

# Towards a Literary and Feminist Neo-Avant-Garde: Carla Vasio's Experimental Fiction

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Fig. 1. Carla Vasio, in her home in Rome in June, 2019. Photo: Joseph Tumolo.  
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Carla Vasio (b. 1923; fig. 1) was one of two women writers present at the Gruppo 63's first meeting in Palermo in October of 1963. The other was her friend, the poet Amelia Rosselli. Despite Vasio's active involvement in several of the group's meetings and activities over the years, she is rarely mentioned in critical discussions, and very little attention has been devoted to her work.<sup>1</sup> This is not an isolated oversight, but a part of a larger pattern of marginalizing the women writers of the Italian neo-avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Even a cursory reading of Vasio's works shows that this marginalization is unjustified, and that she is a writer who actively contributed to the aesthetic innovation of the Gruppo 63 while creating her own experimental literary style. As will become clear, Vasio's experimentation is a fine example of neo-avant-garde aesthetics, distinguished by its sophisticated feminist critique of both the dominant masculinist dynamic of the Gruppo 63 and the misogyny of postwar Italian culture and society. Far from being a mere phase in her literary production, Vasio's commitment to literary experimentation and feminism endured in different forms well beyond the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Lucia Re, "Fanalini di coda," in *Gruppo 63. Il Romanzo sperimentale. Col senno di poi*, ed. Nanni Balestrini and Andrea Cortellessa (Rome: L'orma, 2013), 319. We would like to acknowledge that collaboration for this article was made possible by the UCLA Graduate Research Mentorship Program.

<sup>2</sup> See Lucia Re, "Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde," *MLN* 119 (2004): 135-73.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Vasio's lifelong commitment to experimentalism in literature and the arts, see her memoir, *Vita privata di una cultura* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2013).

Carla Vasio was born in Venice, but as a child moved to the nearby Lido, where she attended elementary school.<sup>4</sup> She remained there until her adolescence when her father, Pasquale, a journalist for the *Gazzettino* newspaper and a member of the partisan resistance, moved the family to Rome during the Second World War. This was a dark period for the family; Vasio's father disappeared, and "Il 1943," she says, "fu il nostro inverno della fame. Fu terribile. Il padre di due mie compagne ebreo notando la mia denutrizione [...] mi diede due scatolette di vitamine americane" ("1943 was our winter of hunger. It was terrible. The father of two of my Jewish schoolmates noticed my malnutrition [...] and gave me two packs of American vitamins").<sup>5</sup> The suffering of the war, however, yielded to the excitement of Rome of the *dopoguerra*, a period of remarkable "vitalità artistica e creativa" ("artistic and creative vitality").<sup>6</sup> It was during this time that Vasio published her first work, *Il pescatore di miti* (The Fisherman of Myths, 1957), an artist's book that she completed in collaboration with the avant-garde painter Achille Perilli. This project, along with a subsequent artist's book, *Le centodieci parole* (One Hundred Two Words, 1962), also completed with Perilli, "hanno stimolato il suo interesse per il rapporto tra linguaggio e immagine" ("stimulated her interest in the relationship between language and images").<sup>7</sup> This interest, along with a parallel passion for experimental music and for the cross-pollination of the arts, characterizes much of Vasio's work and research over the years.<sup>8</sup> Vasio went on to produce numerous artist's books including *I have a dream today* (1979) with Giulio Turcato, *Buongiorno Signor Planck* (Good Day Mr. Planck, 1995, exhibited at the Biennale di Venezia), and collections of haiku poems illustrated by Piero Varroni.<sup>9</sup> The visual dimension often functions as a governing matrix of Vasio's work as a novelist and poet. One example is her *Romanzo storico* (Historical Novel, 1974), a novel that she produced with graphic artist Enzo Mari. The novel—which Italo Calvino called "uno dei più straordinari libri italiani degli ultimi anni" ("one of the most extraordinary Italian books of the last few years")<sup>10</sup>—comprises one large page that unfolds to reveal a family tree, tracing the lineage of a child born in Milan in 1974 back to the seventeenth century.

Even Vasio's more "traditionally" formatted novels are often governed by the visual dimension, though she also pays consistent, close attention to the whole range of the sensory apparatus. Vasio constructs *L'orizzonte* (The Horizon, 1966),<sup>11</sup> her first experimental novel and the winner of the Prix Charles Veillon, in part as a narrative montage based on photographic

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<sup>4</sup> "Carla Vasio: 'Ho fatto la guerra del Gruppo '63, ora vivo per dimenticare tutto,'" interview by Antonio Gnoli, *La Repubblica* (June 1, 2014). All translations are our own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mirella Bentivoglio, *Materializzazione del linguaggio* (Venice: Tipografia Commerciale, 1978), 49.

<sup>8</sup> In 2017, Vasio published *Autoritratto di Goffredo Petrassi* (Self-Portrait of Goffredo Petrassi), the "autobiography" of Goffredo Petrassi, one of the most influential and original Italian composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who experimented with post-Webernian music and incorporated a wide range of literary material in his work. He was a lifelong friend of Vasio's.

<sup>9</sup> See Piero Varroni and Carla Vasio, *Come un insetto* (Rome: Artein Orolontano, 1985); id., *E nulla accade* (Rome: Artein Orolontano, 1995); id., *Iridescente* (Rome: Artein Orolontano, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Italo Calvino, "La foresta genealogica," in *Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 242. This article originally appeared in *Corriere della Sera* (July 16, 1976). In an interview with Joseph Tumolo (Rome, June 27, 2019), Vasio identified Calvino and his wife, Chichita, as longtime, close personal friends.

<sup>11</sup> Carla Vasio, *L'orizzonte* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966; repr. Rome: Polimata, 2011). In-text parenthetical references are to the 2011 edition.

images.<sup>12</sup> This literary strategy puts into practice the critique that Vasio directs at the realist novel in her contribution to the Gruppo 63's debate at the 1965 meeting. "Sento lamentare la morte del romanzo," Vasio said,

ma io vorrei soprattutto sapere in che senso questa perdita mi riguardi. Perché il romanzo di cui ci stiamo disfando è un certo prodotto narrativo ottocentesco, in cui venivano applicate soluzioni precise di tempo di spazio di azioni di caratteri, tutte cose che sono finite [...] come esperienza esistenziale e conoscitiva di una certa società a cui la struttura di quel romanzo corrispondeva.

(I hear those who lament the death of the novel, but I would especially like to know what this loss has to do with me. Because the novel that we are doing away with is a product of nineteenth-century narrative, in which writers applied specific solutions of time, space, actions, and characters [...] all of which have been exhausted; these things were the existential and cognitive experience of the specific society to which that novel's structure corresponded).<sup>13</sup>

If the realist author is to hold up a mirror to the world and record what she sees, in *L'orizzonte* Vasio proposes a different approach for the Italy of the 1960s: shattering that mirror and, as we shall see, reordering and interweaving the fragmented images.

Likewise, her novel *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo* (The Greatest Anamorphosis in the World, 2009)<sup>14</sup> employs as a governing concept "anamorphosis"—a technique whereby a painting or drawing appears "correctly" or reveals a different image when viewed from a designated vantage point (perspectival anamorphosis) or through a looking device (mirror anamorphosis). Despite its relatively recent date of publication, the novel's origins can be traced back to neo-avant-garde experimentalism; it is, in fact, a revision of an earlier text, *L'anamorfosi (un racconto gotico)* (Anamorphosis [A Gothic Tale]), published in 1973.<sup>15</sup> Anamorphosis takes on several functions in the original novel and in its revision, one of which is the deconstruction of the idea of a totalizing representation of "reality" itself. In both *L'orizzonte* and *La più grande anamorfosi*, Vasio's formal experimentation with visual rhetoric functions alongside the content of the narrative to generate multiple levels of meaning. Vasio's oeuvre can be understood as an example of the "radically new relationship between reader and text"<sup>16</sup> that Umberto Eco theorizes in *Opera aperta (The Open Work)*, 1962). Vasio, in fact, more or less endorses this position in her contribution to the 1965 debate in Palermo: "Se il lettore a un certo punto si chiede 'Vediamo come se la cava adesso,' vuol dire che partecipa alla elaborazione del testo e

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<sup>12</sup> Francesco Muzzioli, "Saggio," in *L'orizzonte* by Carla Vasio, ed. Massimiliano Borelli (Rome: Edizioni Polimata, 2011), 163-64.

<sup>13</sup> Carla Vasio, "Dibattito, 10," in *Gruppo 63: Il romanzo sperimentale. Palermo 1965*, ed. Nanni Balestrini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966), 182.

<sup>14</sup> Carla Vasio, *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo* (Bari: Palomar, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Carla Vasio, *L'anamorfosi: un racconto gotico* (Rome: Cooperativa Prove 10, 1973). Vasio's other works of fiction include *La foresta e la fine* (Rome: Grafica, 1961); *Esercizio indiscreto* (Rome: Edizioni di San Marco, 1987); *Spazi oscuri* (Rome: Empiria, 1988); *Laguna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998); *Invisibile* (Rome: Empiria, 2003); *Labirinti di mare* (Bari: Palomar, 2008); and *Piccoli impedimenti alla felicità* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2015). Her collections of poetry include: *Blasone corporale* (Rome: Empiria, 1989) and *Ballate scostumate* (Rome: Le impronte degli uccelli, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Re, "Language, Gender and Sexuality," 148.

che quindi questo gli trasmette un messaggio utilizzabile: così ambedue insieme possiamo imparare qualcosa di tecnica e di rappresentazione” (“If the reader asks himself at some point, ‘Let’s see how she manages it this time,’ then he is participating in the development of the text and the text is conveying a useful message to him: in this way we both can learn something about technique and representation”).<sup>17</sup> In short, in order to understand Vasio’s supremely “writerly” texts (as Roland Barthes would say),<sup>18</sup> the reader must attempt to reorder the narrated events, investigate allegorical meanings, and uncover subtexts.

This makes for very challenging albeit engaging texts, something Vasio reflects on in her memoir, *Vita privata di una cultura* (The Private Life of a Culture, 2013). Describing a chaotic night in Rome during the student protests of 1968, Vasio says she spent time,

chiedendomi se noi, della generazione cosiddetta delle Avanguardie, non facciamo parte ormai di una vecchia generazione colta che è stata consapevole delle valenze di nuove regole più del pensare che del vivere. Dicono che le nostre ribellioni erano soltanto evasioni alla Kurt Weill o attese del nulla [...] e che noi continuavamo ancora a bruciare a lungo nel lungo rogo della Mitteleuropa, destinati a filare la consunzione ultima dell’Illuminismo francese, lucido ma ormai decadente, con la nostra maniera difficilissima e forse troppo civile di disgregare i vecchi contenuti.<sup>19</sup>

(asking myself if we, of the generation of the so-called Avant-Gardes, are not by now a part of an older generation of intellectuals that was aware of the value of new rules for thinking rather than living. They say that our rebellions were only evasions in the style of Kurt Weill or long waits for nothing [...] and that we were burning still on Mitteleuropa’s long funeral pyre. [They say] that with our exceedingly difficult and perhaps excessively civil way of doing away with the old content, we were doomed to spin the last ragged threads of the French Enlightenment, still lucid but by now decaying.)

However, Vasio has always preferred an “impegno culturale” to a more explicit and literal *impegno politico*.<sup>20</sup> It would be incorrect to see Vasio as a disengaged writer, for feminism plays an important role in most of her work. The aforementioned *L’orizzonte* and *La più grande anamorfosi* cannot in fact be properly analyzed without an account of their feminist claims and subtexts; her most recent work of fiction, *Tuono di mezzanotte* (Midnight Thunder, 2017) includes a chapter that reflects on Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and much of her non-fiction is expressly feminist.

In analyzing her fiction, one cannot separate Vasio’s feminism from her neo-avant-garde experimentation. In seeking out alternatives to the languages of hegemonic ideologies, the neo-avant-garde either engaged in a “radical refusal” of these languages or sought to “transform”

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<sup>17</sup> Vasio, “Dibattito, 10,” 183.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Vasio, *Vita privata*, 88-89.

<sup>20</sup> Vasio, “Ho fatto la guerra del Gruppo 63.” In the same interview, Vasio recounts that when Rossana Rossanda asked her to collaborate with *il manifesto*, she declined, saying that her interests were too “frivoli,” “impolitici,” and “leggeri” (frivolous, apolitical, and light). Vasio did contribute an article to *L’orsaminore* on Rossanda’s invitation, however. See Carla Vasio, “Il personaggio Lili Marleen,” *L’orsaminore* 0 (Summer 1981): 52.

them through parody and irony.<sup>21</sup> Vasio opted for the second of these strategies. For example, her narrative experimentation in *L'orizzonte* and her use of anamorphosis as a governing concept for *La più grande anamorfofi del mondo* become a means of challenging a patriarchal ideology and vision.

Likewise, Vasio's major nonfiction works explore a variety of feminist themes. In *SOS mamma* (1994), she writes about SOS Children's Villages, an organization that houses and cares for at-risk youth. The text focuses on the women who work in these villages, and explores questions of motherhood. In *Come la luna dietro le nuvole* (Like the Moon behind the Clouds, 1996), Vasio interweaves a biography of writer Ichiyō Higuchi (1872–96) with the narrative of her own experience living in Japan. Higuchi, despite much personal hardship and the prejudices of a patriarchal society, rose to become one of Japan's greatest writers.<sup>22</sup> This is one of several texts by Vasio (including the haikus accompanied by Varroni's paintings) based on or inspired by the years that she spent in Japan.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout Vasio's work, there is a recurring reflection on *vanitas*, from her earliest texts to her most recent publication, the aforementioned *Tuono di mezzanotte*. Fittingly, in her reflection on the legacy of the Gruppo 63 included in *Col senno di poi* (In Hindsight), the critical anthology celebrating fifty years since the first meeting in Palermo, Vasio writes, "Che cosa rimane? Nulla, naturalmente" ("What remains? Nothing, naturally").<sup>24</sup> This can be understood in terms of Vasio's conviction that all that exists is the present; in fact, all of her narratives are written in the present tense, even as they narrate past events. Even so, Vasio acknowledges in the same reflection that everything was transformed in the wake of the Gruppo 63, a fact exemplified by her own rich corpus of experimental texts. In what follows, we will examine two novels that are particularly representative of Vasio's work, *L'orizzonte* and *La più grande anamorfofi del mondo*.

### **Carla Vasio's Experimental and Feminist Horizon: *L'orizzonte***

Carla Vasio first introduced an excerpt of her experimental writing at the historic meeting of the Gruppo 63 in Palermo in October 1963. Vasio recalls presenting the text "con una voce che quasi non si sente dopo lo show di Elio Pagliarani che recita da grande teatrante le sue poesie" ("with a voice that almost cannot be heard after the show by Elio Pagliarani, who recited his poems like a great thespian").<sup>25</sup> Nanni Balestrini, who had previously commented on some of Vasio's work and encouraged her to continue to write, gave her a contract to publish her first novel with Feltrinelli. Three years later, *L'orizzonte* made its debut in the "Le comete" series, dedicated to experimental literature. That same year, 1966, the novel went on to win the Premio

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<sup>21</sup> Re, "Language, Gender and Sexuality," 146. For an overview of the Italian neo-avant-garde, see the essays in the volume *Neovanguardia: Italian Experimental Literature and Arts in the 1960s*, eds. Paolo Chirumbolo, Mario Moroni, and Luca Somigli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> In 2008, *Come la luna dietro le nuvole* was adapted into a play (*Like the Moon Behind the Clouds*, written in English) by poet and playwright Donald Gecewicz.

<sup>23</sup> Vasio moved to Japan with her partner, the art historian Giorgio de Marchis, who at the time was working as the director of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Tokyo. De Marchis was the author of a number of volumes on twentieth-century art, including one on Giulio Turcato, published in 1971 (Carla Vasio, interview by Joseph Tumolo, Rome, June 27, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Carla Vasio, "Conversazione con Andrea Cortellessa," in *Gruppo 63. Il romanzo sperimentale. Col senno di poi*, ed. Nanni Balestrini and Andrea Cortellessa (Rome: L'Orma, 2013), 273.

<sup>25</sup> Vasio, *Vita privata*, 18-19.

Internazionale Svizzero Charles Veillon, in a surprising upset over Giorgio Manganelli, who was favored to win.

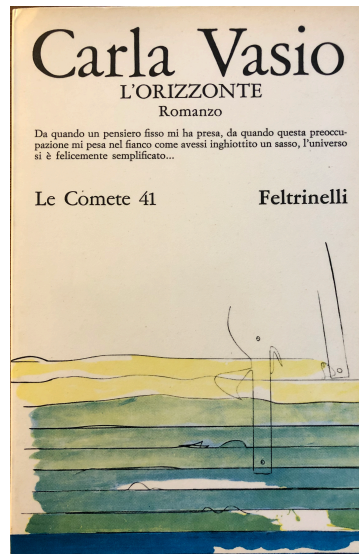


Fig. 2. The first edition of *L'orizzonte*. Art by Mario Schifano.  
Reproduced with permission of Feltrinelli Editore.

*L'orizzonte* is written in the first person, and its sole, autodiegetic and clearly female narrator/protagonist (as well as sole focalizer), recounts her story entirely in the present tense.<sup>26</sup> We learn almost immediately that the narrator is twenty-eight years old, but the use of the present tense throughout the novel blurs the traditional narratological difference between the narrating and the narrated I. Though the narrator describes her surroundings, the exact time and place are at first unclear. It turns out to be Monday, March 21, presumably of 1966, the year of the novel's publication. The book weaves together motifs of the fluctuation of memory and the recollection of past events, which the narrator/protagonist pursues in an attempt to identify a horizon of the self—of herself. Vasio's narrative makes no attempt to provide an organic or exemplary story, or to depict an entire world; it is thus fundamentally different from the kind of totalizing "critical realism" still advocated at the time by writers of the literary establishment such as Alberto Moravia.<sup>27</sup> Instead, *L'orizzonte* seeks to represent and to make sense out of the most contradictory and complex facets of an individual woman's story.

Vasio's novel, though inscribed within a twentieth-century paradigm of experimental writing, relentlessly seeks a horizon that can orient its narrative, connecting it to a feminine identity and a recognizable self. This horizon is neither totalizing nor fixed, and allows for free

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Lanser defines as "autodiegetic" narrators who are also sole protagonists and whose own story and personal experiences and perceptions are at the core of the story. See Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 149-225, and "Sexing Narratology: Toward a Gendered Poetics of Narrative Voice," in *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext*, eds. Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach (Tübingen: Gunter Nar, 1999), 167-84.

<sup>27</sup> Although Moravia chose to attend the first meeting of the Gruppo 63, his criticism of neo-avant-garde experimentalism was rather reductive, as was Pasolini's. For more on the subject, see Stefano Giovannuzzi, "Pasolini, Moravia e la Neoavanguardia," *Sinestesia. Rivista di Studi sulle Letterature e le Arti Europee* 11 (2013): 123-40.

self-expression, as Vasio's narrator seeks to locate herself within her experience in and of time.<sup>28</sup> The implicit relationship with the reader remains fundamental throughout, as Vasio aims to make the reader participate in the development of the text and its meanings.<sup>29</sup>

At the novel's opening, the narrator sits on the steps in front of an *Accademia* (perhaps the Accademia di Spagna in Rome, or the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Valle Giulia) and knits as she waits for a man. It is not a coincidence that she waits outside an Academy, a quintessentially and exclusively male institution prior to the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Likewise, knitting harkens back to an archaic, domestic vision of women. The women of Vasio's generation, born in the fascist era, were forced to contend with a largely misogynistic view of the world that primarily assigned women the role of "wives and mothers," extolling as "feminine" domestic activities such as knitting. Fellow writers and artists (Carla Accardi, Marisa Merz, Milena Milani, Armanda Guiducci, Grazia Livi, Amelia Rosselli, and Giulia Niccolai, to name a few) based their various forms of more or less explicit feminism on the rejection of the traditional "domestic destiny" ascribed to women by fascist ideology.<sup>30</sup> Evoking the spirit of *impegno* that characterized the period of her early experimental writings in the 1960s, Vasio has affirmed without hesitation that she was and still is a feminist.<sup>31</sup>

Knitting is a recurrent motif throughout the novel. On the Academy steps, the narrator/protagonist totemically hopes that in completing her knitwork she will find the courage to utter the fateful sentence she has been meaning to tell the as-yet-unidentified man she is waiting for, who we later find out is her husband, Alberto. These decisive words constitute a central enigma in the text, as they are never revealed. Nevertheless, the reader gradually comes to understand what the narrator/protagonist longs to say and finally will say; the momentous implications of the impending utterance become apparent as the novel reaches its conclusion. In the meantime, it is clear early on that knitting has a complex metaphorical value in the text: it evokes the work of Penelope, who weaves by day and undoes her work at night in order to defend her freedom and delay the moment when she too will have to utter a fateful phrase and consent to marry one of her suitors, who have assumed that Ulysses is dead. As we will see, the sentence that *L'orizzonte's* protagonist continually postpones with the excuse of needing to finish her knitting is the key to her own freedom: uttering it means finding the courage to cut the thread of the relationship that binds her to her husband, a relationship that has effectively imprisoned her.

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<sup>28</sup> Cfr. Vasio's interview with Marita Bartolazzi: "*L'orizzonte*, il primo libro che ho pubblicato, si chiama così perché non c'è un orizzonte rigido, né una lingua pesante, fissa. Io ho l'impressione che sia nato da immagini che fluttuano. Fa parte della mia ricerca verso un altro modo di immaginare. Ed è anche il frutto di un'apertura linguistica" ("For the first book I published, I chose the title *L'orizzonte* because there is no firm horizon, nor heavy or fixed language. I have the impression that it was born from the fluctuation of images. It is a part of my research into another way of imagining. And it is also the product of a linguistic openness"). "Sono una creatura di Venezia". Conversando con Carla Vasio," interview by Marita Bartolazzi, *Ytali* (November 2, 2017), <https://ytali.com/2017/11/02/la-mia-veneziana-parla-carla-vasio/>.

<sup>29</sup> See Vasio, "Dibattito, 10," 183.

<sup>30</sup> See Lucia Re, "The Mark on the Wall: Marisa Merz and a History of Women in Postwar Italy," in *Marisa Merz. The Sky is a Great Space*, ed. Connie Butler (Munich: Prestel, 2017), 36-77.

<sup>31</sup> Vasio, *Vita privata*, 10. Vasio's feminism has taken different forms over the years. Worthy of note are her efforts to promote the work of women writers and artists. One such example is Cooperativa Prove 10, the publishing house she directed, which published writing by Adele Cambria, Maura Cova, Lucia Drudi, Gianna Ciao Pointer, and Zaza Calzia, among others. For a more detailed account of the feminist context of Vasio's novel, see Lucia Re, "Carla Vasio e il nuovo lavoro di Penelope: un orizzonte sperimentale e femminista," in *Italica* 96, no. 2 (2019): 228-55.

Historically, divorce is a key issue for secular feminism. It is important to remember that the first proposal to legalize divorce in post-Fascist Italy only dates back to 1965.<sup>32</sup> The proposal was finally approved in 1969, although in 1974 it was challenged with a dramatic attempt to abolish it by referendum. Until the mid-1960s, not only was divorce impossible, as marriage was not legally dissoluble, but even legal separations were difficult and deeply stigmatized, especially when initiated by women.<sup>33</sup> We can understand the anguish and conflict of Vasio's protagonist only in light of this sociohistorical context.

The text follows the narrator's thoughts, gradually weaving them together into a narrative discourse and a plot. Deploying a subtle, meta-textual irony, Vasio repeatedly makes it clear that knitting is a metaphor for the very process and texture of her narrative, presented as a work-in-progress in the consciousness of her narrator (106). However, Vasio avoids the free, indeterminate stream of consciousness made famous by James Joyce and other modernists. Rather, *L'orizzonte* is a work patiently woven from various threads and recurring motifs. It is stylistically comparable to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>34</sup> At the center of *L'orizzonte* is that fateful piece of news that the narrator/protagonist wants to share with the man she awaits at the Academy, information that is "determinata da una gravità estrema" ("marked by an extreme seriousness") (19). This wait itself becomes a recurrent theme in the narrative, as the narrator/protagonist searches for the strength to be able to utter "questa frase che ha un'improrogabile necessità" ("this absolutely necessary sentence that must not be deferred") (19). Her freedom and ability to claim an identity hinge on this very sentence. The narrator/protagonist thus realizes that she is, in a way, still unable to utter her own name, to perform the speech act that would define her. This is the cause of her anxiety, anguish, and ambiguity ("ciò che ho da dirgli mi fa sentire opaca" ["what I have to tell him makes me feel opaque"]) [15]).

This pursuit of an individual identity and the freedom to express it emerges immediately as a key theme: "Un giorno mi accadrà di incontrare una intera frase che darà il senso, ma ancora il mondo è frantumato in mille nomi" ("One day I will find a complete sentence that will give me meaning, but the world is still shattered into a thousand names") (11).<sup>35</sup> On one hand, this search for a feminine identity is linked to the nascent feminist movement and feminist thought; on the other, it stands in direct contrast to the tendency of Pirandellian modernism to demystify the subject as a mere mask among the many that the individual must choose from, all equally untrue.<sup>36</sup> The marginalization of women in the neo-avant-garde is due in part to the legacy of these Pirandellian ideas, which were particularly prevalent among the *Novissimi*, who believed that the self was nothing more than a Romantic, bourgeois construction. Vasio tenaciously

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<sup>32</sup> On the long-standing, vexed debate on divorce in Italy, and the numerous attempts to introduce legislation related to divorce, see Mark Seymour, *Debating Divorce in Italy: Marriage and the Making of Modern Italians (1860-1974)* (London: Palgrave, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Gabriella Parca, *I separati* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1969).

<sup>34</sup> In the latter the protagonist, Mrs. Ramsay, also observes and reflects on the world and her memories as she knits.

<sup>35</sup> Just as in Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna (A Woman)*, 1906), the protagonist's name is not revealed so that the text can assume a paradigmatic or an (implicitly) exemplary function.

<sup>36</sup> Luigi Pirandello, "L'umorismo" ("On Humor," 1908) in *L'umorismo e altri saggi*, ed. Enrico Ghidetti (Florence: Giunti, 1994), 141: "Ciascuno si racconcia la maschera come può – la maschera esteriore. Perché dentro poi c'è l'altra, che spesso non s'accorda con quella di fuori. E niente è vero! Vero il mare, sì, vera la montagna; vero il sasso; vero un filo d'erba; ma l'uomo? Sempre mascherato, senza volerlo, senza saperlo" ("Everyone tends to his mask as he can—the exterior mask. Because inside there is another mask, which often contradicts the exterior one. And nothing is true! Yes, the sea and the mountains are real; the stone is real; a blade of grass is real; but man? Always masked, without wanting it, without knowing it").

opposes this belief in writing—or “weaving”—her experimental work, which is metaphorically and ironically represented by the humble act of knitting. Making use of knitting as a central metaphor, the novel recounts a woman’s attempt to search for and gradually (re)create her own self.

The narrator displays a phenomenological precision as she describes the various objects, animals, plants, and people that surround her as she waits on the Academy steps. These detailed descriptions of her environment evoke the present and a material, corporeal consciousness which is woven together with the narrator/protagonist’s memories. The narrating voice weaves in and out of a series of flashbacks, alternating between the present and the past. The intention and the narrative tension, however, remain oriented towards the future (that is, towards the sentence that the protagonist has yet to utter). One memory woven together with the present is of the protagonist’s governess, a crucial character who is first remembered by the narrator as elderly and living in an *ospizio*. The protagonist openly wishes that her beloved governess—referred to simply as *la madrina*—could have been her biological mother (19), who, by contrast, is a terrifying figure. This series of memories is continually interrupted by strange apparitions in the narrator’s present, such as the grotesque, addled hand of a man who approaches the narrator as she sits on the steps of the Academy. These images cause the narrator’s consciousness to wander: they invade it and make the present seem surreal.

A small splash of water from a nearby fountain helps the narrator to “[riprendere] il verso giusto” (“to get back on track”) (18) in her knitting and her memories. The water reminds her of the bucket of water that one of the workers at the rest home throws under her governess’ bed. This simple associative mechanism becomes a principal structure in a narrative that could otherwise seem meandering and disordered. *L’orizzonte* is neither, however. It is instead driven by a non-linear narrative logic that functions on both a consequential metonymic axis (more common in traditional realist narrative) and on a metaphoric and associative axis that does not respect the conventions of unidirectionality of time and continuity of space and place. To use Luisa Muraro’s metaphor, Vasio’s prose is not only “knitted” (that is, constructed and held together with perfectly aligned, parallel, continuous stitches), but also “crocheted” or embroidered above and around in unexpected ways.<sup>37</sup> At times, the text self-consciously and ironically reflects back on this very trait: “A un tratto cambio disegno. Facendo un pavimento di punti alternati riesco a sgranare un quadrato su cui viene traforata una penna di pavone” (“I suddenly change my design. Making a background with alternating stitches, I manage to trace out a square with a lace stitched peacock feather pattern”) (84). The mysterious symbol of the peacock feather might allude to the self-indulgent, narcissistic misogyny that has trapped the narrator/protagonist in her marriage; or perhaps it paradoxically symbolizes the “vanity” of the narrator/protagonist herself, who, though subjected to patriarchal culture, “dares” to think of herself and her own erotic needs. The image of the feather, in fact, opens the subsequent recollection of a pleasurable amorous encounter with a man in Paris—not her husband, but a photographer who smokes Gauloises.

Ironically, when the narrator (still seated on the steps) finally spots the man for whom she has been waiting, it is too late: he has already left without noticing her. Yet she made no attempt to get his attention (24-25). As she later reflects, it was an opportunity—now irredeemably lost—to finally utter that all-important sentence (36). In the meantime, feeling secure in her silence and

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<sup>37</sup> Luisa Muraro, *Maglia o uncinetto. Racconto linguistico-politico sull’inimicizia tra metafora e metonimia* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1998).

invisibility, the narrator momentarily abandons her work and continues to contemplate her surroundings and to weave her memories together.

When she takes up her knitting again, the narrator is troubled by what she sees and what she remembers. Two young lovers, dressed in red and blue, manage to hide behind the shrubs in the park in order to have sex and seem to be thrashing about like animals. The image is unsettling and surreal, yet it effectively represents the repressed and hypocritical sexual mores of the time, documented by—among others—journalist Gabriella Parca in her investigative report *Le italiane si confessano* (*Italian Women Confess*, 1959) and by Pier Paolo Pasolini in the documentary *Comizi d'amore* (*Love Meetings*, 1965). Intergenerational and familial love do not fare much better. In a nightmarish memory, the once beloved *madrina* appears abandoned by her family in the filthy dormitory of a rest home. She is a repugnant, pathetic creature whom the narrator remembers looking upon with a mixture of affection and disgust. The *madrina* had asked her for 15,000 lire per month to be able to rent a private room, a sum far too high for the young protagonist. The narrator is then reminded of a different room, the one that she had rented as a student. This room was in the home of a remarried widow, a place where sex was prohibited, deemed impure and illicit. Going even further back in time, the narrator finds herself in a memory of the enchanted garden of her childhood, described in loving and vivid detail (31-32). In the flashback, night begins to fall, everything disappears, and the darkness terrifies the protagonist; the only light that emanates from the house appears malignant and unsettling. Only the *madrina* can save her, welcoming her at the door, taking care of her before bed, and reading to her from a beloved book about birds—animals that have a prominent role in many of Vasio's works.

The clarifying light of the sunset in the narrator's present stands in opposition to the unsettling darkness of the nighttime memory. At twilight, when the sun approaches the horizon, the horizon itself becomes more visible and clearly defined. Here lies the significance of the title's central metaphor. At twilight, looking at the horizon in front of her, the narrator/protagonist realizes that she is indeed able to orient herself in the dense *intreccio* of sensations that are tightly woven together like her knitting. Surfaces and details change and appear different at sunset. Surprising aspects or previously undetected facets and perspectives are revealed (43; 54). The narration thus lingers in a self-reflexive, metanarrative pause that clarifies the significance of the horizon, which we can now understand in an almost Gadamerian sense as a "horizon of understanding."<sup>38</sup> The theme of altering and metamorphosing or deforming appearances and changing perspectives will recur in all of Vasio's narratives (particularly, as we shall see, in *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo*). The missed opportunity to meet the man and the pointless wait for him are undoubtedly a disappointment (36)—like the futile regret evoked by the narrator's memory of her lonely *madrina* in the rest home (39). And yet this sense of absence, privation, evasion, and lack can itself become a "lente per cui il mondo ingrandisce la propria immagine e il senso" ("a lens through which the world enlarges its own image and meaning") (37). This realization is, as the narrator clearly indicates, bitterly illuminating, a kind

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<sup>38</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer defines a hermeneutical situation by means of the phenomenological concept of "horizon" (*Horizont*). Understanding and interpretation occur from within a particular horizon that is defined by one's historically determined situation, though the horizon of understanding is neither static nor unchanging. "To have a horizon," for Gadamer, means "not to be limited to what is nearest, but to be able to see beyond it." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 301.

of epiphany. By reliving and recounting her experience from this new twilight perspective, the narrator/protagonist can define and give form to the identity she seeks to grasp, becoming able to orient herself in her lived space and time.

Following this brief reflective pause Vasio begins the second part of the novel, where her narrator finally names the second most important character in the text, the man for whom she has been waiting at the Academy. He is Alberto, her husband. “Alberto alza finalmente la testa per guardare. È ostile, preso nell’ambiguità” (“Alberto finally lifts his head to look. He is hostile, filled with uncertainty”) (39). The wife’s negative feelings towards her husband are clear from the beginning of this narrative sequence, comprised of flashbacks to a trip they took together to Spain, shortly after they were married (39-57). The narrator expresses herself with an ironic humor, as she does throughout much of *L’orizzonte*: “Avendolo appena preso per marito, la convivenza ancora non mi infastidisce. Per difendermi durante il viaggio porto un pigiama di maglina aderente verde smeraldo e questo basta” (“Having just married him, living together does not frustrate me yet. To protect myself during the trip, I wear tight-fitting emerald green pajamas and that does the trick”) (40). When the couple’s car breaks down on the way to Zaragoza, they are helped by a passing wine merchant and his large family. The protagonist is disgusted by this obviously bigoted group of people, who are avid supporters of Franco’s fascist regime. She is all the more repulsed by her husband, who turns out to be a compliant *simpaticone* (40-41). The protagonist’s incomprehension mounts as Alberto allows himself to be taken in by an elderly gentleman who surrounds himself with sexually ambiguous young men. The old man invites the young couple to dinner and offers to accompany them for the rest of their trip and pay their hotel and restaurant expenses. At this point, the couple begins to sleep in separate rooms.

This portrait of Franco’s Spain concludes with a gruesome scene of a bullfight, which the husband and wife attend at the invitation of the old man. Alberto, along with his elderly companion, is clearly enjoying himself, while the protagonist is horrified at the sight of the dying animal (45-46). As the erotic friendship between the old man and Alberto grows, the wife is happy to find herself free to wander alone. When the old man suddenly collapses, Alberto disappears into a hotel where he cares for his friend. A day later he reappears, irritated, giving no explanation. The rift between the newlyweds becomes increasingly fraught; they begin a hellish trip across a sun-drenched plain, heading for the Costa Brava. In Calafell, the protagonist begins to feel ill. Various doctors prescribe her ineffective painkillers until finally one of them tells her the truth: she is having a miscarriage. The doctors’ reticence and suspicion reflect the widespread belief in countries such as Spain and Italy—where abortion was still illegal and criminalized—that a miscarriage may in fact hide an illicit, self-induced abortion. The very fact of making miscarriage and abortion a theme of the novel is a feminist gesture on Vasio’s part, as abortion was still effectively a social and cultural taboo at the time.

The lonely experience of the miscarriage is like a death for the protagonist, who subsequently resurrects and reacquires a sense of her body: “Per qualche giorno non mi accorgo neppure di essere al mondo [...] Finché, con un grande respiro, con uno scoppio nel cuore, ritrovo il peso delle sensazioni carnali [...] la profonda matrice, la fonte inesauribile di tutte le emozioni rimosse” (“For a few days I do not even realize that I am alive in the world [...] Until, with one great breath, with my heart bursting, I rediscover the weight and feeling of my own carnality [...] that profound matrix, the inexhaustible source of all repressed emotions”) (53-55). When she regains full consciousness, the protagonist realizes that she is alone in the seaside town, and perhaps because of this, she suddenly feels full of energy and curiosity and savors her

surroundings with a newfound joy: “Rido dentro di me [...] mi credo felice” (“I laugh to myself [...] I think I am happy”) (56).

This memory of a youthful sense of liberation, significantly located in the central part of the novel, is followed by a return to the unsettling present of the narrative: night is falling, and the narrator/protagonist realizes that she cannot continue to knit. Knitting allows her to cheat time and to escape from reality: “a tentoni trovo il lavoro e lo raccolgo [...] Col gomito stretto al petto [...] sto per scendere verso il tumulto, di nuovo verso il tormento” (“fumbling around I find my knitting and collect it [...] With my ball of yarn held tight to my chest [...] I am about to descend into the tumult, again into the torment”) (59). It is at this point that the narrator/protagonist finally reveals that the man for whom she had been waiting is indeed her husband Alberto. He appears in front of her just as she finally finds the strength to utter the words that will terminate their relationship (“Ora so che cosa devo dire e come; nessuna parola mi manca. Subito.” [“Now I know what I need to say and how; I know every word. Right away.”] [60]). Before she can speak, however, Alberto abruptly interrupts her, refusing to listen: “Non ora [...] non ora” (“Not now [...] not now”). It is yet another “occasione perduta” (“missed opportunity”) (60). The protagonist, in tears, instead informs Alberto of an invitation to a costume party. At this point, despite the implicit temporal ellipsis, it is clear that the couple’s separation in Spain and the protagonist’s resulting freedom were not definitive. They still live under the same roof, and the protagonist remains burdened under the same yoke.

In the novel’s third sequence, the narrative present shifts to the couple’s terrace at twilight. Despite the increasing darkness, the narrator/protagonist continues to knit, and likewise, her memories come to the fore, unfolding and weaving together various events from her past. The terrace functions as a liminal space at the border between the house and the world beyond it, although the narrator suggests that it could also become the edge of a cliff.<sup>39</sup> One of her memories is of a dinner she prepared for Alberto. It is a “domestic” scene, but profoundly unsettling in the Freudian sense of *unheimlich*.<sup>40</sup> Although the description of the food and the environment are detached and almost coldly objective, the narrator/protagonist’s disgust for Alberto seeps in. The woman is unable to eat anything she has laid out on the table, save for the spinach which she relishes only after her husband reprimands her for serving it in the first place: he does not want his wife to serve him foods he does not like. For her, the apartment is alien; it is a disquieting, disorienting place despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it should be home for her. As Alberto eats, he talks to her, but the narrator recalls “ogni sua parola mi disturba e tutto il discorso mi opprime. Qui non esiste se non la tenebra della notte” (“every word he says annoys me and the entire conversation is oppressive. Here there is nothing but the darkness of the night”) (61-62). The entire sequence is characterized by an almost hellish light. Alberto describes his childhood education with nuns in a religious institution. The woman is disgusted by the sadomasochistic details that Alberto shares; she instead tries to focus on her knitting despite the darkness. If, on the one hand, knitting connotes the most feminine, domestic work one can think of in the context of traditional Italian culture, on the other it becomes clear at this point that knitting is also a mechanical, repetitive, alienating act through which the protagonist attempts to escape from the possibility of a future with Alberto: “Qualsiasi pensiero sul futuro mi atterrisce” (“Any thought about the future terrifies me”) (66).

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<sup>39</sup> “Da qui potrei lanciarmi in qualsiasi direzione, a picco sul selciato, o nel vuoto verso l’alto” (“From here I could throw myself in any direction, down onto the pavement, or upwards into the void”) (75).

<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Die Unheimlich” (1919), translated as “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 17, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press: 1976), 219-56.

Yet, the protagonist is not only fearful; she is also bored. The narrative describes her mechanically undressing before bed, and going to sleep without any interest in her husband: “Nel letto mi addormento per disinteresse” (“In bed I fall asleep out of disinterest”) (66). By now it is clear to the reader that the all-important sentence the narrator/protagonist has wanted to utter since the beginning of the novel is a request for a separation from Alberto. Only in saying these words will she be able to put an end to her feelings of alienation and constraint. These words would allow her to construct her identity as a free woman, an identity she first experienced in Spain. To pronounce these words would mean finally being able to “dirgli chi sono io stessa” (“tell him who I myself am”) (10). In other words, this crucial request would allow her to cast off the subordinate identity of a wife, who must even renounce her own last name, according to the civil code at the time.<sup>41</sup> The narrator never explains why she did not leave her husband after her liberating experience in Spain. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine why Vasio’s protagonist remains with her husband when we read *L’orizzonte* in the sociohistorical context of the novel—the feminist movement is only beginning in 1966, and divorce, like abortion, had yet to be legalized.

To overcome her fears, the narrator/protagonist unsuccessfully seeks refuge in her dreams, looking for some sign that might show her a way out. Although she dreams about a lover and the freedom of a truly loving relationship (66, 73-74, 84-87), she dismisses this hope under the pressure to censor herself. This is perhaps the kind of social masochism that women are often subject to, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the dream leads the narrator to a memory of her childhood in Venice, focused on the figure of her mother, whom she despises (67-70). The mother appears greedy, a tormentor, and “una fiera addomesticata” (“a tamed wild beast”) (67). Even a banal activity like breakfast is transformed into a scene of terror. Beneath her mother’s cruel stare, the daughter trembles: “Non riesco a inghiottire, mi strofino gli occhi, smetto di mangiare: sono io che sto per essere divorata” (“I am unable to swallow, I rub my eyes, I stop eating: I am the one who is about to be devoured”) (69). From a traditional Freudian perspective, this fear of being devoured could represent a refusal to recognize and accept one’s female sexual condition, and thus constitute a refusal to identify with the mother as a woman. However, from a sociohistorical and feminist perspective, to reject the mother is to reject the domestic and subordinate maternal role that she—as an instrument of patriarchy—attempts to pass on to her daughter.<sup>43</sup> The narrator of *L’orizzonte* interprets the dream of her mother as an expression of “un vago terrore di aver ereditato la sua distorta visione del mondo” (“a vague terror of having inherited her distorted view of the world”) (68), and thus of an inability to escape her patriarchal destiny. The mother appears again as a tyrannical figure in another childhood memory (88-91) where the daughter is playing a game with a servant girl, tossing about discarded fruit pits. This time, however, the narrator/protagonist remembers violently rebelling against her mother: “afferro dalla tavola i noccioli e glieli scaglio addosso, a lei, con quanta forza mi viene” (“I grab the pits off of the table and hurl them at her with as much strength as I can muster”) (91).

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<sup>41</sup> As Carla Lonzi later writes, “Riconosciamo nel matrimonio l’istituzione che ha subordinato la donna al destino maschile” (“We recognize marriage as the institution that has subordinated women to a masculine destiny”). See Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (Milan: Rivolta Femminile, 1974), 11.

<sup>42</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2010), 353, 417, 471-75, 824, and *passim*.

<sup>43</sup> Among the many examples of feminist rejection of the mother in twentieth-century Italian literature, Sibilla Aleramo’s novel *Una donna* comes to mind, and—already in a disillusioned and nearly post-feminist mode—Goliarda Sapienza’s *L’arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*, 1998).

By contrast, the narrative ascribes a positive maternal role to the figure of the *madrina*. It is she who nurtures the imagination of the young protagonist by reading to her from the book about birds, animals emblematic of freedom for the girl. One bird that takes on a particular significance is the *cocàl* (seagull), a bird that “non si posa sui rami, sta librato in uno spazio balenante percorso dai riflessi della laguna e dall’odore dell’acqua ferma mischiato al profumo vegetale” (“does not perch on branches, but soars in a glittering space traversed by the reflections of the lagoon and by the odor of still water mixed with the smell of vegetation”) (72). In the same dream of her childhood, the *madrina* exclaims, “Questa bambina è matta come un cocàl!” (“This girl is crazy like a seagull!”), further underscoring its symbolic importance. It is no surprise that the *cocàl* remains a powerful symbol for Vasio, who returns to it in her novel *Laguna* (Lagoon, 2008). The *cocàl*’s perspective is literally a bird’s-eye view; this perspective allows the creature a command over its horizon, a vantage point from which it can see the vastness and magnificence of the lagoon. It is the exact opposite of the lost horizon that *L’orizzonte*’s protagonist repeatedly and sorrowfully evokes. The narrator/protagonist comes back to her senses in the house whose rooms are “disabitate da due persone” (“uninhabited by two people”) (74). She had dozed off, with her knitting on her lap: “in alto l’occhio non trova più un confine dove arrestarsi,” (“looking up, my eyes can no longer find a horizon on which to settle”) (73). This lack of a horizon on which the narrator/protagonist can fix her gaze signifies her sense that she has lost herself.

In one childhood memory, the *madrina* appears in front of a large armoire with a key in her hand; the girl desperately wishes to see inside, but is unable to. This fragmentary memory, which the narrator expands on later, is associated with another, a memory of Alberto. After one year apart (presumably after their trip to Spain), the protagonist and Alberto run into each other in front of Le Pleiadi, a nightclub in Rome. The narrator vividly describes her paradoxical inability to resist Alberto’s violent insistence that she return to him. This portrait of Alberto depicts him as an even more vulgar and repellant figure than before (the protagonist is forced to bring a drunk Alberto home; he complains as he pathetically vomits in the bathroom), and reveals the extent of the protagonist’s abjection as she asks herself, “Quanti anni mi ci vorranno ancora per acquistare un minimo di consapevolezza” (“How many years will it take me to develop some minimal awareness”) (77). It is, however, precisely this memory that grants the narrator/protagonist the awareness she hopes for: “Ma quale umiliazione, quale riduzione ho dovuto operare in questo accomodamento [...] occupata a recitare la mia parte senza neppure buona fede” (“But how I have been humiliated, how I have had to reduce myself in order to accommodate [him] [...] busy playing my role without any good faith”) (79). In this way, the narrator/protagonist realizes that her knitting is perversely similar to Penelope’s weaving, leading her to assert that, “Così non si va avanti” (“I cannot go on like this”) (80). She leaves her work on the seat and looks out over the terrace to take in the view of Rome. A moment later, she finds herself on the steps, leaving the apartment behind her. The reader comes to understand that knitting is ultimately also a metaphor for the work of memory, with its errors and its wandering, with its ability to weave memories into a story that may give form to the self.

The penultimate and most important sequence in the novel brings the *madrina* back to the fore. In her room, we again find the large armoire, object of the girl’s fear and curiosity. We soon discover that the *madrina* jealously guards a cardboard box of photographs inside the armoire, effectively making it a locus of family memories—memories of the protagonist’s youth. The box of photographs evokes Pandora’s box, but just as with the myth of Penelope, Vasio turns Pandora’s story on its head. Rather than unleashing the evils of the world, the protagonist’s

decision to open her *madrina*'s box brings to light a series of images that finally allow her to set herself free. In the pictures, we see the protagonist's past and future, which the *madrina* lays out on the floor like a mosaic. This kaleidoscopic sequence is constructed of memories sparked by the photographs. Recalling her time with Alberto, the narrator remembers "la casa che per anni abbiamo abitato e che da anni ho voluto lasciare" ("the house that we lived in for years and that for years I wanted to leave") (104). Despite the plethora of images, the narrator/protagonist is not disoriented; instead she has a newfound clarity. When the photographs, these "gettoni di esistenza" ("tokens of existence") as the narrator calls them, fall to the ground, the *madrina* tries to stop the protagonist from picking them up. The narrator/protagonist, however, symbolically refuses to allow her *madrina* to take control and, critically, she offers the reader the key to understanding the metatextual sense of the novel's title:

Ma resto ferma, assumendo il centro di questi gettoni d'esistenza che mi cadono intorno, essendo io centro e ulteriormente raccogliendomi in un più interno centro che i miei gesti stessi circoscrivono. "Ecco", penso: "Questo è l'orizzonte di cui mi debbo impadronire". Sicché, sostenendomi sui miei propri piedi [...] guardo la mia immagine riflessa nello specchio [...] sapendo adesso profondamente che io stessa sono riflessa ma consapevole finalmente che io stessa rifletto ogni apparizione circostante, che compito della mia esistenza è di riflettere ogni cosa ma impresa della mia esistenza è rimandare elementi selezionati dall'espressione. (117-18)

(I stand still, becoming the center of these tokens of existence that fall around me. I am the center and I continue to position myself within a more internal center that my own gestures circumscribe. "Here it is," I think: "This is the horizon of which I must take control." Thus, standing on my own two feet [...] I look at my image reflected in the mirror [...] knowing profoundly that I myself am reflected therein but also finally aware that I myself reflect every surrounding appearance. I know that the task of my existence is to reflect each thing around me but the endeavor of my existence is to reflect back those elements that I select through my expression.)

The horizon that the narrator so firmly wishes to take control of is none other than her own destiny. Expression, that is the narrator's choice to articulate and represent herself in and with language, to share her vision and discourse with others, allows her to take charge of her own consciousness and speech, none of which she can delegate to others.

Following the narrator/protagonist's new consciousness of herself and her identity, the novel reaches its concluding sequence—the costume party (98-121), which the reader has already glimpsed in various narrative fragments. As the narrator describes Alberto dancing and laughing, the reader understands that the party has a wild, Fellinian flavor. The protagonist, dressed in a mask and cape, acts more as an external observer to the party, watching it as though on a screen; she is caught between her desire to talk to Alberto and her inability to speak (100-01). When she manages to draw near to Alberto, she finds him drunk again and surrounded by a group of grotesque, dancing characters, leaving her feeling invisible. Caught in a noisy mass of partygoers, Alberto is in a daze, unable to hear his wife's voice. His image appears to her as though it were multiplied and superimposed over other images of him from various key moments

in the novel. In an attempt to free herself from the frenetic dance, the protagonist finds the strength to remove her mask and throw away the feathered turban she is wearing (110, 118).

It is only at this point, when the protagonist has completely unmasked herself, that she is finally able to see Alberto clearly, “il suo viso e tutta la sua persona” (“his face and his entire self”) (155). She nearly finds the courage to tell him what she has desired to say from the novel’s beginning, but, in a scene that overturns Pirandellian modernism, she must first see herself without a mask:

Guardandomi nello specchio ai piedi della scala, delicatamente mi stacco dal viso la maschera, come si sguscia una pelle consumata e morta da quella che sotto si è già rinnovata, che vive e respira nella forma di un viso singolare [...] La pelle accaldata gode di un’improvvisa frescura. Mi passo le dita sul naso sulle guance sulla fronte sul mento: riconosco questi nuovi lineamenti che riappaiono alla luce dopo tanta mistificazione. (118)

(Looking at myself in the mirror at the foot of the stairs, I carefully take the mask off of my face, as though I were peeling dead skin to reveal a layer beneath that is already healed, that is living and breathing in the form of a unique face [...] The unexpected freshness feels pleasant on my warm skin. I pass my fingers over my nose and cheeks and forehead and chin: I recognize these new features that reappear in the light after so much dissembling.)

This recognition is also a symbolic rebirth, accompanied by a new appetite for life. In the kitchen of the house where the party is held, the protagonist finds the refreshments that have not yet been served to the other guests; she savors them as she feels a “sterminata fame” (“immense hunger”) (120). As dawn breaks, the sky is finally clear: “Non c’è particolare che non si stagli, perfettamente visibile [...] in questo limpido apparire [...] al centro dell’orizzonte definito dagli alberi dai colli lontani dall’ansa del fiume” (“Even the smallest detail stands out as perfectly visible [...] in this limpid light [...] at the center of the horizon that is defined by the trees, the far-off hills, the meandering river”) (123-24). The ability finally to be able to speak and to be listened to, to be able to use her own voice to say those as-yet-unspoken words, is described in the novel’s last lines with a richness made all the more effective by the three spaced dots, the ellipsis with which Vasio ends the novel: “la frase si apre con precisa evidenza, mentre gli dico [...] dicendogli con parole che si fondono al calore della bocca, escono dallo stampo, prendendo una consistenza arbitraria e propria, ripetono con facilità, con legittimità, ripetono: ‘Ascolta: devo dirti ...’” (“the sentence begins with a precise clarity, as I tell him [...] words that are forged in the warmth of my mouth. The words emerge molded, taking on their own arbitrary yet necessary texture, and they repeat, with ease, with a sense of legitimacy: ‘Listen: I have to tell you...’”) (124-25). Able finally to speak and free herself from the marriage and the oppressive discourse that had suffocated her for so long, Vasio’s narrator/protagonist becomes the textual embodiment of both a literary and a feminist avant-garde.

## Reclaiming Maternity and a Feminine Agency in *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo*

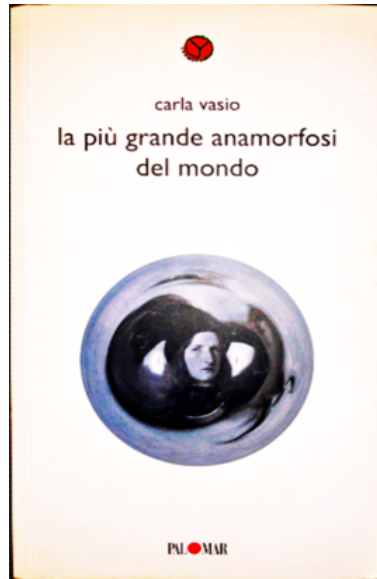


Fig. 3. Carla Vasio, *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo* (Bari: Palomar, 2009).<sup>44</sup>  
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Seven years after the publication of *L'orizzonte* with Feltrinelli, Vasio published her next novel, *L'anamorfosi (un racconto gotico)* with Cooperativa Prove 10. Vasio was one of the ten founders of the publishing house, which aimed to print texts that were of little interest to commercial publishers. Vasio admits that the novel was “subito dimenticato” (“immediately forgotten”)<sup>45</sup> after publication, but rediscovering it years later, she began to revise the text. “Riscritto e ristrutturato,” Vasio writes, “è diventato *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo*, edito da Palomar” (“Rewritten and restructured, it became *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo*, published by Palomar”).<sup>46</sup> The original title, which describes the text as a “Gothic tale,” is a reference to one of Vasio’s literary inspirations, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “Ligeia,” in which anamorphosis plays a key role.<sup>47</sup> Although the plots of the two versions of Vasio’s novel are essentially the same, in the revised text the author eliminated or dissembled some clues, making the narrative more enigmatic and challenging for the reader who, as in the case of *L'orizzonte*, is called upon to take an active role in unpacking, deciphering, and interpreting the text and its multiple metaphors. Like *L'orizzonte*, *La più grande anamorfosi del mondo* is a short novel—or a *racconto lungo*—that employs neo-avant-garde strategies to construct a complex, insightful feminist critique.

The novel is divided into twenty-nine brief chapters and is written from the first-person perspective of an unnamed, male narrator, who will turn out to be deeply unreliable. The narrator

<sup>44</sup> The cover art design is based on the painting by Lorenzo Lotto, “Ritratto di giovane davanti a una tenda bianca” (1528, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) seen as if it were an anamorphic image reflected in a cylindrical mirror.

<sup>45</sup> Vasio, *Vita privata*, 71.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> See Barbara Cantalupo, “Poe’s Visual Tricks,” *Poe Studies* 38, no. 1-2 (2005): 53-63. Cantalupo’s analysis of Poe’s use of anamorphosis as a “visual trick” is strikingly reminiscent of many of the key details of Vasio’s novel.

identifies the male protagonist (himself) as a “fabbricante d’anamorfosi,”<sup>48</sup> an artist specializing in anamorphoses. He lives with his romantic partner, Edeltraut, in southern Lazio near the small Torre Astura peninsula on Italy’s Tyrrhenian coast (90, 127). This peninsula (formerly an island), is home to a picturesque medieval castle, built on what was once a Greek and then a Roman site. The adjacent pine forest has a layered, palimpsestic history and literary tradition. It evokes in particular the theme of betrayal through the figure of the handsome Conradin, Duke of Swabia, held captive there by his traitors before being executed at the tender age of sixteen.<sup>49</sup> Edeltraut’s medieval, German name reinforces this allusion. The location is made all the more uncanny and multi-faceted by the fact that the peninsula and the adjacent territory have been devoted to military uses since the nineteenth century. After World War II, it became the grounds for secret experiments with weaponry (Poligono militare di Nettuno; The Nettuno Military Training Area). The area still belongs today to the Ufficio Tecnico Territoriale Armamenti Terrestri (of the Italian Ministry of Defense), yet it is also, paradoxically, one of the few coastal areas where the natural habitat of the ancient *macchia mediterranea* and its wetlands have been unintentionally preserved, surviving Mussolini’s land reclamation projects of the 1930s, subsequent farming and urbanization projects, and recurrent fires and storms.

The text opens with a description of Edeltraut, who lies dead in the house she shared with the narrator. The *fabbricante* recounts the series of strange episodes that led to Edeltraut’s death, and the reader discovers the terrible truth: the *fabbricante* himself murdered her. The enigmatic episodes that the narrator recounts include a mysterious light in the sky, an unusually violent storm, a wildfire with no flames, light from vehicular headlamps that is inexplicably refracted, and disembodied voices that only he can hear. Throughout the text, the narrator cites newspaper articles about these events; Vasio takes these citations from stories that appeared in the *Paese sera* and *Il Giorno* newspapers in August and September of 1966. These articles serve as the only specific marker of time in the text. In a “nota critica” about these articles, Vasio says that they “dimostra[no] che la follia umana è sempre incoraggiata dalle circostanze” (“show that human madness is always encouraged by circumstances”) (6).

The first of these events is the appearance of the light in the sky, which the *fabbricante* believes to be the sign of a mystery that only he can understand. By contrast, much to the *fabbricante*’s displeasure, Edeltraut expresses her belief that the light was a meteor. This introduces an important dynamic in the novel whereby Edeltraut accepts the more “natural” explanations of the mysterious events, while the *fabbricante* prefers to see them as a challenge to overcome the “limite del pensiero oltre il quale non si può andare senza abbandonare il sostegno della ragione” (“limit of thought beyond which one cannot go without abandoning the support of reason”) (44). In fact, the *fabbricante* comes to believe that he has been specifically chosen to understand a greater, underlying mystery (62).

Following the appearance of the light in the sky, the coast is struck by a violent storm during which the *fabbricante* claims to hear disembodied voices. He explains that the voices have asked to meet with him in the *pineta* near his home by the seashore. As the *fabbricante* approaches the designated location, the voices tell him that, “la presenza indesiderata di una persona in

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<sup>48</sup> Vasio, *La più grande anamorfosi*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> This history and the strange, magical, ominous atmosphere of the pine forest and the Torre are evoked by—among others—Gabriele d’Annunzio in his 1897 *Taccuini* (ed. Enrica Bianchetti and Roberto Forcella [Milan: Mondadori, 1965]), 168-73. The pages, later used in part by D’Annunzio for the novel *Il Fuoco* (1900) describe his love making with “Mortella” while the couple imagines that the small fire they lit with pine needles might burn down the entire forest. The plot of D’Annunzio’s novel *L’innocente* (1892) may be a possible subtext for *La più grande anamorfosi*.

condizioni precarie, estranea, non prevista, annullava l'incontro" ("The undesired presence of a person in a precarious condition, an unforeseen outsider, led to the cancellation of the meeting"). As a consequence, he says, "era inutile che mi avvicinassi al luogo stabilito, data l'impossibilità di approdare alla reciproca definizione e riconoscimento che ci avrebbero permesso di immedesimarci" ("it was useless to go to the appointed place, given the impossibility of reaching a shared definition and recognition that would have allowed us to identify with one another") (72). The undesired presence is Edeltraut, who had followed the *fabbricante* into the pine grove out of concern for him. As the narrator describes Edeltraut's difficulty walking, and how she appears to be "appesantita" ("heavier") (73), the reader realizes that she is pregnant, though the narrator never expressly states—and even wishes to hide—this fact. In turn, it will become clear that Edeltraut *herself* is the "greatest anamorphosis in the world," because, as Vasio writes in the 1973 version of the novel, her feminine figure could "subire mutazioni inarrestabili" ("undergo unstoppable mutations") (44). The narrator, however, claims that the child was not his: after years of living with Edeltraut, the *fabbricante*'s sexual attraction to her waned and their physical relationship faded. Her pregnancy was therefore, he says, "improprio" ("improper") (73).

The narrator recounts the other strange events that take place along the coast; the story comes to a head when the *fabbricante* notices an uncanny figure at a gathering he is hosting with Edeltraut—a figure who bears a striking resemblance to himself. When the *fabbricante* asks Edeltraut who the man is, she hesitates, and the narrator implies that she may have something to hide. In turn, the reader wonders if this figure is the father of her child. When pressed, Edeltraut confirms the resemblance to the *fabbricante* and suggests enigmatically that the figure is his brother, "il fratello che non vuoi mai incontrare" ("your brother whom you never want to see") (112). The *fabbricante*, as usual, rejects her explanation, and implies—somewhat ironically—that he has been doubled. All of this adds a level of ambiguity to the closing scenes of the novel. Is the *fabbricante*'s "double," whom he rejects as treacherous, his brother, a supernatural presence, or merely himself seen from another vantage point? Is he the very child whose paternity the narrator denies? In one of the final chapters, entitled "Altre ombre" ("Other Shadows") (125-27), the narrator recounts the *fabbricante* being in the home he shares with Edeltraut, and seeing an undesired "presence" enter the room; he insinuates that this is the same figure from the gathering. The narrator/protagonist describes himself watching the scene unfold in a mirror, which suggests that the mysterious presence might be—as in "Ligeia"—the narrator/protagonist himself, viewed from another vantage point, a part of his story's anamorphic illusion. Edeltraut demands that the presence identify itself and explain why it is in her home. As she continues to insist on an answer, the *fabbricante* lunges at her, fatally injuring her.<sup>50</sup> All of this, the narrator says, was to "impedirle di ripetere la domanda e di ottenere la risposta" ("prevent her from repeating her question and obtaining an answer"), to stop her from revealing a secret he would prefer to keep hidden (127). At the novel's end, the *fabbricante* goes to work on the largest anamorphosis he has ever created, ironically a tribute to Edeltraut, meant to fix and preserve her memory. This of course further suggests that the still image of the unpregnant Edeltraut, frozen in time, is indeed, for him, a key part of the "più grande anamorfosi del mondo"

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<sup>50</sup> Just as Vasio's narrator might be describing himself at the scene of Edeltraut's murder from another vantage point—as though he were watching someone else—Poe's protagonist suggests that his wife, Rowena, died at the hands of a third party, a supernatural presence. However, as Cantalupo shows, "Ligeia" is in fact the narrator's confession of guilt: he himself has murdered Rowena but attempts to lead the reader astray through his descriptions of the anamorphic decorations in the bedroom where his wife dies and by referencing his addiction to opium. See Cantalupo, 60.

that he planned to create. In the end, however, this anamorphosis fails because the primary image he has in mind, a rose, does not properly yield to the secondary image, Edeltraut's face. Even in death Edeltraut continues to challenge him. Apparently resigning himself to his inability to control her body, her image, and her story, the narrator concludes with a reflection on the nature of narrative, ironically acknowledging that "nessuna storia finisce quando si smette di raccontarla, resta soltanto sospesa in un futuro non descritto e questo è l'ignoto" ("no story ends when we stop telling it; it is merely suspended in an undescribed future, and this is the unknown") (140).

In developing further this analysis of *La più grande anamorfose del mondo*, it is useful to refer to the earlier *L'anamorfose (un racconto gotico)*, as both the revisions and continuities between the texts help to uncover their central claims. Comparing the two works, several points come to light. As Vasio mentions, much of the text is re-written, though the core plot points remain the same. It is immediately clear, however, that the 2009 novel is expanded, largely through the addition of chapters in which the narrator openly discusses anamorphoses and reflects on the *fabbricante's* art. By contrast, the reader of the 1973 text comes to understand the *fabbricante's* trade only from an attentive reading of his descriptions of his craft and from the novel's title. As we will see, this important addition to the narrative allows Vasio to further develop what we might call an implicit "ethics of art." Furthermore, in the earlier novel, Vasio expressly reveals Edeltraut's pregnancy, a crucial plot development only hinted at in *La più grande anamorfose del mondo* (where the reader is left to infer the pregnancy from various subtle signs and allusions), a point we will return to shortly.

Even on the first reading of these two novels, it becomes clear that any one of their episodes or images can be read allegorically, each containing multiple layers of meaning. One can therefore understand *La più grande anamorfose del mondo* and *L'anamorfose (un racconto gotico)* as "open works," as described by Umberto Eco in *L'opera aperta*. In what follows, we will continue to focus especially on the text of *La più grande anamorfose del mondo*, comparing it to its earlier version and seeking to contextualize the significance of both works in Vasio's overall profile as a neo-avant-garde artist and a feminist writer. To begin to untangle the meaning of this enigmatic novel, the reader must first turn to Edeltraut, whose figure Vasio designates as a central point of reference for understanding her text. There are three issues that arise from her highly symbolic yet also physically grounded figure—each stemming from Vasio's "anamorphic" visual rhetoric—which one must address in order to grasp the way the novel functions as a whole. First, from the start of the narrative, anamorphosis is a means through which Vasio solicits an epistemological reflection, as she pushes her readers to question the narrator's insistence on the veracity of his totalizing view of "reality." The second issue to consider is the function of Edeltraut's figure—of both her changing body and her allegorical character—as the "più grande anamorfose del mondo."<sup>51</sup> This visible, physical and cognitive incarnation of anamorphosis as a pregnant woman reveals Vasio's feminist critique, aimed first of all at the misogyny endemic to Italian neo-avant-garde aesthetics. This leads us to the third issue in question in the novel: the ethics of art, which Vasio, as we shall see, posits as a corrective to this misogyny.

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<sup>51</sup> In the use of this particular figure, Vasio recovers the complex meaning and deep, problematic history of *figura* reconstructed by Erich Auerbach as a word used from classical antiquity to the early modern era to signify the physical body and appearance of a person as well as alluding to (and embodying) an increasingly abstract, allegorical, "other" meaning, more or less overdetermined. See Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11-76.

One point that remains consistent in both versions of the novel is the centrality of Edeltraut, as suggested by the narrator at the beginning of the 2009 novel:

—...Edeltraut...

il nome che io stesso ho usato di rado, soltanto in situazioni significative o ritenute tali—come questa, in cui pronunciando il suo nome riporto su di lei il punto preferenziale dove fare convergere i desideri rimossi, le incaute visioni, le tensioni e ogni altro elemento di questa storia. (9)

(...Edeltraut...

the name that I myself used rarely, only on meaningful occasions, or on those considered such—like this one, in which, by saying her name, I once again make her the privileged point of convergence of repressed desires, reckless visions, tensions, and every other element of this story.)

That the narrator—the maker of anamorphoses in his own narrative—declares Edeltraut a “punto preferenziale” in his story is significant. Just as a perspectival anamorphosis has a designated point from which it unfolds, so does the story as told by the narrator. Edeltraut is the point at which the reader must orient him- or herself in order to see the text “unfold” as the author intends. This is the first indication that this novel is meant to be read as a feminist allegory centered on questions of feminine agency and identity, for Edeltraut is both the center of the story and the key to revealing its subtexts. The name “Edeltraut” itself is unusual for a story set in southern Lazio in the 1960s, and is therefore another facet of the novel that is meant to engage the active reader and encourage him or her to uncover its meanings. One interpretive possibility is that Edeltraut is a reference to the Anglo-Saxon saint Æthelthryth (Sant’Eteldreda in Italian; alternatively known as Audrey, Audrée, and Etheldreda) (c. 636-79). Edeltraut is a derivative of Æthelthryth; at least one version of St. Æthelthryth’s hagiography maintains that she took a vow of perpetual virginity before being given in marriage to King Ecgfrith. Though Ecgfrith initially agreed to respect his wife’s vow, he later attempted to force her to consummate the marriage. With miraculous help, Æthelthryth was nevertheless able to preserve her virginity. Crucial to *La più grande anamorfosi* is not the theological element of Æthelthryth’s story, but rather the question of women’s agency. Indeed, Æthelthryth’s story is about a woman who maintains her agency and control over her body, and resists patriarchal pressure to do otherwise.<sup>52</sup>

The issues of female agency come to the fore as the reader realizes that Vasio’s narrator applies his illusionistic craft to his story, describing the phenomena he witnesses as though they contain secondary, hidden meanings that will reveal themselves from the proper perspective. In so doing, the narrator as *fabbricante d’anamorfosi* leads himself to believe that his perception of the world is superior to Edeltraut’s; he therefore feels justified in dismissing her views and in undermining her agency. This becomes apparent in the first episode that the narrator recounts, that of the light in the sky. As mentioned earlier, it is at this point that the dynamic between Edeltraut and the *fabbricante*—whereby he favors mystery and she favors natural explanations—becomes clear. The narrator describes the light as “immobile e bianca” (“immobile and white”)

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the various narratives of Æthelthryth’s life, see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “Rerouting the Dower: The Anglo-Norman Life of St. Audrey by Marie (de Chatteris?),” in *Power of the Weak: Studies On Medieval Women*, ed. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 27-56.

(30) before it flies upwards and away. As Edeltraut notices the light, she remarks, “è caduta una meteora... eppure è passato il 10 agosto” (“a meteor fell... but it is after August 10”) (31-32), a reference to the Perseid meteor shower that normally peaks around that time. The narrator doubts Edeltraut’s explanation; the intensity and the vibration of the light, he says, rules out any possibility that it was a meteor. Furthermore, he is agitated that Edeltraut did not express herself with “maggior rispetto” (“more respect”) and “cautela” (“caution”) in front of the mysterious light (32). This dynamic recurs when the unidentified figure appears at Edeltraut’s and the *fabbricante*’s gathering; while Edeltraut suggests that the figure is the *fabbricante*’s brother, he resists this explanation and suggests that this “presence” is something more enigmatic. As noted, the figure may be Edeltraut’s hypothetical lover and the father of her child, or, most likely, the *fabbricante* himself. Only at the novel’s end does the narrator admit that these alleged mysteries are of his own making, that they are deformations of the “stato reale delle cose” (“the real state of things”) (137) like his anamorphic images. As he continuously and deceptively challenges Edeltraut’s perception of the world, the narrator undermines her agency by seeking to subvert her understanding of reality.

By exposing her narrator, Vasio takes an anti-patriarchal, feminist stance; she shows her readers that his misogynistic ideology is like a lens through which reality appears not only warped, but also overdetermined, as in an anamorphic illusion. This anti-patriarchal position, which appears repeatedly throughout Vasio’s work, is indeed an integral part of her aim to “demystify” and “demythify” language.<sup>53</sup> In exposing patriarchal ideology, Vasio lays the foundation for Edeltraut’s agency, which the unreliable narrator rejects throughout the novel. He does this in part through this unjustifiable insistence on the validity of his view of reality over hers. In fact, the heart of the novel is centered on this feminist subtext. It should be noted that, despite deconstructing the myth of an objective, superior vision by the male subject, Vasio, as in *L’orizzonte*, does not reject subjectivity as such, thereby avoiding the elimination of a feminine self and subjectivity. Indeed, much of the narrative’s feminist commentary centers on Edeltraut’s pregnancy, that is, on the uniquely feminine experience of maternity, of giving life to another.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Re, “Language, Gender and Sexuality,” 137.

<sup>54</sup> See Diotima, *Mettere al mondo il mondo: Oggetto e oggettività alla luce della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1990), in particular the essay by Adriana Cavarero, “Dire la nascita,” *ibid.*, 117: “Messi al mondo da un corpo materno, si viene al mondo con un corpo sessuato, senza che questi corpi, quello della madre e quello di chi nasce, siano separati o separabili dall’interrezza di anima e corpo, senza cioè che vadano a spezzarsi in dicotomie derealizzanti quell’esperienza singolare che insiste sulla soggettività concreta di chi mette al mondo, e di chi al mondo viene, sempre sessuato nella differenza. Qui in altri termini non c’è l’Uomo, ma sempre una madre, una bambina o un bambino, ossia una donna anch’essa nata da madre e così via all’infinito, e una bambina che cresce donna o un bambino che cresce uomo, nati, ambedue, da donna. Qui si annunciano, sempre fattualmente incarnati nella singolarità, i due generi differenti che sempre nascono dal genere femminile incarnato da una madre. Qui allora, l’ordine simbolico del mondo non sopporta neutri universali, né scissione del pensiero dal corpo, né ossessione di durare in eterno, non sopporta astrazioni de-sensibilizzanti per questa umana singolarità sessuata, che non atemporalmente è ma viene, appare, e continua ad apparire nella sua interrezza singolare finché la morte non sopravviene. [...] Questo è solo l’inizio di una filosofia della nascita e di un discorso della madre [...] un lavoro di Penelope, che ricuce corpo e pensiero, ancora tutto da tessere” (“Put into the world by a maternal body, we are born with a sexed body, yet these bodies, the mother’s and that of the person born, are not separate or separable by an individual wholeness of soul and body. They do not, in other words, become severed into dichotomous entities, undoing the singular experience that insists on the concrete subjectivity of the one who gives birth and of the one who is born into the world, always sexed in difference. Here, in other words, we do not have Man but rather always a mother, a female child or a male child, that is, a woman born of another woman, and so on to infinity, and a child who grows as a man or as a woman but both born of a woman. Here are announced—and always factually embodied in a singularity—two different genders that are always born from the female gender embodied by the mother. Here

It is important to recall that when this pregnancy is revealed in *L'anamorfosi (un racconto gotico)*, the voices in the pine grove cancel the meeting because Edeltraut's condition means that she could "subire mutazioni inarrestabili" ("undergo unstoppable mutations") (44). In other words, the meeting is called off precisely because the male protagonist cannot exert control over Edeltraut's pregnant body, a body that may be seen as both single and double, at once self and other.<sup>55</sup> It is her maternal agency and subjectivity, with its symbolic power, that threatens the *fabbricante* and intensifies his misogyny.

The *fabbricante*'s inability to accept Edeltraut's agency and subjectivity is the very thing that pushes him past the "punto di non ritorno" ("point of no return"), that encourages him to undertake what the narrator later describes as a "progetto di morte" ("project of death") (137). Consider the murder of Edeltraut, the ultimate, irrevocable destruction of her agency. The *fabbricante* kills Edeltraut to stop her from obtaining answers from the mysterious presence that has entered their house, a presence that might be the *fabbricante* himself. The narrator describes the scene saying that Edeltraut, "stava per svelare il segreto che non volevo fosse portato in vista, perché temevo che i termini minacciosi dello svelamento mi avrebbero costretto a dare una risposta" ("was about to reveal the secret that I wanted to keep out of sight, because I was afraid that the threatening terms of its revelation would have forced me to respond") (127). Evidently, he is unwilling to face the truth that Edeltraut has become pregnant, thus demonstrating through her own body the "anamorphic" power of being simultaneously one and another, herself and her child—a power that the *fabbricante* can never appropriate for himself.<sup>56</sup> In other words, he does not want it to be revealed that he does not fully control Edeltraut. When the *fabbricante* murders her, he does it precisely because he wants to prevent the revelation of her maternity, which is also a revelation of her agency and its symbolic power. It is significant that when the *fabbricante*, holding Edeltraut's body, looks around the room, he sees no sign of the mysterious presence, which the narrator describes as an "ospite indesiderato" ("undesired guest"): "Ma quando mi sono guardato intorno in cerca di aiuto, nessuno era presente. Come le altre volte, il nemico aveva cessato di esserci senza trapasso sensibile—da presente ad assente senza transito"

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then, the symbolic order of the world cannot bear neutral universals, nor severance of mind from body, nor the compulsion to live forever. It cannot bear dematerializing abstractions to replace this human, gendered singularity—a singularity that *is* not outside time but rather is born, appears, and continues to appear in its singular wholeness until death comes [...] This is only the beginning of a philosophy of birth and of a discourse of the mother [...] the work of Penelope, reweaving body and mind together, a reweaving all still to be done"). This translation originally appeared in Re, "The Mark on the Wall," 75.

<sup>55</sup> In the course of explaining his (possibly false) claim that Edeltraut was unfaithful in *La più grande anamorfosi*, the narrator reveals his own shallowness and sense of betrayal. However, he expressly accepts some of the blame as he admits that he was not attentive to Edeltraut's erotic needs. Specifically, he says that the breakdown of their relationship was not "per [il] demerito [di Edeltraut], perché gli anni trascorsi non le hanno sottratto tanto di bellezza, ma solo si è appesantita la fragilità delle membra che all'inizio mi induceva a coprirle e penetrarle senza timore, mentre più tardi, perduta la sua esilità [...] la mia predilezione si è offuscata lasciando il posto a un'estraneità addolorata che adesso rendeva improprio il suo stato" ("[Edeltraut's] fault, because the years we spent together did not subtract from her beauty; it was just that the fragility of her limbs, which used to tempt me to lay on them and penetrate them without fear, had grown heavy. Later on, as she lost her slenderness, my passion waned, leaving in its place a sorrowful estrangement that made her current state improper") (73). The narrator's understanding of Edeltraut's predicament suggests that it is not her infidelity that drives the *fabbricante* to violence so much as it is her pregnancy.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Kristeva, in "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," uses the maternal body with its 'other' within as a model for all intersubjective relations, thus disrupting the notion of a single unified subject. See Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237-70.

(“But when I looked around in search of help, no one was there. Like the other times, the enemy had disappeared without any perceivable movement—from present to absent without any passage”) (127). This generates another possible understanding of the mysterious presence. While it might be the *fabbricante*, it could also be an allusion to Edeltraut’s agency. In killing her, the *fabbricante* has also destroyed the “ospite indesiderato,” his “nemico” (“enemy”), which is Edeltraut’s different subjectivity as a mother-to-be.

While Edeltraut’s subjectivity threatens the *fabbricante* because he can never completely possess or control it or her, it is the specific threat represented by her maternal agency, her power as a pregnant woman to embody “la più grande anamorfofi,” that drives him to kill her. In other words, Edeltraut’s agency as mother allows her to be the maker of a creation far greater in its symbolic power than any of the *fabbricante*’s artistic works. It is at this point that the reader begins to understand that Vasio’s aim is also to allegorize and critique her experiences with the neo-avant-garde. To illustrate this point, we must first account for Vasio’s unusual selection of anamorphosis as a visual trope for her novel. If the text is set in the 1960s, the art of anamorphosis would be anachronistic. While twentieth-century art is certainly not devoid of anamorphoses, they are more closely associated with the early modern period.<sup>57</sup> However, as Claudio Morandini points out, there are strong reasons to compare the work of the Gruppo 63 to anamorphosis. As he explains, the Gruppo 63’s experimentation, with its “frantumazione del personaggio e [...] delle rassicuranti ma obsolete funzioni narrative, [con] lo sconquassamento dello spazio e del tempo [...] spesso richiama l’anamorfofi” (“fragmentation of characters and [...] of reassuring but obsolete narrative functions, [with] its shattering of space and time [...] often recalls anamorphosis”).<sup>58</sup> The term “anamorphosis” also appears in neo-avant-garde discourse; for example, Giorgio Manganelli famously describes the 100 *romanzi fiume* of *Centuria* (*Centuria: One Hundred Ouroboric Novels*, 1979) as “lavorati in modi anamorfici” (“wrought in anamorphic ways”).<sup>59</sup> The violent, destructive anamorphosis of neo-avant-garde artistic experimentation is parallel to the *fabbricante*’s flawed and deadly anamorphic obsession, and stands in contrast to the life-affirming anamorphic subjectivity embodied by Edeltraut’s pregnant figure.

Vasio’s linking of the art of anamorphosis to both Edeltraut’s pregnancy and to neo-avant-garde literary experimentation also suggests that the author is positing a metaliterary critique of the treatment of femininity and motherhood in the art of the Gruppo 63, or in the works of twentieth-century male avant-gardes more broadly. Unsurprisingly, the neo-avant-garde, like the avant-garde before it, was mired in a misogynistic discourse that tended towards an “appropriation of the feminine,”<sup>60</sup> and especially of maternity.<sup>61</sup> One such example is the poem *Laborintus* (1956) by Edoardo Sanguineti. The poem is framed as a “descent into the unconscious” of a young woman, Renée/Ellie, as a means of “getting at a deeper language of

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<sup>57</sup> Famous examples include Hans Holbein the Younger’s “The Ambassadors” (1533), Emmanuel Maignan’s frescoes in the Trinità dei Monti convent (1642), and Andrea Pozzo’s frescoed ceiling in the Church of St. Ignatius in Rome (1685-94). Anamorphosis has recently become a useful trope for critics, including Blake Gutt, who has undertaken transgender readings of early modern texts featuring men who give birth, as well as modern pregnancy narratives by trans men and gender non-conforming people.

<sup>58</sup> Claudio Morandini, review of Massimiliano Borelli, *Prose dal dissesto. Antiromanzo e avanguardia negli anni sessanta* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2013), in *Fuoriassse* 9 (2013): 64-65.

<sup>59</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, *Centuria: cento piccoli romanzi fiume* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1979), cover copy.

<sup>60</sup> Lucia Re, “Mater-Materia: Maternal Power and the Futurist Avant-Garde,” in *The Great Mother: Women, Maternity, and Power in Art and Visual Culture, 1900-2015*, ed. Massimiliano Gioni (Milan: Skira, 2015), 48-59.

<sup>61</sup> Re, “Language, Gender and Sexuality,” 172.

‘universal’ myths and archetypes which is not compromised or tainted by the dominant ideology.”<sup>62</sup> The “feminine” space that Sanguineti constructs in the text is disconnected from the reality of gender difference; instead it constitutes an “appropriation of the feminine” and “allows for the usurpation of a vast metaphoric field which includes images of giving birth, giving life, nourishing, etc.,” all to the ends of “conceptualizing and speaking about subjectivity outside [...] the worn-out paradigms of the ‘male’ lyric, the male subject, the male hero.”<sup>63</sup> Sanguineti, in short, appropriates motherhood to his own ends, a common move in “avant-garde discourse,” which is often “connected to misogynistic condescension, violence and generally a strong ‘suspicion’ or dislike of women.”<sup>64</sup>

In light of this, it becomes all the more evident that Vasio’s narrator, with his anamorphic art and his insistence on unveiling hidden realities, is a stand-in for the male writers of the neo-avant-garde. In *L’anamorfosi (un racconto gotico)*, the narrator even speaks in terms reminiscent of neo-avant-garde writers as he reflects on how his logic, with its tendency to “anamorphize” reality, led to his fatal error. He fails to foresee the impending violence, he says,

benché io vi sia specialmente preparato—non da ora, da quando per la prima volta spostai il mio punto di vista fuori dalle regole conservatrici cui eravamo precedentemente affidati, fuori da quel rispetto che ci aveva prima concesso di non estenderci oltre le convenute occasioni, sicché a un tratto mi trovai ad abusare [dell’immagine di Edeltraut]... (107-08)

(although I am specially adapted to it—not since just now, but from the first time I moved my point of view beyond the conservative rules to which we had previously entrusted ourselves, beyond that respect that we had previously shown in not extending ourselves beyond established occasions, so all at once I found myself abusing [Edeltraut’s image]...)

Vasio’s narrator here expresses himself like a neo-avant-garde artist, discussing how he abandoned “conservative rules” in a way that ultimately led him to abuse Edeltraut’s image. Vasio’s message is clear: in pursuing their literary innovation and experimentation, the male writers of the neo-avant-garde often abused femininity, appropriating it to their own ends. In light of this, the narrator’s admission of his own guilt in *La più grande anamorfosi* becomes highly significant for Vasio’s subtext: “Infatti,” he says, “è con semplici indizi tratti dalla cronaca che ho potuto deformare lo stato reale delle cose, falsificandone il senso secondo un mio inconsapevole progetto—che ora riconosco progetto di morte” (“In fact, it is with simple clues taken from newspapers that I was able to deform the real state of things, falsifying its meanings as a part of my own unconscious project—that I now recognize as a project of death”) (137). Vasio thus criticizes her colleagues and reminds her readers that reckless artistic experimentation and the aestheticization of violence in art—no matter how innovative and dazzlingly virtuosic—

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<sup>62</sup> Re, “Language, Gender and Sexuality,” 171.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 171-72. The novel *Capriccio italiano* (1963; 2007) also by Sanguineti, may in fact be the specific text that Vasio implicitly seeks to expose and critique. Sanguineti’s narrative is a bewildering series of tableaux and oneiric fragments filled with violence and distorted bodies that dissolve into one another and undergo grotesque metamorphoses. The pregnant body of the narrator’s wife is an obsessive object of dread and loathing. The narrator occasionally envisions himself as a painter, sees Martians and alien beings, fantasizes about killing his child, and has an uncanny double who may be his wife’s lover.

are ultimately sterile and life-denying, and still very much a part of the patriarchal past. By symbolically framing motherhood as the greater anamorphosis—the greater creation—Vasio exposes and critiques misogynistic neo-avant-garde discourses, at the same time advocating a kind of life-affirming art opposed to the patriarchal tradition that, in Adriana Cavarero's words, “è da sempre cresciuta sulla centralità della categoria morte” (“has always thrived on the category of death”).<sup>65</sup>

By understanding Edeltraut as the victim of the *fabbricante*'s reckless misogyny, it becomes possible to decipher another mysterious element in the text: the disembodied voices. These voices are heard exclusively by the *fabbricante* because they exist only in a misogynistic mind; they are the voices of patriarchal ideology, pushing the *fabbricante* deeper into his misogyny. It is in fact these voices that, when directed at the pregnant Edeltraut, render her abject, foreshadowing the *fabbricante*'s choice to murder her. Understanding the voices as stand-ins for the patriarchal ideology that drives the *fabbricante* to the killing of the pregnant Edeltraut, it is clearer still that the narrator is meant, in part, to represent the male writers of the neo-avant-garde. When asked whether her male colleagues in the Gruppo 63 were “maschilisti incalliti,” (“inveterate male chauvinists”), Vasio responded that they “si sentivano tutti geni” (“all thought they were geniuses”).<sup>66</sup> In fact, the narrator not only speaks like a neo-avant-garde artist, but he also views himself as a unique genius, one who believes that he has been specifically elected to understand a higher, disembodied truth that is otherwise inaccessible (130). Indeed, it was the *fabbricante d'anamorfosi*'s baseless assumption of his own genius and his reckless experimentation that led him to enact a misogynistic abjection and erasure of the feminine.

In turn, it is interesting to recall that the largest anamorphosis that the *fabbricante* has ever attempted, comprising a rose and Edeltraut's face (which is to be the flower's shadow), fails as the narrator loses control of his material. On the one hand, this mirrors the situation in question: in killing Edeltraut, the narrator has stopped her from “anamorphizing” in her pregnancy. On the other, it may be a claim about feminine subjectivity as a whole. Edeltraut has obviously lost all agency in death; however, the narrator's inability to control the image he has made of her suggests that there is a greater feminine agency that transcends her as an individual. This point helps us to better understand Vasio's unusual choice of the name “Edeltraut.” Edeltraut, the narrator says, means “nobile diletta” (“noble beloved”) (127), which is perhaps a reference to this life-affirming feminine subjectivity that women can claim and that others must respect.

Through the symbolic image of the pregnant Edeltraut, Vasio also makes a more general statement about the “ethics of art”. It is this ethics of art that acts as Vasio's solution to the misogynistic and deadly appropriation of maternity that she critiques. This ethics safeguards against patriarchal ideologies first by insisting that art must not make totalizing metaphysical pronouncements. On the contrary, art must be essentially metaphorical and therefore open to numerous interpretations. In other words, the artwork must be an “open work” that can constantly give life to new meanings. An open work that fully adheres to this ethics would not appropriate or subsume the feminine to its ends, but rather deconstruct the ideologies that endorse this misogynistic practice.

That art cannot be the vehicle for making absolute or totalizing claims about reality is hinted at in the first chapter of the novel, when the narrator describes the *fabbricante*'s project, which the reader will later recognize as the anamorphosis he designs following Edeltraut's murder. The *fabbricante* laments the difficulty of this project; his material is too abstract, and he struggles to

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<sup>65</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone. Figure Femminili nella filosofia antica* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1991), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Vasio, “Ho fatto la guerra del Gruppo '63.”

construct the “insiemi coerenti” (“coherent wholes”) that together form the two images of an anamorphosis. Instead, he is in the impossible position of having to work with material that behaves like disembodied shadows. There is no way to gain full control of the image, he says, arguing that “è inutile riferirsi a una qualsiasi teoria delle ombre, perché qui, su queste pareti, è l’ombra in sé che si propone come cosa creata—mentre la realtà da cui deriva, di cui dovrebbe essere una proiezione, lentamente si sfalda via via che la vita la abbandona” (“it is useless to make reference to any theory of shadows because here, on these walls, it is the shadow alone that posits itself as a creation—while the reality from which it derives, of which it is supposed to be a projection, slowly slips away as life abandons it”) (8). This realization is connected to the feminist subtext, for Edeltraut is the reality on which this particular anamorphosis is supposed to be based. The narrator finally understands that his art cannot appropriate, fix, and represent Edeltraut’s complex “reality.” As he admits at the novel’s end, “Forse avrei dovuto custodire il suo viso nell’intimità dell’ombra, senza pretendere di concentrare su di lei un’intera storia” (“Perhaps I should have safeguarded her face in the intimacy of the shadows, without insisting that an entire story should converge on her”) (137). It is precisely in imposing his vision on Edeltraut that the *fabbricante* begins to strip her of her agency, and then of her life. The novel’s warning is that art, likewise, must never participate in the construction of totalizing ideologies.

*La più grande anamorfose* is ultimately a rich example of how Vasio employs a neo-avant-garde aesthetic to communicate a feminist message. Vasio’s experimentation with form and language, her deconstruction of hegemonic ideologies, and her endorsement of the open work, all suggest that she deserves to be seen not as a marginal figure within the Gruppo 63, but as one of its core members. Yet Vasio stands out against the largely masculinist dynamic and discourse of the Gruppo precisely because of works like *La più grande anamorfose del mondo* and *L’orizzonte*, both of which employ neo-avant-garde strategies to articulate and foreground a feminine subjectivity and a feminist vision. These novels emerge not only as remarkable examples of a neo-avant-garde aesthetic, but of Vasio’s original feminist contribution to it.