H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laura Benedetti. The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy. Toronto Italian Studies Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. viii + 165 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9744-6.

Reviewed by Silvia Valisa Published on H-Italy (January, 2009) Commissioned by Dora M. Dumont

For the Sake of the Children

The image of the "tigress in the snow," haunting and iconic, is the figure that frames Laura Benedetti's research on motherhood in Italy in the twentieth century. Benedetti derives it from Elsa Morante's La storia (1974), where one of the most memorable and tragic mothers of the twentieth century, Ida, is compared to a lonely tigress in the cold, who licks the snow to survive while biting off pieces of herself to feed her starving cubs. As Benedetti explains in the introduction, it is an image that merges "authority with self-immolation" and "effectively captures the risks and the rewards of motherhood" (p. 11). Conceptually organized around this figure, The Tigress in the Snow provides a wealth of information and reflections on a very specific yet wide-ranging topic, and thoroughly engages with the question of what it means to be a mother, or to write about mothers, in Italy.

The monograph opens with the last part of the nineteenth century, and deftly points out the extent to which only then motherhood became an overarching emotional responsibility for one individual at a time; that is, the extent to which family relationships, becoming based on "love," turned the mother into the single individual entirely in charge of the physical and emotional well-being of her offspring. It is a family model that is often assumed to be universal and ahistorical, and Benedetti's framing of such ideological formation is a good example of her attentive, cautious handling of the rich material with which she is working. One of the main paradoxes Benedetti analyzes is the wealth of historical material on women and on the symbolic value of motherhood in Italy as opposed to the "limited space literature has devoted to mothers as subjects" (p. 4). Even though this paradox is hardly surprising to all those who are acquainted with the Italian traditional ideology of motherhood and womanhood, it is nonetheless extremely interesting to discover the narrative trajectories that Benedetti draws in the five chapters of her book.

Each chapter is organized around a historical and ideological overview of the subject of motherhood in Italy at a specific epoch. This overview is complemented and contrasted with representations of motherhood in literary texts (fiction and essays). In the first chapter, "Mothers at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century," the ideological landscape of "the new mother" is accompanied by a wealth of different representations of motherhood, from Neera's (Anna Radius Zuccari) L'indomani (1889) and her famously antifeminist essays to Annie Vivanti's I divoratori (1910), from Luigi Pirandello's Suo marito (1911) to Sibilla Aleramo's revolution in Una donna (1906). The ambition to cover a wide-ranging selection of texts limits the depth of the analyses, but Benedetti succeeds in evoking the heterogeneity of an epoch (her discussion of the reception of these texts, Una donna in particular, is fascinating) while outlining the guiding trends in its gender politics.

In the second chapter, "Resilience and Resistance: The Fascist Years," Benedetti takes advantage of some of the research on gender during the regime made in recent years (especially Victoria de Grazia's and Robin Pickering-Iazzi's studies) to assess women writers' positions and the images of motherhood brought forward in political directives (from Mussolini's speeches to the institution of the "Giornata della madre e dell'infanzia" that gathered the most prolific mothers in the country). From Matilde Serao's contradictory positions on war to Alba de Cespedes's bestseller Nessuno torna indietro (1936), Benedetti's beautiful prose reminds us that literary motherhood was clearly not aligned with Fascist directives of procreation and motherly sacrifice. It also demonstrates that, in the case of such writers as Vivanti, motherhood was a springboard for exploring other controversial themes, such as notions of racial hybridization. As I read such a thorough account of the different positions assumed by writers, intellectuals, and bureaucrats on the question of mothers, I could not help but think of another book that provides an indirect confirmation of Benedetti's research. Fausta Cialente's first novel, *Natalia* (1930) (Benedetti examines Cialente's powerful *Un inverno freddissimo* [1966] in the third chapter) is both one of the most explicit accounts of the ordeal of labor in the literature of those years and a denunciation of the discursive impasse in which women found themselves when it came to stillbirth and "early" maternal mourning. *Natalia* is also a frank account of a same-sex relationship, and indeed the connection (or lack thereof) between motherhood and sexuality at large is possibly the only ideological knot that is not fully explored in Benedetti's book.

The third chapter, entitled "Questioning Motherhood," clearly depicts the "call to normality" enacted by postwar Italy, and the strong influence of both the Catholic Church and the Christian Democrats "in matters of family and morality" (p. 76). Natalia Ginzburg and Cialente give voice to different models and perspectives, while Elsa Morante's obsessive rehearing of specific themes leads, in Benedetti's acute analysis, to a work organized around the progressive unraveling of the myth of motherhood. Benedetti gives ample room to the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies, and to the centrality that motherhood has in the reflections of these years. She also cogently points to Oriana Fallaci's epochal Lettera a un bambino mai nato (1977) as a work built on the impossibility to conceptualize motherhood and on the "curse of self-annihilation" that it appears to carry on even in Fallaci's text.

The fourth chapter, "Struggling with the Mother," accounts for more recent motherhood narratives, and emphasizes the extent to which "over and over again, novels of the last twenty years of the century stage the move from criticism to understanding, from estrangement to empathy" (p. 98). The century-long parable that Benedetti describes is one in which the emergence of a feminine subject is directly tied to the evolving negotiation of its relationship with the mother, its identification (or refusal to identify) with a subject that is often not considered as such. How do these writers overcome the tigress in the snow syndrome? How can daughters' "ambivalent feelings" turn into a constructive parable of respect and legitimization of both a mother's and daughter's subjectivities (p. 104)? The "shift in perspective" enacted by narrating daughters in both Clara Sereni's and Carla Cerati's books is a pertinent example of the evolving paradigm of motherhood: by looking at mothers in terms that are rich and multidimensional, contemporary (mostly female-authored) narratives succeed in bringing the "person" back into the mother. Yet, Benedetti is also careful in pointing out the dramatic resilience of conservative paradigms of motherhood: the prescriptive impossibility for a woman to be anything else than a mother (especially not a mother *and* an artist at the same time) surfaces in as recent a novel as Cristina Comencini's *Matrioska* (2002).

The fifth chapter presents the hypothesis of a new understanding of motherhood as, instead of an event, "an attitude, a state of mind, ... 'a political act," and two of the narrative examples brought forward explore the possibility of separating "the biological from the psychological aspects of mothering" (pp. 120, 115). This chapter feels more like an invitation to keep moving "forward," a sketch of things to come, than the exploration of an ascertained trend. Possibly more references to the philosophical work being done in recent years on this and similar themes would provide an apt platform to ground the future. Just to mention one possible point of departure, Adriana Cavarero's recuperation of the Arendtian category of birth as opposed to Western philosophy's fascination with death can be a useful companion to the quest for a new conceptualization of motherhood in the new millennium.

As for its guiding metaphor, one might have issues with the title, The Tigress in the Snow, because of its selfdefeating posture. It is, I believe, an apt title for the first half of this book, actually for the first three chapters at least, in which, over and over again, Benedetti demonstrates that "the price for the glorification of the mother was the humiliation of the woman" or that, even when trying to escape that mold, authors inevitably fell into the traps of traditional representations (p. 42). Tigress in the Snow is so evocatively iconic an image that one completely understands its usefulness as the title. Yet almost all the trajectories that Benedetti draws in the fourth and fifth chapters relate to the title only in that they oppose it: many of the post-WWII narratives about motherhood analyzed here are precisely engaged in dismantling such a paradoxical and self-defeating image. Just like the Catholic icon of the Virgin Mary (to which the Immaculate Conception dogma, Benedetti reminds us, was added only in 1854), the tigress is an image of exceptionality and sacrifice. Both figures, the tigress and the Holy Virgin, exploit a "rhetoric of impossibility" (to use Susan Schibanoff's term) that works against any possible selfidentification and empowerment: the model can never be equaled in its perfect, spectacular self-oblivion, and the subject is weighed down by unrealistic expectations. Benedetti's title should then receive the attention it deserves as part of the very problem her book is so deftly exploring, and it can be yet another way in which her work prompts us to read and reread modern and contemporary Italian narrative with this specific ideological conundrum in mind.

In conclusion, Benedetti's book points out the paradoxes and double binds inherent to our history and daily lives as social constructions, but also carefully traces a literary development that is bringing us farther away from any univocal answer on the topic of motherhood and fe-

male subjectivity. Benedetti's research is worth reading for many reasons, among them her ability to succinctly weave into her argumentation many theoretical and critical approaches that enlarge readers' perspectives and her beautiful, deft prose. In addition to being of extreme interest for scholars of Italian modern literature and culture, *Tigress in the Snow* is an excellent teaching tool for its transhistorical perspective and its richness of information, and because it introduces students to a wealth of Italian authors they might have never heard of before.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Silvia Valisa. Review of Benedetti, Laura, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy.* H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23578



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.