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Fanning, Ursula. *Italian Women's Autobiographical Writings in the Twentieth Century. Constructing Subjects*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017. Pp. 260. ISBN 9781683930310. \$ 95.00 (hardcover).

At the beginning of her volume, *Italian Women's Autobiographical Writings in the Twentieth Century. Constructing Subjects*, Ursula Fanning defends her decision to focus on the link between women's writing and autobiography from the charge of essentialism. The sheer quantity of autobiographical works written by Italian women in the twentieth century, she maintains, "is arresting and seems to beg investigation" (ix). Moving away from Philip Lejeune's definition of the "autobiographical pact as a kind of contract [...] in which the author promises the reader that the author, the narrator, and the object narrated refer to the same person" (xiii), Fanning draws on the works of Roy Pascal, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Sidonie Smith to underscore the fictional elements that are present in any autobiography. As "both autobiography and autobiographical fiction draw on the same structural devices," she chooses to examine the two as "kindred narrative genres with an eye to their structuring and to their inherent fictionality" (xv). She also makes important observations on the different issues that men and women face when they decide to express themselves autobiographically. For example, male authors may find it difficult to envisage themselves as the object of the gaze, while female authors struggle to adopt the role of the subject, especially in the case of first-person narratives. And yet, according to Fanning, the range of opportunities offered by the autobiographical modes of expression may account, at least in part, for women writers' enduring fascination with the genre: "The possibility of presenting oneself as author, controller, subject, and object of one's discourse and narrative (even temporarily and tenuously) may be so attractive to women writers that it could help explain the continuing attraction of the autobiographical mode in the twentieth century" (xii-xiii).

Instead of devoting separate chapters to individual authors, Fanning organizes her work thematically, discussing the presence of the father (chapter 1) and the mother (chapter 2) in women's autobiographical works, as well as the authors' treatment of traditional romance plots (chapter 3) and motherhood (chapter 4), and finally their reflections on their own activity as writers (chapter 5). The sixth and last chapter, "The Paratext," examines the authors' commentaries on their own work—prefaces, postfaces, epigraphs, essays, interviews, and even, in Fabrizia Ramondino's case, footnotes—as ways to orient and control the readers' interpretation. An extensive bibliography and an index complete the volume. While the former, in listing the primary and secondary sources for Fanning's analysis, constitutes a precious tool for other scholars interested in the topic, the latter could have been more accurate—see, for instance, the case of Annie Vivanti, discussed on page 118 but not included in the index.

Each chapter is divided into sections marked by headings that capture the predominant attitude displayed in the works examined, and are further divided into subsections devoted to individual authors. For instance, the first chapter ("Figuring the Father: The Long Paternal Shadow") includes sections titled "Admiration/Adoration, Conflict" (with subsections for Sibilla Aleramo, Grazia Deledda, Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Dacia Maraini), "Intrusion/Obstruction" (Francesca Sanvitale and Fabrizia Ramondino), and "Love, Loss, and Reparation" (Gianna Manzini and Lalla Romano). This format—slightly modified in chapters 4, 5, and 6—allows readers to appreciate similarities and differences among various authors with regard to a specific theme. Each chapter also features a conclusion that brings together the various threads of the discussion and sketches the development of the chapter's topic across authors and genres.

Throughout this work, Fanning displays a remarkable ability to discuss a variety of

autobiographical works in light of the ever-increasing body of scholarship devoted to Italian women writers in the twentieth century. Apart from the authors already mentioned, she focuses primarily on Edith Bruck, Francesca Duranti, Oriana Fallaci, Gina Lagorio, Dacia Maraini, Elsa Morante, Lidia Ravera, and Matilde Serao. While some of the writers included in the volume have been the subject of monographs entirely devoted to them, all have been extensively analyzed in the context of thematic studies, particularly in those dealing with motherhood or the mother-daughter relationship, which may explain why Fanning sometimes struggles to differentiate her voice from that of previous critics. Focusing on less obvious authors—such as Goliarda Sapienza, just to name one—would have probably allowed for more original findings.

Fanning's volume also attests to Sibilla Aleramo's central importance in any discussion on the many issues linked to women's experience throughout the twentieth century (and beyond), from motherhood to civil rights. Indeed, Aleramo features prominently in all of the chapters. In one case, however, Fanning seems to misstate the author's importance, when she attributes the alleged lack of works dealing with motherhood in the years that followed the publication of *Una donna* (A Woman at Bay) to "the shock waves caused by Aleramo's work." On the contrary, it appears to me that some novels published soon after *Una donna* could easily be read as a response to this work, either as a rebuttal, like Maria Borio's 1909 *Una moglie* (A Wife), or as an elaboration of Aleramo's view of motherhood as a chain passed on from one generation to the next, like Annie Vivanti's *I divoratori* (The Devourers), published in 1911 and quoted by Fanning, in the context of her discussion of Natalia Ginzburg, as an "intensely personal" work (118).

Fanning continues her discussion of Aleramo by claiming that, not too long after the publication of *Una donna*, the advent of Fascism made motherhood an unsuitable topic: "Mothering, I suggest, is often off limits, especially in an autobiographical context, because of the discourse around it in the Fascist state" (107). It is worth reiterating, then, that Fascist propaganda did not succeed in preventing women writers from tackling the subject of motherhood, and that indeed authors such as Ada Negri, Gianna Manzini, Alba de Céspedes, and Paola Drigo, among others, did deal with the topic in ways that sometimes directly challenge the Fascist discourse on the role of women in society. While it is certainly possible that Fascist propaganda discouraged women from adopting a critical stance when discussing motherhood in works that are overtly autobiographical, it is clear that motherhood as a general theme was not "off limits."

These reservations notwithstanding, Ursula Fanning's well-researched volume provides a thorough overview of the ways in which women writers have explored autobiographical modes of expression throughout the twentieth century, and as such it will prove useful to both students and scholars.

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