness corresponds to the utopian charge of literature, or rather of poetry. There is a direct link, a concurrence, between nearsightedness and poetry. This utopian charge does not superimpose itself upon literary discourse, but actively engages with it through the poetic specificity of the form of the text; voluntary nearsightedness points towards a different, other reality symbolized by Eugenia's desiring gaze, and at the same time denounces intolerable negativity.<sup>68</sup>

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ironic poem, "Sto rifacendo la punta al pensiero" in *Poesie (1980-1992) e Altre Poesie* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996): "Sto rifacendo la punta al pensiero, /come se il filo fosse logoro/e il segno divenuto opaco./Gli occhi si consumano come matite /e la sera disegnano sul cervello /figure appena sgrossate e confuse. /Le immagini oscillano e il tratto si fa incerto, /gli oggetti si nascondono: /è come se parlassero per enigmi continui /ed ogni sguardo obbligasse /la mente a tradurre. /La miopia si fa quindi poesia,/dovendosi avvicinare al mondo/per separarlo dalla luce. /Anche il tempo subisce questo rallentamento: /i gesti si perdono, i saluti non vengono colti./ L'unica cosa che si profila nitida /è la prodigiosa difficoltà della visione." ("I am sharpening my thoughts/, as if the line I drew had broken,/its mark opaque./ The eyes wear out like pencils/and at night they draw on the brain/barely outlined, fuzzy figures./ Images tremble and the pencil line becomes shaky,/objects hide themselves:/it is as if they spoke through endless enigmas/and every glance compelled the mind to decipher them./ Myopia thus turns into poetry,/needing to get close to the world/to separate it from the light./ Even time must slow down:/ gestures are lost, greetings are missed./The only thing that stands out clearly/is the prodigious difficulty of seeing.")

<sup>67</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 213.

<sup>68</sup> It is significant that in his review of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, Eugenio Montale used an optic and a musical metaphor to laud "Un paio di occhiali," defining it "beautiful for its use of focalization and its measured rhythm." See Eugenio Montale, "Letture." *Corriere della sera*, November 14, 1953. See also Clerici, *Apparizione*, 246-7. Like Ortese's Eugenia, who looks like an old woman, in the 1971 "Xenia" section of *Satura*, Montale's wife "Mosca" is a fragile and suffering creature affected by severe nearsightedness. Mosca is remembered as a "small insect" particularly because of her glasses. Eugenia's glasses are also compared by Ortese to a "shiny insect" (*Bay* 29). In Montale's poetry, Mosca's nearsightedness becomes the symbol of poetry itself, of another kind of vision with the ability to see beyond painful, banal reality: "Ho sceso milioni di scale dandoti il braccio/ non già perché con quattr'occhi forse si vede di più./ Con te le ho scese perché sapevo che di noi due le sole vere pupille, sebbene tanto offuscate,/ erano le tue." ("Giving you my arm I descended millions of stairs./ but certainly not because four eyes may see better than two./ With you I descended because I knew that the only real eyes, however darkened,/belonged to you.") Eugenio Montale, from *Xenia II* in *Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1977), 351.

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