

## ARTICLES / SAGGI

### COMING ROUND: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ANESTHESIA IN BRUNELLA GASPERINI'S CUMULATIVE SELF-CONSTRUCT

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#### Sommario

*Brunella Gasperini (pseudonimo di Bianca Robecchi Gasperini) ha tenuto una rubrica di 'piccola posta' e ha scritto romanzi e novelle per due diffuse riviste femminili dagli anni Cinquanta alla fine degli anni Settanta. Il macrotesto autobiografico costituito dal suo dialogo ventennale con le lettrici, da tre volumi di 'cronache familiari' e dai due testi autobiografici I fantasmi nel cassetto e Una donna e altri animali mostra una graduale evoluzione caratterizzata dall'ammissione di conflitti e sofferenze, sia nel pubblico che nel privato, che nelle prime opere erano stati minimizzati (la definizione di Gasperini è 'anestetizzati').*

Bianca Robecchi Gasperini (1919-1979), was a journalist, a writer of romantic fiction, an advice columnist, wife and mother. As Brunella Gasperini, she wrote eleven romances, five collections of short stories, ten non-fiction books, two collections of answers selected from the advice columns she wrote in two women's weeklies between 1952 and her death, and one major

autobiographical text, *Una donna e altri animali*. During her lifetime, her work was ignored by literary critics. In the twenty years since her death the only two analyses of her work have been an essay by Bruno Pischetta, and an introductory monograph by Marina Tommaso, a first attempt to situate Gasperini within the context of women's social and legal developments from the 1960s to the 1980s.

We believe that the most interesting feature of Gasperini's work is her autobiographical construct which emerges from a macrotext consisting of three elements: *Una donna e altri animali*, the *Cronache* (three volumes of 'family tales' first published between 1959 and 1965) and her twenty-year dialogue with her readers through her weekly advice columns. We hope to show that this construct moves from the traditional 'feminine' parameters of 'narrativa femminile' and 'piccola posta' into a specifically literary space, one without any qualifiers. We also argue that part of this evolution involves acknowledging the pain and conflict which are understated (in Gasperini's words 'anaesthetised') in her earlier autobiographical texts.

Gasperini's self-construct is a constantly evolving exemplum forged over a twenty-year period of interaction with a very diverse readership of nearly two million. It represents a phase between female emancipation and liberation and provides interesting insights at the intersection of three overlapping disciplines: Life Writing, Cultural Studies and Women's Studies.

Modern autobiographical theory acknowledges that all self-constructs are positioned within specific cultural contexts. In the words of Jerome Bruner,

the conventional autobiographical genres, of course, reflect idealized cultural patterns. Many are familiar: the selfless seeker after the public interest, the sacrificing family man, the *Bildungsroman* with its assurance of learning

from experience, the ironic and detached observer of the absurdities of the contemporary human condition [...], the guardian mother shielding the young, the seeker after spontaneous self-expression, the forgiving victim of society's outrages, the apologia of the misunderstood public man, and so on. Each contains [...] an account of the protagonist's location in a 'virtual' culture (40).

Gasperini's autobiographical construct does not belong to a conventional autobiographical genre. However, it did exist within a recognisable 'virtual culture' which both affected it and was influenced by it. This 'virtual culture' was mostly identified with the readership of *Novella* and *Annabella*, two of the most popular Italian women's magazines of the 1950s and 1960s.

With twenty years' hindsight, Gasperini, in *Una donna e altri animali*, defined these magazines as

più realisti del re, conformisti, oscurantisti, filoclericali, dove l'umorismo andava subito ucciso con la melassa, le fanciulle vergini (*sic*) dovevano morire o comunque pagare a caro prezzo le loro colpe, le casalinghe avevano sempre la meglio su quelle modernastre che lavoravano fuori, e il massimo della cultura era citare l'*Antologia di Spoon River* (120).

Like all women's magazines, they used texts from a range of genres (features on the rich and famous, beauty, cooking, advice and fiction) to construct their readership, middle-class women who did not work after marriage and who did not have any serious social, political or cultural concerns. The implicit politics of what Susan Sheridan calls their 'imaginary social space' (93) was evident in their focus on the private sphere and

their exclusion not only of any public dimension, but also of any issue (such as domestic violence, abortion, homosexuality or drugs) which might undermine the status quo. The magazines' actual readership, as opposed to their implied readership, was not homogeneous<sup>1</sup> and included some men.

In 1950, Gasperini started writing romantic fiction, for first *Novella* and then *Annabella*: quirky boy-meets-girl stories and novels which appeared in weekly instalments and had conventional plots focusing on the love entanglements of groups of young people. The generic predictability of these texts was offset by humorous touches and by occasional hints that the characters' problems were not necessarily solved by marriage. The success of her fiction led to Gasperini being asked in 1952 to run a weekly advice column for both these magazines, which she did, at first under the name 'Candida', and then 'Brunella'. She was not alone in addressing women's concerns through an advice column in a women's magazine. Colette Rosselli, writing as Donna Letizia in *Grazia*, wittily dispensed advice on etiquette. Elena Gianini Belotti, in the periodical *Noi Donne*, published by the left-wing Unione Donne Italiane, answered questions from women, most of whom were politically active in parties and movements of the left and relatively uninhibited in discussing sexual matters<sup>2</sup>. Gasperini fell somewhere between the two, in that her answers did not have an explicit focus on either etiquette or organised politics.

These two public activities (author and advice columnist)

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<sup>1</sup> In a 1977 interview with Vittorio Spinazzola, Gasperini defined her readers as 'un pubblico non solo estremamente vasto e variabile, ma anche estremamente composito. Si va dalla sinistra alla destra, dalla cultura elementare alla cultura accademica, dalla casalinga alla professionista, dal nord al sud.' (Spinazzola 1977:129).

<sup>2</sup> *Che razza di ragazza* is a collection of letters received and answered by Belotti in the period 1974-79.

increased Gasperini's readership and contributed to the development of a public persona with an emerging autobiographical construct. Her photo appeared alongside her column, and readers reacted favourably to regular biographical articles featuring Gasperini, her husband, and their children. She sometimes cited her own family's response to the problems sent to her. A typical response in *Annabella* (12 November 1961:93) to two teenage girls who found their contemporaries superficial and frivolous was:

Il vostro problema [...] è il problema di molti ragazzi: vi dirò di più, è un problema che vive addirittura in casa mia, sotto le taciturne, meditative, spinose spoglie del mio 'strano' figlio quindicenne; 'strano' perché si interessa di filosofia e di sociologia più che di cha-cha-cha; 'strano' perché [...] pur desiderando la compagnia di giovani [...] non sa partecipare a conversazioni-standard, né interessarsi di argomenti-standard. E si sente solo.

In this way, by the late 1950s, her readership already knew something of her family. Thus she created a persona with no clear separation between public and private, which set her apart from the other advice columnists and other authors of popular fiction, whose lives were not in the public domain.

In the second half of 1959, *Annabella* started publishing weekly stories by Brunella Gasperini which described the adventures and misadventures of the Gamberini family, told in the first person by the husband and father 'Dino'. Dino is married to a woman who has a lot in common with Gasperini: she is short, thin, and writes both advice columns and romantic fiction for women's magazines. The Gamberinis have three children and an unspecified number of animals. Dino's tales were then published in book form as *Io e loro. Cronache di un*

*marito*. Two other collections of 'family chronicles' appeared in book form after being serialised in *Annabella*. In 1961 came *Lui e noi. Cronache di una moglie*, purporting to be the wife's response to the husband's narrative, which had apparently had 'un insospettato quanto immeritato successo' (198). *Noi e loro. Cronache di una figlia*, where the narrating voice is the youngest child of the Gamberini family, followed in 1965. The three texts, which are sequential and chronological, became collectively known as the *cronache familiari* and were republished in 1974 in one volume, under the title *Siamo in famiglia*<sup>3</sup>. All the members of the Gamberini family have personal characteristics that are carried through the *Cronache*, which make it possible for the readers to recognise them from instalment to installment. The distinguishing features of the mother – she twists her hair, lives on coffee, tranquilizers and cigarettes, keeps irregular hours, neglects her appearance and is prone to bouts of hypochondria – partly coincide with Brunella Gasperini's self-description in interviews and in answers to her readers. Fictional representation and autobiographical revelations integrate into one multi-dimensional construct.

The multiple narrative voices (husband, wife, daughter, and – in a later story<sup>4</sup> — son) in the *Cronache* fulfil a number of functions. They interpret cultural ideals from the points of view of different generations and genders. While they apparently displace the mother from the centre of the text, they also show how pivotal she is within the family, in that she mediates all relationships. The constant references by the three narrating voices to her scattiness, untidiness and imaginary illnesses point out the many ways in which she is not a conventional wife

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<sup>3</sup> A later story is supposedly narrated by the son: *Diario di un figlio difficile*.

<sup>4</sup> The story is 'Diario di un figlio difficile', published in 1976 in the collection *Storie d'amore storie d'allegria*.

and mother. The resulting construct, far from being negative, produces a woman who is open, understanding, humorous, loved and respected by children, husband, animals, friends and readers. The following quote from *Io e loro. Cronache di un marito* shows how her husband sees her whilst he is at work:

E io dall'ufficio continuai a seguirla col subcosciente e a disegnare sulle pratiche: una casa angusta e pullulante, tre figli movimentati e altisonanti, una domestica piena di punti interrogativi, di fumetti e di piatti rotti, un cane confusionario, un gatto mefistofelico, un televisore imperversante, valanghe di dischi negri e di peluches, e in mezzo alla mischia lei: una donnetta mingherlina e indomita, coi capelli irti e le dita vorticanti, che pretende di scrivere, rispondere al telefono, tener d'occhio i figli, limitare le catastrofi culinarie della Rosa, agire e pensare, tutto insieme: tra cachet, sigarette, caffè, Dio che tardi, Tatti non interrompermi ogni minuto, Pop hai finito il latino?, Bruna basta con quella lagna!, xxxx, cuccia Bu, John esci dal mio cappello, un po' di sileeeenzio!, Rosa è la casa che brucia o solo l'arrosto?, xxxx, o Dio la mia testa, abbassate il televisore!, chi è che picchia qua sotto?, uf questa maledetta casa!, xxxx, caffè, sigarette, caffè. (115-6)

The *Cronache* are an Italian literary equivalent of the American television 'situation comedies' of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as *I love Lucy* and *Leave it to Beaver*. Like situation comedies, Gasperini's stories have a formulaic narrative structure. Each episode is a minor family drama which develops and by the end is resolved quickly and humorously: the old, much-loved family car is regretfully replaced, the family gets lost on holiday but ends up enjoying the adventure. Pain, though

real, is never fatal or permanent: arguments between family members are quickly settled, sick people and animals get better, and such sources of conflict as homosexuality, drugs, and poverty are kept outside the Gamberini family. Any references to death are cryptic and fleeting, as are any references to politics or to the public sphere. In *Cronache di un marito*, the husband makes a self-referentially ironic comment on the passionate interest, shared by the whole village where they are holidaying – and by his family and himself – in a couple of nesting swans:

L'Algeria era in fiamme, il Medio Oriente traballava, l'ONU aveva le mani nei capelli e il paese di San Mamete si preoccupava unicamente della sorte di tre uova. Con tre futuri cignetti dentro. (30)

The narrative strategies, in common with those of standard situation comedies, involve a number of stock characters. The gruff family doctor, nicknamed 'il Nero Veloce' for his habit of ordering a quick black coffee, the friendly surgeon, 'Dacci un taglio', always ready to operate, the semi-literate housekeeper, Rosa, and several animals appear in several, if not all the *Cronache*. They all reinforce the reader's perception of a family biography with Brunella at its centre. Thus, Gasperini fosters a discursive community familiar with her autobiographical persona and interested in her experiences, all elements of an 'autobiographical pact'<sup>5</sup>.

This self-construct and its limitations, particularly the absence of significant conflicts and pain, were later assessed by Gasperini's narrating voice in *Una donna e altri animali* through a transparent metaphor: '[le *Cronache*] mi parevano vere. Non che fossero false. Ma non erano vere. Erano anestetizzate'

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<sup>5</sup> The definition is by Philippe Lejeune.

(131). She gives two explanations for this. The first is historical and political: the *Cronache* were written between the Christian Democrats' victory in the 1948 election and the years of the economic boom, when the frustrations of marginalised groups were still unverballed. The second is autobiographical: the narrating self of 1978 says about her narrated self of the mid-sixties: 'mi anestetizzai' (121) meaning that she suppressed any misgivings she had about what she was doing.

What she does not acknowledge with this explanation is the positive aspect of her multiple roles in relation to her readers: her cumulative self-construct is part of a complex *exemplum* which also includes the autobiographical persona as advice columnist. The home-based wife and mother, 'Mrs Gamberini' of the *Cronache*, also had a public image as a writer and columnist, and combined features of conventional 'women's role' with features of autonomy. Brunella Gasperini, the columnist, at the same time and within the constraints of the virtual community of the women's magazines, urged her readers to be their own people with their own interests, whether they worked outside the house or not. She tackled issues which in those years in Catholic Italy were seen as highly controversial, such as pre-marital virginity (which she did not consider an unqualified moral value) and sex education for young women and married couples, fully knowing that she would provoke strong reactions from some of her readers. As early as 1962, answering a twenty-one-year-old reader who was not sure whether every sex act led to pregnancy, she said forthrightly:

Probabilmente la madre di questa ragazza è convinta di averla educata benissimo lasciandola arrivare a ventun anni nella più completa ignoranza (ignoranza, non ingenuità, che è diverso), senza il minimo indispensabile di educazione sessuale. [...] Mi scusi la tirata,

giovane lettrice, e veniamo a lei. Io non posso spiegarle attraverso un giornale 'i misteri della vita'. [...] Sono già abbastanza nei guai, e ho già troppe lettrici che aspettano, col mitra puntato, ogni mio argomento 'scabroso' (secondo loro) per gridare alla mia 'immoralità' e 'spregiudicatezza'.<sup>6</sup>

In the late Sixties the discursive world of women's magazines was forced to expand by the impact of politics and by the growing realisation that 'the personal is political'. *Una donna e altri animali* represents Gasperini's narrated self as part of this general awakening:

Arrivammo al risveglio (mio) del pre-sessantotto. Al diavolo i soldi: nel 1966, dimezzando le mie entrate, mollai uno dei due giornali, mi tenni il più avanzato, e cominciai io stessa ad avanzare un bel po' più in fretta. (121).

Social and political dimensions were no longer excluded from the magazines' discursive space, which now included features on sexuality, birth control, and youth protest movements. Gasperini, having chosen to write only for the more progressive *Annabella*, began to use her column as a forum for exchanges of opinion and argument on two of the big issues of late twentieth-century Italy, divorce (legalised in 1970 and recontested through a national referendum in 1974) and abortion (decriminalised in 1978 after a long and bitter campaign).

At the same time, she began to expand her autobiographical self-construct. The chronicles of the Gamberini family stopped

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<sup>6</sup> 1962 letter re-published in Gasperini 1981: 241-2.

appearing, and were replaced by unashamedly autobiographical first-person narratives. From now on the narrator is explicitly identified as Brunella Gasperini, but there is evident continuity with the earlier construct, since this narrator has the same habits and character traits that made Mrs. Gamberini familiar to the readers. The autobiographical pact is reinforced by the fact that Brunella, the new narrator, has only two children, who, like her husband, are no longer identified by fictitious names.

*Fantasmì nel cassetto* (1970) – serialised on a weekly basis, like all of Gasperini's work – is the first of these 'deanaesthetised' narratives. While in the *Cronache* Mrs Gamberini was represented primarily as a wife and mother, whose work was peripheral to her family life, *Fantasmì* revolves around Brunella's work as an advice columnist and around the way her work is central to her life. The 'ghosts' in her 'drawer' are readers whose problems and needs constantly take up Brunella's time and energies, which produces guilt on her part about her children and family, and insoluble tensions between her and her husband.

Gasperini's narrated self and her family are, for the first time, situated in a social context full of problems. Each chapter deals with one or more of these, shown in lengthy excerpts from the readers' letters and Brunella's responses. Brunella's interventions result in both qualified successes and tragic failures, which continue to fill her with guilt and pain years later. She advises a victim of domestic violence to report her husband to the Police, and as a result he murders his whole family. A Catholic politician's pregnant wife consults Brunella because a continuation of her pregnancy would pose a serious threat to her health, but she eventually dies because her husband insists that the pregnancy go ahead. Brunella counsels a severely depressed actress who recovers sufficiently to be able to listen to Brunella's own despair and offer some comfort. A young drug user is committed to a psychiatric hospital by his intransigent

father, but Brunella is able to listen to him non-judgmentally. This troubled context produces another reading of the narrator's habits: smoking, pill-popping, spreading herself too thinly are no longer just represented as amusing quirks, they can now be read as the self-destructive response of an individual isolated in a social climate which is unsympathetic to women.

The evolution of the autobiographical construct is not a linear process. The pain and conflict of *Fantasm* are anaesthetised once again in further stories published in Annabella and reprinted together as *Storie d'amore storie d'allegria*: fragments of the autobiographical construct recur in most of the stories, but the only pain is the melancholic acknowledgment that her youth has gone. The last of these stories, 'Diario di una signora di mezza estate', however, contains numerous memories and self-reflections which re-appear two years later in Gasperini's last and most ambitious text, *Una donna e altri animali*.

The sentimental, up-beat autobiographical fragments of *Storie d'amore storie d'allegria* coexisted in implicit contradiction with the forthright political views Gasperini continued to express in her columns. She represented herself as firmly committed to divorce as a marker of secular society, and to the decriminalisation of abortion in the context of women's right to choose. Her position is summed up in one of the many replies she wrote during the last two years of debates before abortion was decriminalised:

Oggi io sono più libera di esprimermi di quanto non lo fossi nei torpidi, oscurantisti anni Cinquanta. Ma non mi sono mai 'sconfessata'. Non ho mai detto cose che non pensassi [...] Sono nata in una famiglia in cui l'amore per il prossimo, la libertà intellettuale e la tolleranza erano le regole fondamentali del vivere. Non era una famiglia cattolica, signora. Era una famiglia onesta, di cui sono profondamente fiera [...] Per

me l'embrione non è 'una persona', è solo una possibilità di persona [...] Ne deriva che per me è assai meno criminoso abortire che mettere al mondo, in questo mondo sempre più inquinato e violento e spietato, un bambino non voluto [...].<sup>7</sup>

In 1977 a negative review of a romance Gasperini had originally written fifteen years earlier<sup>8</sup> was one of the catalysts that led to her decision to stop writing romances and to consider engaging with more demanding writing. With *Una donna e altri animali*, what she wanted to produce was

Non un libro scritto prima a puntate sul giornale, come tutti quelli che ho scritto finora. Un libro libro. // libro. Quello che dovrebbe un giorno farmi uscire dal ghetto della letteratura marchiata femminile per entrare nella nobile sfera della letteratura diciamo unisex.

Dovrebbe, ma non è detto. (25)

The book, her attempt to penetrate a new readership without deserting the old one, first appeared, ironically, in instalments in *Annabella* in 1977-78, and shortly afterwards was published by Rizzoli. Its metatextual strategies make this Gasperini's most complex and interesting work. The generic nature of the text is deliberately ambiguous. The word 'romanzo', appearing under the title, frees the author from the 'autobiographical pact', and

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<sup>7</sup> 1978 letter re-published in Gasperini 1981: 232-3.

<sup>8</sup> Massimo Romano, writing in *Tuttolibri* Number 26, 1977, made negative comments about *Rosso di sera* which was published in book form fifteen years after being serialised in *Novella* in 1962. In her column *Così la penso io*, Gasperini stated: 'Il giorno che volessi e potessi scrivere un libro "serio", dovrei probabilmente cambiar nome: o i recensori maschi, che per lo più non mi leggono, sapendo che conduco una rubrica "per donne" continuerebbero a trattarmi con sarcastico o indulgente paternalismo' (1979: 39).

places the book within the parameters of autobiographical fiction:

Non è un'autobiografia. Giuro che non lo è. Che non lo sarà. Però ci saranno dentro, è fatale, un sacco di particolari e contorni autobiografici (47).

Regardless of this (qualified) disclaimer, a number of strategies in this text strongly invite the readers to view it as 'authentic' autobiography and as a final summing up of all the facets of Gasperini's self-construct. One obvious strategy is the presence of some of the characters which formed the community of the *Cronache*: their descriptions and traits are sometimes reproduced verbatim<sup>9</sup>. Another is the narrator's implicit differentiation of this text from the previous, 'anaesthetised' ones.

The first chapter sets the frame for a meta-narrative: Brunella's work for *Annabella*. The narrating voice is immediately recognisable as Brunella: a wife and mother, now middle-aged, who is struggling with the combined stresses of a chaotic family and tight work deadlines. The latest of these is an assignment to write a series of autobiographical pieces on herself and the pets in her life. The subsequent chapters are episodes which represent her and her family as no longer insulated from the world outside, but situated in a broad political context: anti-Fascism, the Resistance, and the left-wing movements of the Sixties and Seventies.

The de-anaesthetising process operates on the levels of both form and content. In the *Cronache*, conventional form reflected conventional content: each episode was self-contained, with a

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<sup>9</sup> Two among many instances are the cat Giovanna, compared to T. S. Eliot's Gumbie Cat (Gasperini 1965: 21 and 1978: 133), and the family doctor 'Nero Veloce' who keeps scolding the whole family (1965: 73-76, and 1978: 79-87).

beginning, a development, and a fairly happy resolution. *Una donna e altri animali* is stylistically more complex: it has apparently no beginning and no end. By the third chapter Brunella is still searching for the opening sentence; the closing sentence of the final chapter is 'ci manca il finale' (195). The autobiographical musings are fragmented, and constantly interrupted: their non-linear nature parallels the way the autobiographical persona defines herself through her responses and reactions to a variety of competing ideologies. Brunella is held in a web of overlapping roles and discourses which generate inner conflict. As a journalist, advice columnist, wife, mother, and medical patient, she reacts to her husband's patriarchal posturing, and her daughter's feminism, her son's left-wing activism, and the conservatism of male magazine editors, politicians and doctors. Her 'life-writing' in this text takes the form of a tangle of threads:

è un filo fragile, il mio. Dispersivo. È anche un filo molto aggrovigliato. Ogni volta che mi si rompe o che il bandolo scappa di mano, passo ore tribolate a rincorrerlo nel labirinto della mia psiche [...] trovando e perdendo ogni sorta di bandoli. (25)

The threads keep intersecting: childhood memories, health problems, multiple political disappointments, personal and professional relationships. In this tangle, pain (both physical and emotional) is textually integrated, as part of a life which is by definition incomplete and provisional. In the *Cronache* any conflicts were confined to the family sphere and easily manageable. In *Fantasmî nel cassetto* the narrated self was surrounded by, and absorbed, the pain of the women who wrote to her for advice with problems which varied from the trivial to the life-threatening. *Una donna e altri animali* does not fall

entirely into either pattern: pain is present, but not so easily attributable to clearly defined reasons or episodes. Significantly, the epigraph consists of three lines from a poem by Pablo Neruda:

Questa volta lasciatemi  
essere felice,  
a nessuno è successo niente.<sup>10</sup>

The tangle keeps unravelling, without ever doing so completely. Brunella hints at the reason for this through the voice of a friend known as the 'guru', who repeatedly refers to the 'fratture non sanate' of Brunella's life (72, 78). This metaphor, together with the text's frequent references to mortality, suggests a life whose continuity is shattered by painful interruptions in the form of the deaths of many loved ones. The fear of death diffused throughout the text and interpreted by the 'guru' as fear of life, finds a focus in the death of Brunella's four brothers. Fragments of this story cumulatively lead the readers into constructing a picture of four young men active in the Resistance, who were slaughtered by Fascists and Nazis in the mountains near the Swiss border whilst trying to smuggle Jews to safety. The hints build up towards the text's climax, a dark dream sequence in the final pages, where Brunella sees her brothers fall dead, one after the other, in slow motion.

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<sup>10</sup> They are the opening three lines of 'Oda al dia feliz', from Pablo Neruda's *Odas elementales* (1954).

Whilst this episode can be read as a metaphor for the mortality of her brothers, herself and her children, it can also be read as another form of displacement. In Bianca Robecchi's life, there were three brothers whose premature deaths were separate and due to an inherited disease. There was a tragic wartime death which is never mentioned in her autobiographical fiction but briefly acknowledged in her exchanges with her readers: that of her infant son who was trampled to death in the panic of an air raid. Arguably this is the most troublesome 'frattura non sanata' in Brunella's life; the presence of three children in the *Cronache*, as opposed to the two in the later texts, can also be read as a veiled reference to this lost child<sup>11</sup>.

The thread of mortality extends to a slow-motion dream of the death of Brunella's children, which follows the dream of the death of her brothers, and includes something which is an implicit presence in all autobiographical writing, the death of the narrating self. Death is not constructed as a source of fear: consistently with her self-representation as an agnostic, Brunella accepts it while rejecting the notion of an afterlife ('per me, che mistica non sono, la morte cos'è? Una botta in testa e via' (93)) and serenely writes her own epigraph ('il mio testamento' (43)) on the wall of her study. What Brunella does fear is the end of all experiences and human contacts: 'morire significa rinunciare a ogni passione, rabbia, curiosità – memoria', (93). Her death is also implicitly present in the closing sentence 'ci manca il finale'. Ostensibly a comment made by Brunella's husband about her unfinished autobiographical manuscript, the sentence is also, ironically, the last one of the book, and a fairly obvious reference to the inherent paradox of all autobiographical writing, its necessarily unfinished nature.

Death did follow the publication of the 'unfinished' text.

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<sup>11</sup> The biographical source for this is Tommaso: 35-6. For direct references in her column see, for instance, *Novella* of 9 January 1959: 2, and *Annabella* of 4 July 1968: 4.

Bianca Robecchi Gasperini died less than three months after *Una donna e altri animali* appeared, having lived just long enough to see her book attain some recognition and rise to the top of the best seller list<sup>12</sup>.

We can hypothesise that one of the reasons for this increase in recognition could have been a readership overlap between the more educated section of Gasperini's public and the reading public of the more famous *Lessico familiare* by Natalia Ginzburg (1963), a text which Brunella acknowledges with admiration (100). Through textual form (the use of complex textual structures and recurrent family sayings) and content (histories of large families embedded in Italian anti-Fascist and left-wing politics) Gasperini creates an intertextual reference. Tragic family loss as a consequence of Resistance activity (clearly fictional in Gasperini's account) reinforces this connection and represents a possible bid for respectability within the Italian literary establishment.

The bid has so far been unsuccessful. Gasperini's autobiographical writings have not received much serious attention, either from the literary establishment, or from feminists, and are probably destined to remain confined to the ghetto of 'women's literature'. In a 1978 interview Gasperini explained this by saying that 'una scrittrice "per donne" non merita attenzione, è squalificata in partenza, proprio perché non si rispettano le donne' (Carrano 1978: 109). However, the insights derived from the past thirty years' critical approaches, which have changed the parameters of both 'literature' and 'autobiography', allow us to see that Gasperini's macrotext is an exemplum, to her mainly female readers, of commitment to social change, and an example of early feminist 'life writing'. From its origins in conventional genres like the letters page,

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<sup>12</sup> Evidence of this is provided by Magrini: 6.

romance fiction and family chronicle, the macrotext pushes their limits in both content and form. It draws on them all, refusing to be a linear narrative. It foregrounds unsolved conflicts and the difficulty of closure. Its final stage, *Una donna e altri animali*, is now recognisable as a fore-runner to the more obviously feminist autobiographical writing which began to emerge in Italy several years later – texts such as Clara Sereni's *Casalinghitudine*, Fabrizia Ramondino's *Althénopis*, Marina Jarre's *I padri lontani* and Luisa Passerini's *Autoritratto di gruppo*. Gasperini's texts – read by women of all ages and social strata – were part of the climate which fostered this development.

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