

# TALKING BACK: BIOGRAPHY AS FRIENDSHIP IN ANNA BANTI'S *ARTEMISIA*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In Artemisia, romanzo, autobiografia, e biografia si collocano all'interno di un dialogo fra narratore e personaggio che permette ad Anna Banti di sviluppare una sofisticata discussione metanarrativa sulla biografia, in particolare quella che tratta di donne, come processo di narrazione e come genere che richiede continua ridefinizione.*

Writing the life of another woman requires some of the same qualities or conditions as a good conversation with a friend: mutuality, as interdependence risked, respected, and enjoyed; equality, guaranteeing the grounds for and so allowing the celebration of difference; familiarity, knowing enough about each other in the various worlds we inhabit to hear what is said and to comprehend what is meant. (Minnich, 1985: 287)

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Professor John Gatt-Rutter for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Writing *Artemisia* in the 1940s, Anna Banti seems to have shared such an understanding of what narrating the life of another woman may entail. Banti's fictional biography of the Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, first published in 1947, is the story of the artist's life, a reflection on the writing of that story, and the account of the friendship that slowly develops between the biographer and her subject.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I discuss Banti's "good conversation" with her friend Artemisia, focusing on the "mutuality, as interdependence risked, respected, and enjoyed" as a way of writing the story of another woman's life.

*Artemisia*'s opening words are uttered by Artemisia Gentileschi herself. "Non piangere" (1996: 9), she says to the narrator of her own fictional biography. The narrator is sitting on a path, is wearing only a nightdress, and is racked by sobs. She is crying for her devastated city, Florence, but she is also crying because in the bombing which destroyed her house, she lost the manuscript in which she had given life to a friend, a *compagna*. As she recalls, "Sotto le macerie di casa mia ho perduto Artemisia, la mia compagna di tre secoli fa, che respirava adagio, coricata da me su cento pagine di scritto" (1996: 10).

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<sup>2</sup> *Artemisia* is arguably Anna Banti's most successful novel. First published by Sansoni in 1947, it was shortlisted for the Strega Prize in 1948 and re-published by Mondadori in 1953, 1965 and in 1969 together with *Noi credevamo*, with the title of *Due storie*. In 1974, *Artemisia* was included in the Oscar Mondadori series, and in 1989 was published once more by Rizzoli, who subsequently published it in 1994 in its "Libri & Grandi Opere" series. Bompiani republished it in 1996 in its "I Grandi Tascabili" series.

The realisation of such a loss is unbearable for the narrator, since it marks Artemisia's second death; the first being the artist's prolonged absence from history.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the loss of the manuscript allows Artemisia to come back from the dead as a friend who speaks, as opposed to one who is *coricata* (recumbent) in the pages of a novel. For Artemisia comes back from the dead to help the narrator rewrite the story of her life. In so doing, she becomes both co-biographer and subject of her own story, at times speaking in the first person, at others addressing the narrator to elicit new stories or correct old ones, and gradually disappearing towards the end of the story.

The mutuality and interdependence of the relationship between the narrator and Artemisia is developed in the conversations they have with each other, addressing one another as "tu". This is how the narrator describes her easing into informal friendship:

Ora è per me sola che Artemisia recita la lezione, vuol provarmi di credere tutto quel che inventai e si fa tanto docile che persino i suoi capelli cambiano di colore, diventando quasi neri, e olivastro l'incarnato: tale io l'immaginai quando cominciai a leggere i verbali del suo processo sulla carta fiorita di muffa. Chiudo gli occhi e per la prima volta le do del tu. (1996: 20-21)

The narrator's self-conscious appeal to metafiction adds urgency to her desire to welcome Artemisia into her life. Like all good friends, at times the two women argue with each other: "Non le importa che io mi distragga dallo struggimento di averla perduta, si fa vanto di esistere fuori di me e quasi s'impegna a precedermi di un passo senza suono,

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Duncan has convincingly argued that Banti's account is "an act of restitution for the forgotten life of Artemisia Gentileschi and for the many forms of violence done to her. Similarly, it records the violence done to women and children in the bombing of Florence" (1991: 160). JoAnn Cannon makes a similar remark, linking Banti's novel with "the revisionist interpretations of the Renaissance or Early Modern period by feminist scholars such as Joan Kelly" (1994: 326).

quando il sentiero assolato che percorro svolta nell'ombra" (1996:19-20). At other times, positions change and the narrator assumes the role of comforter: "Nell'impegno d'improvvisare un conforto, quel che ho scritto e ho perduto mi diventa inestimabile come un testo unico e tanto più brucia il mio dolore quanto più Artemisia, assicurandosi, rientra in dignità" (1996:17).

According to Deborah Heller, such self-conscious violation of "the more 'traditional' narrative convention of self-sustaining illusion" belongs to an established "modern — if not new — tradition" which includes writers such as Sterne and Diderot (1990: 47). Yet the dialogue between the narrator and Artemisia is much more than a stylistic convention or narrative technique. It is both a metafictional reflection on the writing of the past as history, and a means to reflect on the writing of biography.

Walter Benjamin writes that history is "the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but filled by the presence of the now" [*Jetztzeit*] (1968: 261). Maurizia Boscagli takes the *Jetztzeit* to be "exactly the moment that cuts through history, the 'now' that blasts its continuum open, thus disrupting and contradicting history's claimed completeness" (1996: 133). In Banti's *Artemisia*, the "presence of the now" is felt through the conversations between Banti's narrator, writing in 1944, and Artemisia, resurrected from the dead. These conversations are "series of intermittent *Jetztzeit*, moments of historical rupture" — to use Boscagli's words (1996: 135) — that interrupt the narrative of Artemisia's life, disrupting its completeness and questioning its closure both in the present and in the past.

Past and present are one when the narrator cannot help but find Artemisia everywhere: "La ritrovo sul prato, all'altezza del Belvedere, dove ci si sdraia sull'erba calda, col rischio delle mitragliatrici" (1996: 17). And the past lives in the present when the bond between the two women is made explicit by their common vulnerability as women which is emphasised by the use of "nostra":

La nostra povera libertà si lega all'umile libertà di una vergine che nel mille seicentoundici non ha se non quella del proprio corpo integro e non può capacitarci in eterno di averla perduta. Per tutta la vita essa si adopra a sostituirla con un'altra e più forte, ma il rimpianto di quell'unica restò: mi pareva, con quei fogli scritti, d'averlo quietato. Ora ritorna più intenso che mai, con un moto di relitto che appare e dispare sull'onda che la porta, e, a momenti, sembra che l'acqua limpida l'abbia digerito. Scottata mille volte al bruciore dell'offesa, mille volte Artemisia si fa indietro e prende fiato per lanciarsi di nuovo nel fuoco. Così usava un tempo, così usa oggi con me. (1996: 22)

In this passage, as in many others in *Artemisia*, Banti blurs distinctions between the historical novel, biography, autobiography and fiction, and creates a “mutual dependence of narrator and protagonist” which for Heller implies an ideal of female friendship (1990: 49). And by taking part in such a friendship, the narrator becomes also a protagonist, in the same way in which Artemisia becomes a narrator. The two women share the memories of Artemisia's life, as it was recounted in “quei fogli scritti”. Hence what they struggle to remember and to narrate is not the story of the “real” Artemisia but rather the life of Artemisia as a fictionalised character. The dialogue between narrator and protagonist implies a self-conscious reflection on biography and its connections with autobiography and fiction. Such connections have become central to current debates about feminist biography and women's life writing.

When soliciting contributions for their 1984 collection *Between Women*, Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo and Sara Ruddick asked a group of feminists who had written about other women to reflect on their writing processes. The editors' questions were simple: “How did their projects begin? Why did they turn to a woman or women for study? Who encouraged, who dispirited them? What did they hope

their work would do for them or their readers?” Ascher, DeSalvo and Ruddick also asked how the writers’ involvement with their subjects affected their lives: “What doubts arose about themselves, their projects, or the women they worked on? How did they change in the course of their work? Did they come to judge themselves or their subjects differently? Were they transformed as writers, activists, teachers, artists, lovers, mothers, daughters, feminists?” (1984: xix-xx).

Some of the contributors to the collection described the relationship to their subjects as one of identification. Others preferred to define it as a process of reciprocity: “I, her biographer, have shaped her life, and she, my subject, has shaped mine”, Alix Kates Shulman wrote about her relationship with her subject, Emma Goldman (1984: 2). In all cases, the biographers recounted their personal stories in order to draw parallels between their own experiences and those of their subjects, and detailed how, in the process of writing, they learned invaluable lessons about themselves as feminists and as women. One of the contributors said: “Women’s biography is simply a special case of our current study of women in which we work to recover our history and ourselves, each at least partly in terms of the other” (Chevigny, 1983: 99).

Not coincidentally, all of the contributors to *Between Women*, mostly feminists involved in the women’s liberation movement, wrote about women who struggled to defy authority and patriarchal oppression by campaigning, writing and demonstrating, often at the expense of recurring periods in prison, confinement and isolation. The subjects are all portrayed as controversial, original, rebellious and, most of all, courageous heroines at odds with their surroundings, who were, perhaps with the exception of Virginia Woolf, generally misunderstood during their lifetimes and virtually forgotten or underrated by posterity.

In a 1993 special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, feminist “theorists, critics, practitioners, and readers” from “a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches” were invited to comment on writing biography (Sharistianian, 1993: 155). This time, however,

although the call for papers did not impose any particular emphasis, the essayists wrote about the relationship between the changing nature of feminism, biography and theory with an implicit awareness that their discussions belonged to the relatively new subgenre of feminist biography. In her introduction to the special issue, Janet Sharistanian conceded that this new “subgenre”, as she called it, is by no means stable and generically well-defined. “Feminist biography is in flux”, she wrote. Indeed, Sharistanian observed that since its origins in the last quarter of the twentieth century, this newcomer “has undergone at least some of the multitudinous shifts that have affected and will continue to affect feminism, biography, and theory” (1993: 155).

Like the contributors to *Between Women*, the essayists in the 1993 collection saw the bond between the biographer and her subject as both inevitable and problematic. Assuming that feminist biography does not merely involve the writing of a woman’s life, they reflected on how their self-conscious feminist politics affected their relationship with their subjects as well as their interpretive processes. The essayists then raised three fundamental questions about definition, purpose and methodology in feminist biography: “What is the feminism in feminist biography?”, “What is the theory in feminist biography?”, and, finally, “What is the biography in feminist biography?” (Sharistanian, 1993: 157).

Implicitly and explicitly, these questions are central to other works on this topic. In *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*, published in 1992, twelve feminist scholars who had written about other women’s lives were asked to narrate the development of their work and discuss their endeavour to account for the gendered selves they wrote about. For the editors of *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* contended that “[w]hen the subject is female” gender “moves to the center of the analysis”. They argued that “the gender consciousness a feminist biographer brings to a female subject can enrich biographers of male subjects as well” since

“few biographies of men highlight gender issues in men’s lives” (Alpern, Antler, Perry and Scobie, 1992: 7).

What distinguishes feminist biography, then, is the focus on the self as gendered. For some of the contributors to *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, such a focus on the self as gendered is illustrated by a deliberate effort to detail the various stages of their identification, as well as disappointment, with the women they were writing about. For others, the relationship was such that they felt compelled to research and document every single day of their subjects’ lives or to include them in their family lives.

In all three collections mentioned so far, there is an obvious tendency to reflect on the process of biographical writing by employing autobiographical modes of expression. Such an approach could be explained by resorting to Liz Stanley’s claim that biography and autobiography, along with the editing of diaries and letters, largely raise “the same epistemological, theoretical and technical issues [...] in relation to the ontological claims of each of these apparently distinct genres” (1992: 3). According to Stanley:

both biography and autobiography lay claim to facticity, yet both are by nature artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product, for no life is lived quite so much under a single spotlight as the conventional form of written auto/biographies suggest. (1992: 3-4)

It could be argued, then, that the feminist writers who felt the need to discuss their involvement with their subjects in terms of “emotional identification”, as Gale Chevigny called it (1983: 98), and mutual understanding intended to make a point which resembled Stanley’s. Keeping Stanley’s comments in mind, I suggest that the conjunction of feminism and biography resides precisely in the ways in which the biographers use autobiography to write about other women’s lives. The

autobiographical approach serves as a means of explaining and discussing the relationship between biographer and subject, but it also allows for two life stories to be written — that of the biographer as well as that of her subject. Since these stories result from an evolving dialogue, they are in process rather than complete, gesturing towards alternative interpretations depending on the biographer's cultural and political allegiances and experiences.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between biography and other forms of expression, including autobiography, has come under discussion again in a recent debate following the publication of monographs on biography by Richard Holmes, David Ellis and Paula R. Backscheider (See Lee, 2001: 53-57).

In *Artemisia*, Banti employs such an evolving dialogue to foreshadow alternative interpretations of Artemisia's life. By emphasising that Artemisia is fictionalised, however, I do not intend to undermine her significance for both the readers and her biographer. Rather, I refer to the fact that our knowledge of her is inevitably mediated by her biographer's process of identification, reciprocation, (re)creation and ultimately self-invention.<sup>5</sup>

This process becomes explicit in a revealing passage in which the narrator reassures Artemisia that "una donna che dipinge nel milleseicentocinquanta è un atto di coraggio, vale per Annella e per altre cento almeno, fino ad oggi" to which Artemisia aptly replies: "Vale anche per te." (1996: 182). The emphasis on recognising and celebrating the women's courage to insist on being artists turns them into heroines. Banti's Artemisia is, indeed, a female hero, yet her heroism lies not only in her ability to achieve artistic independence and celebrity, but also in her problematic position as a female ostracised from her kind precisely because she is a painter. Her exclusion from the world of women causes her as much anguish as her regret over the difficulties she encounters on account of being one. On the one hand, she regrets being a woman for the inconvenience it causes her as a painter, but on the other she mourns for the missed opportunity of being part of a community of women. The few instances when

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<sup>5</sup> Many critics discuss the identification of Anna Banti with Artemisia Gentilechi. Heller suggests that a distinctive "female vulnerability" is the source of the narrator's early identification with the painter (1990: 49). Duncan points out that the "parallel" between the two "is more evident as the narrator addresses Artemisia as both a woman and a female artist initiating a discourse of self-identification which is pursued throughout the text" (1991: 160). Carol Lazzaro-Weis argues that Banti's narrator, identifying with Artemisia's courage for daring to become a professional painter, changes and eventually eclipses Artemisia as a historical figure in her own right (1999: 39). Sharon Wood describes *Artemisia* as a "a meditation on the woman artist," and a reflection on "the struggle between public and private, work and marriage," which Banti herself "felt so acutely in her own life" (1995: 120). The identification has not escaped Banti's contemporaries either, as it became openly acknowledged when the headline of the Florentine daily paper *La nazione* announced the writer's death in 1985 with the words 'Addio Artemisia!' (Wood, 1995: 119).

Artemisia is allowed to relish the comfort of other women are among the moments in the novel when she escapes from a loneliness that is tormenting her. Being pregnant in Naples positions her in the world of women. This is the only instance when being a painter does not prevent her from being accepted by other women as one of them. The result is soothing to a woman on her own who is new to Naples and looking for patrons in order to support herself and the baby to be born:

Le indiscrezioni erano quasi una carezza. “Così giovane” diceva una “così giovane e senza marito!” ... [Artemisia è] conquistata a una fraternità che procedeva per simboli: il decotto rinfrescante, il balsamo, il cibo che sostiene, conforti che la condizione femminile ha maturato nei secoli. In virtù di questi fuggevoli contatti col mondo, la tranquilla reclusa volontaria vede l’umanità sempre più divisa in due parti, troppo diverse, sicché ragione e istinto la convincono che è venuto il momento di rassegnarsi e decidersi, di appartenere a una sola, soffocando il bruciore di quel “se non fossi una donna”, inutile lamento. Meglio stringersi al popolo sacrificato e prigioniero, partecipare al suo destino sordo e miracoloso, dividerne le sensazioni, i calcoli, le verità: segreti preclusi ai favoriti, agli uomini. (1996: 84-85)

Unfortunately for Artemisia, the decision to ally herself with women cannot be fully realised. For first, her profession situates her outside the shared “veiled, momentous fate” of other women. She shares the fate of the “sacrificed” and “imprisoned”, yet her position is different in that, by necessity and not without problems, she has entered the public realm which, to most of the “sacrificed”, is barred. Second, Artemisia comes to understand that her hope of finding companionship with those few women who are in a similar position is made difficult by the patriarchal social system in which she lives. This becomes clear to her

when she organises a party in honour of another painter, Annella de Rosa. Artemisia is determined to suppress her jealousy for the younger and talented painter and to offer her support as the older, more established artist. Annella, however, rejects Artemisia's offer and leaves the party, ridiculing her efforts and inflicting shame on her. This prompts Artemisia to acknowledge the failure to reach her fellow painter, but it also elicits a lucid understanding of the reasons behind such failure:

Nessuno le può far male quanto una donna: questo avrebbe dovuto spiegare a quei signori che forse si son divertiti ai contrasti delle due virtuose. “Vedete queste femmine” avrebbe dovuto dire “le migliori, le più forti, quelle che più somigliano ai valentuomini: come son ridotte finte e sleali fra loro, nel mondo che voi avete creato, per vostro uso e comodità. Siamo così poche e insidiate che non sappiamo più riconosceri e intenderci o almeno rispettarci come voi vi rispettate. Per gioco ci lasciate libere, in un arsenale di armi velenose. Così noi soffriamo ...” (1996: 101)

In my reading of Banti's interpretation, it is not her success in behaving like a man that turns Artemisia into a hero. Instead, what is remarkable is her struggle to come to terms with the unjust difficulties of being a woman and her ability to find consolation in painting. Ultimately, in fact, it is painting that allows her to survive in her own life time and to claim a memory in ours:

Poveri uomini, anche loro: travagliati di arroganza e di autorità, costretti da millenni a comandare e a cogliere funghi velenosi, queste donne che fingono di dormire al loro fianco e stringono fra le ciglia seriche al sommo della guancia vellutata recriminazioni, voglie nascoste, segreti progetti. Un senso d'indulgenza diffusa, allegra

come un volo, la faceva, nel sonno, sorridere. Nel sonno il sorriso è quasi difficile come il pianto e bisogna liberarsene: “Ma io dipingo” scopre Artemisia, risvegliandosi: ed è salvata. (1996: 50)

It is her painting which eventually allows Artemisia to enter a community of women who accept and celebrate her. This community is foreshadowed in the group of women she meets in Florence, and is realised in her friendship with Banti's narrator. As a woman writing in post-war Italy, the narrator recognises Artemisia's struggle and identifies with it. In an effort to overcome the isolation and loneliness which they both see as part of the condition that joined women over the centuries, the narrator gives Artemisia and herself a friendship made of (to use again Minnich's words) “interdependence risked, respected and enjoyed” (Minnich 1985:287). Conversely, as painting saves Artemisia and gives her a friend and a place in a biography, the act of writing another woman's life performs similar miracles for Banti's narrator. It is by writing about, and with, Artemisia, in fact, that Banti claims the power and the means by which to create herself.

The Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero offers a useful insight into the process of reciprocity between the biographer and her subject. In *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Cavarero claims that one's own story can only be told by someone else's tale, and that such a tale defines who one is. She cites the Oedipus myth to show that in order for him to know who he was, he needed others to tell him his own story.<sup>6</sup> Cavarero's argument emphasises the role of story-telling, or *narrazione*, as she calls it. For Oedipus, the Greek dictum *gnothi se auton* (know yourself), does not come from an act of self-scrutiny; rather it is realised by his soliciting of other people's tales of his life.

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<sup>6</sup> Cavarero states: “Il testo sofocleo è così in grado di suggerirci una prima tesi: che cos'è l'Uomo lo dice un sapere definitivo di filosofica assonanza, chi è Edipo lo dice invece la narrazione della sua storia. Perché la tesi sia completa dobbiamo però aggiungere una precisazione: sono gli *altri* a raccontare a lui la *sua* storia.” (1997: 22)

Indeed, it is *others* who tell him *his* story (Cavarero, 1997: 22). The point of Cavarero's argument is that autobiography as such — that is, the telling of one's own life by one's self — is always expressed by others: we tell others our life story in order for them to give it back to us as a *narrazione*. This exchange is both circular and mutual.

For Banti, the move from biography to autobiography works in similar ways, the latter becoming a story within the overall stories of Artemisia's life. On the one hand, the biographer aims to tell the story of another woman's life. On the other, she lets her subject tell her own story by way of a dialogue. Hence Artemisia tells her story in order for her biographer to give this story back to her in the form of a narrative:

Noi giochiamo a rincorrerci, Artemisia ed io. E a fermarci, dai più materiali e scoperti ai più nascosti. Io l'abbandono per il primo viaggio dopo la Guerra: da cui, mi dico, forse non ritornerò. Lei mi rovescia sul foglio un'intera boccetta d'inchiostro. E poi ci guardiamo. Di questa sua vita di Napoli, il fulcro della sua fama, — è fatta sospettosissima, incerta se ricorderò quel che avevo scritto o se batterò nuova strada. (1996: 90-91)

Artemisia's suspicion indicates that she is becoming uneasy about the narrator's new account of her life, suggesting that she believes that the lost manuscript was either more historically accurate or more formally enclosed within stricter genre boundaries. Indeed, for most of the narrative thus far, the narrator has made the crossing of genre boundaries a constitutive part of what was meant to be the biography of Artemisia. In this respect "la nuova strada", which the narrator refers to, stands not only for Banti's new interpretation of Artemisia's life, but for the novelty of her choice to write biography as an act of friendship.

This rhetorical strategy has twofold consequences. On the one hand, it elicits empathy and emotional involvement on the part of the reader,

who cannot help participating in Artemisia's intense desire for her story to be told. On the other, her relationship with the narrator reminds the reader that the historical Artemisia Gentileschi, in her reality, is lost to us now, but Banti's engagement (both as a biographer and as a friend) with her allows both women to survive in the present as friends and as artists. Hence, the reader hears the voice of Artemisia. We feel her standing, in front of as well as behind us. Her voice comes back from the past and by interacting with that of her biographer brings the past into the present.

The conversation between Artemisia and the narrator, which is also a self-reflexive and open-ended dialogue, invites us to question and further develop feminist, as well as conventional, assumptions regarding the writing of biography. The task of the biographer is not to give voice to the "real" Artemisia, but to engage in a process of self-invention which allows self-representational agency for both biographer and subject. To this end, invention of the real is useful — as long as it is done self-consciously: inventing to speak, instead of searching to find the real as it happened.

Had Banti actively engaged in reconstructing the past as she believed it happened but declined to reflect on the subjectivity and autobiographical involvement that necessarily accompanies such a reconstruction, the trepidation of finding Artemisia alive in front of her — and by implication in front of her readers — would have been lost. Artemisia's survival in the present depends on the voice her biographer invents for and through her. By allowing her voice to engage in a dialogue with that of her creator, Banti suggests that the biographer, like her/his historical subject, is made and not found.

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