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The Advertisement: New-feminist Re-readings and Old-fashioned Triangles in the Dramaturgy of Natalia Ginzburg

The generation that took an active part in the new-feminist movement of the seventies is at the center of the stage in the dramaturgy of Natalia Ginzburg. Like Hellman, Ginzburg focuses on the examination of the dynamics of gender in intimate family microcosms, rather than paying direct attention to macroscopic aspects of the women's movement, such as the demonstrations that were happening in most western countries in the years in which Ginzburg wrote her plays.

It has been noted that in *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman's last play, one senses the imminence of a new feminist age. But in that play the proto-new-feminist character Lily is isolated from her generation. Feminism for Hellman is an underscoring motif that hovers behind the reality of the play, but a similar motif becomes the propelling force in the plays of Natalia Ginzburg, an established Italian writer of the same generation as Hellman, who started working for the theatre only in the late sixties, precisely as a result of the new-feminist influence.

In Natalia Ginzburg's plays the gender-definitions pressed by the dominant culture in the conservative mid-century era individually shape expectations and collectively channel desires. But the presence of numerous female characters of the new generation prefigures the momentum that the women's movement was about to take, and liberates the women's homo-erotic desires in the microcosms examined.

Like Lillian Hellman's, Natalia Ginzburg's dramaturgy is atypical for women's theatre. Similarly to her American predecessor, Ginzburg observes the new-feminism from the distance of one generation, and has a more tempered vision of it than her younger contemporaries. Contrary to Hellman, who wrote her last play in 1961, Ginzburg remained

an active playwright during all the salient years of the new-feminist movement. But while Hellman was an experienced playwright when she wrote *Toys in the Attic*, Ginzburg had established herself as a novelist in the post-war years and was new to the theatre when the new-feminism started.

Her women contemporaries in the United States were much younger white new-feminists, working in experimental collectives involved in protest theatre, mainly concerned with rape and abortion, the two catalyst new-feminist issues. More often than not these writers used abstract beliefs and utopian visions to approach their subjects. Black-American women writers drew powerful female characters who show a more disenchanted view of feminism, but at this time they still concentrated primarily on racial tensions.

The established French novelists who had turned to theatre under the new-feminist impulse produced more sophisticated forms of writing, but wrapped the dynamics of gender under complex layers of absurdist symbolism. Ginzburg, on the contrary, uses the absurdist canvas to portray women at the top of their communicative powers.

The translation of her last novel has confirmed Natalia Ginzburg's status among this country's reading public. Her anthologized essays, plays, short stories and novels have long since been favorites of Italian students and teachers. *The Little Virtues*, a newly translated essay-collection, is favorably reviewed in the top newspapers of this country. This diffused interest for Ginzburg in America suggests her international reputation could be due to a genderized response of the public. As a consequence it is appropriate to look back at her plays, that were written between 1965 and 1975, and could have determined the influence of feminism in her writing.

Natalia Ginzburg's dramaturgy gives evidence of the suggested hypothesis that gender difference in writing cannot be formally defined. Scholars who propose a structural answer to the questions "what is the difference? and why study it?" are naturally bound to find that men from a country other than their own, or from an ethnicity other than their own, do things similar to what they had defined as the specific structures of women's playwrighting. Likewise, women from a country other than the United States may do things similar to what Ameri-

can feminist scholars had thought of as "masculine" dramatic structures. But if one uses the subject of a work to begin an aesthetic analysis comprehensive of theme and form, one can show that Ginzburg's theatre has an important place in the continuum unfolding of women's dramaturgy.

Commentators of her literary beginnings just took her for granted as the virtuoso "token" woman of the Italian post-Fascist literary environment. Local critics acknowledged a promising talent, but none spent time on the influence of gender in her writing. Italian criticism being still a male province at the time, Ginzburg's thematics automatically came across as "less relevant."

With the new-feminism, her narratives have attracted a number of female commentators outside and inside her country. These critics have focused their analysis on style and rhythms. Her prose is rhythmically based on a staccato pace and on an abundance of vowels. Her thematic organization functions on stinging humorous bits that intercept the pace, and metaphors on temporality and death that cut across the rhythms creating emotional vertigo. This common denominator of thirty years of writing reflects her contemplative poetic personality and her drive to hide in the observer's corner and unfold the stories of apparent "others" as a means to establish the writer's power to survive them. New-feminist critics have formally described her rhythms and accents, but it takes an aesthetic emphasis on dramaturgy to define the dynamics of gender in her writing.

Her absurdist canvases could easily be viewed as a surrender to "masculine" structures. In the seventies the absurdist form was more than established, especially if compared to the "transformational" experiments of new-feminist collectives in this country. Ginzburg's focus on the microscopic dimension of gender-dynamics, rather than on external manifestations of the new-feminism, has been simplistically related to a generic Italian backwardness. But the analysis of Ginzburg's thematics shows that she consistently brings forth the desires of women, their world of erotic projections and the crucial moments of their collective experience. In this perspective she comes across as the writer who encompasses new-feminism in a visionary perception.

Born before the dawn of Fascism in the World War One period, she

had been through a lot when the women's movement became a prominent force on the Italian scene in the mid-seventies. To define her perspective on women we need to glance at the specifics of the Italian feminist movement. Due to rapid and mass development of the industrial system, in the early seventies Italy had an incidence of illegal abortions and broken marriages higher than most Western countries. Birth-control, officially not permitted, was somewhat diffusely practiced, but, while contraceptives circulated under the official heading of headache remedies, a rapidly industrializing country still had no legal divorce or abortion system. Back-room abortions and illegitimacy had become a way of life automatically.

When the liberal left timidly proposed a cautious set of regulations, it faced immediate resistance from the conservative side of the country. The right wings in alliance with the church establishment set out on a campaign to demand the abrogation of the new laws granting divorce and birth-control rights, by popular referendum. The situation gave a tremendous momentum to the rank and file of local feminism. On the issues of both divorce and abortion the country became politically polarized, and a large majority of the people voted for two times in a row side to side with the women's movement. Italian feminism acquired a clear conscience of its powers: in moving the public opinion from a preindustrial to a post-modern view of the family, Italian feminists felt for a while that they had in their hands the destiny of their country.

A combination of social, historical, religious and economic factors thus made the impact of Italian feminism particularly dramatic. Natalia Ginzburg was affected by this impact, but maintained a sober standpoint and a controlled distance. In 1973 she was a regular contributor to the *terza pagina* of two major liberal newspapers. Questioned about *la condizione femminile*, she answered:

Non amo il femminismo. Condivido però tutto quello che chiedono i movimenti femminili. Condivido tutte o quasi le loro richieste pratiche. (*Vita immaginaria*, p. 183.)

Feminism obscurely appeared to her in the beginning as a new form

of reversed, self-defeating racism. She saw its origins in an age old "inferiority complex" of women, that gave a "secret complicity" as its questionable result. She thought that for feminism to become a positive force in the complex of society the implications of that secret complicity had to be sorted out.

In her eight plays Natalia Ginzburg used the absurdist model and catered from the existential tradition. Being already established as a novel writer, she could afford to stay away from the avant-garde experimentations that were becoming popular among her younger women compatriots. The first woman ever to write for the Italian theatre, she put her plays in the mainstream circuits, and used well-known directors and actors. As happened to Lillian Hellman in America a few decades earlier, she used established dramatic forms to concentrate on significant moments of women's collective experience. But while absurdism forms the canvas of her theatre, her dramaturgy follows the desire to explore the dynamics of gender in her contemporary environment.

The Advertisement for instance (original title *L'inserzione*, literally "the classified ad"), examines the microscopic dimension of the general tensions that gave origin to the new feminism. Teresa is the typically "backward" woman of pre- or de-industrialized societies, who depends on marriage for social status. Deserted by her husband, she starts living with Elena, a female student ten years her younger, who becomes entrenched in the tales of her tumultuous life. The two women become mutual supports and sources of self-assurance for each other, until the student falls in love with Teresa's ex-husband.

A confused, still unconscious and inarticulated homosexuality appears as a major motivation of the two women's alliance, although the author makes it unacknowledged by the characters. Mostly due to the diffused influence of cheap Freudian psychoanalysis, the level of intimacy reached by the two women had previously come across in drama as neurosis or insanity caused by a frustrated heterosexuality. By this middle-aged Italian writer who glances at the new-feminism from one generation behind, the psycho-erotic bond between the two female characters it is now newly regarded as the microscopic seed that gave

origin to the collective new-feminist action. As in the memoirs, however, Ginzburg suggests that there is no solid alliance until the real motivations are collectively acknowledged and surpassed.

From her chosen distance the established writer looks at the formation of feminism in the new alliances that discard the conventional hierarchies that govern gender-roles in society. Under the new-feminist influence, the traditional triangle becomes a microcosm that reveals the gender-dynamics that are at stake in society. The defeat of the new alliance (when Elena leaves Teresa to live with Teresa's ex-husband), reflects Ginzburg's reticence to accept this influence. But the homoerotic basis of the alliance suggests that the writer developed a sharper and a more articulated consciousness of gender as she wrote for the theatre. In *L'inserzione* absurdity is used to present the betrayed complicity that re-establishes the gender hierarchies threatened by the women's alliance in the beginning of the play.

The youngest child of a middle-class half-Jewish family, Ginzburg had absorbed her father's view that "there [was] nothing, absolutely nothing that one could do against Fascism" except undo it by the strength of one's resilience, and still be there to tell the story after its fall. Married to a left-wing Russian-Jewish political activist, who was killed in a prison cell after the World War Two armistice, she had made the best of her wifely exile when the regime had sent him to political confinement. Her "Eboli" is rendered as a remote paradise in the pages that evoke its memories, but the memoir breaks the image of the happy family with Natalia's first and atrocious encounter with death:

Mio marito morì a Roma nelle carceri di Regina Coeli, pochi mesi dopo che avevamo lasciato il paese. Davanti all'orrore della sua morte solitaria, davanti alle angosciose alternative che precedettero la sua morte, io mi chiedo se questo è accaduto a noi, a noi che compravamo le arance da Giro e andavamo a passeggiare nella neve. Allora io avevo fiducia in un avvenire facile e lieto, ricco di desideri appagati, di esperienze e di comuni imprese. Ma era quello il tempo migliore della mia vita e solo adesso che mi è sfuggito per sempre, solo adesso lo so. (*Le piccole virtù*, p. 18-19.)

Bereaved at such an early age and being left a young widow at the end of a second war, the only parent of three small children, she became

interested in a particular kind of character. Her women have lower-class, rural, humble origins, but a tremendous drive to project themselves out in the environment, and a talent for living intensely, and being intensely loved. If they are narcissistic, self-conscious, extremely difficult women, in her dramaturgy one finds that their desires are the cement of society. Like Lillian Hellman, therefore, Natalia Ginzburg is not concerned with feminists, but with ordinary, non-professional and often non-educated women, who obstinately resist the conforming pressures of society. Playwrighting is a parenthesis of her creative life that incidentally coincides with the new-feminist period. After this parenthesis she returned to fiction, but drama put her in touch with the generation formed at the intense experience of the new-feminism, and this understanding became the backbone of her later narratives.

Her activity as one of the most prominent Italian novelists since the forties can be briefly summarized. A series of *romanzi brevi*, written in the pre- and post-war period, started her out as the representative of the *gentil sesso* in a group of left-wing Jewish-Italian *letterati*, among the country's prime liberal intellectuals. A cross between the *novella* and a regular novel, the *romanzo breve* is a swift, condensed, unadorned, narrative conveying the viewpoint of a *voce femminile* in a fable based on a collective protagonist and characterized by Ginzburg's distinctive staccato rhythm and naive accents. *Lessico familiare* (1963), a full-length novel of family life and anti-Fascism, brought national recognition.

Her recent, enchanting, intriguing and sad novels show how drama changed the perspectives of her narrative. From *Caro Michele* (1973) to *La città e la casa* (1983) the epistolary form progressively takes over the traditional narrative. In *La città e la casa* this allows the novel to follow a plot that develops from central Italy to the Eastern coast of this country. The author examines the links that her characters establish between the two continents, and uses the deeds of the new generation to embrace the theme of the ongoing flux over the Atlantic. As in theatre, the composition relies on purely dialogical patterns, and the author uses different registers to pitch on various levels the voices of her characters.

L'inserzione, a play written in 1965 that premiered in 1968, occupies

a somewhat central position in the whole development of Ginzburg's dramaturgy. Lighthearted farce is the initial tone of her dramatic period, which sees traditional gender-roles respected and upper-class, conventional mores satirized. In *Ti ho sposato per allegria*, for instance, the effrontery of Giuliana, a young female character from the working-class, is a vivifying force in the play's milieu. Her adventurous and unpredictable temperament stands in contrast to her upper-class in-laws, sister and mother. Giuliana's maid has adopted conventional manners to be on the safe side, and she strangely mimics the rigidity of Giuliana's in-laws. Giuliana's influence begins to be felt in the environment, but her alliance with the maid keeps the scope of the satire on the social level. A darker tone in the later plays is conducive of the suffocating atmosphere imposed, despite feminism, by the impinging economic crisis. In *La porta sbagliata* a confused, unacknowledged anxiety hovers over a disappointed baby-boom generation that has reversed gender and class conventions, but feels itself to be of no use to an unevenly developed society. With its oblique humor and its diffused anxiety, *L'inserzione* finds in between these two its dramatic balance.

L'inserzione brought Ginzburg to the international attention of feminist scholars of the theatre. Partly as a result of this attention, the play has since been periodically revived, translated, taught and anthologized. A controversial view of Italian women is the basis of its popularity. Its London premiere suggest that the script had a provocative potential with respect to the Italian public. The success of its production in Europe rested on the assumption that the plays' protagonist realistically corresponded to the Italian type. But when *L'inserzione* finally opened in Italy, the protagonist's role was purposely played as a neurotic not to disturb the local public.

Formal assessments of the play by non-feminist writers range from absurdist, to tragic farce, to comedy of sentiment and of manners. The compulsive talkativeness of Teresa is invariably seen as its subject. This emphasis on the protagonist narrows the perspective of Ginzburg's dramaturgy: the play uses the conventional triangle to examine gender dynamics in the power struggle of a couple.

Teresa and Lorenzo have managed for a year to live apart from each other. After five years in a contrasted, tempestuous, but tremendously passionate marriage, they have regained their mental balance and now periodically visit each other.

A beginner in writing for the stage, Ginzburg is still very dependent on the narrative. Her borrowing from the absurdist model gives a neurotic slant to the characters, but the play deconstructs the absurdist model because it shows verbal flows as erotic channels between characters. The first act develops as Teresa, who now lives alone and retreated in her apartment, responds to the calls for the three classified ads that she placed in the local paper to regain some touch with reality. She wants to sell her villa and her antique sideboard, and find an au-pair to share the apartment. She would prefer a student, to bring a fresher breeze in the stagnant air of her retirement. She definitely wants a woman, to stand on an equal footing and enjoy a discrete presence in the apartment.

Teresa's talkativeness is a form of desire by which she projects herself onto others. As she steps through the door, an inordinate verbal flow invests Elena, the university student who is interested in moving to the apartment. As she keeps asking questions, Elena is slowly caught in a spell by the other character. Predictably, Teresa concentrates on Lorenzo, and gives the details of the terrible roughs that brought the separation, sought and warmly fostered by the upper middle-class family of the husband. From her story one gathers the impression that these two people did not know how to deal with each other: on the one hand their marriage was based on a liberated and frankly physical passion, on the other they could not find ways in which this relationship could become socially positive for each other. They mostly wound up in crazed situations because of trite expectations of each other. For instance, the prospect of a countryside wealthy tranquillity made Lorenzo invest all his money in a pretentious villa. When Teresa found out that she did not care for that wifely quiet, they came back to Rome and lived on fast-food in an empty apartment.

An anonymous caller for a classified ad, Elena is transformed into an addicted spectator of Teresa's story-telling in less than one act. In

the crescendo of questions that Elena asks Teresa about her married life one reads her growing power on the other character. In speaking of their childhood the two women also reinforce the bond that is growing between them. Their experiences in their respective families, as little girls growing up in the years of the backlash, are strikingly similar. Both Teresa and Elena come from rural backgrounds and had powerless, exploited, hard-working mothers. They felt like second-class citizens in their families because they were placed second to their brothers. They spent their teen-age years thinking of ways to escape the drab perspective of a woman's life in the country. While Elena moved to Rome in the sixties and had access to education thanks to the liberal climate, Teresa, not much older than Elena, had moved ten years earlier, with the improbable project of becoming an actress. But in the fifties she found a still conservative, prudish, extremely misogynist climate. A number of shots as an extra in the growing local film industry suggested to her that even the more liberal movie world was remaining insensitive to her charms. If she had failed as an actress, she had at least taken care of herself enough to avoid the streets by finding a husband.

Act one thus concludes on a positive note for the two women: Teresa's story wins the respect of the other character, and Elena moves in with the understanding that they will give mutual support to each other. Both women are too primitive in their assessment of their sexuality, to realize that the strength of this bond is based on a physical attraction for each other. But the timidity and fundamental anxiety of the two characters suggest that the author deliberately leaves the possibility open that the two could fall in love with each other.

The feminist influence at this point can be regarded as the propelling force of the play: Natalia Ginzburg's curiosity about the two women's alliance manifests the writer's desire to be included in the "secret complicity" that she questions in the memoir.

The second part of the play goes into a reverse gear and shows more of the author's generational reticence vis-a-vis the new-feminism. When Lorenzo arrives in the second act, a casual visit rapidly transforms into a scene of seduction, as he feels his former role threatened by the new partnership. A sense of ownership of the women's place exudes from his gestures in the apartment. His presence breaks the quiet, intimate

balance that the women had established. In talking to Elena, he gathers a sense of power from presenting himself as the unquestioned center of Teresa's desires. In speaking of their marriage, he demeans Teresa's image in the eyes of the new partner. Act two concludes on Teresa's silence while Lorenzo wins Elena to his powers.

In a short exchange with Lorenzo, while Teresa is still out, Elena naively acknowledges the mutual support, much beyond the *aupair* relationship, that the two women are giving each other. But, as soon as the three are together, Lorenzo counterattacks by flirting with Elena. Lorenzo obviously capitalizes on Elena's naiveté, but Teresa stays out of his trite games of seduction, and actually outsmarts him by his own remarks. Being closely in touch with Elena has obviously made Teresa quite impassive to the power games of her husband; she is aware that his affected interest for her charming *aupair* is but a form of unconfessed jealousy for her new partnership.

The two women are alone again when Teresa is excluded from Elena's desires in the third act. Elena offers friendship in exchange for the annulment which—no divorce being possible—would regularize the status of the new couple: Teresa is condescending until Elena announces that her future visits will be not alone but with Lorenzo, and as a couple. Her rage explodes off stage, in an astounding but well prepared climax: she shoots her companion and calls Lorenzo to transfer the responsibility of her act.

The violent climax can be easily perceived as a structural echo of an existential type of violence, reconverted to murder from suicide, and, in the wake of the absurdist model, completely gratuitous and abstract. But the aesthetic analysis of gender and desire shows that Teresa, on the contrary, is reacting against the concrete loss of her newly found female friend and companion by the inconsiderate hand of her ex-husband. In the last scene the two women take leave of each other, while Teresa is expecting the calls for a new ad.

The absurdist canvas becomes threadbare in the cyclic finale that concludes the act. The door-bell rings and Teresa dries her eyes, runs to the door, and opens it for Giovanna, a prospective new *aupair*.

The Ionescan note leaves one to wonder what would happen if Giovanna decided to move in. The scene closes on Teresa, a defeated,

enigmatic and extremely powerful woman, who incarnates the new-feminist reality as it entered in the lives of most common people.

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