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*The Tigress in the Snow. Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy.* By Laura Benedetti. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2007. x+165 pp. \$40; £25. ISBN 978-0-8020-9744-6.

The title of this book – a reference to Morante’s comparison of *La Storia*’s protagonist to a tigress who fed her cubs her own flesh so that they could survive a frozen solitude (p. 11) – and its jacket illustration – a drawing by Käthe Kollwitz of a woman hugging a dead child – proclaim at once grief and self-immolation as the parameters of Italian ideologies and cultural representations of motherhood. Fittingly, the book that follows analyses Italian 20<sup>th</sup> Century women writers’ constant negotiation of these entrenched symbols and expectations.

In the ‘Introduction’, Laura Benedetti stresses two points: 1. she is interested in literary works that foreground the discrepancies between ideals and women’s concrete experience; 2. literature contributes to, rather than merely reflects, cultural constructions of motherhood and, as such, it may anticipate issues which become visible and relevant at later times. These methodological premises dictate that the book focus primarily on women writers, who by necessity offer a more complex and conflictual view than the glorification of sacrificial motherhood present in male writing. As for her theoretical framework, Benedetti states briefly that she draws on the ‘international gender criticism’ (p. 7) that set the pace for the current reflection on motherhood (Rich, Chodorow, Hirsch and Ruddick), as well on the Italian philosophers of Diotima.

The five chapters which form the book skilfully interweave historical, philosophical, psychological, social, political, scientific, demographic, economic, legal, religious, and cultural factors with literary aspects, to produce a lucid account of how women’s literature illuminated, resisted, or contested contemporary ideologies of motherhood. Gender theories are often invoked to bring into relief the theoretical force and modernity of the insights afforded by certain texts.

Chapter 1, ‘Mothers at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century’, highlights the irrelevance of the newly-emerged bourgeois, Catholic ideal of the family held together by maternal care to many social strata of recently unified Italy. Neera, Vivanti, Aleramo, Deledda and Negri drew attention to the contradictions between expectations and reality in different ways. Aleramo is shown to be a pioneer in foregrounding questions posed seventy years later by Rich and Chodorow, for example the difference between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution or the nature of women’s on-going desire for motherhood and mothering.

Chapter 2, ‘Resilience and Resistance: The Fascist Years’, uncovers different forms of literary resistance to the regime’s ideas on women and motherhood, paralleling the limited success of Mussolini’s policies on reproduction: the absence of the ‘prolific mother’ from contemporary literature, including the *romanzo rosa*; Negri’s and Serao’s rejection of the regime’s demands for the sacrifice of sons in war, which highlights the ‘intrinsic contradiction between mothering and war’ recently explored by Ruddick (p. 55); Vivanti’s challenge of the regime’s anxieties at the threat of racial mixing; De Cespedes’ portrayal of ‘real’ women and of one particular character who is ‘a total stranger in the culture of motherhood promoted by Fascism’ (p. 69).

Chapter 3, ‘Questioning Motherhood’, is underpinned by the notion that the desire to return to normality after the war hindered change: women had to fight hard and wait

till the 1960s-70s for the abolition of many Fascist discriminatory laws. The chapter covers a period of radical transformations and thus must negotiate a variety of texts and positions. Benedetti does this by dividing the period into two blocks. The first encompasses the immediate post-war years up to the 1950s and is characterized by a rift between, on one side, male writing and popular culture which proffered images of mothers (of sons) in keeping with the ideal of the Virgin Mary and, on the other side, women's writing portraying characters struggling with a divided sense of identity as mothers and women (Cialente and Ginzburg). The second sub-period, the 1960s-70s, saw the emergence of younger writers who brought to bear a new feminist awareness on their treatment of motherhood (Cerati and Maraini). Further diversity is incorporated into the chapter through the analysis of two special cases: Morante's ambiguous representations of mothers and the mother-son dyad across the whole period and Fallaci's controversial and contradictory dissection of pregnancy in her 1975 *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*. The work of both writers demonstrates the intrinsically complex and problematic nature of motherhood and the impossibility of approaching it from clear-cut ideological positions. This chapter uses new sources (*Quotidiano Donna*) to give a new and more nuanced account of Italian feminism's move from rejection to recuperation of the mother (if not of motherhood).

Chapter 4, 'Struggling with the Mother', takes a new look at now classical Italian narratives on mothers and daughters, seeking to assess whether and how a daughter's experience of her mother affects her own attitude to motherhood. This chapter opens with a good contextualising introductory section, but it does not offer the same wide assortment of texts and rigorous focus as the previous ones. The analyses of Sereni's, Ramondino's, Ferrante's, Comencini's and Sanvitale's texts do not seem to yield strong results or to point to an Italian narrative paradigm on this thematic.

The nine-page-long Chapter 5, 'Mothers without Children', is devoted entirely to linking the steady decline in Italian birth rates with the concept of symbolic mother and the practice of entrustment elaborated by Italian feminists in the 1980s and 1990s. It is a pity that this very helpful discussion is not followed by literary analyses. Benedetti refers very briefly to only two texts, by Viganò and Maraini, on symbolic attachments of older women to young girls. In the closing paragraph to the chapter and to the whole book, reproductive technologies and adoption are mentioned as concerns of the third millennium to be investigated in future studies for their impact on notions of lineage and parenting.

Other issues could be added to these two, which also deserve the attention of researchers in, for example, psychology and sociology, as well as in literary criticism for the impact they have had or might have on literature or for what literature can tell us about them: frustrated motherhood in relation to reproductive technologies, mothers of 'imperfect' children, symbolic motherhood among adult women, parenting in single-sex families, motherhood and mother-daughter relations among migrant groups, single mothers, and, more recently, the limitations imposed by economic and labour precarity upon women's choice to become mothers. Some of these concerns have already surfaced in late Twentieth-Century texts: see for example Sereni on mothering a 'different' child or the representation of female blood and symbolic genealogies in 1990s female *cannibali* writing. Some pointers to their emergence in (or a note on their absence from) Italian literature at the turn of the millennium would have taken Benedetti's book truly to

the doors of the Twenty-First Century. We might have then been better equipped to begin to formulate answers to two research questions that underpin the book: is there evidence that a hitherto absent maternal subjectivity is in the making and that we are moving towards a new perception and practice of motherhood that is not simply self-immolation? If women have thrown the shackles of tradition and may be free to choose to become or not to become mothers, we should not discard the impact of new constraints and conditionings, some of which have the potential to create new types of *mater dolorosa*.

Notwithstanding my reservations about the last two chapters, *The Tigress in the Snow* will be a key text in any university course on Italian women's writing, offering in-depth textual analyses set against both the literary panorama and the socio-historical and material circumstances in which the texts originated. The book is well-written and remarkably free from typographical errors.

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