

**Mermaid Without a Tale:  
Disability, Sexuality, and the Limits of Discourse in Italian Narrative (1975-2009)**

by

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Abstract

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Disability as a category of critical discourse and literary critique is only just beginning to find its way to Italian literary and cultural studies. As such, the depths of the newly forming field of Italian disability studies are as yet largely unplumbed – a vast and uncharted sea of hermeneutic possibilities. Rather than offer a diachronic survey of texts, however, this dissertation seeks to untie a series of theoretical knots that characterize representations of the disabled body in recent and contemporary Italian literature, with regards to the relationship between disability, gender, sexuality, and discursive practices. Drawing from Robert McRuer’s “crip theory” and the notion that the disabled body is always already to a certain extent a queer body, I argue that instances of disability in modern Italian narratives inherently act to challenge normative conventions of gender and sexuality. At the same time, alternative embodiments lead to unconventional reading, writing, and speaking practices, a fact which has profound implications for the study of narrative more broadly. The material quality of such practices, so often disavowed or forgotten, is undeniable in the case of the texts examined here, causing the relationships between reader, text, character, and author to be reconfigured. At the same time, the role of *voice* in narrative undergoes a series of transformations throughout the dissertation, at times problematic and at others liberatory.

In Chapter One, I argue that by writing in the place of speech, the deaf protagonist of Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) challenges the primacy of the spoken over the written word in Western culture, representing a “language of the body” that is profoundly different from the female symbolic theorized by feminist critics and philosophers. Where scholarship on Maraini’s novel has interpreted Marianna’s deafness and muteness as a metaphor for the silencing of women in a patriarchal order, I maintain that such readings close down fruitful possibilities for interpretation on the basis of disability. Through an exploration of Marianna’s alternative modes of communication, I contend that silence need not be synonymous with an absence of communication, just as text need not signify bodily absence.

Chapter Two draws on the shared history of disabled and gendered others, reminding readers that the disabled body and the female body are often discursively rendered as similarly “lacking,” linking them in reciprocal relation. To illustrate the point, I read Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1975) alongside Gabriele Pedullà’s short story, “Miranda” (2009), proposing “literary transability” as an interpretive frame by which to understand instances where “able-bodied” characters simulate disability as a means to escape *gendered* norms: here, the disabled body is made use of as an icon of deviance that opens the way towards other corporeal transgressions. In both cases, such transgressions are made possible *vis-à-vis* non-normative discursive practices that are inseparable from disabled corporeal difference, though in the final instance, the disabled bodies and subjects themselves are removed from the scene. Chapter Three argues that the practice of collaborative writing in Stefano Benni’s *Achille piè veloce* (2003) simultaneously both allows for and appropriates Achille’s authority as a disabled writer, suggesting a more reciprocal relationship than those explored in Chapter Two. Achille’s writing favors process over product, a view that parallels his emphasis on sexual enjoyment over completion, short-circuiting conventions of writing, publishing, and masculine sexuality. He, too, is erased from the final pages of the novel, however, in an example of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have termed “narrative prosthesis.”

Finally, in Chapter Four, I turn to a reading of autobiographical texts by disabled women authors, each of whom use the figure of the *sirena* – the siren or mermaid – in order to represent themselves. The subjects analyzed in this chapter each grapple in different ways with the relationship between mind and body, staged upon the partially human body of the mermaid. The mermaid’s *coda*, as stand-in for both the phallus and the writing pen, reveals a hybridity that bridges gender categories, as well as those of human and animal, oral and written, disabled and non-disabled. Drawing parallels to medical literature on the surgical treatment of the condition “sirenomelia” (fused legs), I argue that the insistence upon the separation of the mermaid’s legs combines heteronormative fantasies of controlling the monstrous female body with the normalizing imperatives of medical cure, illustrating the extent to which ableist ideologies undergird and reinforce normative expectations regarding gender and sexuality, and vice versa. While the first two texts discussed in this chapter confirm a conception of disability and feminine sexuality as incompatible, Barbara Garlaschelli’s *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento* (2001) suggests an integration of the two categories that is effected through the writing of the text itself.

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## Introduction

### Disability Studies and the Italian Context

Era muta. Non che fosse muta di qualcosa, come,  
con facile effetto letterario, ho detto più sopra  
del suo sguardo: era muta e basta.  
–Tommaso Landolfi<sup>1</sup>

When I first met Antonietta Laterza in her home in Bologna, she was working on an art piece for an exhibition, entitled “The Wall of Dolls,” to take place during Men’s Fashion Week in Milan, an installation meant to raise awareness among men about violence towards women. Laterza’s contribution was a Barbie doll that had been fitted with a mermaid tail made out of tinfoil and a wheelchair whose wheels were constructed out of two compact discs. Later she wrote this statement about the piece:

La bambola che propongo all’installazione di Jo Squillo Wall of Dolls, è l’immagine di una Barbie-sirenetta rivisitata in chiave postmoderna sulla carrozzina, dove mi rappresento in modo autoironico con cenni autobiografici. Il cerchio è la sintesi iconografica tra ruota come movimento e libertà, il disco come cd sonoro impresso dalla voce delle donne-sirene contemporanee, simbolo di energia infinita e di femminilità.<sup>2</sup>

[The doll that I propose for the installation of Jo Squillo’s Wall of Dolls, is the image of a Barbie-mermaid revisited in postmodern style in a wheelchair, where I represent myself auto-ironically with autobiographical allusions. The circle is the iconographic synthesis of the wheel as movement and freedom, the disc as musical CD imprinted with the voice of contemporary women-mermaids, symbol of infinite energy and femininity.]

Here, the wheelchair is synonymous with voice, which for Laterza, as a well-known singer and songwriter, is central to her personal and public identity. At the same time, both voice and wheelchair signify mobility and freedom, and thus Laterza suggests that the capacity to speak out and the ability to move independently are both necessary in the construction of a strong feminine identity.<sup>3</sup> Using the wheelchair to represent this double sense of movement and self-

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<sup>1</sup> Tommaso Landolfi, “La muta,” *Tre Racconti* (Milan: Adelphi, 1998), 23. “She was mute. Not that she was mute of

<sup>2</sup> Antonietta Laterza, Facebook post, 20 June 2014. Used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> The first half of the statement reads as follows: “Le bambole di ‘Wall of Dolls’ sono per me le donne come Nora di Casa di Bambola, sono tutte le donne che non vogliono subire la sottomissione all’identità di genere, e non certo la donna-oggetto nel concetto di cosificazione nella società negli anni ’70. La bambola in una società sana rappresenta la proiezione dell’istinto materno, del sacrificio, della cura di sé e degli altri, aiutando lo sviluppo della propria identità femminile nel senso più positivo” [“The dolls of ‘Wall of Dolls’ are for me the women like Nora in *A Doll’s House* [by Ibsen], they are all the women that don’t want to undergo submission to gender identity, and certainly not the woman-object in the theory of thingification in the society of the 1970s. The doll in a healthy society represents



representation implies that, for Laterza, disability does not impede the realization of this identity. To the contrary, it is her wheelchair that allows her access.

Laterza has been using the symbol of the *sirena* to represent herself in her art, music, and performance for decades. As I will discuss at length further on, the mermaid signifies corporeal difference (the fish tail) as well as physical beauty and allure (the naked, female torso) – challenging stereotypes of disabled women as being asexual, as well as foregrounding the importance of voice, and therefore of symbolic exchange. For Laterza, the mermaid figure brings together the two identity categories with which she most identifies and to which she has dedicated her life as an activist and artist. As both female and disabled, Laterza is well aware of the problems associated with what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called “the cultural intertwining of femininity and disability,” though she repeatedly signals both as a source of strength and pride, and has played with this interconnection by exhibiting her sexual nature in order to challenge cultural taboos around sexuality and disability.<sup>4</sup>

I will not examine the mermaid figure in depth until the final chapter of the dissertation – as with any mermaid, one reaches the fish tail only at the end – but I raise it here in order to invoke the confluence of themes that I discuss throughout the dissertation: disability, gender, sexuality, and communication. As will quickly become clear, I am just as concerned with subjects who do not have a voice as those that do, and I mean that literally, not, as Landolfi puts it, for “facile effetto letterario.” Navigating the waters of intersectionality, in dialogue with disability studies, feminist theory and queer theory, my dissertation attempts, through a variety of ways and means, to reconcile the notion that voice and narrative are necessary elements of subject formation and political representation with the fact that many people do not speak and have no intention of doing so.

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If disability theory is only now beginning to make its way to Italian literary studies, it is not for a lack of material. From the origins of Italian literature to today’s contemporary fiction and film, representations of disability appear repeatedly, often playing a central role in some of the field’s most prominent works. Although this dissertation focuses on instances of disability in modern and contemporary Italian literature, these representations are part of a history that extends back for centuries – in terms of sociocultural understandings and ways of “treating” disability in Italy, as well as the fictional representations and accompanying meanings attached to such depictions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Dante’s *Commedia* is in part founded upon the metaphors of bodily defect, suffering, disease, and impediment that lend the *Inferno* its narrative impact and which are contrasted to the Pilgrim’s quest for spiritual wholeness.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*

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the projection of the maternal instinct, of sacrifice, of self-care and the care of others, aiding in the development of one’s own female identity in the most positive sense.”]

<sup>4</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “treatment” in a double sense: as the treatment of a subject within literature, media, and other discourses, as well as in terms of medical or curative treatment.

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting, if limited, example of a disability approach to Dante, see: Nico Tonelli and Roberto Marcolongo, “Dante, l’Inferno e il McGill Pain Questionnaire,” *Reumatismo* 59.2 (2007): 173-183. The article undertakes a semantic exploration of the term “dolore” in the *Inferno*, and maps modern conceptions and categories of pain onto the circles of hell and the various punishments to be found in each, with the goal of using the structure of Dante’s Hell as “una possibile scala di disabilità” [“a possible disability scale” (174)]. “La voragine infernale, così come la descrive Dante, allora si trasforma, e diventa una immensa scala di valutazione, indagando, con tutti i suoi descrittori del dolore, gradi progressivi di disabilità. La descrizione che il Poeta ci offre è così precisa e

is set against the backdrop of the Black Death and some of its most famous episodes involve disability or the simulation thereof.<sup>7</sup> A recent study by Julie Springer examines metaphors of blindness, medicine, and cure in Petrarch's *oeuvre*; and Giambattista Basile's *Cunto de li cunti* has received brief mention in studies of disability and the fairy tale.<sup>8</sup> Relevant texts from the modern period are far too many to list here, but include works by such authors as: Giovanni Verga, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Cesare Pavese, Giorgio Bassani, Italo Calvino, Elsa Morante, and many others.<sup>9</sup> Despite this rich and abundant supply of literary examples, aside from a very few exceptions in recent years, these works have not been examined through the lens of disability as a category of critique, largely due to the fact that disability studies as a field is only just beginning to expand outward from its origins in the Anglo-American context.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, the vast majority of scholarship on these works takes an approach that does not openly acknowledge the existence of disability as a corporeal reality or as a potential critical

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completa che potremmo chiedere al paziente in quale girone infernale si porrebbe, per capire immediatamente quali siano le sue vere pene" (182) ["The infernal chasm, as Dante describes it, is thus transformed, and becomes an immense evaluative scale, investigating, with all of its descriptors of pain, the progressive levels of disability. The description that the Poet offers is so precise and complete that we could ask a patient in which circle of Hell they would place themselves, in order to understand immediately what their real pains are."] The article does not engage with works or concepts from disability studies but is limited to an exploration of the terminology and categories regarding pain to be found in the *Inferno* from the point of view of a health worker.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Masetto da Lamporecchio's feigning of deafness and muteness in Day Three of the *Decameron* (3.1), which he uses to gain entry to a convent in order to sexually exploit – and be exploited by – the nuns who live there; see, also, the first story of Day Two, in which Martellino pretends to be "crippled" in order to gain access to Saint Arrigo's body and be "cured" along with the other "cripples". In both cases, it is due to a faking of disability that the condition is able to be "miraculously" cured.

<sup>8</sup> Julie Springer, *Blindness and Therapy in Late-Medieval French and Italian Poetry* (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2011). Springer argues, in part, for an understanding of the role of the poet as curative. On Basile, see: Ann Schmiesing, *Disability, Deformity and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014). Schmiesing notes, in particular, "the agency that Basile depicts in 'Penta with the Chopped-Off Hands,' where the unprostheticized Penta uses her feet to sew, starch collars, and brush hair as a lady-in-waiting to the queen" (96).

<sup>9</sup> Some specific examples are: Verga's "Il canarino del N. 15" (1883); Matilde Serao's *La mano tagliata* (1912); Pavese's *La luna e i falò* (1949); many works by Calvino, including *Il visconte dimezzato* (1952) and "La distanza della luna," in *Le cosmicomiche* (1965); Giorgio Bassani, "Una notte del '43," (1956); Elsa Morante's *La storia* (1974); and D'Annunzio's *Notturmo* (1921). Some of the most recent contemporary examples include: Giuseppe Pontiggia's *Nati due volte* (2000); Paolo Giordano's *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (2008); Niccolò Ammaniti's *Branchie* (1994); as well as a number of works by Stefano Benni, Clara Sereni, and Dacia Maraini.

<sup>10</sup> Though not related to Italian literary studies, recent scholarship that engages more explicitly with disability in the Italian context includes: the *Italian Journal of Disability Studies*, begun in 2013, which at least so far has taken a non-literary approach, focusing instead on the ethico-legal and sociological issues surrounding disability in Italy and elsewhere; and the special issue of *Modern Italy* 19.2, "Disability rights and wrongs in Italy," eds. David Forgacs and Rachele Tardi (2014), which again focuses mainly on cultural and societal aspects of disability in Italy, with the exception of Sarah Patricia Hill's contribution on disability in cinema. A monograph out this year by Susanne Knittel, *The historical uncanny: disability, ethnicity, and the politics of Holocaust memory* (2015), reframes the discourses of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy from a disability perspective. Anthony Martire's dissertation, "La comunità mutilata: Embodiment, Corporality, and the Reconstruction of the Italian Body Politic in the Works of F.T. Marinetti and Gabriele D'Annunzio," (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 2012), examines the use of metaphors of bodily mutilation and prosthesis to represent the Italian nation-state, though he does not engage explicitly with disability studies. Anne Finger gives a fascinating disability reading of Gramsci's essay on the Southern Question: Anne Finger, "Antonio Gramsci's South... or... Some Aspects of the Disability Question," *New Politics* 14.1 (Summer 2012). The first full-length treatment of disability in cinema to come out of Italy focuses not on Italian film, but on cinema in the American context: Flavia Monceri, *Ribelli o condannati? 'Disabilità' e sessualità nel cinema* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2012).

lens, invariably interpreting disabilities as metaphors for something else.<sup>11</sup> For example, most criticism of Dacia Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, which I will treat at length in Chapter One, does not address its protagonist's deafness and muteness as a disability, instead seeing it as a "symbol" for the silencing of women in a patriarchal order.<sup>12</sup> This is a common critical reflex: scholars and readers confronted with disability instinctively look for metaphorical interpretations, stripping disabled characters of their "corpo-reality," to use Robert McRuer's term for my own purposes, and forcing upon them a symbolic interpretation which obscures the material reality of disability, thereby denying it *as* disability.<sup>13</sup> In the context of literary disability studies, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder refer to this tendency as one aspect of a mechanism they call "narrative prosthesis," according to which disability appears in literature only in the service of an ableist narrative structure, as narrative motor or metaphorical vehicle.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that issues of the body, of bodily difference, and bodily breakdowns have not been treated within the ambit of Italian literary studies, and to great effect. The focus, however, has rested largely upon explorations of *malattia* and *folia* [disease and madness], rather than disability itself, terms that might be considered in parallel with disability, or perhaps as sub-categories, depending on one's definition.<sup>15</sup> The latter in particular has lent itself well to psychoanalytic critique, one of the dominant theoretical paradigms of the twentieth century, though the former is often interpreted under the same guise – as a "symptom" of a psychological ill. If "the body speaks," it is surely not speaking about itself, but is always pointing to something else. What is omitted, then, are the many examples of bodily difference that cannot be included under these rubrics; and even among those that can, the depth of critique is limited by a lack of contextualization in the material, historical reality of those who live or have lived with such conditions, as well as by the omission of the rich tradition of critical insight that an engagement with the field of disability studies offers. In particular, disability studies offers a way to think about the material reality of the body as having its own effects in relation to the subject, even as it critiques the notion that disability exists only *in* the body.

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<sup>11</sup> This is commonly noted within disability studies scholarship and is especially elaborated in: David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> As another example, see: James Gaffney, "Dante's Blindness in Paradiso XXV-XXVI: An Allegorical Interpretation," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 91 (1973): 101-112. While not a "disability studies" approach per sé, Gaffney addresses one of the many thematic threads to be found in the *Commedia* that relate to disability, interpreting it as an allegory, whereby Dante's temporary blindness "is to be understood primarily not as the extinction but rather as the re-direction of his spiritual vision" (110).

<sup>13</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). McRuer's discussion of "corpo-reality" centers around the composition classroom and the "corporate university," an institutional reality that informs and perpetuates the injunction to privilege wholeness in composition, as in bodies.

<sup>14</sup> See Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, for a thorough discussion of the invisibility of disability in the Western literary tradition; in particular Chapter One: "Representation and Its Discontents: The Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Film."

<sup>15</sup> As but a few particularly excellent examples, see: Gian-Paolo Biasin, *Literary Diseases: Theme and Metaphor in the Italian Novel* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975); Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989); Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *Corpi che parlano: Il nudo nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005). The most recent issue of the online journal, *Mosaici*, "Beautiful Sick Body: Italian Poetry from the Insight of Disease," ed. Rossella M. Riccobono, *Mosaici. Learned Online Journal of Italian Poetry* 4 (2015), features five essays on sickness and disease in the poetry of Dino Campana and Alda Merini; Mariannina Coffa; Primo Levi; Elsa Morante; and Sergio Corazzini and Guido Gozzano.

While perhaps there is a lack of critical engagement with disability within the field of Italian studies, I certainly do not mean to suggest that there is no awareness of disability as an important sociopolitical issue in Italy. In fact, Italy is considered particularly advanced in certain areas of disability awareness, particularly with regards to education. Much scholarship has been produced on the concept of *integrazione* [inclusion], with regard to both schools and the workplace, and Italy's program is often held up as a model for other nations to follow.<sup>16</sup> Within the academy, Education departments see the majority of output and development surrounding issues of disability.<sup>17</sup> From a rights perspective, Italy's laws are on par with those of other developed nations, though the implementation of those laws is often impeded and regulation is inconsistent. As is often the case in the Italian context, much of the work being done on marginalized populations happens outside of the academy in organizations that are funded either by national or local government programs or by private donors, rather than in academic cultural studies programs. For example, the *Centro Documentazione Handicap* in Bologna houses an extensive library of titles on disability and is the seat of a group who performs disability awareness presentations in Italian schools. Many other similar centers are in operation throughout Italy, with particularly large numbers serving children with autism and Down syndrome.<sup>18</sup>

There has also been a recent proliferation of Italian works of fiction and film that not only feature disabled characters but that deal directly with the issue of disability in a manner that is complex and multi-faceted, discouraging facile metaphorical readings. The texts themselves –

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<sup>16</sup> Italy has a long history of promoting the integration of people with disabilities into society, as evidenced by the deinstitutionalization movement of the 70s. For an outside perspective on Italy's integration program, see Arlene S. Kanter, Michelle L. Damiani, and Beth A. Ferri, "The Right to Inclusive Education Under International Law: Following Italy's Lead," *Journal of International Special Needs Education* 17.1 (May 2014): 21-31. They conclude: "Italy's commitment to inclusive education is commendable. Today, it is perhaps the most inclusive education system in the world. Many challenges to realizing the goal of full inclusion remain, but most such challenges reflect gaps in implementation of the law rather than a retreat from Italy's longstanding commitment to the values of acceptance and belonging that drives Italian inclusive education" (29).

<sup>17</sup> In the Italian context, sources are too numerous to mention here. I cite only a small selection among many titles: Anna Maria Murdaca, *Complessità della persona e disabilità: le nuove frontiere culturali dell'integrazione* (Tirrenia: Edizioni del Cerro, 2008); Daniele Altieri, *Disabilità e integrazione: la storia di Adriano: un percorso riuscito dalla scuola al lavoro* (Tirrenia: Edizioni del Cerro, 2006); *L'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità: trent'anni di inclusione nella scuola italiana* Ed. Andrea Canevaro, (Trent: Erickson, 2007); *La disabilità tra costruzione dell'identità e cittadinanza*. Eds. Paola Maria Fiocco and Luca Mori (Milan: F. Angeli, 2005); Franco Larocca, *Nei frammenti l'intero: una pedagogia per la disabilità* (Milan: F. Angeli, 1999); Michele Venni, *Il posto giusto per me: storie di integrazione professionale di persone con disabilità* (Trent: Erickson, 2004); *L'arte dell'integrazione: persone con disabilità costruiscono percorsi sociali*, Ed. Bruna Grasselli (Rome: Armando, 2006). Studies on the relationship between literature and disability are conducted from a pedagogical point of view. See: Federica Millefiorini's *E, quasi incredula, mi aprivo alla speranza': Percorsi di letteratura della disabilità* (Milan: EDUCatt, 2010). The text is written as a companion to Millefiorini's course at the *Università Cattolica* in Milan, "Letteratura della disabilità e della marginalità," which lists as its course objective: "Acquisizione e approfondimento di conoscenze della letteratura italiana utili per comprendere e trattare dal punto di vista educativo i problemi della marginalità e della disabilità" ["The acquisition and deepening of knowledge of Italian literature, useful in understanding and treating the problems of marginality and disability from an educational point of view."] For another pedagogical perspective on narrative and disability, see: Mariangela Giusti, *Il desiderio di esistere: Pedagogia della narrazione e disabilità* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Also of note is the number of journals dedicated entirely to issues related to disability. The *Centro Studi Erickson* alone publishes twenty-one different journals on topics ranging from integration in schools to the use of internet learning. *HP-Accaparlante*, has dedicated an issue to the theme of literature and disability, *HP: Rivista per chi opera nel sociale*, No. 67, January/February 1999.

including works by Stefano Benni, Dacia Maraini, Giuseppe Pontiggia, and countless contemporary disabled writers – not only invite an engagement with disability, but often require that the issue be confronted.<sup>19</sup> I see these works as belonging to a larger set of conversations that began with the civil rights movements of the 60s and 70s and attempts by marginalized populations to gain new forms of recognition. Activists questioned mainstream assumptions that particular kinds of bodies and bodily practices should necessarily correlate to an inferior position in society and a lack of certain rights, whether on the basis of gender, race, sexuality or ability. While in Italy it was perhaps discussions of gender that gained the most traction during this period, issues of disability were by no means left out of public debates. Thus, in 1971 and 1977, new laws were passed that called for the inclusion of disabled students in “normal” classrooms, abolishing special schools. And soon thereafter, Franco Basaglia spearheaded the de-institutionalization movement that led to the closure of asylums throughout Italy in 1978. Examples of societal discrimination made their way into public consciousness – as well as into literary texts – with newfound political import, though of course disparaging representations and stereotypes continued (and continue) to proliferate and the texts considered here are by no means unilaterally productive.<sup>20</sup>

It is here that I begin my study: rather than undertake a chronological survey of disability throughout Italian history, or even through the course of the twentieth century, I begin at the moment that disability – or “handicap” as it would have been called in an earlier moment – began to take shape as a global cultural identity, as a category of subjectivity in its own right. The texts that I will discuss throughout this dissertation form what I find to be a particularly fascinating intersection of critical discourses that come out of this historical moment, each inextricably tied to the other. I focus in particular on the relationship between disability, gender and sexuality, and trace the ways that the interactions between these categories within Italian narratives have shifted over the last forty years. It is my contention that out of the texts themselves, new theoretical perspectives are borne. Thus, my approach does not – or does not only – entail an “application” of Anglo-American disability theory to Italian texts. Instead, I let the texts suggest their own theoretical models and, in the process, I/they propose a set of implications – regarding disability, gender, sexuality and narrative – that are specific to the Italian context, even as they are ultimately relevant beyond that context as well.

Imperative to my project is a denaturalization of normative reading, writing, and speaking practices that are accepted as given or “normal” within the ideology of ability.<sup>21</sup> I contend that these communicative practices are inherently bound to normative ideas regarding sexual practices, as both are based on assumptions about the body and the way it should function in a given context. What this suggests is that the upsetting of narrative norms and boundaries with

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<sup>19</sup> A few of Dacia Maraini’s works are specifically “about” disability – the theatrical production *Stravaganza* (1987) in particular – while others, as I will show, oscillate between representations of disability as a subject category and an apparent conflation of disability with femininity.

<sup>20</sup> The “return to the body” that is recently much discussed within academic circles grows in part out of these traditions of activism and awareness-raising, as well as out of the many works of literature and film that grapple with bodily difference in new ways, though recent developments are focused more firmly on the material and its interactions and effects, rather than on the need for new subjects and identities. I place disability studies within this new materialist turn, though I recognize that it necessarily straddles the two approaches.

<sup>21</sup> On the “ideology of ability,” see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 9-11.

regard to the disabled subject, necessarily leads to the production of queer subjects as well.<sup>22</sup> I focus on subjects that use unconventional modes of communication – whether they write collaboratively, enlist aids to read and write, or use a computer to speak – suggesting that the disabled subject is not only constructed *as* different, but is constructed *via* radically different means. Thus, on one hand, the alternative means of communication used by disabled characters and authors in Italian narratives expand the scope of what is considered possible – or societally acceptable – with regard to linguistic, social, and sexual exchange.

What is more, on the theoretical level, these unconventional avenues for exchange act to challenge longstanding assumptions regarding writing and orality – in the vein of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* – as well as the age-old illusion that *logos* and the body are somehow incompatible. The subjects and texts I discuss provide unequivocal examples of bodies that are not only physically productive of language but that remain inexorably tied to their linguistic products in a variety of “queer” ways. In my textual analyses throughout the dissertation, I focus on possibilities for “syntactic resistance”: places where the narrative form is disrupted that might otherwise (re)produce oppressive structures, thereby reinforcing normative representations of (disabled) subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> I also note instances where the linguistic modes or formal structures used within these texts and by their characters offer alternatives to the norm. As one example, the autobiographical novel from which my project takes its name, *Sirena senza coda* (Mermaid Without a Tail, 2009), is co-written by Cristina Tonelli who, due to cerebral palsy, is unable to speak, and uses a specialized computer program to communicate. This technology not only provides Tonelli with the means to communicate on a daily basis, it has also made her career as a writer possible. It is thus through the necessity of writing as a communicative aid that Tonelli found her vocation in the written word. It is my contention that the writing process informs and shapes the final products created, while at the same time challenging narrative norms that eschew collaborative writing or that dictate when, where, and how writing “should” or should not take place. Whereas disabled subjects have often traditionally been “silenced” or spoken *for*, I argue that the many alternative means of communication taken up by disabled characters and writers open up new ways of thinking about disability, writing, and representation, challenging both narrative conventions and stereotypes of disability.

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Disability studies is a humanistic and social sciences based field that has its roots in the disability rights movement and positions itself in opposition to the “applied” medical and rehabilitative fields, aiming not to “cure” disability in the individual body, but instead seeking to promote reform in the surrounding society and environment, through a critique of discriminatory

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<sup>22</sup> Again, this understanding is indebted to Robert McRuer (2006), as well as Tom Shakespeare, et al (1996) and further articulations by Tobin Siebers (2008, 2012); Abby Wilkerson (2011); Alison Kafer (2013); Joshua St. Pierre (2015) and others.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida uses the phrase “syntactic resistance” in *White Mythology* to refer to a certain syntactic remainder or “supplement” that carries the potential for undoing the binary opposition between the semantic and the syntactic. One effect of this undoing is a cancellation of the hierarchy whereby the syntactic is subordinated to the semantic. This potential will prove particularly relevant with respect to the tendency for disabled characters to be imbued with a given negative *meaning* or interpreted as metaphors. However, I also use the term in a broader sense to refer to any instance where the formal aspects of a text work to upset normative expectations and interpretations with respect to disability. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 270.

social norms and practices.<sup>24</sup> With the relatively recent rise in political and social awareness of disability as a minority identity in the American and British contexts over the last twenty-five years, a robust exploration of literary disability studies has also taken shape, which recognizes disability as a category that is not only valid and valuable, but essential to critical discourse.<sup>25</sup>

Within the context of literary studies of disability, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have argued that narratives *make use of* disability as a crutch or “prosthesis,” as a vehicle to carry the narrative through an obstacle to its final resolution, which often takes the form of either death or cure. While I agree with Mitchell and Snyder’s assessment on the one hand, I argue that narrative also carries a profoundly generative potential and that metaphors of disability do not always necessarily exert a violence upon disabled subjects.<sup>26</sup> Instead, I argue that narratives often play a central role in the (re)construction of disabled identity in potentially productive and edifying ways.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, it is often precisely a *lack* of access to certain modes of narrative that can allow for new forms of narrative innovation, which in turn validate – or even engender – alternative modes of being.

On the other hand, as Italian sociologist and queer theorist Flavia Monceri has suggested, disabled subjects might benefit from going *beyond* identity as constructed through narrative, focusing instead on practices and modes of being that need not be discursive.<sup>28</sup> As Mitchell and Snyder argue, the discursive quality of narrative is often at odds with the disabled characters it represents, seeking to metaphorize disability in a bid to escape the materiality that disability inexorably invokes. My aim is not only to point out occasions where this phenomenon occurs but also to show that another counter tendency is also at play, where the linguistic and narrative structures used within these texts and by disabled characters allow for, or even act in the service of, an alternative understanding of bodily, sensory or psychic experience. I thus hold out the possibility for modes of signification and communication that do not necessitate voice, text, writing or indeed linguistic forms of any kind. I hold these tensions present throughout my project, examining the ways in which narrative at turns closes down and opens up productive and generative possibilities for disabled subjects.

Operative throughout my project is a phenomenon I am calling “superabilità,” a pointed play on words that combines the Italian definition of “surmountability” or “overcoming” with the

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<sup>24</sup> See Simi Linton’s *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) for an excellent overview of disability studies in the American academic context. See, as well, the many articulations of the social model as an alternative to the medical model, one of the foundational theoretical moves of disability studies that has since been complicated in myriad ways.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*; Michael Bérubé, “Disability and Narrative,” *PMLA* 120.2 (2005): 568-576; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*; Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); and many more. For an excellent array of approaches to disability in literature, see the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*.

<sup>26</sup> In this, I follow, in particular Michael Bérubé’s discussion in “Disability and Narrative.” See also: Jay Dolmage, “Between the Valley and the Field,” *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 27.1-2 (2005): 108-119; Amy Vidali, “Seeing What We Know: Disability and Theories of Metaphor,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.1 (2010): 33-54.

<sup>27</sup> For more on Italian pedagogy, narrative and disability, see: Giusti (1999); Millefiorini (2010); and Elisa A.G. Arfini, “Corpi che non contano? Processi di de-sessualizzazione dei disabili e narrazioni personali,” in *Sessualità narrate. Esperienze di intimità a confronto*, eds. Marco Inghilleri and Elisabetta Ruspini (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2011), 103-124.

<sup>28</sup> Flavia Monceri, *Oltre l’identità sessuale: Teorie queer e corpi transgender* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2010).

notion of a superhuman power, or “super-ability.”<sup>29</sup> This duality speaks to the often-paradoxical nature of societal understandings of disability – as a deficiency or problem that must be overcome and, at the same time, as a potential advantage or “specialness” that sets one apart. Fictional disabled characters are thus often assigned extrahuman powers – such as Marianna Ucria’s telepathic powers – in order to “compensate” for what is perceived as a defect or lack, revealing the text’s inability to accept disability at face value. By filling in what is seen as missing, both bodies and modes of relating are normalized, barring any possibility for productive difference. By the same token, autobiographical writing by disabled authors is often expected to conform to narratives of “overcoming,” in which disabled writers must recount how they “overcame” their disabilities through strength and perseverance.<sup>30</sup> In the texts I focus on here, this imperative is in part effected through, and evidenced by, the fact of having written the narrative itself. The super-ability in question thus refers precisely to various forms of narrative or linguistic capacity, which in most cases compensate for a prior “silencing.” I pay attention as well to the traditionally gendered codes of various discursive media – such as “male writing” and “female voice” – and how these interplay with stereotypes of disability. I contend that, more often than not, it is precisely a character or writer’s disability that *allows for* a certain freedom from narrative and gender conventions.

Chapter One, “Mutola com’è: Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* and the Problem with Finding One’s Voice,” introduces some of the key tensions that will run throughout the dissertation through an analysis of Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (1990) [The Silent Duchess]. Maraini’s novel, set in eighteenth-century Sicily, follows the story of a deaf and mute noblewoman, Marianna Ucria, from her repeated subjugation within the gendered hierarchy of her community to her final decision to escape alone to the Italian peninsula. The text has been understood as an allegory for female liberation from the constraints of a patriarchal society, aided by the protagonist’s passion for literature and philosophy, as well as her own ability to read and write. Scholarship on Maraini’s novel thus tends to read Marianna’s deaf-muteness as a “symbol” for her role as a silenced woman in a patriarchal order, with the effect of erasing the existence of disability from the text entirely. Paying particular attention to the relationship between the primary character’s deaf-muteness and her alternative modes of communication, I show instead how treating Marianna’s disability *as* disability opens up the possibility for reading a new kind of deconstructive force within the text, one that calls into question both narrative and communicative norms.

Through the writing of notes, Marianna challenges the primacy of orality over the written word, representing a mode of interaction that has no need for speech. Here, I employ Lennard Davis’s theorization of the “deafened moment” of reading – as a non-oral mode that is inherent to the reading and writing of texts. Through the insistently material quality of her writing and interactions with other people, Marianna utilizes a “language of the body” that is profoundly different from the female symbolic that is so coveted by feminist theorists. What is more, Marianna’s character is granted powers of telepathy – an example of *superabilità* that allows her to “hear without hearing.” However, this superhuman access to the minds of others only reinforces her entrapment in a symbolic code that both defines and alienates her. Rejecting heterosexual encounters in which her body “speaks” to the body of the other, she instead

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<sup>29</sup> *Superabilità* is a term that I have derived from the title of a disability outreach organization, *SuperAbile*, and its corresponding journal.

<sup>30</sup> This imperative has been associated with what has come to be called “inspiration porn” by many within the disability community.



embarks upon a nomadic journey that takes her first away from sexual difference, as she travels initially with a female companion, and then away from difference entirely, as she continues on alone. It is in this return to identity via sameness that she is able to transform silence – from a mode that stands in opposition to linguistic presence to one that has its own present and communicative power. However, this subversive potential is undermined by the text’s refusal to allow Marianna to develop a sign language, a move that would erase the need for the textual and verbal fields entirely.

Chapter Two, “Seeking Transabled Knowledge: Dis-simulation as Gender Transgression in Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in Guerra* and Gabriele Pedullà’s ‘Miranda,’” theorizes “literary transability” as an interpretive tool with which to analyze moments in narratives of disability where a nondisabled character temporarily crosses over to a disabled state in order to effectuate a personal awakening, specifically through a process of “queer” education. I use the term “transability” to denote an abstract condition of mobility – specifically an ability to travel across a given boundary or between two given subject positions. At the same time, I make reference to the phenomenon “transableism” (also known as “transability”), a so-called Body Integrity Identity Disorder, whereby a nondisabled subject identifies as disabled and often seeks to simulate – or “correct” the body to conform to – the desired disabled conditions. In conversation with Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis* as well as Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory*, I theorize a “transabled” position that allows for the temporary appropriation of a given impairment by a nondisabled subject as a means to sexual liberation.

First, I consider *Donna in guerra* (1975) [Woman at War], an earlier novel by Dacia Maraini that tells the story of Vanna, an oppressed wife and schoolteacher on vacation with her husband. She makes the acquaintance of Suna, a strong and very sexual woman, who is physically disabled and walks with crutches. Though Suna is stared at and ridiculed in public, her strength and feminist stance places her in a position that counters many stereotypical representations of disabled women as asexual and helpless. Through her (sometimes queer) association with Suna, including a sexual dream in which she inhabits Suna’s disabled body, Vanna gets an education in feminist thought and becomes empowered to leave her abusive husband and abort an unwanted baby. I mobilize Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s formulation of “the stare” as that which plagues the disabled female, as opposed to the psychoanalytic “gaze,” and suggest that Suna incites an intertwining of both stare and gaze in her spectacular sexualized stance. Garland-Thomson’s notion of triangulation between disabled and nondisabled women will be central here as well, though I will complicate the hierarchical relation of her theory as one of charity-giving, due to the fact that Suna rejects any intimation that she might require assistance from her nondisabled counterpart. Woven throughout Maraini’s novel are instances of erotic and/or perverse storytelling that highlight and problematize the relationship between perversity, narrative and disability, as well as the role that each plays in the quest for political and personal emancipation. I argue that Suna’s strength as a disabled character is, in the last instance, disallowed by the logic of the text, as her flexible sexuality serves finally to effect Vanna’s metaphorical enablement, while she cancels her own existence in an inexplicable suicide.

Next, I examine Gabriele Pedullà’s short story, “Miranda” (2009), as another instance of transability at work, where Miranda’s lack of sight effectuates a cancelling of binary divisions, allowing a traversal between categories (male/female, animal/human, heterosexual/homosexual). Blindfolded, the sighted Stefi simulates Miranda’s blindness, allowing her access to a new mode of knowing that is grounded in the tactile. Inseparable from this epistemological shift is a sexual

awakening – a relation that stems from the fact that the reading of Braille texts, the “reading” of faces, and the sexual “reading” of another body all depend on the transmission of information through the fingertips. Embedded within Pedullà’s story is an anxiety about border crossings, which I read as standing in for the demarcations between both disabled/nondisabled as well as heterosexual/homosexual. Figuring Miranda’s blindness as an issue of translation, Stefi understands Miranda’s “language” as one that necessitates corporeal contact and thus, in the interest of cultural relations, she allows herself to engage in an ambiguous queer encounter while blindfolded. The crisis of identity that ensues leads Stefi to question the reality of her own experience, disallowing the possibility of a blind or disabled mode of knowing.

The third chapter, “From *Pharmakon* to Phantom Limb: (Over)writing Disability in Stefano Benni’s *Achille piè veloce*,” continues to explore the use of alternative modes of communication as key to the articulation between disability and narrative, this time through an analysis of Stefano Benni’s *Achille piè veloce* (2003) [Fleet-footed Achilles]. Here, I argue that the act of collaboration in both writing and sexual practices leads to a subversion of writerly authority and hetero-able autonomy. In particular, I offer a conception of collaborative authorship that troubles the boundary between the linguistic/writerly subject and the sexual subject, suggesting that each of these phenomena are inextricably bound to Achille’s status as disabled subject.

Engaging Derrida’s figure of the *pharmakon* – an understanding of writing as both a remedy and a poison – I argue that the disabled character, Achille, acts as a *pharmakon* within the narrative, both aiding and hindering Ulisse’s writing process and resisting definition, a condition which ultimately leads to the preclusion of his own writerly authority. Achille turns to narrative in order to normalize his disability, but in the process gives over his life and his life manuscript to his non-disabled counterpart. Achille’s abdication of his finished work suggests the preclusion of his own writerly authority, while at the same time proclaiming a disregard for the end product of writing, focusing instead on the writing *process*.

Refiguring Lacan’s mirror stage as a moment of *recognition*, rather than *misrecognition*, again returns the subject to himself, removing the need for the symbolic recognition effected through the dispersal of one’s linguistic production. At the same time, Achille’s pan-sexuality imbues his writing with a sexual agency of its own that acts independently in the world while remaining physically tied to its author. Following Vivian Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts*, I argue that Achille’s relationship to language is thus not substitutively prosthetic, but is instead prosthetic in the Italian sense of *protendere* – an extending outward that is radically productive without necessitating detachment or loss.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation, “*Sirena senza coda* and Other Tales: The Siren-Mermaid as Figure for Disability from Dante to Garlaschelli,” discusses the recurrent use of the *sirena* as a metaphor for disabled women in Italian narrative. A remarkable number of Italian autographical accounts of disability make use of the figure of the mermaid, including: *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua* (1995) [I, Mermaid Out of Water] by Mirella Santamato, *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento* (2001) [Siren: Heavy Vehicle in Motion] by Barbara Garlaschelli, and *Sirena senza coda* (2009) [Mermaid Without a Tail] by Cristina Tonelli and Giancarlo Trapanese. In Italian, the term *sirena* refers to both siren and mermaid, conflating Homer’s irresistible yet deadly winged creatures with the legends of the half-human, half-fish of the sea. Each of these texts grapple with the relationship between mind and body, staged upon the hybrid body of the mermaid.

Here, I employ the figure of the tail or *coda* as representative of both lack and excess, a dual role that parallels accounts of the female voice and encapsulates the notion of *superabilità*. Marked by a heightened desirability, the inability to walk, and a particular vocal prowess, the *sirena* exemplifies the enmeshment of sexuality, disability and narrative that forms the basis of my argument throughout the dissertation. What is more, the hybrid form of the mermaid's body in these texts accompanies a hybridity in narrative forms, particularly in relation to composites of genre and collaborative writing processes. The dual form of the mermaid suggests an alternative understanding of subjectivity that is not bound to conventional generic or gendered constraints. I argue that the *coda*/tail marks the mermaid as not only an animal/human hybrid, but a gendered one as well, where the tail is a phallic symbol belonging to a body that is always understood as female. At the same time, the *coda* is a metaphor for writing as well, a figuration that embeds the phallic writing pen within the female mermaid body. In order to gain access to a fully human subjectivity, the tail must be rejected in favor of human legs, a process which recalls a transsexual transitioning (from male *coda* to female legs and vagina) as well as a process of transability, only this time in the reverse. The mermaid thus rejects a dual-gendered and disabled symbolic identity in favor of an unambiguously female body whose symbolic representation is potentially threatened. These mermaid narratives thus appear to mark a return to a gendered (and able-bodied) subject even as the hybrid body inherently persists in rejecting attempts at categorization. In each case, the tail or disability persists, as does the writer's symbolic capacity, suggesting instead the possibility for a plural subjectivity that straddles, as it were, the boundaries of all subject positions.

Positioned at the intersection between disability theory and Italian literary studies, my dissertation works to redefine the relationship between language, sexuality and the body, as it has been elaborated by various strains of post-structuralist thought. I argue that the inclusion of disability theory serves to complicate philosophies of the subject as put forward by theorists such as Lacan and Derrida, and feminist philosophers Cixous, Irigaray, and Adriana Cavarero, opening up new ways of engaging with the Italian literary canon. What is more, I suggest that disability studies itself can benefit from the reading of Italian texts, which offer new insights into questions of mind and matter. Through an analysis of modes of communication and sexual practices utilized by disabled characters and authors in recent Italian fiction and autobiography, I contend that the relationship between bodily morphology and linguistic production that emerges in relation to disabled corporealities produces new ways of understanding the relationship between body and self as well as new possibilities for communicative exchange, both linguistic and not. Employing disability as interpretive key, my dissertation thus uncovers the productive potential contained in these narratives for reimagining the limits of the human, as well as the norms that govern bodies, language, narrative, and sexuality.

## Chapter One

### “Mutola com’è”: Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* and the Problem with Finding One’s Voice

For many readers and critics, Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) [*The Silent Duchess*] is a novel about voice. Depending on one’s orientation, this fact may seem either obvious or preposterous, given that Maraini’s protagonist is deaf and non-speaking. Marianna Ucrìa is among the most widely read of Maraini’s novels. Translated into dozens of languages and made into a major motion picture, Maraini’s novel has reached a vast, transnational audience in the twenty-five years since its first publication. Within the circles of Italian literary studies, *Marianna Ucrìa* is the subject of a particularly extensive list of critical essays, book chapters, reviews, and interviews with the author. Criticism of the novel univocally understands Maraini’s text as a feminist novel, concerned with gender roles and with the history of violence and oppression against women in Sicilian society and beyond. Marianna – as a deaf and mute character – is thus interpreted as a metaphor for the “silencing” of women in a patriarchal order. Though this reading is certainly important and valid, in this chapter I will argue that the omission of interpretations on the basis of disability has the effect of precluding the possibility for other productive hermeneutical possibilities and unwittingly subscribes to an ableist ideology. Reading *Marianna Ucrìa* alongside critical disability theory, I argue, offers a way beyond certain interpretive impasses encountered by feminist readings of the novel and allows for a fruitful exploration of the narrative effects of Marianna’s deafness and lack of speech.

Maraini’s protagonist, Marianna Ucrìa, is born into a noble family in eighteenth-century Sicily.<sup>1</sup> Both deaf and unable to speak, Marianna communicates through the writing of notes, and consequently, her interlocutors are compelled to do so as well. The fact that Marianna engages in the writing process as a means to communicate already signals an intrinsically charged relationship with the individual narrative in which she appears, as well as with narrative form, more generally. In this chapter, I will explore the ways that disability theory opens onto new interpretations of Maraini’s novel, in particular, seeking out instances where Marianna’s deafness leads to a disruption or reshaping of narrative norms. First, I will address extant scholarship on *Marianna Ucrìa*, in order to show that reading the text through an exclusively feminist apparatus that takes no account of disability studies closes down productive possibilities for interpretation. What is more, such readings ultimately break down on the logical level when pressure is applied to the metaphors of disability that undergird them.

Marianna and her conversation partners take up the roles of readers and writers in a reciprocal relationship that casts each as both producers and interpreters of text. In eighteenth-century Sicily, a context where even noblewomen were rarely educated in reading and writing,<sup>2</sup> Marianna’s status as disabled, as socially marked by difference, is compounded by, and

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<sup>1</sup> Maraini explains that the idea for the character of Marianna came from a portrait of one of Maraini’s own ancestors by the same name who was herself deaf and non-speaking. See: Dacia Maraini, *Bagheria* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1993); and *Conversazione con Dacia Maraini: Il piacere di scrivere*, eds. Paola Gaglianone, Maria Serena Sapegno, Aldo Rosselli (Rome: Omicron, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Literacy was a pressing issue in eighteenth-century Sicily where even the aristocracy was largely illiterate. During this period a special school for aristocrats was created in an attempt to remedy this. See: Denis Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily*, Vol 2: *Modern Sicily After 1713* (New York: Viking, 1968), 302.

inextricable from, her engagement with the world of texts – with literature, philosophy, and eventually business as well, as she will take over the management of her husband’s lands after his death.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is arguably her disability which allows her access to reading and writing, a point to which I will return further on. At the same time, the trajectory of Marianna’s “lunga vita” [long life] is, in many ways, restricted by the fairly inflexible social mores and expectations of women in Sicilian society during the time period, symbolized by the traumatic event of being raped by her uncle at age five, and the subsequent post-traumatic response consisting in sudden hearing loss and lack of speech.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Marianna’s disability is ostensibly brought on by a sexual assault perpetrated by a family patriarch necessitates a feminist reading of the novel, and there are many excellent discussions on that score.<sup>5</sup> For my purposes here, however, I am interested not so much in the *origins* of her disability but in the *effects* of her disabled embodiment on her relationship to language and the symbolic, and thus, by extension, to the form of narrative itself.

### “Finding Her Voice”: Feminist Readings of *Marianna Ucrìa*

Like many of Maraini’s works, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* focuses its attention on a marginalized, disempowered subject. In much of Maraini’s oeuvre, the subjects represented are

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware of the anachronism inherent in using the term disability here. I do so purposefully in order to evoke the modern understanding of the term and the sense of a concrete reality that it imports. Using the terms “silenced” or even simply “deaf-mute,” leaves too much room for a metaphorical interpretation that relegates Marianna’s character to a two-dimensional, symbolic state. Maraini herself has remarked that Marianna is a symbolic character, though she claims it was an unintentional development. See: Simona Wright, “Intervista a Dacia Maraini,” *Italian Quarterly* 34.133-34 (1997): 71-91. It is my aim to reclaim for Marianna a portion of the multi-dimensionality her character has been systematically denied through an interpretation of (her) disability and the textual effects it creates. I use the terms “disabled,” “non-disabled” and “able-bodied” always with a certain amount of trepidation, as there are many reasons to question their use given the difficulty of defining such categories. For an excellent discussion of vocabulary and meaning in studies of disability, see: Linton, *Claiming Disability*. I will continue to use these terms throughout this dissertation but please understand them to be subject to critique/deconstruction.

<sup>4</sup> In diagnostic terms, Marianna’s condition ostensibly corresponds to a type of hearing loss that is considered “non-organic” or “psychogenic,” meaning that it has no physical cause. Labeled a “conversion disorder” in psychiatric terms, psychogenic deafness was once associated with hysteria, a fact which reveals logical similarities in psychoanalytic and medical understandings of both disabled and female subjects. In a 1954 article, P.F. King describes the classification of psychogenic deafness as follows: “(1) Functional deafness.– (a) Loss of discrimination faculty (Kopetzky); (b) organic deafness with hysterical overlay, and (c) pure hysterical deafness with no evidence of organic defect.” P.F. King, “Psychogenic Deafness [Abstract],” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 47.11 (Nov 1954): 941-942. The implication is that the sudden onset of deafness (or aphonia) is the result of a psychological or emotional trauma that becomes converted into a neurological or physical symptom. I am not here interested in a psychological or psychoanalytic interpretation of Marianna’s condition as my aim is to place on emphasis on the fact of her deafness and its effects, as opposed to its underlying cause. For a discussion of Marianna’s as a case of hysterical mutism, see Sharon Wood, “The Language of the Body and Dacia Maraini’s *Marianna Ucrìa*,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 2.2 (1993): 223-238. For my purposes in this chapter, I will focus on the inherent differences between the identity categories disabled and female, rather than their similarities. I will return to a discussion of this complex relationship in Chapter Two.

<sup>5</sup> In particular, the Philomela myth is an unavoidable comparison, in which Philomela is raped and her tongue cut out by her attacker so that she cannot tell anyone. Instead she weaves a tapestry for her sister that relays the story pictorially, sparking comparisons between weaving (textile) and writing (text). See Gabriella Brooke, “Sicilian Philomelas: Marianna Ucrìa and the Muted Women of Her Time,” in *Gendering Italian Fiction. Feminist Revisions of Italian History*, eds. M. Marotti and G. Brooke (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999), 190-201. Notably, Marianna does not ever “tell the story” of her rape, via speech or writing, though the novel itself could be seen as the telling of her story in this way. Marianna’s servant and friend, Fila, invokes Philomela as well (in the Italian – Filomela).

oppressed or victimized women. From Anna's abandonment in her 1962 debut novel, *La vacanza* [*The Vacation*], to Vanna's isolation and dissatisfaction as a wife in *Donna in guerra* [*Woman at War*] (1975), to Isolina's brutal murder in the eponymous work, *Isolina* (1985), Maraini's works trace the lives of women who are brutalized or violated, kept from their own desires, knowledge, and power. This fact is oft-noted in Maraini criticism and it is arguably impossible to engage with Maraini's texts without engaging with feminist thought – whether political, philosophical, or literary – despite the fact that the author herself has resisted the label “feminist” at times.<sup>6</sup> While it is clear that Maraini is largely concerned with the female subject, disabled characters, too, appear throughout her body of work and yet disability is not given its due attention as a category of critique within scholarship on her work. In *Stravaganza* [*Extravaganza*] (1986), the inmates of an insane asylum are released and struggle to reintegrate into their families; Vanna's outspoken, highly sexual friend, Suna, in *Donna in guerra* has a mobility impairment due to polio and uses crutches in order to walk; and Marianna Ucria is hearing and speech impaired. And yet, it is Marianna's condition as a *woman* that is signaled in criticism about the novel, figuring her character as simply another in the line of female subjects to whom Maraini “gives voice.”<sup>7</sup>

There is little criticism that reads Marianna's deaf-muteness as a disability. While within the novel, Marianna is interchangeably referred to as “la mutola” [the mute], and “sordomuta” [deafmute], and her experience is clearly heavily impacted by her status as non-hearing, the

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Maraini's relationship to feminism and political activism, see: Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, “Introduction” to *The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini*, eds. Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Ada Testaferri (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> One example of this tendency to insert Marianna in a long line of “silenced” female characters penned by Maraini, can be found in Chemotti's “Marianna Ucria: parola senza voce,” where she writes: “In questo contesto, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (1990) si può considerare, allo stesso tempo, punto di approdo e nuovo transito per il discorso ideologico sull'identità femminile iniziato dall'autrice fin dal 1962 con il primo romanzo *La vacanza*, dove la protagonista Anna anticipava la serie di ritratti di *protagoniste ammutolite perché annichilite dalla realtà* in cui si trovano ad operare.” Saveria Chemotti, “Marianna Ucria: Parola senza voce,” *Studi novecenteschi* 30.66 (2003), 284, emphasis mine. [“In this context, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (1990) (The Silent Duchess) can be considered, at the same time, a point of convergence and departure for the discussion of female subjectivity begun by the author starting in 1962 with her first novel *La vacanza* (The Vacation), where the protagonist Anna initiated a series of portraits of protagonists who are *muted because of their effacement* by the reality in which they find themselves.”] (All translations are mine, except where noted.) In another example, Grazia Sumeli Weinberg writes: “La mancanza di una propria voce nelle prime eroine, come appunto Anna nella *Vacanza*, Enrica nell'*Età del malessere* (1963) e Maria in *A memoria* (1967), *ammutilate dall'effetto dello scontro con la realtà circostante*; la memoria labile di Armida nel *Treno per Helsinki* (1984) e la duplice mutilazione di Isolina (1985) si manifestano nel personaggio di Marianna *come vera lesione fisica*, un vivere nella dimidiazione, che tuttavia la donna riscatta non solo per se stessa ma per tutte le altre figure di donne che l'hanno preceduta, nel suo lungo cammino verso la conoscenza.” Grazia Sumeli Weinberg, “La forza della negatività: la dialettica del soggetto parlante nella *Lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* di Dacia Maraini,” *Otto/Novecento* 19.3/4 (May-Aug 1995), 177, emphasis mine. [“The absence of a voice of their own for the first heroines such as Anna in *La vacanza*, Enrica in *L'età del malessere* (1963) (*The Age of Malaise*), and Maria in *A memoria* (1967) (*By Heart*), *muted by the collision with their surrounding reality*; Armida's faint memory in *Treno per Helsinki* (1984) (*Train to Helsinki*) and the double mutilation of Isolina (1985) are manifested in Marianna's character *as a real physical wound*, a life lived in incompleteness, that nevertheless she redeems not only for herself but for all of the other female figures that have come before her, in her long march towards consciousness”]. The idea that the metaphorical silence of Maraini's other female characters becomes concretized in Marianna's deaf-muteness represents a common trope in the treatment of disabled characters, whereby the disability, in its materiality, is utilized in order to lend a certain weight to the metaphorical meaning it is meant to evoke. See: David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006): 205-216; and David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*.

criticism on the text largely evades the fact of her deafness, showing preference instead for her muteness or “silence.”<sup>8</sup> Many readers of Maraini’s novel interpret Marianna’s condition as a symbol of her silencing as a woman in a patriarchal society, or alternatively as a catalyst for her liberation from that oppressive yoke.<sup>9</sup> Rossana Rossanda writes in her preface to Maraini’s *Isolina*: “Rare sono le Marianna Ucria, affascinante nella straordinarietà della sua sorte, *metafora dell’essere femminile senza udito e parola nei luoghi della storia*, dove ancora dobbiamo batterci” [“Rare are the Marianna Ucrias, fascinating because of her extraordinary fate, *metaphor for being female/the female being without hearing and speech in the places of history*, where we must still fight.”]<sup>10</sup> Or as Grazia Sumeli Weinberg puts it: “[L]a vita di Marianna, come dimostra la scrittrice in altre sue opere, sta a riconferma della norma in quanto *storia di tutte le donne che non hanno potuto parlare, che sono dovute rimanere mute*” [“The life of Marianna, as the author demonstrates in other works, acts to reconfirm the norm insofar as *it is the story of all women that have been unable to speak, that have had to stay mute*.”]<sup>11</sup> Such readings, while important from a feminist standpoint, metaphorize disability and remove deafness from the scene, covering over the productive potential for a reading that treats disability on its own terms.

Implicit in this mode of reading is the assumption that “silence” necessitates social isolation. Pina Palma, in “Finding her Voice and Returning to the Center: *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*,” equates a “voiceless” state with a necessary exclusion from social interaction despite the fact that Marianna clearly negates such a totalizing view through her use of writing and other means of communication. Evoking Lacan and Deborah Britzman’s theory of voice, Palma writes: “[Britzman’s] assertion, which places ‘voice’ at the center of all social interactions, brilliantly articulates the daunting isolation in which ‘voiceless’ people live.”<sup>12</sup> This “daunting isolation” is certainly not suggested in the opening of the novel where Marianna appears to have no trouble understanding her father as he speaks to her: “La bambina spia le labbra del padre che ora si muovono più in fretta. Sa cosa le sta dicendo anche se non lo sente.” [“The girl watches her father’s lips as they begin to move faster. She knows what he is saying to her even though she cannot hear him.”]<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that her lack of speech and hearing has no affect on her social relationships, but it is clear from the opening pages that her condition has not impeded her understanding of, or even her closeness to, those around her. Palma goes on

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<sup>8</sup> This preference is reflected in the title of the English translation, *The Silent Duchess*, which shifts the focus from her name to the twin identity markers, “silent” and “duchess,” calling attention to both her class status and her so-called “silence.” In one example of the slippage from deaf *and* mute to mute alone, Joann Cannon writes: “*La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* presents the trajectory of the life of a Sicilian noblewoman and *deaf mute*. The *mute* heroine must resort to the written word to communicate with the world.” Joann Cannon, “Rewriting the Female Destiny: Dacia Maraini’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 49.2 (1995): 136, emphasis mine.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Brooke (1999); Chemotti (2003); Pina Palma, “Finding her Voice and Returning to the Center: *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*,” *Rivista di studi italiani* 21.1 (2003): 111-118; Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, “Page, Stage, Screen: The Languages of Silence in Maraini and Faenza’s *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*,” *MLN* 123.1 (2008): 56-76; Giuseppina Sant’Agostino, “*La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*: tessere la memoria sotto lo sguardo delle chimere,” *Italica* 73.3 (1996): 410-428; Christina Siggers Manson, “‘What’s hell? Palermo without any cake shops’: re-examining oppression in Dacia Maraini’s Palermo,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 7.1 (2007): 79-94; Wood (1993).

<sup>10</sup> Rossana Rossanda, preface to *Isolina*, by Dacia Maraini (Milan: Rizzoli, 1992), vi, emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> Sumeli Weinberg, “La forza della negatività,” 183, emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> Palma, “Finding her Voice,” 111.

<sup>13</sup> Dacia Maraini, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997), 7. In developing my own translations of *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*, I consulted *The Silent Duchess*, trans. Dick Kitto and Elspeth Spottiswood (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1998).

to argue that by the end of the novel Marianna “finds her voice,” in part vis-à-vis a sexual awakening, which she then “reaffirms” by leaving her home and family in Sicily and traveling to the Italian mainland. Significantly, however, Marianna does *not* recover her speech and hearing capabilities, a complication which does not seem to deter the reading of Marianna’s “voicelessness” as a metaphor and her process of self-discovery in terms of a “finding” of that “voice.” Thus, for Palma and others, Marianna’s *non*metaphorical voicelessness at the diegetic level is “overcome” through a metaphorical “finding” of her voice, thereby undoing the very grounds for the original metaphor, i.e., by demonstrating that her lack of speech is not, in fact, synonymous with a lack of power, identity, and social relationship.

Even analyses of the novel that seem to embark in the direction of a disability perspective end up reassigning important insights about Marianna’s disability to the service of a commentary or critique regarding women and/or feminist thought. Again, I cite Sumeli Weinberg as an example: “Solo perché considerata diversa, menomata, anormale, a Marianna è permesso l’accesso al mondo della lettura e della scrittura [...] Paradossalmente, dal dolore del corpo nasce il piacere del testo” (182) [“Only because she is considered different, maimed, abnormal, is Marianna permitted access to the world of reading and writing ... Paradoxically, from the pain of the body the pleasure of the text is born.”] Sumeli Weinberg initially points towards a potentially productive reading of Marianna’s disability – despite the assumption of a “dolore del corpo,” a *pain* in the body, which is not altogether commensurate with Marianna’s experience – as that which releases her from certain societal bounds, allowing her access to the world of texts. However, she goes on to undo the possibility of a productive relationship to language for Marianna, stating: “Vista in questa luce, l’anomalia di Marianna, il suo mutismo, acquista una doppia funzione nell’ambito della ricerca del soggetto femminile. Se da una parte il mutismo è simbolo dell’effettivo svuotamento dell’io, della sua secolare assenza, dall’altra, lo libera dall’ignominia del ruolo ricevuto e dal determinismo del condizionamento sociale” (182) [“Seen in this light, Marianna’s anomaly, her muteness, takes on a double function with respect to the search for the female subject. If on one hand muteness is a symbol of the effective emptying out of the ego/the ‘I’, of its centuries-old absence, on the other hand, it frees it from the shame of its prescribed role and the determinism of social conditioning.”] Sumeli Weinberg begins from a stance that situates Marianna in a special class with regards to language, where it is ostensibly Marianna’s disability that allows for her entrance into the realm of the written word and written knowledge(s). From there, however, Marianna’s sensory difference is interpreted only as it relates to her role in society as a woman, while at the same time, from this disenfranchised position, Marianna’s access to the textual is transmuted into a “svuotamento,” an emptying out, of productive linguistic possibility. Again, the absence of the spoken word, when understood as a metaphor for disempowerment, leaves no possibility for a productive reading of disability within the text, even where critics of Maraini are clearly working with ideas that could lead in that direction. Without the critical framework, without the tools, of a disability studies perspective, such concepts and observations are led back to the service of other non-disabled subject positions at the expense of the disabled subject. This is not to say that feminist readings and disability theory cannot or should not work in tandem when reading *Marianna Ucrìa*. In fact, I argue that such a juncture of theoretical approaches is not only advisable but necessary given the confluence of marginalized subject positions that are represented in the figure of Marianna, as both female *and* disabled.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Notably, Marianna’s class position is *not* one of marginalization but her privileged status as a member of the Sicilian aristocracy is repeatedly “trumped” by her status as disabled. Even Marianna’s servants pity her condition:



Like Palma and Rossanda, Christina Siggers Manson reads Marianna's lack of speech and hearing as a symbol for her role as a silent and silenced woman in a patriarchal order. She writes: "Maraini's deaf-mute protagonist epitomizes the silent female in a world where women's voices continue to go unheard" (87). Embedded in Manson's claim is a logic by which Marianna's (individual) silence is translated into a metaphorical silence afflicting *all* women in society. However, given that ours is "a world where women's voices continue to go unheard," it would perhaps be more accurate to assert that Manson's "silent female" *has* a voice but that it falls on "deaf ears," so to speak. It is, thus, "the world" that is cast as deaf while "the silent female" herself is, in fact, neither deaf nor mute. Again, while this interpretive schema occupies an important place in the service of a feminist reading, it has the effect of erasing the existence of disability from the text entirely; or, alternatively, of conflating the disability, in this case deafness, with the cruelty of the "world" or society, thus casting deafness as synonymous with callousness or even misogyny. Thus, deafness is situated as an evil that is inflicted upon Marianna by society, instead of as a trait that Marianna possesses which society is unable to manage or accept.

In another revealing passage, Manson compares Marianna to the Sicily of Dacia Maraini's youth: "Marianna's beauty is marred by her disability, brought about by male oppression and violence, just as for Maraini, Sicily's breathtaking landscapes are marred by its treatment of women and engrained violence" (90). Aside from the egregious claim that being deaf and non-speaking "mars" Marianna's beauty and the questionable equation of Marianna with the Sicilian landscape, this analogy exhibits a certain confusion in its logical relationship. When simplified, the analogy reads as follows: *Marianna* is to *disability* as *Sicily* is to *the poor treatment of women/violence*. Thus, Marianna's disability is cast as analogous to the poor treatment of women and violence in Sicily even though it is (according to the narrative) this same poor treatment of women and violence that *caused* her disability in the first place when Marianna was violently raped by her uncle, Pietro. According to this logic, the effect is mistaken for the cause, and Marianna's disability itself becomes the violent oppressor.

In a discussion of nineteenth-century narratives of female exploitation and empowerment, disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes that often the very characters that authors seek to empower become paradoxically stigmatized. She writes: "Because readers must simultaneously feel sympathy for the victims and horror at their callous exploitation, this narrative strategy tends to conflate unethical practices with their effects, projecting the fear of becoming disabled onto the disabled person and confusing the victim with the crime."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Marianna's deaf-muteness is understood both as a post-traumatic symptom stemming from the violence to which she was subjected, *and* as a symbolic stand-in for that very violence, the stain that "mars" her otherwise beautiful character.

If Marianna's disability is seen as a symbol for (or perpetrator of) the oppression of women, then it follows that as long as she is deaf and non-speaking, she will also be oppressed. Thus, the only way for Marianna's story to have a "happy ending" is for her to "find her voice,"

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"sembra incredibile ma è così: la cuoca Innocenza Bordon, figlia di un soldato di ventura delle lontane terre venete, analfabeta [...] prova pietà per la grande duchessa che discende direttamente da Adamo per via paterna..." (63) ["It seems incredible, but it's true: the illiterate cook Innocenza Bordon, daughter of a mercenary soldier from distant Venetian lands [...] pities the great Duchess who descends directly from Adam through the paternal line..."] It should be noted, however, that were it not for Marianna's social status, she would not have access to reading and writing, the tools that allow her to communicate with the hearing people around her.

<sup>15</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 84.

an outcome that significantly *does not* occur in the novel.<sup>16</sup> Christine Ashby, in her article, “Whose ‘Voice’ is it Anyway?: Giving Voice and Qualitative Research Involving Individuals that Type to Communicate,” discusses the circulation of the concept of “voice” within the feminist movement as a metaphor for self-possession and self-expression. Rethinking this metaphor in her work with disabled subjects, she writes:

While my goal as a researcher has always been to give voice to the perspective of individuals, particularly students, considered to have significant disabilities, the further along I got into the research process, the more uncomfortable I became with an unproblematized use of the term giving voice. Was I really giving voice? Was it mine to give? Whose voice is it really? Who benefits from the telling? Is spoken voice preferable? I began to question the implications of giving voice and what that means methodologically, particularly with regard to research participants often presumed to have cognitive disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

What then is the goal for Marianna, if not to “find her voice”? What effect does reframing this question have on issues of female subjectivity, oppression, and women’s expression? In the pages that follow, I will show how treating Marianna’s disability *as* disability opens up the possibility for reading Marianna differently, which calls into question narrative norms, produces new textual effects, and ultimately reveals the extent to which Marianna’s final liberation from gendered restrictions depends upon her physical embodied reality as deaf and non-speaking. Reading Marianna’s deafness and silence literally,<sup>18</sup> as impairment, allows for the possibility that she can be deaf and speech-impaired *without* being marred, oppressed, victimized, etc., a possibility that I believe the text clearly means to encourage.<sup>19</sup> Marianna is not, in the end,

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<sup>16</sup> As another example of the treatment of disability in scholarship on Mariani’s novel, Ryan-Scheutz favors the outdated term “handicap” over disability, and makes reference to Marianna’s “handicap” only as either an instrument to propel the narrative motor or as something to be “countered” or “overcome.” This is especially surprising given that Ryan-Scheutz does engage with themes related to Marianna’s disability, such as her development of sign language in the film version. However, even as she does so, Ryan-Scheutz refers to such developments as being in the service of Marianna finding her “voice.”

<sup>17</sup> Christine Ashby, “Whose ‘Voice’ is it Anyway?: Giving Voice and Qualitative Research Involving Individuals that Type to Communicate,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 21.4 (2011): n. pag. Web. May 21, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> I acknowledge that, in the reading of texts, a pure “literality” is not possible. However, as much as possible, I mean to work from an assumption of a certain bodily and sensory experience that is not always already displaced onto a distant, unrelated, or at the very least, contiguous theme or subject position. See Vivian Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts* for her analogous discussion of the metaphorical treatment of prosthesis in critical theory, summarized in note 37 of this chapter. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> I use the terms “impairment” and “disability” following common usage in disability studies which defines “impairment” as “an injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function,” and disability as “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers. Definitions are taken from the handout, “defining impairment and disability,” found in the Disability Archive UK, hosted by the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds, ed. Alden Chadwick. These definitions are consonant with the social model of disability, a model that has come under critique precisely in that it risks downplaying the importance of impairment to the experience of disabled identity. See Tom Shakespeare’s *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006). Other models include: the charity model, the rights model and the eugenics model. A.J. Withers’s *Disability Politics and Theory* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing Company, 2012) dedicates a chapter to each of the dominant models and proposes the “radical disability model” as another alternative, which holds that disability cannot be considered apart from the matrix of oppressions and subject positions that subjugate

“cured” of her deafness or speech impairment and yet, in the final instance, she is able to attain a certain level of empowerment, sexual awakening, and freedom of movement.<sup>20</sup>

The critical tendency to read disability as metaphorical stand-in precludes the possibility of a disabled subject, capable of acting according to his or her experience of the world and, as Ellen Samuels puts it, “relies upon the physically deviant body as a trope, rather than as a body in its own right.”<sup>21</sup> As metaphor, the disabled character can only ever refer elsewhere, pointing to meanings and associations that have little or no relevance to disabled experience, indeed negating the possibility of such experience. While a certain amount of metaphorical interpretation is inevitable (and often quite fruitful for thinking through and with disability), I aim to treat Marianna’s disabilities literally where possible, exploring the multiform potentialities opened up by her experience as deaf and non-speaking.<sup>22</sup>

Drawing from critical disability theory, I argue that, through Marianna Ucria’s deafness, Maraini’s text offers a potential challenge to the demand for “compulsory able-bodiedness” that is exerted both within the narrative and its criticism.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, I will signal the many ways in which this subversive capacity is kept in check by recalcitrant normative forces that continue to perform a regulatory function within the text. In particular, the narrative of trauma that ostensibly lies at the origin of her disability would seem to call for a psychoanalytic framework, making recourse to the mandates of treatment and cure. Notably, however, Marianna is not “cured” upon discovering the truth of her trauma, suggesting a refusal to participate in a psychoanalytic mode.<sup>24</sup> Dialoging with both disability studies and feminist theory, I offer a nuanced reading of Maraini’s text that will suggest a possible way out of certain recurring

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and define the individual.

<sup>20</sup> This freedom is arguably somewhat questionable in character, as from one point of view she elects to wander in self-imposed exile for the remainder of her days, unable to take part in the social communities of her society. From this perspective, it is significant that her traveling partner is the illiterate servant and outcast, Fila, whose illiteracy guarantees that communication between the two women will be limited to gestures and other non-linguistic modes. In the final pages of the novel, even the once-homicidal Fila is able to successfully settle herself within the institution of marriage and the traditional roles of womanhood, after being rehabilitated and rescued by Marianna from a mental institution.

<sup>21</sup> Ellen Jean Samuels, “Critical Divides: Judith Butler’s Body Theory and the Question of Disability,” *Feminist Formations* 14.3 (Fall 2002), 63. Regarding the role of the disabled body in Butler’s work – an observation which extends to much gender theory and feminist critique – Samuels writes, “the disabled body becomes a disinvested symbolic medium for the display and mediation of sexuality, which then apparently constitutes the ‘real’ and primary subjectivity” (71).

<sup>22</sup> The critique of metaphor will not be new for readers familiar with disability theory, thanks to Mitchell and Snyder’s foundational work in *Narrative Prosthesis*, and recent critiques of such critiques have complicated the question in productive ways which I will take up in Chapter Three. However, as an introduction of a disability perspective within Italian studies, it is important to begin here and to establish the stakes of omitting disability from the conversation.

<sup>23</sup> I use the term “compulsory able-bodiedness” following disability theorist, Robert McRuer, in *Crip Theory*. In his use of this term, McRuer borrows from the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality,” used by scholars of feminist theory. See, in particular, Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980); and Gayle S. Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975). For McRuer, compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are inseparable mechanisms that cannot be thought apart from one another. This fact will figure prominently further on in Chapter Two.

<sup>24</sup> Disability theory and trauma studies are largely considered to be incompatible in the Anglo-American tradition of disability studies. See James Berger, “Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide,” *JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture, and Politics* 24.3, part 2 (2004): 563-582. See, also, Kate Noson, “From *superabilità* to *transabilità*: towards an Italian disability studies,” *Modern Italy* 19.2 (2014): 135-145, on the ways that Italian disability studies does not display the same incompatibility.

aporias that arise from the feminist critical mode, in particular with respect to the relationship between language and the female subject.<sup>25</sup> In order to present an alternative view, I will first discuss the relationship between language, or narrative more specifically, and the *disabled* subject.

### **What Happened to You? Disability, Narrative and the Demand for a Story**

Disability theorists have noted a particularly unique and complex relationship between disability and narrative. While many have discussed this relationship within the realm of literature, Lennard Davis notes that the connection is equally relevant outside of the confines of literary analysis – in discussions of disability as it exists or is represented in its many permutations in the non-literary world. In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Davis asserts that, “a disability produces the demand for a response.”<sup>26</sup> He writes: “When one speaks of disability, one always associates it with a story, places it in a narrative. A person became deaf, became blind, was born blind, became quadriplegic. The disability immediately becomes part of a chronotope, a time-sequenced narrative, embedded in a story” (3). Davis notes that this imperative to narrativize one’s disability often serves, from a normative and ableist perspective, as a mode of explaining away or isolating the experience of disability as something external – or other – thereby mitigating the “threat” it supposedly poses to the “able-bodied” subject.<sup>27</sup> A parallel might be drawn here between the injunction to narrativize and the metaphorizing reflex discussed in the previous section. In both cases, the attention is drawn away from the bodily fact or impairment and is relocated in abstraction, as story or metaphor. In both cases, a displacement occurs that allows the nondisabled subject to remain firm in its able-bodied status, a subject position that is dependent upon an unwavering denial of the body and the cordoning off of the all-too-corporeal other. The question, “What happened to *you*?” ensures that the story becomes “*your* story” or “*their* story,” and it must be told again and again, each iteration retracing the boundary between disabled and non, distancing the listener from the possibility of crossing over.<sup>28</sup> The demand for the story (of the disabled other) thus enacts an apotropaic function in an attempt to ward off the possibility of contagion or cross-contamination.

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<sup>25</sup> Here, I am thinking especially of the search for an *écriture féminine* or a language of the body, which always falls prey to the same conundrum: in order to join the conversation, the female subject must communicate using the “phallogocentric” symbolic order.

<sup>26</sup> Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), xvi.

<sup>27</sup> I use the term “ableist” following the usage within the field of disability studies, which roughly corresponds to the terms “sexist” and “racist.” In part, to be “ableist” is to discriminate (consciously or unconsciously) against others based on their ability or perceived lack of ability. One of the attitudes associated with an ableist stance is the perception of people with disabilities as a threat to the “able-bodied” status of the perceiving subject, resulting in a tendency to mark the disabled person as Other in an attempt to deny the slippery nature of “disabled” as a category. All of these terms can and should be called into question. Some in the field of disability studies prefer “disablist” to “ableist” because it emphasizes that the discrimination is based on the grounds of disability (as social construction), and does not necessarily have anything to do with ability (as objective medical assessment). Others, Davis included, use the term “temporarily able-bodied” (TAB), in the place of “able-bodied,” to emphasize the idea that even those who do not consider themselves disabled and are not defined by society as disabled *will* at some point be disabled, given that they live long enough. I will use “able-bodied” within quotation marks in order to highlight the problematic nature of the term and to take into account objections to “TAB”; for instance, some claim that much of the stigma and hardship associated with disability has to do with what is seen as an inferior or inadequate level of ability *with respect to* one’s age. See, for example: Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin, “Temporarily Able-Bodied: Useful, but not always true,” *Disabled Feminists*. February 3, 2010. <http://disabledfeminists.com/2010/02/03/guest-post-temporarily-able-bodied-useful-but-not-always-true/>.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity is clearly operative here.

Italian sociologist Elisa Arfini echoes Davis's point but suggests a possible positive consequence to this demand, alluding to the central role narrative plays in the formation of the "disabled identity".<sup>29</sup>

La disabilità ha un rapporto privilegiato con la narrazione, perché è la sua stessa esistenza è un invito a raccontare [sic]. I soggetti disabili sono più esposti alla narrazione perché la loro presenza all'interno di una relazione comunicativa incoraggia a porre la domanda «cosa ti è successo?». Rispondere a questa domanda può essere solo la soddisfazione di una curiosità altrui, ma rappresenta anche una possibilità di costruzione di sé.<sup>30</sup>

[Disability has a privileged relationship with narration because its very existence is an invitation to tell a story. Disabled subjects are more exposed to narration because their presence within a communicative relation encourages the posing of the question 'What happened to you?' Responding to this question can be merely the satisfaction of others' curiosity, but it also represents a possibility for the construction of the self.]

The injunction to tell one's story is thus, according to Arfini, perhaps externally imposed but also potentially internally edifying as part of the process of identity formation. It is notably "la loro presenza" [their presence] that calls for the narrative, according to Arfini – a physical (biological) presence which by the fact of its very existence requires that it be explained. While this is arguably a claim that can be made of any subject identity, the terms are perhaps particularly rigid with regard to disability, where there is – or is perceived to be – an element of mystery or opacity regarding the origins of one's disability and, as a consequence, a curiosity is incited in the (able-bodied) listener which must be assuaged through the telling of the (disabled) other's story.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, one need not explain in daily encounters *how* it is that one came to be female, though gendered subject positions are similarly discursively constructed and then subsequently naturalized, their constructedness covered over.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I refer to disabled identity here in quotes in order to acknowledge the varying views on whether such an identity can be said to exist. To claim that there is any one cohesive "identity" associated with disability is clearly problematic, particularly when one considers the vast range of diversity that the term disabled is meant to include and the fact that many who are considered disabled do not designate themselves as such (for example, those in the Deaf community who consider themselves as part of a linguistic and cultural minority). Others, however, especially those involved in the disability rights movement and political activism, advocate for the need for solidarity and support across the dividing lines of impairment, association and self-definition.

<sup>30</sup> Elisa Arfini, "Corpi che non contano?," 104. I should note that race is often interrogated along analogous lines: "Where are you from?" or "What are you?" are questions commonly posed in encounters of racial difference, especially in the case of mixed-race heritage.

<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, Dacia Maraini cites her own curiosity about the real Marianna – the ancestor whose portrait she sees in her family's villa in Bagheria – as the motive for writing the novel. She describes Marianna as having eyes at once sad and happy: "Questa dualità, questa doppiezza del suo viso, unita al fatto di sapere che Marianna era sordomuta mi hanno messo addosso una grande curiosità. A quel punto ho cominciato a leggere libri su libri, ad andare nelle biblioteche per cercare documenti e ad immergermi negli scritti sull'epoca e dell'epoca" (Maraini, *Conversazione*, 29-30) ["This duality, the ambiguity in her face, together with the fact of knowing that Marianna was deaf-mute provoked a great curiosity in me. At that point I started to read books upon books, to go to libraries to look for documents and immerse myself in the writing of the period and about the period."]

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that, for Freudian psychoanalysis, a similar logic applies to gender as that which I am describing here in relation to ability. However, for Freud, the little boy understands his own body as "normal" and

Davis sees the novelistic form itself as one that privileges that which is perceived as “normal” or “acceptable,” eschewing that which is considered to be outside the norm: “[T]he very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (41). While this may in many instances be the case, one can easily make an argument to the contrary, as very often the primary character of a narrative is in some way considered to be outside of – or is, in the course of the narrative, removed from – the norm. Indeed, in “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note that in many novels, the central character is “afflicted” with a disability which must be overcome or cured, or is in some way neutralized, often through the death of the disabled character. Mitchell and Snyder, like many before them, contend that the novel requires *novelty* – that which is outside of the norm. This is not to say that as a form it is not normative; their claim is that the narrative departs from a place of non-normativity in order to then corral, fix, or eliminate altogether that which is considered abnormal or perverse. The novelistic trajectory traces a path from or through an obstacle to its resolution, and depends upon disability in order to accomplish this task, using it as a crutch or “prosthesis.” They go so far as to contend that this is true of *all* narratives, not solely those with disabled characters.<sup>33</sup> As Mitchell and Snyder put it, “Narrative prosthesis (or the dependency of literary narratives upon disability) forwards the notion that all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excess.”<sup>34</sup> While this is not a particularly original claim within narrative theory more broadly, the radical shift enacted by Mitchell and Snyder’s theory is the idea that the very functioning of this narrative mechanism depends upon *disability* and the logic that seeks to exclude or eradicate it.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not one accepts this, their theory nonetheless reveals the extent to which disability is cast not only as obstacle – as a negative object or state to be resolved, overcome or *moved through* – but also as vehicle, that which carries the narrative to its resolution.<sup>36</sup> And both of these functions exist in the place of – and preclude the possibility of – a conception of disability as productive potential, cultural difference, personal trait, or experience.

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assumes that all bodies are like his, resulting in his need to construct the castration narrative in order to explain the “defective” female body. In the case of disability, there is no easily accessible narrative – repressed or not – to be called upon, and instead the onus is placed on the disabled other to “explain,” reinstating the safe distance of the “normal” subject.

<sup>33</sup> While Mitchell and Snyder take narratives which directly represent disability as their main focus, the logic underlying their claim extends to all narrative: “The act of characterization is such that narrative must establish the exceptionality of its subject matter to justify the telling of a story. A subject demands a story only in relation to the degree that it can establish its own extra-ordinary circumstances. The normal, routine, average, and familiar (by definition) fail to mobilize the storytelling effort because they fall short of the litmus test of exceptionality. The anonymity of normalcy is no story at all. Deviance serves as the basis and common denominator of all narrative.” Mitchell and Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” 209.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” 208.

<sup>35</sup> In a related discussion, narrowed however to modern aesthetics and conceived in a decidedly more positive and productive vein, Tobin Siebers argues that disability is, for modern art, a mark of *quality*. He “conceives of the disabled body and mind as playing significant roles in the evolution of modern aesthetics, theorizing disability as a unique resource discovered by modern art and then embraced by it as one of its defining concepts.” Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> Following Teresa de Lauretis’s understanding of the gendered structure of narrative in *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), I propose the idea that the obstacle or space through which the hero moves might also be cast as disabled (rather than female). For a more in-depth discussion of this idea, see Chapter Two.

Like Davis, Mitchell and Snyder see disability as inciting the demand for narrative: “The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world, and, thus, the language of a tale seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line. In this sense, stories compensate for an unknown or unnatural deviance that begs an explanation” (209). The presence of a disability within narrative, according to Mitchell and Snyder, is what allows for the narrative to follow its necessary course. Disability, they claim, thus acts as a “prosthesis” – a supportive (literary) device that carries the narrative from deviance to normalcy.<sup>37</sup>

### **Marianna Ucria and the Authorization to Interpret**

*La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* not only traces the life of the eponymous character, it also seeks to offer an explanation for Marianna’s disability, the origins of which are unknown even to Marianna herself. Her desire to uncover the cause of her deafness mirrors the need-to-know that motivates the reader to continue reading.<sup>38</sup> This is precisely the function that Mitchell and Snyder elaborate above: it is Marianna’s deafness that creates the need for the story. The reader wonders “What happened to her?” just as Marianna wonders “What happened to me?” invoking the ubiquitous question asked in the face of disability and simultaneously engaging the

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<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Mitchell and Snyder use a metaphor of disability – the prosthesis – to refer to a literary function or process, a critical practice that is so often criticized within disability studies. In a sharp and at times brilliantly witty polemic about the use of prosthesis as metaphor in academe, Vivian Sobchack writes: “Sometime, fairly recently, after the ‘cyborg’ became somewhat tired and tiresome from academic overuse, we started to hear and read about ‘the prosthetic’ – less, in its ordinary usage, as a specific material replacement of a missing limb or body part than as a sexy, new metaphor that, whether noun or (more frequently) adjective, has become tropological currency for describing a vague and shifting constellation of relationships among bodies, technologies, and subjectivities.” (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 207.) Mitchell and Snyder do not directly address the potential effacement-via-metaphorization that a usage of the prosthetic metaphor (or metaphorical prosthesis) risks enacting, though one might argue that the authors intended a certain irony in such usage. However, it is worth keeping in mind the impact – with respect to both theory and “lived bodies” – of such terminology. The employment of the “prosthetic” in *Narrative Prosthesis* is a figural or theoretical mobilization of a literal/material lived condition that regards many disabled people. Interestingly, within Mitchell and Snyder’s work, the prosthetic is made use of as a metaphor or figure *for* disability itself. That a particular part or piece of (some) disabled experience is used to stand in for “disability” in general mobilizes a complex synecdochic relation that I would suggest is at once both reductive and productive. Sobchack herself does not advocate for the abolition of a figural use of the prosthetic. Instead, she suggests that “metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche [be] put in the service of illuminating the nature and experience of our prostheses instead of the prosthetic serving to illuminate something else (and elsewhere)” (216). In the case of *Narrative Prosthesis* – as I see it – the prosthesis-as-metaphor points back to the experience (and representation) of disability and disabled people (some of whom use prostheses and some of whom do not), thereby “illuminating” the general category that is labeled “disability” (of which prosthesis-users are a part), indirectly including the experience of prosthesis-users, even as it displaces such experience to encompass the whole of the group (that is called disabled). I keep these complexities in mind as I refer to the notion of narrative prosthesis, and while the “prosthesis-as-metaphor” will make several appearances throughout this dissertation, I hope that – in the service of a productive reflection upon the lived experience of disability and its literary and textual representation – the potentially reductive aspects of such usage will be forgiven.

<sup>38</sup> Again, the curiosity that spurs both Marianna and the reader extends to the author as well. In an interview, Maraini describes her own writing process as one of discovery: “Non ho mai lavorato su ‘scalette,’ progetti scritti, strutture prefabbricate. In genere sono molto curiosa io stessa di sapere cosa succederà nel prossimo capitolo e come andrà a finire” (Maraini, *Conversazione*, 7) [“I have never worked from outlines, written plans, prefabricated structures. Generally, I myself am very curious to know what will happen in the next chapter and how it will all end.”] The idea that the writer/author inhabits a role similar to that of the reader and protagonist suggests a kind of collaborative writing process. I will discuss this idea further in Chapter Three in relation to Stefano Benni’s *Achille piè veloce*.

narrative motor. The fact that the cause of her disability is opaque even to Marianna thus situates her in the same position as the reader, as one who desires an explanation.

Within the text, Marianna is herself figured as a reader in a variety of ways, even to the point of becoming a reader of minds. In fact, her ability to “read” the thoughts of others is what will eventually allow her to discover the truth about the origins of her disability. Casting Marianna as a reader of stories, and, more precisely, a reader of *her own story*, as opposed to being the object of interpretation or – alternatively – a *teller* of stories, displaces her character from the center of the action to one who, like the reader, is attempting to interpret the action of the narrative. However, Marianna’s mode of communication, which is necessitated by her deafness, consists in a form of textual production that undoes this displacement and, to a certain extent, reinstates her character’s centrality.<sup>39</sup> Marianna is thus able to act as both interpreter and object of interpretation. Mitchell and Snyder assert that:

[T]he problem of the representation of disability is not the search for a more ‘positive’ story of disability [...] but rather *a thoroughgoing challenge to the undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites*. There is a politics at stake in the fact that disability inaugurates an explanatory need that the unmarked body eludes by virtue of its physical anonymity. (212, emphasis in the original)

If *Marianna Ucrìa* does not entirely escape this “authorization to interpret,” it is my claim that the text at least offers an additional signification to the phrase. While the text allows, if not demands, that Marianna be interpreted, Marianna, too, is given the “authorization to interpret” both the people and texts she encounters. And though her interpretive mode may point in the direction of a reinscription in a narrative of origins that can only conceive of her disability as being based on lack, it is my contention that the embodied “modality” of her (deaf) interpretation itself engenders the possibility of a different outcome that need not rely on the imperative to explain.

From the beginning of the novel, Marianna wonders about the timing and conditions surrounding the onset of her deaf-muteness. She remembers – or thinks she remembers – having heard voices as a young child and wonders whether she had in fact learned to speak before losing the ability: “Forse aveva anche imparato a parlare? Ma quanti anni aveva? quattro o cinque? una bambina ritardata, silenziosa e assorta che tutti avevano la tendenza a dimenticare in qualche angolo” (16) [“Perhaps she had in fact learned to speak. But how old was she? Four or five? A delayed child, silent and absorbed, that everyone tended to forget in some corner.”] The desire to pinpoint her age at the moment she stopped speaking bears out Davis’s notion that a disability must always be embedded within a certain “chronotope,” or timeframe, and the idea that she was “ritardata” signals that Marianna’s development is to be understood as incongruent with the norm, in chronological terms.<sup>40</sup> From the very start of the novel, we are made aware that

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<sup>39</sup> And, if we take into account Maraini’s description of her own writing process as being in some way more akin to *reading* and the activation of an interpretive process, then it is not so far off to assume Marianna’s own reading and interpretive process as part of a writerly role.

<sup>40</sup> As I understand Davis’s use of Bakhtin’s chronotope, the narrative of disability implies a chronology that is embedded in the physical body. From the moment of its acquisition, whether at birth or later, a disability thus takes on both a chronological and a spatial existence. As Bakhtin writes, “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.



Marianna's "lunga vita" ["long life"] will follow a chronology that does not align with that which is considered to be "normal." The slippage into free indirect discourse here opens up a porous boundary between Marianna and the novel's narrator, and the question, "Ma quanti anni aveva?" ["But how old was she?"] suggests an uncertainty – either on Marianna's part or that of the narrator – as to the chronological sequencing of her story.<sup>41</sup> If we can assume that the question is meant to be understood as part of Marianna's thoughts, this scene then offers further support for the idea that she is acting in the role of reader and interpreter of her own story. She is as ignorant of the events of her past as the reader.<sup>42</sup>

At this early stage in the narrative, the onset of Marianna's disability is recounted as though there were no cause: "Un giorno, *senza una ragione*, era ammutolita. Il silenzio si era impadronito di lei come una malattia o forse come una vocazione. Non sentire più la voce festosa del signor padre le era sembrato tristissimo" (16, emphasis mine) ["One day, for no reason, she fell silent: silence had taken hold of her like an illness, or perhaps like a vocation. To never again hear the festive voice of her father the Duke had seemed so sad."] The narrator declares that there was no cause for the onset – that she became mute "senza una ragione" ["for no reason"]. However, toward the end of the novel we learn that there was a very specific *ragione* for her sudden silence: as a young child, she was raped by her uncle, causing psychological trauma that resulted in her ensuing silence and deafness. That this fact is concealed for over two-hundred pages of the novel supports the notion that this is a narrative of investigation, a search for a hidden truth that will explain and contain the perverse and abnormal.<sup>43</sup> In this respect, *Marianna Ucrìa* follows the normative schema as described by Davis, Mitchell and Snyder. The text introduces a disability and then embarks upon the task of embedding it in a narrative and investigating its origins. However, here it is not only the fact of the disability, or the presentation of a difference, that provides the impetus for the narrative motor. It is the investigation – the search to uncover the origin of the disability itself – that spurs the novel along. Thus, Marianna's

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<sup>41</sup> Blakey Vermeule's characterization of free indirect discourse in *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) is particularly apt in this case, which she offers as part of her claim that humans read fiction (and voraciously) as part of an evolutionary drive to exercise our "mind-reading" skills, that which allows us to understand other people as possessing a mind and a subjectivity apart from our own. She argues that "Free indirect discourse is one of the major literary techniques that writers use to put pressure on our mind-reading capacities" (72-3). As we will see, Marianna's "mind-reading" takes on a more literal significance as a telepathic power. In her discussion, Vermeule quotes Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978), 103: "By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation. This ambiguity is unquestionably one reason why so many writers prefer the less direct technique." Marianna's lack of vocalicity thus lends itself well to this particular narrative device and allows a way for her thoughts to be "voiced" without the need for dialogue. See also, John Bender, "Impersonal Violence: The Penetrating Gaze and the Field of Narration in Caleb Williams," in *Vision and Textuality*, eds. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 256-281. Bender sees the use of free indirect discourse as a marker of the shift at the end of the eighteenth century from the realist novel to the interiority of the modern novel (262).

<sup>42</sup> The confusion regarding the narrator here stems from an instance of free indirect discourse on hyperdrive, to the point that it is at times unclear whether the narrator is "voicing" Marianna's thoughts or if perhaps the narrator *is* Marianna, speaking of herself in the third person. I will return to this merging of character and narrator in my discussion of Marianna's telepathy, which grants her access to the thoughts of other characters.

<sup>43</sup> The reference to her father in the quotation discussed here is significant in that her father was all along aware of the sexual assault and concealed it from her. *Her father's silence* is thus passed on to her and is physically manifested as deaf-muteness. The use of the term "impadronito," which contains within it the root "padre" provides further support for this reading.

“search for self-understanding,” within the context of what has been lauded as a feminist *bildungsroman*, mirrors that ordinary tale of literary psychoanalytic tradition – Oedipus – in which the revelation of the truth of one’s identity brings one face-to-face with a trauma too great to bear. The quest to understand “what went wrong” presumes from the outset that Marianna’s way of being is inherently flawed. At the same time, that “flaw” is what allows for Marianna’s relative recuperation with regards to her status as female subject.

Worthy of note in this regard is the pairing of the terms *malattia* [illness] and *vocazione* [vocation] in the citation above, betraying the text’s ambivalence about Marianna’s silence: it is both an affliction *and* that which enables her vocation as reader and intellectual.<sup>44</sup> The ironic formulation of a vocation – or a *calling* – to be silent further accentuates this ambivalence. In normative terms, it is her silence which ostensibly *calls for* the recounting of the story and the desire to understand her past, while her particular embodiment and her own production of narrative carries the potential for a radical non-normativity at the textual level.

### **The Deafened Moment: Disability as Modality**

Davis wonders if it is possible to engage with the topic of disability without falling prey to the normativizing injunction to narrativize. He contends that satisfying the demand for narrative when a disability is presented often leads to a certain amount of sentimentalizing and can run the risk of closing off the experience of disability within confines that preclude the possibility of any engagement or overlap with what is considered “able-bodied” and therefore “normal.” He suggests that instead of thinking of disability as a substantive to be described, or even as a condition or characteristic belonging to certain people, that it be thought of as a “modality.” He explains that, for example, while engaging in the act of reading, one is operating within a deafened modality or “moment.” He writes: “All readers are deaf because they are defined by a process that does not require hearing or speaking (vocalizing).”<sup>45</sup> Here, we see that, insofar as it is a *process*, there is an inescapable temporal aspect to the reading of (and with) disability. By shifting attention to the “moment” of reading, Davis in a sense rehabilitates the role of temporality in relationship to disability and narrative. Instead of being embedded – and, therefore, fixed – in a *chronotope*, disability, from Davis’s perspective, becomes an open and shifting category, a space-time that can be entered and exited more fluidly.

Keeping Davis’s notion of the deafened moment in mind, we can consider Marianna – as both deaf, and therefore always operating within Davis’s deafened modality, and a reader in all the ways mentioned above – as a figure for *all* readers. However, it should be noted that Marianna’s story is told such that her status as reader is presented as being a *result of* her deafness. This applies to the fact that she learns to read and write at all, and her subsequent appetite for reading books – unable to hear or speak, she turns to the printed page instead of engaging with friends and family – as well as to her ability to read minds, an ability that seems to develop in compensation for her inability to hear. If we are all, as readers, operating within a deafened moment or modality, then – as readers of *Marianna Ucrìa* – we are doubly aligned

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<sup>44</sup> The dual nature of Marianna’s silent mode invokes the many ways in which Marianna is hybridized throughout the text. Figured as a chimera with the head of woman by the fresco artist who paints their villa, and later as “mezza volpe, mezza sirena” (256) [half fox, half siren], Marianna’s communicative difference becomes converted and displaced onto a physical or bodily difference and takes on an unrecognizable form whose various parts are irreconcilable. It is tempting here to turn the tables on the feminist readers of Maraini, and claim that perhaps Marianna’s femaleness could thus be read as a metaphor for her linguistic and communicative difference.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 3.

with Marianna's character. However, the fact that Marianna's status as reader is *caused by* her status as a deaf person presents an inversion of Davis's formula. Instead of the "deafened moment" arising as a result of the act of reading, Marianna reads as a result of her deafness. Although she may seem to represent a figure for what Davis calls the "reader incarnate," Marianna's experience necessitates a causal relation that embeds her disability in the very sort of chronological sequencing Davis sought to avoid.

Though Marianna's focus on the origins of her disability may be an unavoidable fact in the text, I would like to suggest that we keep Davis's formulation in mind, as a way to shift our focus to the *effects* of Marianna's deafness, rather than the causes. The retroactive investigation undertaken by Marianna, and thus imposed upon the reader, reinforces a psychoanalytic logic that must trace every symptom back to its source. If, as Davis suggests, we think of disability as a modality, rather than an identity or condition, it opens up the possibility of a phenomenological reading that would foreground the effects of Marianna's particular embodiment on her present self and environment, as opposed to an interpretation that points relentlessly to the past. Keeping this possibility in mind, I will first consider the various permutations of Marianna's own particular chronology in relation to disability, as well as the ways it works both with and against psychoanalytic modes of reading.

### **"Crip Time": Non-normative Chronologies in/and the Age of Disability**

*La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* in many ways defies normative conceptions of narrative progression.<sup>46</sup> The title of the novel itself reveals a certain preoccupation with time and aging – both of which will come to figure prominently in the text. At the same time, the novel seems to progress in fits and starts and many of the most important events in Marianna's life occur during chapter breaks, leaving the reader to fill in the missing pieces. As a result, the reader is simultaneously engaged in a retrospective and reconstructive labor, attempting to piece together the story of *how* Marianna became deaf, while at the same time, moving forward, following the narrative arc of her present, much of which focuses on the effect that her experience as deaf and mute has on her life and relationships.<sup>47</sup> While this is not a particularly original or innovative narrative structure *per sé*, it is important to note that the ways in which the chronology of this particular narrative strays or is interrupted are intrinsically linked to Marianna's disability.

Disability theorists note a certain duality that pervades the understanding of disability as it relates to time, observing the number of ways that changes over time – both individual and social – *affect* and *effect* the disabled identity. To this effect, Tobin Siebers points out an important distinction between disability as a minority group or identity marker, and other minority groups such as those based on race and gender. As Siebers puts it: "I know as a white man that I will not wake up in the morning as a black woman, but I could wake up a quadriplegic."<sup>48</sup> Conversely, an obese person may not be considered disabled today, but

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<sup>46</sup> The term "crip time" in the context of disability studies refers to different experiences of time or ways of moving through time which are contingent upon particular embodiments. For a thorough discussion, see Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 2013). Here, I borrow the term to refer to a narrative chronology that is "crippled" as a result of Marianna's presence in the novel.

<sup>47</sup> Using the terms of Russian Formalism, the *fabula* of Marianna's past (and the story of her disability) is told through the *sujet*, or narrative, which encompasses her own investigation of that past, as the events of her life continue forward.

<sup>48</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 5. Also, consider Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's formulation in *Extraordinary Bodies*: "That anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to

tomorrow the requisites may have shifted such that obesity will be considered among recognized disabilities.<sup>49</sup> The potential for an involuntary and potentially abrupt shift into identification with the minority group of disability is a threat to what Robert McRuer calls “compulsory able-bodiedness,” which prevails in today’s hetero-ableist society. The boundary between disabled and non-disabled is one that is easily blurred and, therefore, also easily traversed. It is arguably this instability of categories that provokes attempts at containment or stabilization within narratives in order to form clear and distinct delineations of these boundaries. The result of such attempts, with respect to questions of temporality, is often twofold: one notes in narratives featuring representations of disability, first, a marked resistance to chronological progression in an effort to contain the disability or the disabled character and, by the same token, a contrary tendency toward the proliferation of non-normative temporal modes which subvert these same attempts at containment. In the case of *Marianna Ucrìa*, Marianna’s character is often presented as frozen in time, or without age (the text’s effort to contain her in a kind of freeze-frame), while simultaneously living a particularly “lunga vita” [“long life”].

At various points in the text, the long duration of Marianna’s life is directly correlated to her disability, as if her lack of speech and hearing had caused time to stand still, halting the aging process. In one particularly revealing passage, Marianna’s brother muses on Marianna’s seeming agelessness:

Conserva la faccia da ragazzina questa sorella mutola... mentre la sua si è gonfiata e fa bozzi da tutte le parti... che sia la mutezza ad averla preservata dalla rovina degli anni?... c’è un che di verginale in quegli occhi da stralunata... [...] dietro quei pizzzi, quelle mantelle, quei fiocchi color notte c’è un corpo che non conosce il piacere... deve essere così, il piacere consuma, dilata, sgretola... (205)

[She still has the face of a little girl, this dumb sister of his... while his is swollen and has bumps all over it... And if it were her muteness that has preserved her from the ruin of the years?... There’s something virginal in those wide bewildered eyes... [...] behind that lace, those cloaks, those bows the color of night, there is a body that has never known pleasure... It must be that... pleasure consumes, distends, crumbles...]

Carlo, whose mind is being “read” here by Marianna, raises the possibility that it is his sister’s *mutezza* [muteness] that stops her aging process, exhibiting a clear example of the link between the text’s resistance to chronological progression and Marianna’s disability. The text refuses to allow her to age: as a disabled person, she must be fixed in time. As Siebers notes, an awareness

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those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities” (14).

<sup>49</sup> I use obesity as an example because it has been a recent topic of debate. “Morbid obesity” is recognized under the ADA as a disability in certain circumstances. For various positions on this debate, see Roland Sturm, Jeanne S. Ringel and Tatiana Andreyeva, “Increasing Obesity Rates and Disability Trends,” *Health Affairs* 23.2 (Mar/Apr 2004): 1-7; Lauren Cox, “Doctors Fight Labeling Obesity a Disability: Disability Label Brings up Anti-Discrimination and Insurance Coverage Debates,” *ABC News*. Jun 18, 2009.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/WellnessNews/story?id=7865711>; Pam Belluck and Jim Yardley, “China Tightens Adoption Rules for Foreigners,” *New York Times*. Dec 20, 2006.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/20/us/20adopt.html>.

of disability requires that a person face one of the inherent contradictions of human existence – the belief that we will somehow defy death despite the fact that, as beings in time, our death is inevitable.<sup>50</sup> The passage of time in any text implies the possibility of a change of state, the possibility of death, and of a slippage from “able-bodied” to disabled. Thus, within a narrative that involves a disabled character, we often find that either the narrative progresses towards the resolution of the disability – most often in the form of cure or death – or else the progression of time is in some way inhibited. In other words, this tendency to halt the aging process is a strategy that “backfires”: time must stand still in order to “contain” the disability, but that same tactic entails interrupting the normative narrative progression of time, causing it to tip over into a form of chronology that is non-normative.

Carlo’s thoughts in this passage reveal not only the link between Marianna’s agelessness and her “mutezza,” but also point to a connection between disability and asexuality, or an assumed inability to experience pleasure, which is particularly interesting in light of the causal relationship between Marianna’s disability and her sexual violation as a child.<sup>51</sup> Marianna’s disability emerged after she was raped by her uncle, after which point she could no longer speak or hear. The uncle who perpetrated this act upon her is the very same uncle she will later be constrained to marry – *because of* her disability – under the assumption that no one else would want to marry a “sordomuta” [“deafmute”]. Thus, the logical relationship: “Marianna is deaf and mute because she was raped by her uncle,” becomes instead: “Marianna must enter into sexual relationship with her uncle because she is deaf and mute.” This circular logic allows Pietro, her uncle, to be retroactively absolved of guilt: once she becomes his wife, it is no longer inappropriate for him to have sexual relations with her. If Marianna is frozen in time, unable to age, Pietro is thus able to resignify his crime as a legal union.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, this collapsing of time works in the opposite direction as well. Although when she is obliged to marry her uncle, Marianna is of a more “appropriate” age for sexual union (by the standards of the time, that is – she is thirteen), she is nevertheless “preserved” as a child, due to the narrative’s effort to impede her aging process. From this perspective, her uncle is caught in a repetitive loop, committing the same crime over and over again.<sup>53</sup>

The text’s attempts at halting Marianna’s aging process translate into a chronological progression that does not conform to the norm. By the same token, attempts to contain and define Marianna by virtue of her disability are undermined, exposing the culpability of the other

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<sup>50</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis cites Peter Stallybrass on silence as chastity: “Silence, the closed mouth, is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to woman’s enclosure within the house” (Stallybrass, 127). Davis glosses this effect as an equation of “the voracious speaking mouth” with “the voracious sexual mouth” (Davis, 115). Marianna, traumatized sexually, is thus deprived of speech and hearing but the healing of the former does not lead to a restoration of the latter, suggesting either a fault in the psychoanalytic assumption that healing the cause will eradicate the symptom or, alternatively, that the two are not to be understood as inextricably linked and mutually sustaining. See: Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).

<sup>52</sup> This was a legal practice until 1965 in Italy. If a rapist married his victim, he would be retroactively absolved of the crime. Many thanks to Soledad Anatrone for pointing me to this fact.

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the rape scene is repeated on their wedding night, causing her to run back to her family home, but she is forced to return to him the following day. Later, even after the birth of eight children, Marianna describes their sexual encounters in terms of violation: “Un assalto, una forzatura, un premere di ginocchia fredde contro le gambe, una esplosione rapida e rabbiosa” (125) [“An assault, a forcing, a pressing of cold knees against her legs, a rapid and rabid explosion.”]

characters around her who have played a role in shaping her fate. At the same time, although Marianna herself is represented as unchanging, at the metanarrative level, the fact of narrative progression and the structure of language itself requires a movement forward through time. The chronology of reading is thus also at stake here, and is implicated in Marianna's relation to temporality and the reckoning with traumatic origins that it necessitates. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus in particular on Marianna's relationship to reading, and language more generally, in order to tease out the various parts of this complex relationship.

### **Silent Presence and the Materiality of the Sign**

In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis claims that in the late eighteenth-century – amidst the rise of both print culture and concerns regarding the education of disabled populations – deafness came onto the scene in Europe as a widespread topic of interest. As he puts it, “the deaf person became the totemic representation of the new reading public” (62). Where it used to be commonly held that hearing was necessary for communication and learning, according to Davis, with the proliferation of texts and visual sources of information, eyesight became the new privileged sense. Davis writes: “[T]he metaphors of the body have to be rearranged. In this new world, the cultural icon for the reader of print culture becomes the deaf person. The deaf person becomes the case in point for the reader incarnate” (113). *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* takes place in eighteenth-century Sicily, more or less at the moment of this transition, and as I discuss above, Marianna, the voracious reader and insatiable intellectual, can easily be figured as the “reader incarnate” of which Davis writes.

Davis notes that, for the deaf – or within the “deafened moment” – text is not a translation of auditory speech. Following Derrida, Davis contends that in Western literary and philosophical history, despite the shift to a text-based culture, textuality has always been considered to be the secondary byproduct of the more primary and “natural” spoken word. Writing is assumed to be a transcription of an originary spoken language. As Gayatri Spivak writes in her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, “What is written is read as speech or the surrogate of speech. ‘Writing’ is the name of what is never named.”<sup>54</sup> Following Derrida's lead, Davis presents an alternative view, in which the spoken word loses its pride of place:

By the deafened moment, I am speaking (writing) of a contextual position, a dialectical moment in the reading/critical process, that is defined by the acknowledgement on the part of the reader/writer/critic that he or she is part of a process that does not involve speaking or hearing. I address this position because reading/writing has been unproblematically thought of as a process that involves hearing and vocalizing. (100-101)

It is, significantly, the “acknowledgement on the part of the reader” that hearing and speaking are unnecessary in the act of reading, which defines the “deafened moment.” Without this acknowledgement, the text presumably remains always already marked by the assumption of orality. In the absence of a reader who is predisposed to approach a given text within a deafened modality, can a text on its own call for such an acknowledgement? I will argue that Maraini's novel does just that, by way of Marianna's own deafness and the relationship to text that it

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<sup>54</sup> Gayatri Spivak, Preface to *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), lxx.

engenders, not only for Marianna Ucria, the character, but for readers of *Marianna Ucria*, the text.

In the case of *Marianna Ucria*, the presumption of orality is put into relief by the fact that Marianna's form of "dialogue" consists in the writing of notes that present – in textual form – that which would generally be read as an oral statement, despite the fact that in reality *any* dialogue appearing in printed book form can only be presented to the reader as text. In order to retain their textuality, then, Marianna's *biglietti* [notes] must be signaled as text. Her mode of communication is thus rendered doubly textual in order to cancel out the orality that is automatically assumed within the narrative dialogic form. As Davis puts it: "Deafness, in effect, is a reminder of the 'hearingness' of narrative. It is the aporetic black hole that leads to a new kind of deconstruction of narrativity" (115). It is precisely this deconstructive quality that I am interested in here. Marianna's deafness, as well as her mode of communication by way of the production of text, serve as reminders of this "hearingness," thereby signaling beyond the character's communicative difference within the narrative to the level of metanarrative, challenging the hearing reader and critic to realize his or her own implication in the fallacy of the spoken quality of text.<sup>55</sup>

Traditional assumptions regarding textuality are profoundly affected by this shift in perspective. Whereas the spoken word – in the Western philosophical tradition – is generally considered to be instantaneous to the enunciator and a sign of the subject's presence to itself, the written word is perceived as a sign of the author's absence. However, instead of allowing the narrative to fall away into absence, the text – to use Derridean terms – represses itself *as writing* and, as Davis notes, "[t]he act of writing is falsely given the qualities of sonic duration" (100). Marianna Ucria's deafness does not allow for this act of repression to take place. Her continual engagement in the writing process forces the reader to remain consistently aware of the written quality of her communications. Far from creating a text based on absence, however, Marianna's character instead provides the possibility for the reassignment of a positive (by which I mean *present*) value to the act of writing.

For Marianna, the written word maintains a certain static quality and a capacity for duration through time, allowing for the author/interlocutor to be either present *or* absent at the time of reading/response. Marianna often revisits past conversations, preserved in the form of notes she has saved. Instead of relying upon memory, she has the ability to consult tangible records of past dialogues. On one hand, this collection of discursive bits casts Marianna as a kind of receptacle for the language of others, a theme that I will return to later on in this chapter. However, her archive of notes also constructs a disjointed narrative of its own, forming a collapsed chronology that "freezes" or preserves the moment(s) of conversation. This sedimentation of textual instances, able to be read synchronically or at random as opposed to diachronically or linearly, suggests the ways in which her own mode of discourse affects and refracts meaning.

Marianna's saved notes are so reminiscent of deaf artist Joseph Grigely's art installations, I feel compelled to mention them here. His "Conversation Pieces" are formed from meticulously arranged notes, bits of his past dialogues with hearing people, which cover the walls of a room. Susannah Mintz writes of Grigely's work: "Talk is here concretized as writing that remains [...]"

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<sup>55</sup> This also points to a phenomenon that I am claiming is effected by disabled characters, whereby the reader is not allowed to "forget" that s/he is reading and is made constantly aware of the act.

to recall, even paradoxically to perpetuate, human presence.”<sup>56</sup> By “talk,” Mintz refers to what *would* be spoken dialogue between two hearing people, and which – in the presence of deafness – takes on a material form through writing. While Grigely’s work foregrounds the reading process as the viewer engages in viewing/reading the work, the concepts translate easily to Marianna’s case. The emphasis on materiality – both with respect to the material presence of the writer during the writing process as well as the textual product produced – signals a certain boundedness between writer and text, foregrounding the inseparability, in physical terms, of what Vivian Sobchack terms “both ‘writing bodies’ and ‘bodies of writing’” – of the *act* of writing and the content that issues from it.<sup>57</sup> The fact of Marianna’s bodily presence *during* the act of writing challenges the perception of writing as the representation of an absence or lack. As a result, the understanding of language as prosthetic is put into question – rather than a replacement or substitution (whether for bodily presence of the writer or of the signified), Marianna’s words themselves constitute a material, tangible object.

Similarly, silence within the “deafened moment” must be resignified as a mode that does not imply the physical absence of the interlocutor, nor the absence of communicative process. As Davis notes, while blindness bars text as technology, “the deaf moment is thought to bar narrative as defined in an oral/aural culture” (107), thus precluding the very possibility of narrative production. Without the spoken word, it is assumed that narrative becomes impossible, despite the fact that our modern print culture is inundated with text-based narratives. Marianna’s textual narrative production thus serves to undercut and redefine foundational preconceptions regarding silence, speech, and text, which continue to exert their influence on our experience and interpretation of narratives.

The felt presence of silence in Maraini’s novel is not easily cast as unilaterally positive in valence, however. In fact, the text often seems to resist the notion that meaning is possible in the realm of silence. Thus, it is not my intention here to claim that Maraini’s text enacts a wholesale inversion of hierarchies, privileging silence and text, while eschewing the need for speech. I mean primarily to question the idea of silence/text as equivalent to bodily absence or lack and to signal the felt presence of silence in the text, often figured as a material substance that acts upon the characters and their environment. As one example: “Il silenzio attorno al suo corpo è spesso e vetroso, si dice Marianna” (173) [“The silence around her body is thick and glassy, Marianna tells herself.”] The tactile quality of silence in this passage implies, not only a presence, but one that displays its own particular materiality and texture. The fact that Marianna “tells herself” about the quality of the silence around her suggests further that the “telling” need not imply sound.

From the start of the novel, the reader is given indications of Marianna’s experience as deaf and non-speaking through descriptions of her environment as she perceives it. In the following passage, we see another example of the material presence of silence:

Il silenzio è un’acqua morta nel corpo mutilato della bambina che da poco ha compiuto i sette anni. In quell’acqua ferma e chiara galleggiano la carrozza, le

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<sup>56</sup> Susannah B. Mintz, “The Art of Joseph Grigely: Deafness, Conversation, Noise,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 6.1 (2012): 2. About his piece, “White Noise,” she writes: “there is no continuous narrative, only shreds of paper, vestiges of thought and impulse, and a multiplicity of represented selves. This works to interrupt a humanist, ultimately ableist, definition of identity as a whole, fully knowable and transcribable according to a recognized narrative arc” (4). See, too: Joseph Grigely, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 110.



terrazze dai panni stesi, le galline che corrono, il mare che si intravede da lontano, il signor padre addormentato. Il tutto pesa poco e facilmente cambia posto ma ogni cosa è legata all'altra da quel fluido che impasta i colori, scioglie le forme. (10)

[Silence is a dead water in the maimed body of the child, who has just turned seven. In that clear, still water float the carriage, the balconies hung with laundry, the chickens running about, the sea glimpsed from afar, her sleeping father. Everything weighs so little and easily changes positions but each thing is bound to the others by that fluid that blends colors, dissolves shapes.]

Here, the narrator paints a picture in which silence has a physical form. However, it would appear that the absence of sound translates to a lack of distinct boundaries between objects. Silence – a state perceived (or not, as the case may be) by the aural faculty – makes the physical forms of things in the *visual* field indistinct, allowing them to easily change places or causing them to fade away. Figured as water, silence is given a material form – one that fills space and changes the way objects are perceived, revealing a notion that often seems to underlie the text: without *verbal* language, the visual world loses form, and therefore, order and meaning. Thus, while silence is perhaps not categorically a sign of absence, it does suggest a scrambling or confusion of forms that may impede the narrative function all the same.

Similarly, in the following passage, the narrator discusses the impact that imagined sounds have on Marianna, despite the fact that she is unable to hear them, whereas her father remains unaffected by the actual noises: “Anche se per lei sono solo rumori immaginati, per lui sono veri. Eppure lei ne è disturbata e lui no. Che scherzi fa l'intelligenza ai sensi mutilati!” (9) [“While for her they are only imagined noises, for him they are real. And yet she is disturbed by them and he is not. What tricks the mind plays on crippled senses!”] Here, the imagined sounds have more of an effect on Marianna than the “real” ones do on her father. She is only able to “imagine” these sounds because of what she sees. In a redirection of the normative vector that proceeds from an auditory sensory stimulus to the aural sensory receptor, Marianna instead perceives sound through the visual field.

Another example of this confusion of the aural and visual realms is present in the first description of Marianna's interaction with her father:

La bambina segue nello specchio il padre che, chino, si aggiusta le calze bianche sui polpacci. La bocca è in movimento ma il suono delle parole non la raggiunge, si perde prima di arrivare alle sue orecchie quasi che la distanza visibile che li separa fosse solo un inciampo dell'occhio. Sembrano vicini ma sono lontani mille miglia. (7)

[The girl watches her father in the mirror as he bends down to adjust his white stockings over his calves. His mouth is moving but the sound of his words doesn't reach her, is lost before it makes it to her ears, as though the visible distance separating them were just a trick of the eye. They seem close but they are a thousand miles apart.]

Silence creates a spatial rift, separating Marianna from her father. The fact that she cannot hear him thus becomes figured as a problem of distance, or as a defect of the eye. The confusion of

senses – in this case, the confusion of visual space or distance with sound and language – speaks to the idea that the presence of a disability must always be accompanied by a certain blurring of categories, a tendency towards disorder and confusion. This blurring leads Marianna to mistrust her own senses.

This passage also suggests a malfunctioning of Lacan’s mirror stage. Unable to hear the words of her father, Marianna, it would seem, does not successfully take up the Symbolic, a fact which then translates to an illusory or confused perception of material reality. However, Marianna’s father will grant her a different kind of access to the Symbolic through his gift of writing instruments and the knowledge of reading and writing. Here, I suggest that Marianna’s recourse to the written word, guided by her father, implies a gendered separation between the written and oral, an argument that is supported by her mother’s *resistance* to writing and by Marianna’s own conviction that she will never be like her mother: “non diventerò mai come lei, si dice, mai, neanche morta” (8) [“I will never be like her, she tells herself, never, not even when I die.”]<sup>58</sup> What is more, while her father’s handwriting is “bella [...] tutta tonda e tornita” [“beautiful ... round and shapely”], that of her mother is described as *zoppicante* [limping/shaky]: “La ragazzina rilegge le parole frettolose della madre che scrive ignorando le doppie, mescolando il dialetto con l’italiano, usando una grafia zoppicante e piena di ondeggiamenti” (29) [“The little girl rereads the hurried words of her mother who writes heedless of spelling, mixing Sicilian dialect with Italian, her handwriting shaky/limping and full of wavering lines.”] Her mother’s mode is oral and dialectal, and her reluctant attempts at writing are themselves described in terms that suggest disability.<sup>59</sup> Despite the suggestion of an

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<sup>58</sup> In *Conversazione con Dacia Maraini*, Maraini remarks that she sees writing as an endeavor that is fundamentally “femminile” [“female”]: “Comunque direi che *la pratica della scrittura è femminile* anche quando è fatta dagli uomini: i romanzi trattano di un microcosmo familiare, trattano dei ‘piccoli’ gesti quotidiani, dei sentimenti d’amore più prosaici, della cultura degli interni, da sempre delegata alle donne mentre gli uomini si assumevano altri compiti come la professionalità di un mestiere, la scoperta del mondo, l’elaborazione della scienza, la gestione del potere, la guerra, l’esplorazione dell’Universo. *La narrazione è quindi una delle arti più femminili che esistono* e non è un caso che le lettrici siano sempre state soprattutto donne. Il testo poi è un *textus*, un tessuto fatto a mano, che certamente appartiene alla più antica competenza femminile” (13-14, emphasis mine) [Anyway I would say that the practice of writing is female even when it is done by men: novels are about a familial microcosm, “little” daily acts, the most prosaic feelings of love, the culture of interiors, always delegated to women while men took on other tasks like the professionalism of a career, the discovery of the world, the elaboration of science, the wielding of power, war, the exploration of the universe. *Narration is therefore one of the most feminine arts that exist* and it is not by chance that readers have always been mainly women. Furthermore the text is a *textus*, a fabric made by hand, which is certainly part of the most ancient female knowledge.”] Maraini’s views as expressed here complicate the gendered division of writing and orality that emerges in *Marianna Ucrìa* and are subject to some scrutiny. For instance, how true it is to claim that readers have always been mainly women? Until fairly recently, literacy rates among women were quite low. Of course, Marianna’s own engagement with the written word and her alignment with the author herself bespeak a motive for Maraini’s opinions on the matter. For further complication, consider that Pietro, Marianna’s uncle-rapist-husband, rejects the written word, castigating books as “bugiardi” [“liars”], although he tolerates Marianna’s own engagement with the world of writing: “sa che per Marianna la lettura è una necessità e mutola com’è ha pure le sue ragioni” (52) [“he knows that for Marianna reading is a necessity and, mute as she is, she has every right.”] Pietro, by contrast, rarely reads what Marianna writes in her notes to him. In one episode, he gives Marianna a guided genealogical tour of his ancestor’s portraits and, while he does submit to writing the information down for her, such knowledge is of the sort that is conventionally handed down through stories told within the family. So while perhaps a claim cannot be made that the oral and written modes are neatly separated along gendered lines, I maintain that the oral mode should be understood as belonging to Marianna’s matrilineal line, which Pietro, as her mother’s brother, reinforces.

<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Maraini uses similar language in the autobiographical *Bagheria* to describe the spoken dialect of the region: “Avremmo imparato poi, che Bagheria mostrava la sua robustezza linguistica *storpiando pesantemente i*

alliance here between the disabled and female subjects, the mother's alignment with the oral mode effectively precludes the possibility of connection between mother and daughter, and indeed this estrangement on the discursive level is borne out at the level of the narrative: Marianna's mother, sedated with opiates, is largely absent from Marianna's life, offering a partial explanation for her apparent ignorance of Marianna's rape as a child. Interestingly, the disconnect between mother and daughter predates Marianna's trauma and subsequent deaf-muteness, suggesting the possibility of an active (if unconscious) refusal on Marianna's part of the "language of the mother."<sup>60</sup>

### The Language of the Mother: Orality and the Mummification of the Written Word

Many scholars read Marianna's engagement with the writing process as unilaterally productive and empowering, but such interpretations miss the gendering of the written and oral modes that is reinforced numerous times throughout the novel.<sup>61</sup> Not only is it her father who bestows the gift of writing upon her, every new *passo* that brings her further into the world of texts, is facilitated by a male character: first Mariano's friend, Grass, leaves her a volume of Hume's philosophy, then later Don Camalèo engages her in profound discussions of literature and philosophy. While on one hand such personal and intellectual development implies a certain triumph on Marianna's part over the oppressive norms of the time, at the same time her participation in these discourses is firmly restricted and governed by the law and language of the

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*nomi*, tutti i nomi, da quelli delle cose a quelli delle persone. Il signor Boscu era mio padre Fosco, Popopazia era mia madre Topazia, Raci ero io, Ciunka mia sorella Yuki e Ntoni, mia sorella Toni" (26, emphasis mine) ["We would later learn that Bagheria displayed its linguistic vigor by *severely mangling/crippling names*, all names, those of both things and people. 'Signor Boscu' was my father Fosco, 'Popopazia' my mother Topazia, 'Raci' was me, 'Ciuka' my sister Yuki, and 'Ntoni' my sister Toni."] By contrast, written language is described as "nobilissima" ["most noble"] and is aligned with the author's memory of her father. Significantly, she describes her father as one who wrote but did not speak: "Ma non parlava. Come se nelle parole ci fosse qualcosa di limitativo e di volgare. O per lo meno nel pronunciarle ad alta voce. Perché il pensiero era considerato 'nobile'. E la scrittura nobilissima. Infatti lui scriveva, come aveva scritto sua madre, mia nonna" (61) ["But he didn't speak. As if words contained something restrictive and vulgar. Or at least pronouncing them out loud. Because thought was considered 'noble.' And writing the most noble. In fact he wrote, as did his mother, my grandmother."] Here, while perhaps not divided on gendered lines, the separation of oral and written is definitively marked according to a kind of class structure or hierarchy, where orality predictably takes the inferior role. The reference to the spoken as "volgare" and writing as "nobile" should also remind readers of the history of the Italian language itself, which was called *il volgare* in contrast to Latin, the language of writing and erudition. This is a topic not unfamiliar to Maraini herself and is discussed at some length in *Conversazione con Dacia Maraini*.

<sup>60</sup> Thus, in a revision of Cavarero's theory in *Nonostante Platone: Figure femminili nella filosofia antica* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1990) of the interrupted gaze between mother and daughter, in the case of Marianna, it is the mother's *voice* that is interrupted, unable to be received by her daughter and vice versa. We read: "La voce della signora madre, chissà com'era? A immaginarla viene in mente una voce profonda, dalle vibrazioni basse, sgranate. È difficile amare qualcuno di cui non si conosce la voce. Eppure suo padre l'ha amato senza averlo mai udito parlare" (107) ["Her mother's voice, who knows what it was like? Imagining it, a deep voice comes to mind, with low, gravelly vibrations. It's hard to love someone whose voice you do not know. And yet she loved her father without ever having heard him speak."] The asymmetry acknowledged here reveals, however, an admission that the disconnection between mother and daughter is perhaps not entirely based on the absence of speech and hearing.

<sup>61</sup> As one example: "Marianna's only communicative links with her environment are gesture and writing. Both these means of communication create a text inside the text that establishes the character as creator of language and, therefore, again, as a potential literary foremother for the author herself." Maria Ornella Marotti, "La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa: A Feminist Revisiting of the Eighteenth Century," in *The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini*. eds. Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Ada Testaferri (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000), 169.

father. By contrast, silence – like orality – is cast as female: “Il silenzio le è madre e sorella: ‘Madre santa di tutti i silenzi, abbi pietà di me’... le parole le salgono alla gola senza suono, vorrebbero prendere corpo, farsi udire, ma la bocca rimane muta, e la lingua è un piccolo cadavere chiuso nella cassa dei denti” (173) [“Silence was her mother and sister: ‘Holy mother of all silences, have pity on me’... the words rise to her throat without sound; they would like to take shape, make themselves heard, but her mouth remains mute, and her tongue is a little cadaver closed within the casket of her teeth.”] Silence, figured as mother and sister, inhibits her linguistic expression, while her father offers an alternative in the form of writing.<sup>62</sup> As many have argued before, such associations suggest a metaphorical reading of Marianna’s “silence” as representative of the oppression – and “silencing” – of women in a male-dominated society.<sup>63</sup> Writing itself, however, is described in similarly oppressive terms, complicating attempts to construe it as unilaterally salvific.

Marianna’s daughter, Felice, offers the following thought regarding her mother and the nature of the written word: “alle volte pensa che sia proprio mentecatta, le difetta la ragione. Sarà perché le manca la parola e ogni pensiero diventa scritto e gli scritti, si sa, hanno la pesantezza e la levigata goffaggine delle cose imbalsamate” (100) [“At times she thinks that [her mother] is really crazy, without rational thought. It must be because she is lacking words and so her every thought is written and written words, everyone knows, have the heaviness and polished clumsiness of things that are embalmed.”] Marianna’s husband/rapist/uncle Pietro, will later be embalmed, suggesting a connection between her tongue as “cadaver,” the written word as embalmed, and the violent oppression of the male patriarch.<sup>64</sup> His deadened materiality is driven home by the term “impietrito” [petrified], a play on his name used twice to describe him, both in life and in death.<sup>65</sup> The written word is thus not necessarily to be understood as a liberatory mode

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<sup>62</sup> In one particularly illustrative example, when Marianna’s mother tells her she will marry her uncle (and rapist), we read: “Ora la signora madre ha posato la penna e le parla fitto fitto come se lei potesse sentirla, accarrezandole con un gesto distratto i capelli bagnati di aceto. / Infine strappa la penna dalle mani della figlia che sta per scrivere qualcosa e traccia rapida, con orgoglio, queste parole: / ‘In contanti e subito quindicimila scudi’” (30) [“Now her mother has put down the pen and is speaking without pause, as if she could hear her, distractedly carressing her hair, still wet with vinegar. / Finally, she grabs the pen from her daughter’s hand, just as she was about to write something, and rapidly, with pride, traces the following words: ‘In cash, right away, 15,000 escudos.’”] Her mother literally takes the pen from her hand, disallowing further dissent or comment and imposing the institutional injunction to marry, presented in terms of economic exchange.

<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Maraini herself came to understand her protagonist in these terms and it is clearly an unavoidable and valuable reading in many regards. My aim here is not to discount such interpretations, but to include a disability perspective in the discussion, given that disability is put to work here as metaphor.

<sup>64</sup> When her mother tells her she will have to marry her uncle, Marianna is incredulous: “‘Alla mutola un marito?’ scrive Marianna appoggiandosi su un gomito e macchiando nella confusione, il lenzuolo di inchiostro” (29) [“‘A husband for the dumb girl?’ writes Marianna, leaning on one elbow and, in the confusion, staining the sheets with ink.”] Here, the staining of the sheets recalls Marianna’s rape, driving home the link between her future marriage and her lack of speech, which necessitates her use of ink. Ink – or writing – is thus figured as the connection to the language and law of the Father – the contractual stain that marks her boundedness to the patriarchal order and to the ownership of the man who sexually violated her.

<sup>65</sup> One scene describes Pietro’s contrition after Marianna finally finds the strength to refuse his sexual advances: “Avverte il corpo dell’uomo impietrito accanto a sé, abitato da stracci di pensieri che sgusciano come spifferi d’aria da quella testa sbiancata e priva di saggezza” (91) [“She is aware of the body of the hardened man next to her, inhabited by shreds of thoughts that slip out like puffs of air from his greyed and foolish head.”] After his death, Marianna observes Pietro’s embalmed body in the catacombs: “Così nudo non l’aveva mai visto; così nudo e arreso eppure composto e dignitoso nei suoi muscoli assopiti, nelle pieghe severe del volto impietrito” (149) [“She had never seen him so naked – so naked and passive and yet composed and dignified, with his sleeping muscles and the severe folds of his hardened face.”] Marianna remembers herself as “impietrita” during the violent sexual encounters

of female discursive engagement, as many feminist readers of Maraini would have it, but perhaps as a concession that allows for participation in the phallogocentric order. Sumeli Weinberg writes: “Se il romanzo è la raffigurazione del mutismo storico della donna, esso è anche la testimonianza della parola scritta come mezzo per il recupero di una sua nuova coscienza” [“While the novel is perhaps a representation of the age-old muteness of woman, it is also a testimony to the written word as her means of recovering a new consciousness.”]<sup>66</sup> While I understand the temptation to read Marianna’s writing as an example of the *ordine simbolico femminile* [female symbolic order] so sought after by feminist theorists, the problem remains that either woman is excluded from the symbolic or she joins a system that is *maschile* [male]. Sumeli Weinberg tellingly uses the very terms of masculinist psychoanalytic discourse in her explication of Marianna’s communicative practice: “Comunicando con il mondo esterno con biglietti, la ‘parola parlata’ di Marianna, la sua ‘voce’, si trasforma in ‘segno’ che, da ‘vuoto’, si apre ora ad essere ‘colmato’. Con la scrittura, si crea infine per la donna uno spazio tutto personale, inedito” (182) [“Communicating with the outside world via notes, Marianna’s ‘spoken word,’ her ‘voice,’ is transformed into ‘sign’ which, once ‘empty,’ opens itself to be ‘filled.’”] Sumeli Weinberg’s use of scare quotes here suggests the fine line she is walking between the *appropriation* of terms from a psychoanalytic apparatus that represents the female as inherently lacking and a *dissociation* with such terms even as they are here reproduced.

The ambivalent and at times transparently antagonistic attitude towards writing expressed within the text, is not easily translated to Maraini’s own statements (in interviews and elsewhere) on the relationship between silence, communication and writing, which emerge as largely revelatory and self-affirming.<sup>67</sup> While Maraini has denied any intentionality in creating a “symbolic character” in the figure of Marianna Ucria, such themes clearly imbue the text and its protagonist. It is tempting to read Marianna as a stand-in for Maraini herself, a parallel that the quasi-anagrammatic nature of their names encourages and which episodes from the autobiographical *Bagheria* support. In the foreword to the 1998 edition of *La vacanza* – Maraini’s debut novel, originally published in 1962 – the author describes herself as shy, unable to converse easily with others: “Solo la scrittura poteva sostituire in qualche modo la parola muta, la parola sepolta in bocca come un morticino imbalsamato” [“Only writing was able to substitute in some way for the spoken word, the word buried in the mouth like a dead child, embalmed.”]<sup>68</sup> Written *after* the publication of *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria*, Maraini’s foreword retroactively assigns the terms of Marianna’s muteness to her own relationship to writing. Note the striking similarity in language. Here, again is the quote from *Marianna Ucria*: “ma la bocca rimane muta, e la lingua è un piccolo cadavere chiuso nella cassa dei denti” (173) [“but her mouth remains mute, and her tongue is a little cadaver closed within the casket of her teeth.”] The muteness made literal in *Marianna Ucria*, is for Maraini a metaphorical transmutation of shyness, of an impediment to speech that renders her own *parola muta*. Marianna then, even in her muteness, as a textual product acts as productive substitute for

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with her husband: “Marianna ripensa ai loro frettolosi accoppiamenti al buio, lui armato e implacabile e lei lontana, impietrita” (125) [“Marianna thinks back to their hurried couplings in the dark – he armed and implacable, and she far away, turned to stone.”]

<sup>66</sup> Sumeli Weinberg, “La forza della negatività,” 186.

<sup>67</sup> Maraini, in an interview, states: “[W]e write to find something that we didn’t know before writing it. Whose existence perhaps we intuited vaguely but without realizing it concealed from ourselves.” See: Benedetta Centovalli, “The Silence of the Outcasts: An Interview with Dacia Maraini,” *Words Without Borders*, trans. Jamie Richards, (2005), <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-silence-of-the-outcasts-an-interview-with-dacia-maraini>.

<sup>68</sup> Dacia Maraini, *La vacanza* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), vi.

Maraini's own metaphorical silence, covering over the absence of spoken language with the written – a relation that Marianna's character enacts at the diegetic level of the text. Interestingly, it is Maraini's silence or "la parola sepolta" ["the buried word"] that is described as embalmed whereas for Marianna, the written word ("gli scritti") is characterized as such, suggesting that for Maraini, the written word is where the repressed spoken word goes to die.

Thus, the act of writing can only take Marianna so far. She gains a certain amount of agency vis-à-vis her appropriation of a (male) subject position within the male-dominated symbolic order but the text makes it clear that Marianna must go beyond *both* the written *and* the spoken word in order to escape that order. The text points instead to a language of the body, a point which others have taken up in various ways. Sharon Wood, for example, attributes to Marianna a hysterical mutism that ties her to Freud's Dora, and Susan Amatangelo suggests a reading of Marianna's mode of mothering as touch-based and therefore sensual.<sup>69</sup> I will claim a different sort of "language of the body" for Marianna, drawing primarily from disability studies though still in conversation with psychoanalytic and feminist theory. In a sense, part of what makes Marianna's communication non-normative is her recourse to so many different channels and methods of interaction. In a proliferation of modes, Marianna refuses to accommodate that which is considered "normal" in any given context.

### **Blindness : Insight :: Deafness : Telepathy**

As I discuss above, it is Marianna's disability that allows her a certain access into the realm – and language – of men, an access which she will then renounce in the last instance when she takes to traveling the mainland of Italy with her illiterate servant. This renunciation follows from the realization that her father was complicit in the violence that led to her silence in the first place. Her father takes great pains to hide this fact, concealing the events of her past from her. Although she remembers having heard voices as a child, her father tells her that she was born deaf and mute:

"Tu sei nata così, sordomuta," le aveva scritto una volta il padre sul quaderno e lei si era dovuta convincere di essersi inventata quelle voci lontane. Non potendo ammettere che il signor padre dolcissimo che l'ama tanto dica delle menzogne, deve darsi della visionaria. (16)

["You were born this way, deaf and dumb," her father had once written on her notebook and she had had to convince herself of having imagined those far away voices. Unable to admit that her sweet father, who loves her so much, could lie to her, she tells herself she must be hallucinating.]

Her father's lie causes her to mistrust her own memories of hearing voices as a child, again barring the possibility of her participation in the oral and aural modes. Of particular interest here is the use of the term "visionaria" to describe the idea that Marianna was only imagining things, or more specifically, "hearing voices." Again, there is a blending of what is heard and what is seen, as well as a confusion between what is real and what is imagined, both of which are

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<sup>69</sup> See: Sharon Wood (1993); and Susan Amatangelo, "Coming to Her Senses: The Journey of the Mother in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*," *Italica* 79.2 (2002): 240-256.

ostensibly *brought about* by the presence of Marianna's disability.<sup>70</sup> This blurring offers a way to understand the relation of this confusion to the question of writing versus orality: writing as text is *seen* where the spoken word is *heard*, a distinction that causes the text to falter where Marianna is concerned, leading to the blending and blurring that we find here.

Davis notes that in Western literary history, blindness has traditionally been associated with insight: throughout the canon we find blind prophets, poets, and "seers" of many types. Davis traces this correlation, citing the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare among those to make this connection. In one of the most famous examples, Oedipus's blindness is directly linked to his moment of recognition and understanding – the revelation of the truth about his origins. Davis suggests that there is a striking incongruence in this association when one considers the privileged position afforded to orality in Western culture. If a lack of sight leads to insight, or a kind of seeing without seeing, a lack of hearing should lead to an ability to "hear" without hearing, but the fourth term in the analogy is missing. Notably, there are few examples, if any, of deaf characters that possess a profound capacity for understanding.<sup>71</sup>

The figure of Marianna Ucria offers a potential answer to this riddle, vis-à-vis her telepathic powers. As one who "hears" others' thoughts, she is thus figured as able to "hear" despite the fact of her deafness. The lack of a fourth term in the equation provides another explanation for the continual conflation of the visual and aural fields in *Marianna Ucria*. Within the text, the analogy is completed as follows: absence of sight is to insight as absence of hearing is to... *visionaria*. Marianna's misrecognition of herself as one who is "seeing things" reveals a preoccupation within the text with Marianna's inability to hear. By the anxious logic of the text, all she *can* do is see. It further speaks to a certain oscillation contained within the term *visionaria* that will be relevant when we consider the corresponding term in relation to deafness. In the Italian, one who is *visionario* is one who hallucinates, and thus sees in a faulty manner, *or*, by contrast, one who sees in a manner that is particularly acute, beyond what is considered possible for a human. This double meaning, when applied to the function of hearing as opposed to sight, corresponds directly to Marianna's relationship to hearing. On one hand, she is barred from the apprehension of auditory input; on the other, she is able to hear what others cannot, gaining access to private thoughts that would otherwise remain interior. Thus, not only is Marianna the reader *par excellence*, she is also able to transgress the boundaries of individual consciousness, allowing her access to the internal monologues of those around her, affording her a kind of "supercritical" reading power. Indeed, this ability – or what I am calling a "superabilità" – suggests a kind of breakdown of the boundaries between internal and external, and a breach of the borders separating characters.<sup>72</sup> Marianna's *inability* to externalize her own internal dialogue

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<sup>70</sup> Here, it is notably her father who creates the confusion by lying to her about her childhood. The fact that he communicates with her in written form suggests that he is scripting her past, writing a history over the one she remembers. The confusion created by her father is quickly absorbed by Marianna, as she opts to blame herself rather than admit that her father would lie to her.

<sup>71</sup> See Davis's discussion of disability theory in relation to blindness and insight in *Enforcing Normalcy*, 100-125. He is drawing, too, from Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971) and the connection he makes between "criticism and the body" (Davis, 101).

<sup>72</sup> Again, I use "super-ability" partially in reference to the Italian, "superabilità," which is a term coined within the field of disability studies in Italy. The term in Italian implies both the concept of "superabile" – or "able to be overcome" – as well as the idea of an ability that goes beyond the norm, a super power: super + abilità. The term thus addresses both excess (going beyond the norm) and lack (implying there is something that needs to be overcome). I use the term to refer to instances of compensation within narratives that present a disabled character who, perceived as lacking in some way, develops or exhibits a compensatory power. It should be noted that "superability" is a term that has had some circulation within the context of Anglo-American studies of disability as

is thus overcome, or compensated for, by her ability to appropriate the thoughts of others. Utilizing an ability or sense that is unique to her puts her at a distinct advantage over those around her, canceling the disadvantage that is assumed by other characters (and perhaps by the reader) due to her deafness.<sup>73</sup>

The reciprocal link between her deafness and mindreading abilities is further strengthened by occasions within the text where mindreading is figured as an interpretation of gestures, in a mode similar to the interpretation of sign language. In one of the first episodes in which we are made aware of Marianna's special power, the narrator initially describes a scene in which Marianna guesses the thoughts of her cook, Innocenza, based on the woman's gestures: "Dai gesti stizziti indovina quello che la donna sta pensando" (60) ["From [Innocenza's] irritated gestures she is able to guess what the woman is thinking."] However, the woman's thoughts are entirely too specific to be a rough estimation or general gist gleaned from a few gestures. Her thoughts proceed as follows: "Odiosi questi lacci che debbono essere infilati negli occhielli; ma la duchessa Marianna se le fa fare su misura queste scarpe e poi le regala a noi... e come sputare su un paio di viennesine di camoscio da trenta tari?" (60) ["I hate these laces that have to be threaded through the little eyelets, but Duchess Marianna has them made to order and then passes them on to us... and how can you spit on a pair of suede Viennese boots that cost thirty *tari*?"] While one could argue that Marianna is perhaps imagining her own version of the woman's thoughts, we quickly come to learn that Marianna has a much more immediate and precise access to these *pensieri* [thoughts]. We read: "E ancora una volta Marianna viene raggiunta, quasi aggredita dal pensiero di Innocenza" (61) ["And once again Marianna is assailed, almost assaulted by Innocenza's thoughts."] This time Innocenza's thoughts reveal that someone has been stealing hay from the barn – a piece of information that would be impossible for Marianna to guess based on gestures. Furthermore, the fact that Innocenza's thoughts are placed within quotation marks presents them to the reader as though they were dialogue. Here, instead, we "read" Innocenza's thoughts *through* Marianna. Marianna is, in a sense, becoming omniscient, blurring the line between character and narrator, much as she has already done in relation to character and reader. As one who now occupies all roles, Marianna comes to inhabit and interpret the text from every angle. The fact that Marianna "reads" others' thoughts, presents further support for understanding this text as one that subverts and challenges narrative norms as well as social hierarchies. Marianna's progressive development as a mind reader, places her in a position of power with respect to the other characters in terms of what (and how) she is capable of knowing. Her inability to hear is transformed into an all-hearing, all-knowing position.

In becoming omniscient, through her powers of extrasensory perception, Marianna is finally able to learn the truth about her past and the origins of her disability when she reads the thoughts of her brother, Carlo. Marianna "hears" Carlo's stream of consciousness: "il fatto è che

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well. See, for example: Isabel Karpin and Roxanne Mykitiuk, "Going Out on a Limb: Prosthetics, Normalcy and Disputing the Therapy/Enhancement Distinction," *Medical Law Review* 16.3 (2008): 413-436; and Elena L. Grigorenko, Ami Klin, and Fred Volkmar, "Hyperlexia: disability or superability?" *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 44.8 (2003): 1079-1091. These are medical, not literary, studies, and refer unilaterally to the notion of an ability that surpasses the norm. They do not carry the Italian sense of overcoming. "Superabilità" bears some resemblance to Joseph Shapiro's "supercrip" as described in his seminal work, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Random House, 1994), though there again the emphasis is on inspirational disabled people who perform exceptional feats. See also my discussion in: Noson, "From *superabilità* to *transabilità*."

<sup>73</sup> Though I am reading it here as a potentially productive "advantage," I will show further on the limits of such superabilities which are arguably always the product of ableist fantasy.



sì, ora lo ricorda, lo zio Pietro, quel capraro maledetto, l'aveva assalita e lasciata mezza morta..." (210) ["the fact is that, yes, now he remembers, Uncle Pietro, that damned billy goat, had attacked her and left her half-dead..."] It is thus her telepathy that allows her to uncover the story of the origins of her disability and satisfies the normative demand for its explanation. Her disability, in a sense, indirectly provides the key to understanding its own origin. Whereas Oedipus blinds himself after having learned the truth, Marianna learns the truth *by way of* her deafness and the power she has developed in order to compensate for it. The fact that she accesses this truth through mindreading also supports an interpretation of her telepathic powers as an allegory for reading itself. Marianna's access to the deafened modality of reading allows her to discover truths that would otherwise remain out of her grasp.

The occasions where Marianna is assailed by the thoughts of others often bring with them a host of other sensory input as well. I have already noted the blurring between the aural and visual, but we find too, the presence of odors and tactile sensations in association with the thoughts that she hears/reads. In one instance, Marianna notes the smells that she associates with the cook: "Marianna si chiede per quale infausta alchimia i pensieri di Innocenza la raggiungano chiari e limpidi come se li potesse udire. Non lo vuole quel carico, le è sgradevole. Nello stesso tempo le piace aspirare gli odori di quella gonna grigia che sa di cipolla fritta, di tintura di rosmarino, di aceto, di sugna, di basilico" (77) ["Marianna asks herself by what sinister alchemy Innocenza's thoughts come to her plain and clear as if she could hear them. She does not want that burden; it is unpleasant to her. At the same time she likes to breathe in the odors of that grey skirt which smells of fried onion, rosemary tincture, vinegar, lard, basil."] This synesthetic shifting – from tactile to olfactory, visual to gustatory – may be due to an inherent difficulty in pinpointing which sensory faculty should be active in the process of mind-reading. Rather than use just one, Marianna instead alternates between a panoply of senses. That which is *extra-sensory* is expressed through a synthesis of *all* senses.

In another episode, Marianna attempts to stop the flow of thoughts she intercepts while spying on Innocenza:

Marianna si tira indietro chiudendo gli occhi. Non vuole posare lo sguardo sulle nudità della sua cuoca. Ora tocca a lei scrollare la testa per liberarsi di quei pensieri inopportuni, appiccicosi come il succo delle carrube. Le è già successo altre volte di essere raggiunta del rimuginio di chi le sta accanto, ma mai così a lungo. Che stia peggiorando? (64)

[Marianna pulls back, closing her eyes. She does not want to rest her gaze on her cook's nakedness. Now it is her turn to shake her head in order to free herself from those tactless thoughts, sticky like carob juice. It was not the first time that she had been aware of the brooding thoughts of those around her, but never for so long. Could it be getting worse?]

Here, in another example of visual and aural blending, Marianna closes her eyes in order to not witness her cook as she undresses, drawing a parallel between Innocenza's physical nudity and the nakedness of her thoughts. In averting her eyes, Marianna hopes to avoid witnessing the cook's private interiority, suggesting a link between her telepathic powers and a kind of penetrating vision. To add to the sensory confusion, Innocenza's thoughts are described as sticky, imbued with a kind of material presence, one that here invokes the sense of taste.

Notably, the terms of hearing are not present at all, giving way to the language of sight (“gli occhi,” “lo sguardo”), suggesting that perhaps her telepathy should be understood as aligned with the written word rather than the spoken – as incontrovertibly a matter of reading, not of hearing. Indeed, much later in the novel, Marianna’s access to Innocenza’s thoughts is likened to a spell “che la porta a leggere i pensieri di lei, come se li trovasse scritti sulla carta” (243) [“that leads her to read her thoughts, as if she had found them written on paper.”] This analogy creates an explicit link between the “reading” of thoughts and the reading of the written word. As opposed to a “hearing without hearing” then, which would complete the analogy proposed by Davis, Marianna’s telepathy – as a form of *reading* – is a capacity that rests on the visual and therefore is perhaps not the final answer to Davis’s conundrum.

Sumeli Weinberg sees Marianna’s telepathy as a passive, feminine power: “Appunto perché afflitta da una ‘mancanza’, da un ‘vuoto’, Marianna si apre ad una sensibilità tutta femminile: di raccogliere in sé i pensieri degli altri e [...] di calarsi, per così dire, interamente nell’altro” (182) [“Precisely because she is afflicted by a ‘lack,’ by a ‘void,’ Marianna opens herself to a sensitivity that is wholly feminine: to gather within herself the thoughts of others and [...] to identify completely with the other.”] Sumeli Weinberg equates this process with a productive fusing, where Marianna’s thoughts take form through the thoughts of others and eventually then make their way to the page. I would like to note, by contrast, the language of affliction that accompanies Marianna’s telepathy. She is described as “quasi aggredita” by Innocenza’s thoughts and in the above citation wonders if the condition is worsening. She is clearly bothered by the unwanted entrance of others’ thoughts, often attempting to back away in order to escape them, even as she takes advantage of a certain access to knowledge that her power affords her. Sumeli Weinberg tellingly uses terms of penetration in reference to these telepathic instances, which suggests a parallel with the unwanted penetration of Marianna’s sexual violation. Keeping this perspective in mind, I would like to suggest that her “power” might not be so empowering after all. Although she is able to learn the origins of her disability through reading her brother’s mind, this access to knowledge, and significantly to self-knowledge, comes at a price. Indeed, the means to uncovering her past trauma reenact the very conditions of that trauma. Just prior to finally learning the truth of her childhood rape, Marianna’s experience of telepathy is described in terms of horror and abjectness: “Vorrebbe fermarlo, strappare quel rametto estraneo da cui cola una linfa ghiacciata e amara, ma come avviene quando si fa recipiente di pensieri altrui, non riesce poi a rifiutarli. È presa da un bisogno acre di toccare il fondo dell’orrore dando corpo alle parole più segrete e volanti, più abiette e inutili” (206) [“She would like to make it stop, to tear out that alien branch dripping its bitter icy sap, but when she finds herself the receptacle for others’ thoughts, she is unable to refuse them. She is overtaken by an acrid need to touch the limit of the horror, giving weight to their most secret and fleeting, their most abject and useless words.”] The parallel to rape is unmistakable here: Marianna wants it to stop, is unable to refuse, and is finally overtaken. Interestingly, her own agency here reflects a mode of relationality that is based on touch (“toccare il fondo dell’orrore”), and a need to translate the horror of words to a corporeal state (“dando corpo alle parole”). We see here a tension between bodily and verbal ways of knowing or relating and another example of the ambivalence that characterizes Marianna’s relationship to the symbolic.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Marianna’s voiceless body thus becomes a container for the symbolic ruminations issuing forth from the minds of others. Vis-à-vis her telepathy she makes the words of others material, “giving body” – as the Italian reads – to that which ostensibly belongs to the realm of abstract, evanescent mind. As Mitchell and Snyder argue in *Narrative Prosthesis*, the disabled (literary) body comes to serve as a corporeal anchor, lending weight – and therefore

Thus, the barring of sound that was originally described as a problem of distance is overcome by Marianna's telepathy but only vis-à-vis a violent encounter.<sup>75</sup> Marianna's attempts at escaping the verbal are substituted by various alternative symbolic systems that disallow her own mode of communication even as they give her access to a certain power within her social milieu. In absence of the spoken word, she is given the tools of writing and reading and manifests telepathic abilities, all of which keep her variously inscribed and unable to refuse, despite her own groping towards a haptic form of relating. Even Saro, her young illiterate lover with whom she finds a certain respite from verbal onslaught, eventually learns to write in order to convey to her the message "Vi amo" ["I love you."] Marianna retains the young man's message despite her intentions of discarding it, which – while it could speak to the conflicting whims of amorous folly – I suggest should be read as another example of her inability to refuse both the sexual and symbolic advances of those around her. She hides his note in her box of *biglietti*, significantly stashing it "sotto un mucchio di biglietti del signor padre" (171) ["under a pile of notes from her father."] Saro, too, thus crosses over to join the ranks of the other men in her life who seek to entrap and control her within the symbolic matrix.

### **"Priva di gravami di testa": Sign Language and the Freedom of Silence**

In his discussion of the spoken versus the written word, Davis discusses the "scrambling" of sites in the body where language is created and/or received. The scrambling of senses that occurs during Marianna's mind-reading episodes may arise as a manifestation of this short-circuit. However, Davis suggests another mode of communication that could bypass the conundrum altogether. Davis notes that sign language presents the same "originary" and "receptive" points as writing. The hand creates and the eye receives, just as with writing and reading. Thus, sign language could offer another possible option for the missing fourth term – a way to hear without hearing. Davis writes: "Sign language occupies the interstice where space and silence come together; sign language is the locus where the body meets language" (117). Keeping in mind our earlier discussion of the presence of silence in *Marianna Ucrìa*, I would like to suggest that sign language may offer a kind of missing link or underlying subtext by which to make sense of the sensory scrambling that occurs throughout the text. As we have already seen, Marianna's telepathy is originally described in terms of the interpretation of *gesti*. Marianna, however, conspicuously *does not* use sign language to communicate with those around her, opting instead for the writing of notes.<sup>76</sup>

There is one instance, however, in which something like sign language is referenced. Marianna's infant son, Signoretto, is portrayed as having a very special relationship to his

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substantial, incontestable significance – to the immateriality of the textual or symbolic. Thus, the pristine realm of thought postulated by the tradition of Western metaphysics maintains its untainted purity and saves itself from having to succumb to the vulgar decrepitude of embodiment while simultaneously borrowing the *gravitas* – the "realness" – of the Other's body.

<sup>75</sup> Telepathy itself is defined in terms of distance. As a kind of "feeling from a distance," telepathy need not occur through symbolic media, though it is most often portrayed as such, hence the slippage into understanding it in terms of "mindreading."

<sup>76</sup> This is notably not the case in the film version, *Marianna Ucrìa* (1997), directed by Roberto Faenza, where Marianna not only learns sign language from Mr. Grass, she also teaches it to her children, allowing her a way out of the bind discussed in this chapter. This, I argue, is an effect of the visual medium of film. Similarly, writing is not used very often within the film despite the fact that it is so central to the novel, perhaps because it would be untenable for a viewer to be expected to read throughout the film. Consequently, there is much more focus on lip-reading, sign language, and voiceover.

mother: “Un bambino allegro e intelligente che sembrava avere intuito la sordità della madre e aveva inventato lì per lì un linguaggio per farsi capire da lei e solo da lei. Le parlava scalciando, mimando, ridendo, tempestandola di baci appiccicosi” (79) [“A happy and intelligent child that seemed to have intuited the deafness of his mother and had invented a spontaneous language to make himself understood by her and only her.”] Her son “speaks” to her through the movement of his body, using a private language that is mimetic, gestural and sensual. Signoretto utilizes the entire range of nontextual, nonverbal modes of communication. He gains knowledge through intuition, he gestures, touches her, laughs, and uses each part of his mouth but – significantly – *not* in the service of speech: “Le incollava la grande bocca senza denti sulla faccia, le lambiva gli occhi chiusi con la lingua, le stringeva con le gengive i lobi delle orecchie, ma senza farle male, come un cagnolino che conosce le sue forze e sa dosarle per giocare” (79) [“He would attach his large toothless mouth to her face, he’d lick her closed eyes with his tongue, he would squeeze her earlobes with his gums, without hurting her, like a puppy that is aware of its strength and knows how to keep it measured when playing.”] Signoretto is thus able to communicate his affection without recourse to linguistic expression. His *baci* [kisses] are described as *appiccicosi* [“sticky”] like the silent thoughts of the cook, supporting the reading of a correlation between Marianna’s telepathy and her son’s mode of communication, though Signoretto’s approach is much more favorably received. In both instances, however, the possibility of a gestural language is introduced only to be quashed or mutated. In the first instance, Innocenza’s *gesti* are transformed into a socially untenable and invasive form of telepathy, and in the second instance, Signoretto – who offers a real possibility for a reciprocal communicative mode through gesture – dies while still a young child. The possibility of a sign language is thus repressed by the text: the logic of the narrative cannot allow for its existence, for to do so would mean to cancel the necessity of both the oral and the textual in any narrative, thereby effacing the very matrix upon which the text is founded.

Signoretto’s relationship with Marianna is also indicative of a failure of the law of the father. Significantly, Signoretto’s navel never heals after his birth, leaving the mark of his connection to his mother fresh, as if they had only just been detached. In many ways he remains a baby – he does not grow teeth or hair, and most significantly he does not develop the capacity for language:

All’età in cui tutti gli altri bambini cominciano a parlare, lui faceva solo delle risate. Cantava, urlava, sputava, ma non parlava. E il signor marito zio aveva cominciato a scrivere biglietti minacciosi: “Mio figlio non lo voglio mutolo come voi.” E di seguito: “Tocca separare, così dice lo speziale, e anche il dottor Cannamela.” (80)

[At the age when all other children learn to speak, he would only laugh. He would sing, wail, spit, but he didn’t speak. And uncle husband had started to write threatening notes: “I don’t want my son dumb like you.” And then: “You must separate: that is what the apothecary says and so does Dr. Cannamela.”]

Signoretto “speaks” the language of the mother, which is to say, he does not speak at all (“mutolo come voi”), but instead communicates in non-verbal ways. The father commands that the two be separated, a separation which in psychoanalytic terms entails the entrance into the symbolic, taking up language in order to fill the divide that opens up between self and other, self and mother. The law of the father, in Signoretto’s case, is not obeyed and shortly thereafter

Signoretto dies, at the age of four. The reader is not privy to this death, however: it, like many of the important events of Marianna's life, occurs "off-screen" in one of the lacunae between chapters. Even in death, Signoretto evades symbolic inscription, exiting quietly from the text.<sup>77</sup>

It is worth noting here that Marianna's own beloved father also bore the name Signoretto. Thus, although not the firstborn, the child Signoretto is already signaled as the special or favored son, and is symbolically positioned to take the place of Marianna's father. Disobeying the law of the father, and adhering instead to that of the mother, the figure of Signoretto-the-child, suggests an attempt towards an alternative symbolic order. The "law of the mother" is here figured as silent, affectionate and material – based on touch and contiguity. Signoretto's death would appear to confirm for Marianna that such a communicative system cannot be sustained. Perhaps, though, by supplanting Marianna's own father and then dying before reaching childbearing age, little Signoretto manages to effectuate a severing of the patrilineal line, ensuring that his name – and the restrictive social conditioning that it represents – will not carry on into further generations. The "sign" in Signoretto-the-father's name – an endlessly repeating signifier that masquerades as the only Signifier – is thus blocked in its appropriation and branding of all future sons. The function of the Name-of-the-Father – to ensure identification with the symbolic order – has already partially failed once (in Marianna's own failure to take up the spoken symbolic) and is here reaffirmed. Signoretto-the-child offers a sign of a different character. After his death, Marianna muses upon her other children and how quickly they grow and change: "Solo Signoretto si è fermato. L'unico dei suoi figli che non corra, che non si trasformi giorno per giorno" (93) ["Only Signoretto stopped growing. The only one of her children who doesn't run, who doesn't transform day by day."] Like Marianna, then, Signoretto is frozen in time: "ripete all'infinito i suoi sorrisi d'amore" (93) ["he endlessly repeats his loving smiles."] The repeating "sign" that Signoretto bears is thus not the empty signifier of the symbolic, but takes instead the shape of a corporeal sign, an "expression" of the body, of filial love, that is unsubstitutable.

The other function of the Name-of-the-Father, the prohibition of incest, fails with respect to her son as well. Marianna initially relates to Signoretto-the-father as a lover – "il solo 'cavaliere candido come neve' che si sia proposto al suo amore" (60) ["the only 'knight white as snow' that had offered himself to her love"] – the Ariostan intertext suggestive in its own right of a *literary* patrilineage, signifying the identification of her father and his love with her own relationship to literature, reading, and writing.<sup>78</sup> However, to complicate matters further, the

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<sup>77</sup> After the chapter break, we learn of Signoretto's death in passing, in explanation for Marianna's insomnia: "Da quando è morto il piccolo Signoretto, di notte non riesce a dormire" (83) ["Since little Signoretto died, she is unable to sleep at night."]

<sup>78</sup> Maraini quotes the Ariostan verses – incorrectly – as follows: "Ecco pel bosco un cavallier venire / il cui sembiante è d'uom gagliardo e fiero / candido come neve il suo vestire, / un bianco *pavoncello* ha per cimiero..." (60) ["Now from the wood there comes a knight, / who seems a man – proud, robust: / his garments are of purest white / and white the bird upon his crest."] Replacing Ariosto's "pennoncello" ["pennant or plume"] with "pavoncello" [the *pavoncella* is a Lapwing which, in the Italian, derives its name from the *pavone*, or peacock, because of their similar iridescent plumage], Maraini's misquote thus points away from the feather itself, notably a writing implement, to the bird from which such a feather might derive. This substitution seems to suggest a refusal of the synecdochic function that places writing at the symbolic center of her father's seduction. It is curious, then, that in the lines that follow she reconnects the two, reinstating the *pennacchio* as central figure: "Fin da quando aveva sei anni il 'cavaliere' l'aveva ammaliaata col suo 'pennacchio di bianco pavoncello' e poi quando lei si era messa ad inseguirlo lui se n'era andato ad ammaliaare altri cuori, altri occhi inquietanti" (60) ["Ever since she was six years old, this 'knight' had charmed her with his 'plume of peacock white' and then when she set out to follow him he had gone to charm other hearts, other disquieting eyes."] She goes on to attribute her father's abandonment to her failure to speak and cites as unhappy outcome his giving her in marriage to her uncle, perpetrator of her sexual

knight in question in this episode of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, is in fact Bradamante dressed as a man, introducing yet another twist in the quest to assign a given gender to the written word in Maraini's text.<sup>79</sup> With Signoretto-the-child, on the other hand, Marianna's (symbolic) incestuous thoughts become flesh: "Solo con il piccolo Signoretto ha strafatto, lo sa, il loro è stato un amore che andava al di là del rapporto madre e figlio, per sfiorare quello di due amanti" (87) ["Except with little Signoretto she overdid it, she knows, theirs was a love that went beyond that of mother and son, resembling instead that of two lovers."]<sup>80</sup> The physical intimacy of the mother-son union thus supplants the literary, symbolic bond that characterized her relationship with her father, a corporality that is repeatedly proffered only to be just as quickly rescinded.

In the final pages of the novel, Marianna decides to leave Sicily, her family, and her lover, and embarks on a journey to the Italian mainland with her former servant, "la matta" Fila. At first, her encounters with new people seem to reinforce her feeling of difference and isolation. She is unable to participate in conversation with the men she meets on the boat from Sicily, a relational difficulty that is portrayed in terms of mobility: "si sente goffa e inabile" ["she feels clumsy and inept"]; and "Lo stupore della nuova situazione le impaccia i movimenti" (249) ["The shock of her new situation hinders her movements."] As Marianna leaves her home behind, her "inability" is temporarily heightened, and she paradoxically experiences her newfound mobility as a kind of immobility. In this liminal space, with the illiterate Fila as her only companion, she is perhaps freed from the need to read and write but she is still assailed by Fila's thoughts, still prey to the influx of others' words. However, once on the mainland, the two women befriend a group of actors who make themselves understood via gesture: "Non si erano affatto turbati per la sordità della duchessa, anzi si erano subito messi a parlare con le mani e con il corpo, facendosi intendere benissimo da lei e suscitando le risate matte di Fila" (255) ["They were not at all bothered by the Duchess's deafness; in fact they immediately began speaking with their hands and bodies, making themselves easily understood and inciting raucous laughter from Fila."] In this episode, although one written note is mentioned, there is no indication of telepathy and, in fact, both the written and telepathic modes seem to dissipate in favor of a more gestural

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assault. However, given the misquotation as well as the mistaken gender identity of the cavaliere, we might read an undercurrent of resistance here, whereby the *pennacchio*, instrument of her father's seduction as well as of his abandonment, is in fact derivative of a hidden female source.

<sup>79</sup> To take the comparison further, it is possible to consider Marianna's relationship to the pen as similar to that of Bradamante and her spear which is endowed with magical powers, allowing her to win duels with stronger (male) opponents. In Valeria Finucci's *The Lady Vanishes*, she notes that Bradamante's strength as a warrior is thus due entirely to the magic spear, not to her own skill as a warrior: "Being a woman, we know that the only lance Bradamante can have must necessarily be magic; moreover, being an image of phallic power, the lance can only be given to her, given indeed by the most critically admired representative of law and reason in the text, Astolfo." See: Valeria Finucci, *The Lady Vanishes: Subjectivity and Representation in Castiglione and Ariosto* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 236. Reading Marianna in a similar light confirms the notion that her skill as a writer is undermined by the fact that it is a "power" bestowed upon her by a male authority – a power that remains with that authority even when it is she who takes up the pen. By this interpretation, the *cavaliere* that she invokes as an image for her father is instead a figure for herself, disguised in the armature and plumage of the male writer.

<sup>80</sup> Amatangelo remarks upon the sensuous quality of Marianna's relationship with her son: "Her deafness and mutism do not hinder her ability to care for her young children; instead, they compel her to mother differently, by using her body more actively" (243). While Amatangelo notes that this bodily mode of relating to her children takes on a special quality with relation to Signoretto – "The sensuality essential to Marianna's mothering acquires a different meaning in her relationship with her youngest child, Signoretto" – her conclusion downplays the incestuous undertones that are not so subtly implied by the text, couching it instead in terms of self-sacrifice: "The boy's death reinforces Marianna's notion that a mother should resist giving herself completely to her children" (243).

understanding. When Marianna pays for dinner, the actors “sapevano ricambiare il favore mimando i loro pensieri con allegria di tutti” (255) [“were able to repay the favor by miming their thoughts to the delight of all.”] Finally, it would seem that she is emerging from the confines of the symbolic, and by turn, the restrictive roles of her gender and status. Her freedom, then, in the last instance, is not gained through a mastery of the written word, but through her flight from it:

Marianna gustava la libertà: il passato era una coda che aveva raggomitolato sotto le gonne e solo a momenti si faceva sentire. Il futuro era una nebulosa dentro a cui si intravedevano delle luci da giostra. E lei stava lì, mezza volpe e mezza sirena, per una volta priva di gravami di testa, in compagnia di gente che se ne infischia della sua sordità e le parlava allegramente contorcendosi in smorfie generose e irresistibili. (256)

[Marianna was enjoying her freedom: the past was a tail that had wound under her skirts and only at times made itself known. The future was a cloudy haze within which one could glimpse the lights of a carousel. And there she was, half fox and half siren, for once free of burdensome thoughts, in the company of people that couldn't care less about her deafness and happily spoke to her, contorting themselves in generous and irresistible poses.]

The troupe of actors perform for Marianna in a manner similar to her son, Signoretto – through mime and laughter. “[P]riva di gravami di testa” [“free of burdensome thoughts”], she is at last liberated from the penetrating words of others, able to relax in their company. Marianna is here described as half fox and half siren/mermaid – a hybrid of which one half, the siren, is already a hybrid figure – and her past as a tail that she keeps hidden under her skirt. As a siren who does not speak, Marianna recalls the silent sirens of Kafka's story, “The Silence of the Sirens”: “Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.”<sup>81</sup> It is thus in her silence, more than her words or writing, that Marianna's power lies: by refusing to engage in the symbolic order, she is able to resist participation in the patriarchal order. If we understand Marianna's deafness as a form of resistance or protest enacted by *not* hearing, an interesting reversal is revealed: where Odysseus had his men plug their own ears in order to resist the deadly call of the sirens, here it is the siren – as figure for Marianna – who resists by not hearing. Where the Homeric tale warns men of the dangerous trap set out by the monstrous female, Maraini's imparts a response: it is entrapment in the male symbolic that is to be feared and resisted.

The fox, too, holds special symbolic meaning for Maraini. In her Introduction to the collection of poems, *Viaggiando con passo di volpe*, Maraini writes again about *Marianna Ucria*, invoking the fox as a symbol for nomadism, for traveling, which in turn, she understands as being possible through writing and literature. The fox, for Maraini, is also a feminine presence: “Quello che mi piace di questa sorella del lupo, è la sua leggerezza silenziosa, il suo curiosare notturno, il suo amore per le ombre e per i boschi” [“What I like about this sister of the

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<sup>81</sup> Franz Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens,” in *Parables and Paradoxes: Bilingual Edition*, trans. Clement Greenberg, et al. (New York: Schocken, 1958), 89-93.

wolf, is her silent weightlessness, her nocturnal exploring, her loves for shadows and forests.”<sup>82</sup> This association has roots in her childhood in Japan, where she heard fairytales about foxes that were really women who had transgressed societal norms: “Nelle favole giapponesi la volpe non è altro che una donna che ha subito un incantamento, che è stata trasformata in animale per un suo proibito innamoramento o per una sua proibita maternità” (21) [“In Japanese fairytales, the fox is non other than a woman who has been transformed by a spell into an animal because of some forbidden love affair or forbidden maternity.”] Both halves of this hybrid figuration are thus meant to represent a transgressive female presence, one that for Maraini is ultimately silent and animalistic, and that notably in this scene, must remain hidden.

This jumble of animal parts recalls an early episode in the novel where the solicitous artist charged with painting her villa’s frescoes depicts a series of chimeras bearing her own face. The figure of Marianna that is associated with her past – and thus with male attention – is overdetermined and incoherent, a product of the grafting together of symbolic parts.<sup>83</sup> To turn again to disability theory, I would like to invoke Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s claim that hybridization always in some way characterizes disabled identity: “The disabled person always fuses the physically typical with the physically atypical. [...] Within this liminal space the disabled person must constitute something akin to identity. According to the principal of unity, the disabled person becomes grotesque either in the sense of a gargoyle, breaching boundaries, or in the sense of a eunuch, one who is incomplete, not whole.”<sup>84</sup> In Marianna’s new social environment, “in compagnia di gente che se ne infischia della sua sordità” [“in the company of people who couldn’t care less about her deafness”], she manages to keep her grotesqueness under wraps, so to speak. The fact that it is her skirt that hides her monstrosity suggests again that her disability cannot be separated from the fact of her femininity, a point which I hope by now has proven undeniable.<sup>85</sup>

Even in her newfound freedom, Marianna has not yet entirely escaped symbolic entreaty, however. As a last attempt at calling Marianna back to the folds of Sicilian society and the roles of womanhood, her suitor, Don Camalè, sends her a letter reiterating his proposal of marriage and his admiration for her. He cites Marianna’s deafness as that which sparked his attraction:

Ma sapete che è proprio essa, la mutilazione di metà dei vostri sensi che mi ha attratto nell’orbita dei vostri pensieri? Che ci sono fatti folti e rigogliosi proprio a causa di quella cesura col mondo che vi ha costretta fra libri e quaderni, nel fondo di una biblioteca. La vostra intelligenza ha preso un avvio così curioso e insolito da indurmi in una deliziosa tentazione d’amore. (261)

[But did you know that it was precisely that, the maiming of half of your senses, that attracted me to the orbit of your thoughts? And they are dense and flourishing precisely because of that caesura from the world that kept you among books and

<sup>82</sup> Dacia Maraini, *Viaggiando con passo di volpe: Poesie 1983-1991* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991), 20.

<sup>83</sup> Interesting in this regard is the fact, that in order to distract herself during sexual encounters with her husband, Marianna thinks about the hybrid unions of various gods and mortals, and in particular of Leda and Io, both of whom were transformed into animal shapes (126).

<sup>84</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 115.

<sup>85</sup> In order to illustrate the impossibility of thinking feminism apart from disability studies, Garland-Thomson evokes Aristotle’s classification of the female as a “deformed” or “mutilated” male (in Book Two of *Generation of Animals*). The female is, in this sense, always already disabled, and a disabled woman is thus doubly disabled, another way in which Marianna is hybridized. I will discuss this at length in Chapter Two.



papers, in the back of a library. Your intelligence began in such a curious and unusual manner that it has led me to be deliciously tempted by love.]

The circuit is perhaps indirect, but the logic is clear: Marianna's disability led to her detachment from the social world which in turn caused her to turn to the world of texts, making her a more interesting and attractive companion. This somewhat circuitous trajectory leads Marianna back to a place of circumscribed female roles, precisely what her difference supposedly liberates her from. No longer assumed to be asexual because of her disability, here she is instead deemed a desirable mate *because of* her difference. A parallel can be drawn here to her engagement with the symbolic: her deafness and lack of speech are presumed to preclude engagement with the realm of words but instead lead her to a profound and complex immersion, or even entrapment, within it.

Contemplating Camalèò's letter, Marianna is overcome by nostalgia, and questions her nomadic roving, which she describes as "frivola e perversa" ["frivolous and perverse"], wondering whether she should instead return home. In the last moments of the narrative, while staring at the Tiber river, she briefly considers suicide but instead resolves to continue on: "Ma la voglia di riprendere il cammino è più forte" (265) ["But the desire to resume the journey is stronger."] Following her *voglia*, she will continue her perverse wandering and, rather than closing the circuit, either through death or a return home, she will instead open a new chapter, even as the novel itself ends.

### **Conclusion: "Ed è muta"**

The final lines of the novel suggest a productive possibility for silent, nonverbal communication: "Marianna ferma lo sguardo sulle acque giallognole, gorgoglianti e interroga i suoi silenzi. Ma la risposta che ne riceve è ancora una domanda. Ed è muta" (265) ["Marianna rests her gaze on the gurgling, yellow water and interrogates its silence. But the response she receives back is another question. And it is mute."]<sup>86</sup> The fact that she *interrogates* the silence of the river implies a mode of dialogue that is, finally, conducted on her own terms. The mute response she receives is, in turn, a question – a kind of perverse dialogue that, like her wandering path, does not close the circuit. What is more, ending the novel with the phrase, "Ed è muta" – the lack of pronoun leaving open the possibility that it is she being described as mute here instead of the question – could arguably be read as a defiant statement of the immutability of her deaf identity. Reading the perversity of her desire to wander – and therefore to escape the various female roles that await her back home – as corollary to the perverseness of her open, silent dialogue, suggests an understanding of her final "freedom" as incontrovertibly dependent upon and inextricable from her deafness. In her wordless dialogue with the Tiber, she has entered into a mode of discourse that involves neither the spoken nor the written word. What she understands from that dialogue remains opaque to the reader. Thus, in the final instance, she succeeds in producing a discourse that need not be "translated" into linguistic terms, and which thus, by extension, cannot take part in a psychoanalytic reconstruction. Marianna's very power, incrementally acquired through the course of the novel, cannot be separated from the effects of her disability, whether in her entrance into the world of literary and philosophical texts or in her

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<sup>86</sup> Dick Kitto and Elspeth Spottiswood translate this line as "She questions her silences," rather than "its silences," due to an ambiguity that exists in the Italian but is impossible to translate into English. See: *The Silent Duchess*, 235.

decision to extricate herself from that world. To say, then, that Marianna finally “finds her voice” is to undermine the very foundation upon which her freedom is constructed.

While this chapter is largely constructed on a critique of feminist interpretations of Maraini’s novel in order to show the omissions inherent in such interpretations, in the next chapter, I will recuperate the role of feminist theory in relation to disability through an analysis of an earlier novel by Maraini – *Donna in guerra* (1975) – in conversation with a recent short story, “Miranda,” by Gabriele Pedullà. Though I have provisionally – and necessarily – bracketed the feminist perspective here, via an engagement with feminist disability studies I will now argue that questions of gender and disability, in fact, cannot be considered separately.

## Chapter Two

### Seeking Transabled Knowledge: Dis-simulation as Gender Transgression in Dacia Maraini's *Donna in Guerra* and Gabriele Pedullà's "Miranda"

In order to articulate the complex relationship between disability, gender, and sexuality that I understand as central to representations of disability in Italian fiction, I seek, in this chapter, to delineate a new interpretive apparatus with which to examine such representations, what I am calling "literary transability." I borrow the term from the transabled community and the real-world phenomenon of transability, which refers to a condition by which a nondisabled person identifies as disabled, and to which I will return further on in this chapter. Literary transability, as I have conceived it, is a phenomenon that pertains to texts that feature a relationship between a non-disabled protagonist and a secondary disabled character. In such texts, the nondisabled character temporarily "simulates" disability in order to access a kind of knowledge that would otherwise remain opaque to them.<sup>87</sup> This simulation is carried out with the aid of a disabled character who in some way instructs the nondisabled character or offers the key to a moment of epiphany, awakening, or enlightenment and thus performs a "pedagogical" role that is instrumental to the narrative arc and to the primary character's development.<sup>88</sup>

Though I borrow from Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis the notion of a certain instrumentality that can be attributed to the disabled characters in these narratives, I would like to point to an aspect of narrative prosthesis that has been ignored in the many reiterations and interpretations of their theory. In Chapter Two of *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder note that once the disabled character has served its purpose, the "deviance" will then be rehabilitated or fixed in some way. This they claim can happen via cure, rescue, extermination, "or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being" (54). They then go on to cite examples that conform to the first three categories but fail to return to the last. Is this meant to be another form of negative representation for Mitchell and Snyder? Or is there a hidden productive value operative within the logic of narrative prosthesis? I hold open the possibility for a reparative reading of disability representations even as I seek to uncover the ways in which

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<sup>87</sup> On disability and "faking," see: Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), especially Chapter Five, "Dissimulations," from which I take the title for this chapter; and Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), in particular the chapter, "Fantasies of Fakery." Both are concerned with moments of "fakery" (whether literary or historical) that are associated with scamming, malingering, or laziness, and what these associations tell us about constructions, histories, and performances of disability.

<sup>88</sup> On disability as "pedagogical tool," see: Vivian M. May and Beth A. Ferri, "Questioning Ableist Metaphors in Feminist Theories of Resistance," *Prose Studies* 27.1-2 (Apr-Aug 2005): 133; and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). On disability "simulation" in the interest of "awareness," see: Schweik (2009), 131-2. Some recent examples of simulation exercises that are used in "educating" non-disabled people about the experience of disability: "Dining in the Dark" restaurants like Blindekuh in Zurich, the traveling Blind Café, or Opaque in San Francisco. Recent initiatives in Italy include: La Skarozzata: Una passeggiata per provare la disabilità, as well as gaming software such as ComeSE, "simulazione di difficoltà in ambienti virtuali," created by TiconBlu. For a perspective that covers some critiques of the issue, see: Sally French, "Simulation Exercises in Disability Awareness Training: A Critique," *Disability, Handicap & Society* 7.3 (1992): 257-266; Sheryl Burgstahler and Tanis Doe, "Disability-related Simulations: If, When, and How to Use Them in Professional Development," *Review of Disability Studies* 1.2 (2004): 8-18. For a more recent perspective, see Toby Olson, "How Disability Simulations Promote Damaging Stereotypes," *Braille Monitor* (Jan 2014): n. pag. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

“alternative modes of being” are routinely instrumentalized, closed down, or shut out. Thus, what I would like to focus on here is less a unidirectional, prosthetic relation but rather a dynamic (and potentially reciprocal) process, whereby a disabled mode or position is one that is open and available to any character in the text.

Access to this form of (disabled) knowledge or knowing, in the cases I will examine, brings with it as well access to non-normative sexual identities and practices, a fact which I will argue is integral to – and inseparable from – the process of literary transability. The “lessons learned” (or in some cases rejected) are thus simultaneously epistemological, ontological, and sexual in nature, offering new modes of thinking, being, and relating as a gendered body, a fact which will have potentially productive implications from feminist and queer perspectives, but that I argue carries ambivalent outcomes with regard to disability.<sup>89</sup>

This chapter moves both backwards and forwards in time, in order to bring together two texts that, while different in many ways – most notably with regards to the time of writing and genre – are, in my view, particularly illustrative of literary transability. Dacia Maraini’s novel, *Donna in guerra*, written in 1975 at the height of feminist debates in Italy, is arguably Maraini’s most politically-charged and self-consciously “feminist” text, though as I have already mentioned, most of her works deal in some way with the societal oppression of women.<sup>90</sup> Pedullà’s fairly recent short story, “Miranda,” by contrast, focuses explicitly on the primary character’s encounter with disabled difference, and is housed within a collection of stories loosely related to language and translation, *Lo spagnolo senza sforzo* (2009). “Miranda” is inspired by Ingeborg Bachmann’s 1972 story, “Eyes to Wonder,” written and published during her time living in Rome, a fact to which I will return further on. Both plots center on a relationship between a disabled woman and a nondisabled woman, and in both cases the disabled woman offers a model of sexual confidence and femininity that is lacking in the nondisabled character. Both disabled characters display a certain amount of exhibitionism and spectacularity, calling attention to their femininity and sexuality rather than placing emphasis on their disabilities, or at the very least, seeking to be viewed by their peers as *both* disabled *and* sexually attractive. Both texts contain queer encounters between the two female characters, revealing the extent to which the ideology of ability is bound up in the ideology of heterosexuality, which, as I will argue, is central to literary manifestations of transability.<sup>91</sup>

The characters I will analyze in this chapter are all women, which problematically leads literary critics to interpret the disabled female character as being in metaphorical relation to the nondisabled character, especially in the case of Maraini’s novel, which deals explicitly with issues of gender and feminism.<sup>92</sup> Continuing from my discussion in chapter one, I will thus

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<sup>89</sup> Again, see Schweik’s *Ugly Laws* on the potential for simulation to generate new bodily knowledge or experience: “if a faker settled in for the long haul with, say, a white cane, his or her body concept altered sometimes in ways not at all identical to the experiences of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘blind man’ but nonetheless palpable, experiential. The reason we cannot quite begin to imagine these possibilities is that ableism obliterates their traces” (131). In the cases I will examine here, the reason is more specifically a gendered erasure. The “simulations” I analyze in these texts are temporary, fleeting, and thus I will argue that they serve *not* to permanently alter the simulators bodies in terms of (dis)ability, but to effect the possibility of an undoing of gendered norms.

<sup>90</sup> See Chapter One for a discussion of Maraini’s ambivalence with regard to the term “feminist.”

<sup>91</sup> Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory* offers an extensive analysis of the ways that disabled and queer subjectivities intertwine with and inform one another. I will come back to McRuer’s influence on my own theory further on.

<sup>92</sup> This fact need not exclude the possibility that a male character might fulfill a similar role. Indeed, Chapter Three will focus on a similar pairing of male characters in Stefano Benni’s *Achille piè veloce*. One might also recall the scene in Dino Risi’s *Profumo di donna* where Ciccio takes up Fausto’s cane and pretends to be blind, standing tall and barking out orders in imitation of Fausto’s overbearing aggression, which could arguably read as a performance

consider the various permutations of the metaphorical relation between women and disability, as well as the epistemological function of narrative, speech, and text in such relations. Here, however, the focus will shift somewhat from the ways that disability opens onto alternative modes of communication (though that will factor in here as well) to the ways that disability is utilized as a means to access “alternative modes of being,” and in particular, of being a woman, as both a sexed and sexual subject.

### “The Mutilated Male”: Feminist Disability Studies

As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and others have shown, “conjoining” feminist theory and disability studies goes beyond a simple intersectional analysis.<sup>93</sup> Women have, since the time of Aristotle, been defined as lacking, deformed, mutilated, or otherwise deficient, in contrast to a supposedly whole male subject. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson invokes Aristotle’s figuring of the female body as always already a disabled or monstrous body, and points to the fact that “woman” is often defined within the structure of heterosexist discourse in terms that suggest disability. Commenting upon Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, she writes: “Aristotle ... conjoins the ‘monstrosity’ – whom we would today term ‘congenitally disabled’ – and the female outside the definitive norm. In Book Two, Aristotle affirms this connection of disabled and female bodies by stating that ‘the female is as it were a deformed male’ or – as it appears in other translations – ‘a mutilated male’” (20). This same logic is reflected in psychoanalytic theories of castration, by which a woman is understood as a castrated male. Ellen Samuels, following Garland-Thomson, writes: “Western thought has historically claimed, not a difference, but a *correspondence* between disability and femininity” (65).<sup>94</sup> The understanding is that the two categories are set in parallel relation based on a perception of shared deficiency. In other words, both identities have been historically constructed as fundamentally and inherently lacking.

Over the last five decades, within feminist discourse, this association has been turned on its head and the oppressive patriarchal structure itself is called out as that which “disables” women, a topic which I discuss to some extent in chapter one. However, as I have shown, an understanding of the oppression of women as commensurate with a state of disability is equally problematic for a number of reasons. In both cases, women are considered to be metaphorically disabled, whether because of an assumed inherent lack or due to an extrinsic disabling force. The latter case has recently been taken up by feminist disability scholars in an effort to challenge rhetoric that excludes disabled experience and/or perpetuates disability oppression within the realm of feminist discourse and activism. As Kim Q. Hall states in her Introduction to *Feminist Disability Studies*:

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of exaggerated manhood, one of the “lessons” Ciccio learns during his week with the captain. I will offer a full reading of Risi’s film elsewhere. It should be noted, however, that where a disabled female character is usually understood as a metaphor for femininity, a disabled male character is interpreted in a variety of ways, often for a negative character trait affecting “humanity” in general, rather than manhood in particular. See as one example, Cherrie Moraga’s play, *Heroes and Saints* (1972), in which the primary character is a (female) head with no body. The character takes after Luis Valdez’s *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1968), but here becomes interpreted as a statement about the chicana experience, and thus about both gender and race. Telory W. Davies argues that the realities of the play’s *production*, however, necessitate a confrontation with issues of accessibility and mobility, and therefore of disability.

<sup>93</sup> See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: “Feminist Disability Studies,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30.2 (2005); and “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (2002).

<sup>94</sup> Samuels, “Critical Divides,” 58-76, emphasis in the original.

Within feminist disability studies, the suggestion that “woman” is disabled by compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy is met with ambivalence. While the claim establishes an important conceptual connection between disability and gender, it also reflects (and risks perpetuating) dominant conceptions of disability as lack and deficiency, to the extent that it is accompanied by a desire to show that the association of women with disability is unjust to women (3-4).

The logical effect of the relation that Hall describes is that, in order for “woman” to be rehabilitated from her oppressed state, all traces of, or associations with, disability must necessarily be eradicated, leaving disabled women in a no-man’s-land, so to speak.

According to Garland-Thomson, there is a distinct triangulation at play between disabled and nondisabled female characters: “the normative female body ... occupies a dual and paradoxical cultural role: it is the negative term opposing the male body, but it is also simultaneously the privileged term opposing the abnormalized female body” (28). Rather than conflate representations of disabled women with “normative” female characters, via an understanding of disabled female characters as metaphorical representations of oppressed (normative) women, Garland-Thomson thus retains distinct subject positions for each term in the triangular relation. Leaving aside for now the question of where the disabled male fits into this tripartite equation, I would like to signal the fact that representations of disabled female characters thus not only carry the duality signaled by Garland-Thomson here – as standing in relation to both “the male body” and “the normative female body” – but they also still persist in inhabiting another dual role as well: that of being both a subject in her own right separate from the “normate” woman and being a metaphor for that very “normate” woman.<sup>95</sup> The metaphorical role assigned to disabled female characters only operates by way of a faulty logic that automatically associates both femininity and disability with lack. Problematically, then, the rehabilitation of femininity must necessarily involve a negation of disability. However, this persistent metaphorical relation is also what allows for the operation of what I am calling literary transability at work in these texts, an operation that necessitates not a dissociation with disability but the embracing and inhabiting of the very disabled mode the characters should ostensibly seek to reject, according to the logic that would understand disability as commensurate with either deficiency or patriarchal oppression.

### **Triangulation and Metaphor in Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra*: Disability as Liberation**

Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1975) offers what would seem to be a clear example of Garland-Thomson’s theory of triangulation at work, focusing on the relationship between the nondisabled protagonist, Vanna; her husband, Giacinto; and her outspoken, disabled friend, Suna. Through the course of the story, Vanna, a woman who is oppressed by her role as

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<sup>95</sup> In *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), Garland-Thomson defines the “normate” as follows: “the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries. The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). “Normate” thus functions as both adjective and noun, and though Garland-Thomson introduces the term in relation to disability, it is understood as being constructed upon any and all categories of difference that carry social valences of power or hierarchy. In this way, Garland-Thomson’s work extends from Erving Goffman’s stigma theory, a fact that she acknowledges in her discussion.

submissive wife, makes gradual progress toward sexual and social liberation. Instrumental to Vanna's transformation, Suna is a strong, sexual, and politically active woman who, due to a childhood bout with polio, is unable to walk without the aid of crutches. It is via Suna's instruction and assistance that Vanna learns to break out of the normative constraints of her marriage and gender position and finally leave her husband. Suna's disability is figured as inextricable from her sexuality, a dynamic that complicates and undergirds her marginal positioning, while metonymically enabling Vanna's rehabilitation from what is problematically understood as a metaphorically disabled state.<sup>96</sup> While on the one hand, Suna's character offers many challenges to stereotyped understandings of disabled women, and even suggests disability as a symbol for women's emancipation, I will show that Suna's strength as a disabled character is, in the last instance, disallowed by the logic of the text and finally serves instead only to effect Vanna's metaphorical enablement.

As I have already discussed to some degree, one way of understanding the danger of this metaphorical effacement is offered by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's conception of narrative prosthesis. For Mitchell and Snyder, disability acts as a prosthesis within narrative, as an initial aberrance or lack, which calls for the need to tell the story. The purpose of the narrative is then to fix, corral, or otherwise "deal with" the disability in some way. This phenomenon is one of many ways in which a disabled character that at first seems integral to a narrative becomes in some way erased, cured, or forgotten by its end. They write: "the deficiency inaugurates the need for a story but is quickly forgotten once the difference is established."<sup>97</sup> In the case of Maraini's novel, however, while Suna will indeed be erased from the text by the end, through suicide, her disability is never forgotten. In fact, it is the key to the resolution of the novel as opposed to being that which "inaugurates" it, as Mitchell and Snyder suggest. It is here that I would like to propose transability – which I will define more fully further on – as a more apt model in this case: in Maraini's novel, it is *Vanna's* lack that inaugurates the story, not Suna's, and it is only by inhabiting a disabled mode – an "inhabiting" that takes the form of a dream towards the end of the novel – that Vanna is able to effect her own rehabilitation.<sup>98</sup> Suna, however, arguably still serves as prosthesis for the furtherance of Vanna's progress, as her

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<sup>96</sup> As I argue in Chapter One, Marianna Ucria's "silence" has been similarly (mis)understood by scholars as a metaphor for the "silencing" of women. In the case of Suna and Vanna, the two terms in the metaphorical relation are projected onto two different characters, one physically disabled and one metaphorically disabled. Whereas Marianna (as physically disabled) is cast as a metaphor for all women everywhere (metaphorically disabled), in the case of *Donna in guerra*, Suna (as physically disabled) is a metaphor for Vanna (metaphorically disabled) who represents all women everywhere (metaphorically disabled). It is part of the aim of this section to complicate these metaphorical relations.

<sup>97</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis," 210.

<sup>98</sup> This is akin to McRuer's notion of "flexible bodies" – borrowing from Emily Martin – whereby "the heterosexual, able-bodied subject, as well as the postmodern [sic] culture that produced him or her, can easily disavow how much the subjective contraction and expansion of able-bodied heterosexuality [...] are actually contingent on compliant, queer, disabled bodies" (*Crip Theory*, 18-9). As one specific example, in his discussion of Melvin, Jack Nicholson's character in *As Good As It Gets*, McRuer writes: "Able-bodied status is achieved in direct proportion to his increasing awareness of, and need for, (heterosexual) romance" (24). At the same time, Melvin's gay sidekick, Simon, takes on the traits of disability in order to assist in rehabilitating the disabled Jack Nicholson both in terms of heterosexuality and ability. However, what I am interested in here is the way that disability allows a movement away from compulsory heterosexuality rather than the way queer, disabled bodies allow for hetero-rehabilitation. It may also be fruitful here to think of Maraini's novel as participating in an international feminist trend in literature of the 1970s and 80s that celebrates women with different bodies and minds as representative of the difference of women in general, and of lesbian sexual identity in particular. Some examples include: Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982).

“difference” is continually made present throughout the novel and it is in emulating Suna’s sexual liberty that Vanna finds a way out of her (figurative) imprisonment. One could argue that Suna’s physical disablement thus functions in metaphorical relation to Vanna’s social and psychic immobility, casting them in a parallel relation to one another. While this may in fact be the case in some respects, there is another contradictory movement at play here. Suna, as a symbol for female empowerment and freedom, cannot easily be cast as helpless and immobile, suggesting that the metaphor itself falters in the presence of her character. I propose instead that Suna’s disability can more properly be seen, given the logic of Maraini’s narrative, as representative not of woman’s entrapment and immobility, but on the contrary, as that which offers freedom *from* entrapment.<sup>99</sup> Understanding disability as liberation is problematic in its own regard, as I will show, but offers a helpful frame through which to understand the relationship between the two women in Maraini’s novel and suggests a number of productive and non-stereotypical implications for studies of disability that, as I argued in chapter one, are a common feature of Maraini’s work.<sup>100</sup> This productive understanding of disability does not bear out in the final pages of the novel, however, where Suna’s character inexplicably commits suicide and Vanna goes on to achieve freedom from her husband through a somewhat stereotypical feminist awakening. In the pages that follow, I will show the ways in which Suna’s character resists stereotyped and metaphorical representations of disability up until the point of her death, when she becomes transmuted into the very reductive metaphorization she had earlier managed to escape. I argue that *both* of these contradictory movements are made possible by the logic of transability, which I will discuss briefly here before returning to a close reading of how transability functions within the text.

### **Born in the Wrong Body: Transability and the Desire to be Disabled**

Using the term “transability,” I refer to an abstract condition of mobility – specifically an ability to travel across a given boundary or between two subject positions. In the case of disability then, the second part of the term, “-ability,” takes on a double meaning, as both suffix (*able* to traverse a boundary), and as a substantive root (*able* to traverse a boundary *of ability*).<sup>101</sup> At the same time, I make reference to the phenomenon of “transableism,” or “transability,” a so-

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<sup>99</sup> I am not the first person to claim that Suna’s disability might be understood as a vehicle for empowerment. Elena Dalla Torre remarks: “Interestingly Vittorio deploys the image of broken legs, which evokes Suna’s disability. The image of disability is therefore an empowering one even in Vittorio’s speech. I claim that the image of women’s broken legs signify Suna’s and Vannina’s act of doing violence to their own bodies in order to denounce the violence of the system” (“French and Italian Feminist Exchanges,” 49). However, I will argue that even this metaphorical treatment of disability as empowerment ultimately has the effect of disallowing Suna’s disabled subjectivity.

<sup>100</sup> As was the case for Marianna, it is Suna’s disability that “frees” her from the constraints and societal expectations that would otherwise apply due to her gender.

<sup>101</sup> A third option is also possible, where the prefix “trans-” is understood as a going beyond or a transcendence rather than as a traversal between two subject positions. This would imply a transcendence of disability as a category of identity. I borrow from Flavia Monceri’s understanding of “transgender” in this same vein, put forth in *Oltre l’identità sessuale*. This understanding of the “trans-” prefix is similar to conceptions of “genderqueer,” which describes a gender identity that is fluid and non-binary, and has been theorized within recent American trans theory as well. See for example: Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), especially the chapter, “Transcending Sexual Difference.” She writes: “understanding transgender as a ‘border crossing’ figures gender itself as a kind of a bounded territory – gender not just as a property of bodies but as *property itself*” (172). In the final pages of this chapter, I will treat this third option more fully.



called Body Integrity Identity Disorder, whereby a nondisabled subject identifies as disabled and often seeks to simulate – or “correct” the body to conform to – the desired disabled conditions, even seeking surgery in order to do so.<sup>102</sup> Although it is a point of contention for many in the transabled community, this identification with a disabled state is often concomitant with a sexual desire for people who are disabled in the same way (whether paraplegic, amputees, etc.). Understanding this *desire for disability* as both a desire for a certain identity or subject position as well as for a given sexual object choice – I argue that literary instances of transability are inextricably bound to questions of sexuality and ultimately serve to upset the boundaries between not only disabled and nondisabled, but also between heterosexual and homosexual; male and female; man and woman.<sup>103</sup>

Transability is a condition that has recently been the subject of intense debate in medical, sociological and, especially, bioethical studies, given the obvious ethical questions doctors face when a patient requests what is understood by medical professionals to be a disabling procedure. The rhetoric used within the transabled community to describe transability suggests its inherent potential for reconfiguring societal conceptions of “normal” or “desirable” bodies. Referring to the most common form of the condition – which relates specifically to the desire to have a limb amputated – one article states: “People suffering from body integrity identity disorder report that a particular limb does not belong to them, and that they feel ‘over complete’ and want to have the alien limb amputated” (Müller, 36). This sense of “overcompleteness” implies an excess that hinders or causes discomfort, whereas the disabled state is seen as that which is “whole” or correct. Rather than a lack, disability is thus understood as an ideal, even neutral, condition, while “ablebodiedness” is felt to be excessive. This paradigm turns conventional notions about disability on their heads: what is conventionally seen, by normative standards, as either an excess or a deficit is here a desired and optimal state.

The term transability itself is used by an online community of people who identify as “transabled” (*transabled.org*), whereas the medical literature is undecided on what to call the

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<sup>102</sup> Extensive literature exists on transability, body modification, self-demand amputation, and Body Integrity Identity Disorder. Here, I draw from the following: Jenny L. Davis, “Narrative Construction of a Ruptured Self: Stories of Transability on Transabled.org,” *Sociological Perspectives* 5.2 (2012): 319-340; Sabine Müller, “Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID) – Is the Amputation of Healthy Limbs Ethically Justified?” *American Journal of Bioethics* 9.1 (2009): 36-43; Nikki Sullivan, “Integrity, Mayhem, and the Question of Self-Demand Amputation,” *Continuum* 19.3 (2005): 325-333; Michael B. First and Carl E. Fisher, “Body Integrity Identity Disorder: The Persistent Desire to Acquire a Disability,” *Psychopathology* 45 (2012): 3-14; Alexandre Baril, “Needing to Acquire a Physical Impairment/Disability: (Re)Thinking the Connections Between Trans and Disability Studies Through Transability,” *Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 30.1, Special Issue: *New Conversations in Feminist Disability Studies*, trans. Catriona LeBlanc (2015, forthcoming).

<sup>103</sup> On “desiring disability,” see Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson, “Introduction” to “Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies,” Special Issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003): 1-23. For various theoretical treatments of transgender and transsexuality, see: Flavia Monceri, *Oltre l'identità sessuale* (2010); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005); Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body* (2010); and Teresa de Lauretis, *Soggetti eccentrici* ((Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999). For works that incorporate disability and trans perspectives, see: Eli Clare, “Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement,” *The Transgender Studies Reader* 2 (2013); Jaspri Puar, “Disability” in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.2 (2014): 77-81; Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan, “King’s Member, Queen’s Body: Transsexual Surgery, Self-Demand Amputation, and the Somatechnics of Sovereign Power,” in *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies*, eds. N. Sullivan and S. Murray (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

condition. Older terminology refers specifically to the desire for amputation (apotemnophilia<sup>104</sup> and somatoparaphrenia<sup>105</sup>), but recent literature notes that the condition is not limited to this form of impairment, and can extend to paraplegia, blindness, deafness and other conditions. Many have argued for understanding transability as an identity disorder – similar to the diagnosis of transsexuality as “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID) – and thus the use of the correlative term, Body Integrity Identity Disorder, is now gaining acceptance. Interestingly, those in the transabled community have lobbied for a definitive diagnostic label and inclusion in the DSM-V, as a means to legitimacy and access to treatment (which is, precisely, the “correction” of the body via surgery, as in the case of GID or transsexuality). As Jenny L. Davis has shown, the narratives employed by those in the transabled community bear striking resemblance to narratives traditionally used in cases of transsexuality to explain the desire for a different embodied reality. Davis explains that such narratives almost invariably evoke the sense of being “born in the wrong body,” a condition which suggests a disconnect between one’s felt identity and one’s bodily or anatomical reality: “The content of these stories – an essentialist definition of transability – connects BIID to the ‘born in the wrong body’ claim and suggests corrective surgery as the only solution to this illness of a ruptured self” (336). I want to emphasize the marked similarities between “Gender Identity Disorder” (or transsexuality) and “Body Integrity Identity Disorder” (or transability), a consonance that I maintain is more than merely coincidental or appropriative. The use of the prefix “trans-” is itself already indicative of an overt desire on the part of the transabled community to identify with – or at the very least, emulate – transsexuality.<sup>106</sup> It is my contention that the inextricability of these two “conditions” – at least as concerns attempts at defining them – corresponds to a constitutive logical mechanism in cases of literary transability, whereby slippages between the categories of “disabled” and “able-bodied” cannot take place without an accompanying slippage between categories of sexuality and gender. In this sense, my understanding of transability extends in part from Robert McRuer’s understanding of “compulsory able-bodiedness.” He argues “that the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness: that, in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice versa.”<sup>107</sup> One difference I would like to underscore in my understanding of literary transability, especially in Vanna’s case, is the element of desire for the “disabled, queer bodies” upon which this relation depends.

While Vanna never explicitly states a desire to *be* physically disabled, I argue that the events of the novel suggest that her (albeit reluctant) sexual desire for Suna and her temporary appropriation of Suna’s disability in the dream sequence towards the end of the novel are what allow for her transformation as a woman. While Suna as a disabled character exhibits many traits that challenge stereotyped representations of disabled people – and especially disabled women –

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<sup>104</sup> “Apotemnophilia” refers specifically to sexual arousal based on the fantasy of one’s self as an amputee. It is most closely associated with BIID.

<sup>105</sup> “Somatoparaphrenia” refers to a condition whereby the subject rejects a given limb or one side of the body, denying ownership of it.

<sup>106</sup> See Karen Nakamura’s recent work on intersections between the trans and disabled communities in Japan: “Trans/Disability: Disability, Queer Sexualities, and Transsexuality from a Comparative Ethnographical Perspective,” paper presented at the forum ‘Shōgai, kuia, shitizunshippu’ (Disability, queer, citizenship), held at the Center for Barrier-Free Education at the University of Tokyo (2012); available at: [www.p.u-tokyo.ac.jp/cbfe/030/2012-01/TransDisability.pdf](http://www.p.u-tokyo.ac.jp/cbfe/030/2012-01/TransDisability.pdf). Thanks to Susan Schweik for pointing me to this paper.

<sup>107</sup> McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 2.

as weak or helpless victims, she ultimately still serves an objectified and instrumental role in the narrative. This ambivalence with regard to disability is part of what makes the double movement of transability possible – transability is both that which allows for Suna’s disability to be seen as desired and desirable while also making it a tool for a specifically female empowerment.

### **Where the Stare Meets the Gaze: The Spectacularity of Disabled Sexuality**

Written from Vanna’s point of view, in diary form, *Donna in guerra* already structurally precludes the centrality of Suna’s character, establishing Vanna as writing subject and Suna as (observed) object.<sup>108</sup> While this objectification is furthered by Suna’s physical difference, which attracts attention from the public, her role as objectified other does not go unchallenged. When Vanna first glimpses Suna in the town square, she is accompanied by two other people in what is described as a “strano terzetto” [strange trio]: “Gli sguardi di tutti si fissano impietosi sullo strano terzetto. Qualche bambino scoppia a ridere apertamente. Ma i tre non sembrano offendersi. La ragazza si fa strada fra i tavolini battendo le stampelle sull’asfalto, la testa alta, le spalle muscolose, i capelli morbidi come una cascata fresca e selvaggia” (8) [“Everyone stares pitilessly at the strange trio. Some children erupt in open laughter. But the triad doesn’t seem to be offended. The girl makes her way between the tables, pounding her crutches against the asphalt, her head high, her shoulders strong and muscular, her hair soft like a fresh and wild waterfall.”] This scene exemplifies what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes as “the stare,” playing on the psychoanalytic theory of the gaze. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson writes of the disabled female subject: “If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle. The stare is the gaze intensified, framing her body as an icon of deviance” (26). However, while people may stare and laugh, Suna is described in a strong and powerful stance that challenges a view of disability as a position of weakness. Indeed, while Suna may be cast as the object of the stare, she maintains her own position as staring subject: “La ragazza viene avanti arrancando sulle stampelle. Gira intorno gli occhi limpidi provocatori. Veste di rosso” (8) [“The girl comes forward, hobbling on her crutches. She looks around, her eyes shining and confrontational. She’s dressed in red.”] Her own gaze is powerful, aggressive even, in the face of the stares of those around her, and later, when Suna and Vanna finally meet, it is Suna who stares at Vanna, not the other way around. “Alle otto è arrivato il buffo terzetto che ha preso posto vicino alla fontana. La ragazza paralitica vestiva di bianco, aveva dei geranei rossi lacca sui capelli. Ha ordinato una limonata. Mentre beveva ho visto che mi guardava. Mi fissava con occhi ridenti” (57) [“At eight the funny trio arrived and took up a place near the fountain. The paralytic girl was dressed in white and had red geraniums in her hair. She ordered a lemonade. While she was drinking it, I saw that she was looking at me. She stared at me with laughing eyes.”] And later, Vanna writes: “Continuavo a sentire lo sguardo della ragazza paralitica fermo su di me. Improvvisamente l’ho vista alzarsi e venire zoppicando verso il nostro tavolo” (57) [“I continued to feel the gaze of the

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<sup>108</sup> This fact complicates interpretations of Mariani’s novel that place Vanna’s diary writing in the tradition of Aleramo’s *Una donna* or DeCespedes’s *Quaderno proibito*. As Vanna undertakes the only form of writing that was available to her (private, non-literary) – where she can be the subject and author of her own story – she simultaneously becomes the author of Suna’s story, inscribing her otherness within the context of her own narrative. See Augustus Pallotta, who situates Mariani in relation to Aleramo and other “feminist authors.” Of *Donna in guerra*, he writes: “The title itself is noteworthy: it brings up to date Aleramo’s *Una donna* with a militant qualifier that immediately directs the reader’s attention to the Italian feminist movement” (361). Augustus Pallotta, “Dacia Mariani: From Alienation to Feminism,” *World Literature Today* 58.3 (1984): 359-362.

paralytic girl locked on me. Suddenly I saw her get up and come limping toward our table.”] Suna assumes a dominant role in relation to Vanna, one of the many ways in which she evades categorization as objectified and passive disabled female. Here, she is explicitly set in contrast to Vanna’s passivity, accentuating her bold confidence all the more. Thus, while perhaps Garland-Thomson’s concept of triangulation is an apt figure to invoke with regard to Suna and Vanna’s relationship, the hierarchical structure of it must be revised or even inverted entirely. Where Garland-Thomson understands the disabled female as occupying the same role in relation to the “normate” female character as the normate female does to the male, here, it is Suna who asserts and maintains power over Vanna.<sup>109</sup>

What is more, Garland-Thomson’s formulation of the stare, as quoted above, seems to suggest that it be understood as a *desexualized* version of the gaze, transmuting the “sexual spectacle” of the normative female to the “grotesque” one of the disabled subject. As we will see, Suna’s sexuality is, by contrast, an integral part of her identity as disabled subject, causing what could be termed an intertwining of the stare and the gaze. Suna’s promiscuity and constant references to her own beauty and sexuality challenge ideas of the disabled subject as asexual, what Garland-Thomson explains, reading Harlan Hahn, as “the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people” (25). The intertwining of the gaze and the stare still has the potential to cast Suna in the role of a passive object to be studied or gawked at, and indeed her “hypervisibility” seems to be doubled by this effect. However, in playing up her own brand of showing off – as part of both her personality and a desire to attract sexual attention – Suna’s exhibitionism could also be read as a challenge to that hypervisibility. She demands that people look at her and see more than – or something other than – her disability. Integral to this move is a shifting of attention from her body as disabled to her body as sexualized.

This does not mean that her disability is not remarked upon. As I note in chapter one, and as Lennard Davis and others have argued, according to societal norms, the physical fact of disability cannot be ignored – it must be explained or narrativized. Davis writes, “the disabled body must be explained [...] The question never has to be put because it is always actively in default mode – it is always already asked.”<sup>110</sup> Indeed, during their first encounter, Suna tells Vannina the story of her disability, unprovoked, seemingly out of the blue. First Vannina speaks:

- Abito a Roma, ma sono siciliana e tu?
- Vivo a Napoli, mia madre è inglese, mio padre turco.
- Sei qui in vacanza?
- Sai che Santino ha fatto il cameriere da me, te l’ha detto?
- No.
- Io ho avuto la poliomielite, non posso camminare senza stampelle, le gambe mi funzionano poco, fino al ginocchio, dal ginocchio in giù sono morte, porto pure degli apparecchi, ma li odio, preferisco le stampelle, una gamba regge meglio dell’altra, la destra, vedi, sono una frana, però ho un bel corpo, ci credi? (58)

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<sup>109</sup> It should be noted that the male characters in Maraini’s novel are similarly not so easily cast as uniformly dominant and oppressive. See Dalla Torre (2014) for an excellent discussion of alternative masculinities in Maraini’s novel. Elena Dalla Torre, “Between ‘Men’: Masculinities and Female (Perverse) Desire in Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in Guerra*,” *Italian Studies* 69.1 (2014): 127-38. This does not mean that either of these subject positions (able-bodied, male) lose their structural power in the novel. Even as Suna’s character displays a certain dominance over Vanna, the fact remains that Vanna’s “I” structures the story and narrates Suna’s representation. I will return to this further on.

<sup>110</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xvi.

- [- I live in Rome, but I'm Sicilian, and you?
- I live in Naples, my mother is English, my father Turkish.
- Are you here on vacation?
- You know that Santino was a servant at my house, did he tell you that?
- No.
- I had polio, I can't walk without crutches, my legs don't work well, down to the knee, from the knee down they're completely dead, I also have braces but I hate them, I prefer crutches, one leg is steadier than the other, the right, see I'm a mess, but I have a beautiful body, do you believe it?]

Anticipating what Davis calls “the demand for a response,” Suna explains her disability in great detail without waiting for Vannina to ask, beginning with the medical diagnosis and cause, then offering the particulars of her physical status in an unbroken rush of words. In the same breath, having dispatched with this cursory obligation, she goes on to assure Vanna that she has a nice body, immediately countering any possibility for associating her disability with ugliness or asexuality.<sup>111</sup>

Similarly, the man Suna is sleeping with – Santino – claims to take no notice of the fact that she uses crutches: “alle stampelle non ci faccio caso” (61) [“I don't pay attention to her crutches], and the implication is, of course, that his attention is focused elsewhere. As both disabled and sexually desirable, Suna occupies two competing positions that, according to societal norms, should not coexist, with the effect that she must continually distract attention from one (disabled) to the other (object of sexual desire). To complicate matters further, Suna, as her figuration in the “strano terzetto” above implies, is understood as belonging to (at least) three categories that mark her as other: disabled, female, lesbian/bisexual, as well as foreign – her mother is English and her father Turkish. In light of her complex identity, then, it is arguable that Suna be understood as representing the “other” par excellence, suggesting that any number of categories might be affected by the logic of transability. However, for my purposes here, I will focus on the relation of gender, sexuality, and disability, as the novel is universally understood as a tale of women's liberation, and Suna's disability is simultaneously both understood as instrumental to that process and, at the same time, left largely untheorized and/or unproblematically discarded in the scholarly criticism on Maraini's novel.

### **Disability as Escape from Normative Gender Constraints**

Vanna's “privileged” status, to use Garland-Thomson's terms, is further put into question by the fact that it is Suna who acts as mouthpiece for women's rights and sexual liberation while Vanna is inured to the traditional role of wife and submissive woman. As with Marianna Ucrìa, it is precisely *because* of her disability that Suna is able to escape these normative confines, as her father and others perceive that she is unlikely to fulfill such roles. She says of her father: “sai cosa vuole? che io mi trovi al più presto un marito per togliermi dalle scatole; ma con queste gambe non è facile” (73) [“You know what he wants? For me to find a husband as soon as possible so he doesn't have to deal with me anymore; but with these legs it isn't easy.”] Because of her disability, Suna slips in and out of participation in the category of

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<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, Suna notes here that she rejects her prosthetic leg braces – though of course the crutches can be understood as prostheses as well, but a claim could be made regarding a resistance to her function as narrative prosthesis.

woman and the oppressive confines such participation entails, allowing her the flexibility to occupy various subject positions at once. As Garland-Thomson writes, “The figure of the disabled woman” is “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman.”<sup>112</sup> By virtue of the fact that Suna belongs to the category “disabled,” she is thus in some way freed – or barred – from complete participation in the category “female.” Tobin Siebers has made a similar argument in his reading of the Berkeley poet, Mark O’Brien: “once the choice to embrace disability erases the marker [of gender], both femininity and masculinity as we know them disappear.”<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, it is often suggested in the text that Suna be thought of as not-quite-female – at times, she is represented as possessing stereotypically masculine traits or “un poco uomo e un poco donna” (64) [“a little bit man and a little bit woman”], while at others she is described as something not entirely human, a “sirena” [a siren or mermaid], or “quella mezza donna,” [“that half woman”] as Vanna’s husband Giacinto calls her. This shifting terminology highlights what I am calling literary transability in representations of disability: where disability is foregrounded or openly acknowledged, *gender* lines become blurred and complicated, through a complex relation that has profound implications for analyses of both gender and disability. Indeed, the two cannot be read separately and are in many ways mutually constitutive. Transability thus operates at the juncture between two contradictory mechanisms: the first is a literary operation whereby disabled female characters are understood as metaphors for their normate counterparts due to an assumption of a shared lack (whether due to biological inferiority or social oppression); and the second is a societal prohibition which dictates that a disabled woman cannot participate in the category of female. Both mechanisms are based on a historical construction of womanhood that is itself contradictory – woman is simultaneously cast as both lacking and therefore “disabled,” as well as needing to be reproductively capable, and therefore able-bodied – and both sides of this contradiction are naturalized as being innate to the female gender.

As one example, Vanna describes her passive behavior in terms of that which is “natural” to her gender. When asked by the head of the extremist political group with which Suna has involved her to execute certain tasks for his political project, Vanna writes: “Volevo dire no. Ma mi sono lasciata andare alla dolcezza di dire sì, di farsi attenti, umili, di eseguire con remissività un incarico, per ricevere poi l’approvazione di chi è più sicuro e più abile. Era quello che si aspettavano da me, era naturale, era il mio compito di donna” (108, emphasis mine) [“I wanted to say no. But I let myself be carried away by the sweetness of saying yes, of being attentive, humble, of executing a task with submissiveness, to then receive the approval of *someone more confident and more able than me*. That’s what they expected of me, *it was natural*, it was my duty as a woman.”] Vanna here situates herself, as a woman, as one who is *less able*, creating a logical link between womanhood and disability, and suggesting, like Aristotle, that this state of affairs is “natural” and therefore incontrovertible.

Where woman is presumed to be less able than man, in a move that bears out Garland-Thomson’s theory of triangulation, Vanna still assumes that Suna, as a disabled woman, will be less capable than she. Instead, Suna is notably very *abile* in terms of both sexual aptitude, political involvement, and even stereotypical “women’s duties.” Watching Suna preparing a meal, Vanna expresses surprise that Suna is so functional in the kitchen: “Si muoveva goffamente, appoggiandosi alle stampelle, senza però rovesciare niente, *con grande abilità e destrezza*. Ho visto subito che era contenta” (171, emphasis mine) [“She moved awkwardly,

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<sup>112</sup> Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 29.

<sup>113</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 173.

leaning on her crutches, but without knocking anything over, *with great ability* and skill. I saw immediately that she was happy.”] Suna’s physical disability in conjunction with her functional *ability* confuses Vannina’s rigid definition of what is “natural” for a woman and upsets unquestioned gender hierarchies. If woman is understood as disabled (or lacking), and yet Suna, the physical manifestation of disability, proves herself to be highly capable (and therefore not lacking), even “content,” the subjugation of woman by virtue of the woman/disability analogy loses its meaning and power. And at the same time, the association of disability and deficiency is revealed as erroneous.

### **The Monstrous Female Body, Or: You Make Me Feel Like an Unnatural Woman**

Abby Wilkerson describes the oft-noted tendency for disabled people to be considered asexual. “Just as homosexuality, long considered an illness, was treated for years with drugs, castration, hypnotherapy, psychoanalysis, and aversion therapy, people with various kinds of disabilities have also faced medical denial of their sexualities” (193). The term “asexual” can notably be interpreted as either without a sex or gender or, alternatively, as without a sexuality, as one who does not have sex. The first possibility lends itself to queer readings, while the second is more traditionally reserved for stereotypes of disability.<sup>114</sup> Suna notably participates in both of the categories Wilkerson mentions in her analogy: as both queer and disabled, Suna as sexual subject should be, according to Wilkerson’s claim, doubly denied. Suna’s father bears out this tendency towards sexual prohibition when he tells Vanna that it would be better if Suna were paralyzed up to the navel so that she would not be able to have sex: “se rimane incinta che fa, me lo dici che fa?” (164) [“If she gets pregnant, tell me what will she do?”]<sup>115</sup> Instead, Suna seems to represent a paragon of sexual liberation and female empowerment. As a champion for political agency for women, Suna’s ostentatious sexuality is central to her political project – a fact that will be confirmed when she is barred from participation in the male-dominated radical socialist movement on the grounds of her homosexuality. As Wilkerson notes, “Together, queer and disability perspectives help reveal why sexual agency must be understood as an important and, in some ways, key component of the liberation struggles of all disenfranchised groups rather than a luxury to be addressed after achieving goals that might be perceived as more basic” (197). Ostracized from mainstream society due to her disability and from the radical political group due to her queerness, Suna thus comes to stand alone in her political struggle – rather than continue to fight for the equally chauvanistic extremist group, she is forcibly cast out, excluded in a move that reveals a different kind of oppression at play. Rather than compromise her feminist ideals in the service of a class struggle, Suna stands alone as a champion for women’s rights and queer subjectivities. Given the rampant instances of sexual violence throughout the novel, it is clear that Suna is meant to be understood as a spokesperson, denouncing the structures of power constructed along the lines of gender and sexuality. Because of these factors, numerous critics have argued that Suna represents an active force for social change in the public domain signified

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<sup>114</sup> It is important to recognize that asexuality is also understood by many as being a sexuality in its own right, though for my purposes here, I am addressing the idea that disabled people are often unfairly assumed to be asexual and are thus not considered as sexual partners, denied access to birth control or sexual education, or encouraged not to reproduce. Voices in the asexual community are working to trouble such associations from the other side of the question, upholding their right to *not* practice sexual intimacy, without being considered pathological or unnatural.

<sup>115</sup> As is often the case, it is not that Suna is physically incapable of reproducing but the societal assumption is that, as a disabled woman, she could not possibly be capable of caring and providing for her children. See Chapter Four for further discussion along these lines with regard to Mirella Santamato’s *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*.

by the piazza where Suna and Vanna first meet.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, Tota and Giottina, the women Vanna befriends who run the laundry in town, present a space for female solidarity constructed discursively around storytelling.<sup>117</sup> The three women together thus ostensibly comprise the public and private aspects of Vanna's "education," as she makes her transformation away from her submissive role within the patriarchal system of marriage.

However, Suna and the laundrywomen are aligned in various ways. As one example, the "teatro" of the laundry appears in reference to Suna as well:

È una che fa teatro, mi sono detta: quei vestiti sgargianti, quei fiori nei capelli, quel modo di parlare affrettato ed esibizionistico. Improvvisamente l'ho trovata ridicola e antipatica.

Lei mi scrutava. Sembrava leggermi nella testa. Infatti ha detto subito con voce triste:

"Stai pensando che sono una pazza esibizionista, e che ti sono decisamente antipatica." (59)

[She's theatrical, I thought to myself: those gaudy clothes, the flowers in her hair, that rushed and exhibitionist way she has of talking. Suddenly, I found her ridiculous and annoying.

She was studying me. She seemed to be reading my mind. In fact, she said with a sad voice:

"You're thinking that I'm a crazy exhibitionist, and that you find me decidedly annoying."]

As a theatrical exhibitionist, Suna is clearly aligned with the *teatro* of Tota and Giottina's laundry, though her brand of theatricality is understood by critics to be more action-oriented and "public," whereas Tota and Giottina's is understood as discursive, spatial, and private. This is not an entirely consistent claim, however, given that Suna's form of theatricality is here explicitly tied to her mode of speech – "quel modo di parlare affrettato ed esibizionistico" – while the laundrywomen execute various public actions that take Vanna outside of the "safety" of the laundry.<sup>118</sup>

The two women, Tota and Giottina, enchant Vanna with their stories of sexual perversion and deviance, tales in which female dominance is privileged and men are left to watch or despair in their exclusion. As Pauline Dagnino notes, "Their stories are from outside the heterosexual arrangements that are privileged in a patriarchal culture; beyond the genital arrangements of male and female" (239). While it is often unclear whether the laundrywomen's stories are meant to offer models for Vanna to follow or warnings to be heeded, regarding Suna, they are

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<sup>116</sup> See Virginia Picchiotti, "Symbolic Mediation and Female Community in Dacia Maraini's Fiction," in *The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini*, eds Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Ada Testaferri, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000), 103-120.

<sup>117</sup> Pauline Dagnino and Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld both read the laundry as a pre-symbolic space that signifies the womb. See: Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, "Body as Will: Incarnate Voice in Dacia Maraini," and Pauline Dagnino, "Revolution in the Laundry," in *The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini*, eds. Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld and Ada Testaferri (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000).

<sup>118</sup> Suna is also described here in terms that suggest that she, like Marianna Ucria, might be capable of mind reading. This is not a theme that is developed further in the novel, but it is interesting to note the link.



uncharacteristically transparent.<sup>119</sup> Vanna runs into Tota one day in town and the woman delivers the following message:

“Giottina mi ha detto di dirti così: attenta alle alazze di chi non può volare.”  
Mi ha buttato in faccia queste parole sibilline e poi se n’è andata, compunta, un sorriso enigmatico sulle labbra carnose. (62)

[“Giottina told me to tell you this: beware the wings of those who cannot fly.”  
She thrust these sibylline words in my face and then went away, contrite, an enigmatic smile on her fleshy lips.]

Later, the women repeat their admonition, this time appealing to the same conception of “naturalness” that categorized Vannina’s description of her passive womanhood:

“Tu sei una rintontolita piena d’acqua sciapa, non capisci niente, non lo sai che l’amicizia la puoi avere solo da noi che siamo per il cuore tuo, però che gli altri cercano di fotterti, *non sono naturali*, sono viscidì, ingannatori.”  
“Attenta alle alazze di chi non sa volare,” ha ripetuto Giottina con faccia da sfinge.  
“Ma che significa?”  
“Guardati da quell’uccello con le alazze sbarbicate, quella turca che ti ficchi in casa a tradimento.” (87)

[“You’re an idiot with a head full of water, you don’t understand a thing, you don’t see that you can only find friendship with those of us who are of your heart, and that the others want to screw you, *they aren’t natural*, they’re slimy, deceivers.”  
“Beware the wings of those who cannot fly,” repeated Giottina with a face like a sphinx.  
“But what does it mean?”  
“Beware of that bird with the clipped wings, that Turk you let into your house.”]

The idea that Suna is “not natural” is here linked to her both her foreignness and her disability, specifically to her inability to “fly,” but given that the same term – “natural” – is used to denote a docile, feminine passivity that Suna is understood as lacking, we see again how Suna’s sexuality and her disability are understood as functioning in tandem, as two aspects of the same “unnatural” phenomenon.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Giancarlo Lombardi also sees the laundry as purely female space, but argues that Tota and Giottina fail at offering Vanna “any potential weapon which could enable her to achieve her own independence from men” (103-4). For Lombardi, their transgression remains relegated to the private space of the laundry and, as mere storytellers, their narratives do not have the power to effect change. Suna, by contrast, represents political action for Lombardi. Giancarlo Lombardi, *Rooms With a View: Feminist Diary Fiction, 1952-1999* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

<sup>120</sup> Thus, where some scholars argue that Tota and Giottina’s tales are central to Vanna’s “sexual education” in that their perverse stories offer a challenge to a phallogocentric society, in the context of my argument, however, the laundrywomen would seem to be warning Vannina against inhabiting Suna’s corporeal state, and thus against emancipation. In that sense, I read them as a moralizing entity, not as an educative one as others claim.

Giacinto, Vannina's husband, brings the two instances together, in his castigation of Suna:

- È la storpia che ti mette contro di me.
- Perché ce l'hai tanto con lei?
- La giudico per quello che è: una troia.
- Ma perché?
- Perché *non è naturale*; mi rompe i coglioni.
- Che vuol dire naturale?
- Che segue la natura.
- Cioè?
- Per una donna la natura è una cosa dolce, femminile; quella non fa che parlare a vanvera e dire cazzate e rompere l'anima alla gente.
- Io sono naturale?
- Tu sí, fin'ora sí, ma ora proprio ora ti metti contro natura.
- Perché decido di partire?
- Tu di natura sei buona, calma, affettuosa, paziente, remissiva; oggi invece fai la stravagante, vai contro natura.
- Ma se mi va di fare così, anche questo fa parte della mia natura.
- No, io ti conosco benissimo, è inutile che imbrogli; tu di natura sei diversa, sei una donna vera, molto femminile e ora fai così solo per imitare *quella mezza donna*. (141-142, emphasis mine)

- [- It's the cripple who has turned you against me.
- Why do you hate her so much?
- I judge her for what she is: a whore.
- But why?
- Because *she isn't natural*; she gets on my nerves.
- What do you mean by "natural"?
- That which follows nature.
- Meaning?
- A woman's nature is to be sweet and feminine; that one doesn't do anything but babble on and talk shit and drive people crazy.
- Am I natural?
- You, yes, at least up until now. But right now, in this moment, you're going against nature.
- Because I decided to leave?
- You're good by nature – calm, affectionate, patient, submissive; today though you're acting bizarre, against your nature.
- But if that's how I want to act, then this is also part of my nature.
- No, I know you too well, it's useless to fool yourself; you're different by nature, you're a real woman, feminine, and now you're doing this just to imitate *that half woman*.]

Rather than refer to Suna by name, Giacinto evokes two derogatory epithets: "la storpia" and "una troia." What is "unnatural" about Suna's sexual practices and lack of subservience is thus

meant, at the same time, to refer to her disabled body.<sup>121</sup> We then come to see how if we are to understand Suna as a metaphor, it should not be one suggesting the disablement of all women (a universal condition exemplified by Vannina's character). I suggest she be seen instead as a vision of woman that exceeds or undoes normative expectations, standards, or regulations – regulations which can be understood as enforcing social, political, and biological conformity.<sup>122</sup> Giacinto's description of Suna as “quella mezza donna” suggests on the one hand a stereotypical and derogatory understanding of disability as lack, making her incomplete (as both a human being and specifically as a woman); however, the phrase can also be interpreted as an understanding of Suna's character as half woman and half *something else*, whether that other part be half man or half animal or half something else altogether is unclear.<sup>123</sup> What is clear is that it is Suna's disability that precipitates this ambiguous and polysemous hybridization, which – by omission – carries with it possibilities of alternative genders, species, or even previously unthought categories, all or any of which mark Suna, for Giacinto, as unnatural.

Interestingly, when pressed as to exactly what it is about Suna that Giacinto finds to be unnatural, the explanation he gives has to do with neither her disability (“la storpia”), nor her sexual behavior (“una troia”); instead, he calls attention to her mode of speech (“quella non fa che parlare a vanvera e dire cazzate”). Recalling her theatrical role as characterized in part by her mode of speech, “quel modo di parlare affrettato ed esibizionistico” – what in her alignment with the laundrywomen offered Vanna a kind of transgression that is at once discursive and politically-motivated – Giacinto now attributes her mode of speech as being the very definitional core of her unnatural-ness. Indeed, Suna's stream-of-consciousness style of speaking allows her to defy normative syntactical patterns, often tacking on seemingly unrelated comments or questions to the end of a story. In one example, she is telling Vannina how Santino, her house-servant and lover, came to be kicked out of her house: “Marta l'ha cacciato perché non faceva niente, stava sempre con me e non si occupava della casa, *credi che potresti fare l'amore con me?*” (64, emphasis mine) [“Marta made him leave because he wasn't doing anything, he was always with me and wasn't looking after the house, *do you think you could have sex with me?*”] Her sudden question, put forth without a pause, acts as a sort of sexual supplement, a syntactical add-on or *coda* that shifts the direction of the discourse without warning, disrupting the story and catching her interlocutor off-guard.

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<sup>121</sup> As Dalla Torre writes, “Giacinto attempts to reinforce his authority over Vannina by upholding a binary view of what he thinks it is natural and unnatural in the behavior of a woman. The effect is also that of using Suna's disability (‘storpia’ is a derogatory term) as a way to demonstrate the unnaturalness of her behavior and discredit her as a woman. For Giacinto Suna is a ‘half woman’ because she does not conform with his traditional gender views and because she encourages Vannina to go against his will.” Elena Dalla Torre, “French and Italian Feminist Exchanges in the 1970s: Queer Embraces in Queer Time,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan (2010), 52.

<sup>122</sup> On Suna as subversive in terms of sexuality, see: Tommasina Gabriele, “From Prostitution to Transsexuality: Gender Identity and Subversive Sexuality in Dacia Maraini,” *MLN* 117.1 (2002): 241-256.

<sup>123</sup> On Giacinto use of the term “mezza donna,” Elena Dalla Torre writes: “Whereas Giacinto uses ‘mezza donna’ in a derogatory manner as he does with the term ‘storpia,’ Suna reclaims both in a subversive style. As a consequence Suna's disability can be read productively in conjunction with her own alternative construction of gender” (“French and Italian Feminist Exchanges,” 53). Dalla Torre's dissertation is the only source I have located that frames Suna's disability as productive, though she notes that an analysis on the basis of disability is not the purpose of her dissertation, which offers instead an in-depth reading of Suna in terms of gender and sexuality: “Although this is beyond the scope of this chapter, I think that a more in-depth analysis of Suna's disability can enrich the reading of the novel” (53, n. 37). Despite this acknowledgement, I see Dalla Torre's claim for reading Suna's disability as productive because of its link to an “alternative construction of gender” as an example of how Suna's disability is arguably made use of in the service of queer or feminist aims.

In the most extreme example of this strategy at work, Suna is expressing her fear to Vannina that she is losing Santino's interest because of her disability:

- [C]redi che non mi vuole più?
  - Sei così bella, Suna!
  - Di sopra, come una coglionona di sirena. Qualche volta quando siamo nudi nel letto vedo che mi guarda: il petto bello, lo so, il ventre bello sì, i fianchi belli hm hm, e poi improvvisamente le pupille fanno *ghghghgh* e si stringono infastidite, al posto delle gambe ho una coda rigida, schiumosa fredda, che ci fai con una sirena nel letto me lo dici?
  - La sirena non ha sesso.
  - *Io ho una fica bellissima, ci credi?*
- Questo suo modo di parlare del proprio corpo mi infastidiva. Ho sorriso stupidamente senza sapere che rispondere. (112, emphasis mine)

- [- Do you think he doesn't want me anymore?
  - You're so beautiful, Suna!
  - On top, like a fucking mermaid. Sometimes when we're naked in bed together I see him looking at me: breasts – beautiful, I know, stomach beautiful, yes, hips beautiful, mm hm, and then suddenly his pupils go *ghghghgh* and contract, disturbed, in place of my legs I have a stiff tail, foamy and cold, what do you do with a mermaid in bed, tell me?
  - Mermaids have no sex.
  - I have a beautiful cunt, do you believe me?
- Her way of talking about her own body bothered me. I smiled stupidly without knowing how to respond.]

Figured as a mermaid with a tail in the place of legs, the implication is that Suna's disability precludes the possibility of intercourse.<sup>124</sup> In keeping with the ableist understanding of disability as negating sexuality, Suna thus must state explicitly that she has a 'fica' so as to eliminate the question that is unposed but ever present: can a "ragazza paralitica" have sex? Indeed, as Vanna notes, "La sirena non ha sesso" ["Mermaids have no sex"], an ambivalent statement that suggests both the lack of a gender as well as the lack of genitals tout court. Vanna's statement is curious in that it is generally understood that the sirens/mermaids are gendered female. Her statement here then reinforces the text's anxiety regarding Suna's status as female – how can she be both disabled and have a gender? As Tobin Siebers notes in a brilliant twist on Lacan's "laws of urinary segregation," where sexual difference is reduced to the signs on ladies and gents public restrooms, the disabled bathroom shows a figure not in a skirt or pants, but one in a wheelchair – a sexless entity.<sup>125</sup> However, the terms Suna employs suggest not a *lack* of sex organs but instead the substitution of a phallus for the female sex organs ("al posto delle gambe ho una coda rigida,

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<sup>124</sup> Chapter Four will deal at length with the figure of the *sirena* and its positioning at the intersection of disability and gender.

<sup>125</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 152; and Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 168.

schiumosa fredda”).<sup>126</sup> In a move that recalls Irigaray’s numerical distinction in *This Sex Which is Not One*, Suna notes the appearance of *una coda* (one) in the place of *le gambe* (what should be two). Suna’s disability here is thus figured not as a womanly lacking but as a phallic excess – a *coda* or supplement that renders her simultaneously a) without a sex (or gender); b) *having* a phallus or *coda*; and c) struggling to convince others that she in fact does possess *una fica bellissima*.<sup>127</sup>

This tripartite figuration recalls the “strano terzetto” of the opening pages, this time pointing not only to the normative prohibition of sex for disabled people, which causes Suna to boast a kind of hyper-sexuality in compensation, but also to the fact that what we might understand as Suna’s metaphorical function in this case, a third distinct form of metaphORIZATION, logically refers to the heterosexist notion that a woman in possession of power is a monstrosity.<sup>128</sup> Thus, that which “disables” Suna is her possession of a knowledge and power that is considered unnatural or inappropriate for a woman and is therefore inadmissible in a patriarchal society.<sup>129</sup> As Barbara Spackman, in her discussion of Maria Corti’s *Il canto delle sirene*, writes: “the coupling of monstrosity and knowledge in the figure of the sirens; the coupling of female bodies and knowledge, which for the Western idealist tradition is equivalent to a contamination of knowledge by ‘the body,’ is necessarily monstrous.”<sup>130</sup> Maraini’s novel

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<sup>126</sup> Lombardi draws a similar connection in his interpretation of the fish imagery that appears throughout the novel: “Metaphor for the male penis [...] as well as metaphor for the quintessential male prey, woman, *fish* comes to symbolize the Lacanian phallus, that which all men are bound to try and regain through their relationships with women, quintessential bearers of the phallus itself” (*Rooms With a View*, 110); and Beverly Allen reads Suna’s mermaid metaphor as representative of an immobilization of her “archaic power” as a woman: “Furthermore, Maraini’s figuration of Suna, whose legs are paralyzed, as a mermaid, conflates Suna’s own archaic power with a crippling handicap in the present, as if the present were capable only of a gross, disempowering interpretation of the mobilizing properties of fin-like legs, which the present sees only as a stabilizing handicap.” Beverly Allen, “Paralysis, Crutches, Wings: Italian Feminisms and Transculturation,” *Surfaces* Vol. 3 (Sept 15, 1996): 12. In both cases, Suna’s disability is figured as commensurate with womanhood.

<sup>127</sup> I will further theorize the “coda” in relation to both the mermaid’s tail as well as the written *coda* in Chapter Four, where I will devote the entire chapter to the figure of the mermaid in relation to disability. The mermaid is hypersexualized on top in order to divert attention from her fishy lower regions. The mermaid is also, as Cavarero has shown, much more sexual, passive, and irresistibly beautiful physically than were her Siren ancestors, whose main source of temptation lie instead with the sound of their voices. See Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci: Filosofia dell’espressione vocale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003); and “The Vocal Body: Extract from *A Philosophical Encyclopedia of the Body*,” trans. Matt Langione, *Qui Parle* 21.2 (2012): 76.

<sup>128</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis has claimed that Suna uses her sexuality to compensate for her disability: “Suna, a beautiful and relatively well-off paralytic, through whom and with whom Vannina participates in the adventures, preaches female emancipation, independence, and sexual liberation. Yet she herself falls into the easily recognizable trap of using sexual promiscuity to compensate for her handicap” (303), in “Gender and Genre in Italian Feminist Literature in the Seventies,” *Italica* 65.4 (1988): 293-307; and repeated in *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women’s Writing, 1968-1990* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 76. Christina Siggers Manson (2003) agrees with her: “Whilst [Suna] advocates female liberation she forms an emotional dependency on Santino and, as Lazzaro-Weis points out, uses sexual promiscuity to counterbalance her disability.” Christina Siggers Manson, “The Struggle for Liberation: Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in Guerra*,” in *Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies: A journal for teachers of Italian in higher education* 36, eds. Katia Pizzi, Catherine Keen and Ruth Glynn (2003): 18-19. My claim is that while her promiscuity may be in causal relation to her disability, so too is her role in representing “female emancipation, independence, and sexual liberation.”

<sup>129</sup> Lombardi claims something to this effect: “in a society that demands her disempowerment, Suna’s strenuous resistance to female objectification is what actually hinders her from being symbolically able to walk among chauvinist men and demure women” (*Rooms With a View*, 115).

<sup>130</sup> Barbara Spackman, “Monstrous Knowledge,” in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2001), 301.

requires that we insert the question of disability into this equation, and what Suna's character suggests is that reading monstrosity here as "disability" both elevates disability to the status of knowledge or female empowerment, while at the same time, allowing for the possibility that *any* woman might thus inhabit or take up this metaphorical position without ever experiencing the lived, physical reality of a disabled embodiment. So, in figuring disability as feminist knowledge, a different kind of knowledge is precluded – that of the disabled subject.<sup>131</sup>

The problem with any metaphorical understanding of disability is that its physical representation is left vulnerable to being swept away once its metaphorical characteristics have been effectively mastered or appropriated. The logic of metaphor itself allows for this destructive erasure – a rhetorical function that is based on the similarity of attributive qualities, these qualities are thus inherently detachable, and once appropriated, the "literal" bearer of those qualities is no longer needed. Drawing from Irigaray's association of the phallus with metaphor and the female genitalia with metonymy, I suggest that Suna's worry over the singular phallic *coda* replacing her dual sex, be read as an anxiety not about her disability, but about her own status as metaphor within the text, and by extension, her imminent erasure from it. If the *coda* is to be understood as signifying the phallus (as well as metaphorization and eventual erasure) we begin to see how the logic of transability, in transmuting disability to a transgendered or transsexual state, is simultaneously productive/transgressive in terms of sexuality as well as being potentially dismissive of difference in terms of disability. Her mode of speech then, in its series of non-sequiturs and its lack of closure, can be read as a metonymic resistance to the metaphoric drive that threatens her. Her linguistic *coda*, her syntactical supplement, refuses the phallic reading of her tail/disability that places her outside the category of women.

As a *sirena* from Naples, Suna cannot help but invoke Parthenope, the siren upon whose dead body Naples was constructed. A siren of the winged variety, Parthenope threw herself into the sea when she failed to seduce Odysseus and her body washed ashore at the site of the future Naples.<sup>132</sup> Suna, whose name means "swan" in Turkish, is likened multiple times throughout the novel to a bird.<sup>133</sup> I would like to suggest then that she be seen not only as a phallic fish-tailed mermaid but also as a bird-like siren whose power lies not in her seductive female body, but in her voice and her (spoken) narrative power.

It is significant then, that part of what indicates Vanna's development towards empowerment is precisely her successful adoption of Suna's mode of speech. In a sense, Vanna's narrative has already textualized and fixed Suna's "parlare a vanvera" within the context of her written diary. However, in a different brand of appropriation, Vanna's development towards liberation is explicitly signaled by her ability to speak in a way that resembles Suna. In his description of Vanna's newfound defiance with regard to her husband, Anthony Tamburri quotes Vanna's exchange with Giacinto in which he remarks that Vanna has been a good wife up until that point but that she is changing and rejecting the "best part" of herself. Vanna responds: "The best because it's convenient."<sup>134</sup> As Tamburri notes: "Her last utterance echoes Suna's earlier criticism of Giacinto's statement 'sex counts very little when two people love one another'; – she

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<sup>131</sup> Part of the conundrum in defining the natural/normal woman is that she must somehow be both sexual and asexual. This is the crux upon which the idea of transability turns in *Donna in guerra*. Explicit sexuality automatically places a woman in the category of not normal, or monstrous, which is here exemplified by Suna and metaphorized as disabled.

<sup>132</sup> See Linda Austern and Inna Naroditskaya, eds. *Music of the Sirens* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>133</sup> See Lombardi, *Rooms With a View*, 115-6.

<sup>134</sup> In the original Italian: "Perché ti fa comodo" (Maraini, *Donna in guerra*, 237).

had retorted, ‘he says it because it’s convenient for him.’”<sup>135</sup> In echoing Suna’s words, Vanna emulates Suna’s discursive style, while at the same time ventriloquizing her oral utterances within the written context of her diary. At this point in the novel, Vanna has returned home to Rome and her only contact with Suna is notably via the letters she receives from her friend who is still in Naples. Suna’s speech turned textual in Vanna’s diary now gives way to Suna’s letters – already text – appropriated and cited obliquely, reminding the reader that Suna has never held control over her own discourse.<sup>136</sup> Suna’s spoken words, and now her letters, reproduced within the context of Vanna’s diary, mark a different kind of appropriation of Suna’s symbolic agency, and reveal the extent to which Suna’s attempts at resisting metaphorical erasure and narrative closure throughout the novel have been in vain.<sup>137</sup> As Lombardi writes, “The authorial choice to alternate Suna’s letters with Vannina’s regular entries clearly demonstrates how, to a certain extent, the two friends have become one person, their voices suddenly interweaving in a narration of suffered female empowerment.”<sup>138</sup> This problematic conflation of the two characters bears out the metaphorical relation I have been theorizing throughout this chapter.

### **The Ruptured Self Made Whole: The Role of Narrative Wholeness in Transability**

In order to draw the connection between Vanna’s narrative appropriation and the mechanism of literary transability, I would like to return for a moment to our discussion of *non-literary* transability, and in particular, the importance of narrative in the construction of transabled identity – a construction that both redefines the subject’s past and justifies or validates the desire for a differently embodied future.<sup>139</sup> Earlier, I noted the correspondence between the construction of transsexuality and that of transability in the use of the “wrong body” narrative. People who identify as transabled describe a disabled state as the wished for outcome of a surgery which would act to “fix” what they experience as being “wrong” with their bodies – i.e., that they are not disabled. The rhetoric used in narratives of transability is thus still one of wholeness, though in this case, “wholeness” might mean the amputation of a limb. As First and Fisher note: “a majority (77%) of subjects reported that their primary motivation for wanting to become an amputee was ‘to feel whole, complete, or set right again’” (7). Significantly, this idea of a “whole” self is in part produced through the construction of an ordered and meaningful narrative. Jenny Davis writes: “narrative transforms what is messy and fragmented into something neat, linear, and consumable ... Narrative is therefore a resource in the reconstruction of events, but more relevant here, narrative is also a resource in the reconstruction of the self.”<sup>140</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Anthony Tamburri, “Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra: Victory or Defeat?*” in *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy: A Modern Renaissance*, ed. Santo L. Aricò (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 144. In the original Italian: “Lo dice perché gli fa comodo” (90).

<sup>136</sup> For this line of thought, I am indebted to the participants in my course, “Part of that World: Sirens and Mermaids from Homer to Disney,” taught at UC Berkeley in Spring 2014.

<sup>137</sup> She is no longer a present body or voice, but a distant interlocutor, whose letters, like the Sirens’ song in Homer, become subsumed into the narrative of the primary character. On the appropriation of the Sirens’ song in Odysseus’ narrative, see Lillian Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>138</sup> Lombardi, *Rooms With a View*, 119.

<sup>139</sup> See: Noson, “From *superabilità* to *transabilità*.”

<sup>140</sup> J. Davis, “Narrative Construction of a Ruptured Self,” 327. Elisa Arfini has also noted the apparent centrality of narrative for people who identify as transabled: “Quando i soggetti si confrontano con un desiderio deviante, si chiedono da che luogo e tempo abbia origine. Se il desiderio si traduce in un progetto per il proprio corpo è necessario inserirlo in una narrazione, soprattutto se si vuole che il proprio progetto sul corpo abbia conseguenze identitarie” [“When subjects are confronted with a deviant desire, they ask themselves from where and when it

The rhetoric of wholeness here points up the fact that even where an apparent bodily “incompleteness” is desired, the process of identity construction via narrative persists in its dependence on an understanding of the self as whole. Thus, the (physical) “lack” or “deficit” of disability becomes the missing piece – a necessary stage or experience – that will lead to a desired (narrative or metaphorical) wholeness. Paradoxically, then, the *lack* becomes that which is *lacking* in rounding out the subject’s identity.<sup>141</sup>

In the case of Vanna and Suna, I argue that Vanna desires Suna’s disabled body as a means to her own liberation – precisely because of the “lack” it represents – while simultaneously ordering Suna’s metonymic “babbling” into a coherent narrative “whole,” thereby thwarting Suna’s attempts at resisting narrative inscription.<sup>142</sup> Put differently, Vanna must recognize the fact that she is (metaphorically) disabled or “lacking” in order to find her own “wholeness” as an awakened liberated (and nondisabled) female subject.

Suna’s efforts at resisting metaphorization – and its accompanying erasure – are thus fruitless, and in the final pages, we learn that she has taken her own life by jumping out of a window, a death which is unexpected and without explanation.<sup>143</sup> While some critics make sense of her suicide as a natural consequence of either her failed political attempts or her unrequited love for Santino, I find both explanations to be less than satisfactory.<sup>144</sup> Throughout the novel, she is nothing if not headstrong and persistent, and at the time of her death, she had been studying to be a doctor, showing no signs of surrender. An understanding of Suna’s disability as commensurate with a metaphorical and pedagogical vehicle for female empowerment provides the key to making sense of Suna’s suicide, aided by Vanna’s dream, which follows at the close of the novel and presents the most explicit manifestation of what I am calling “transability” in the novel.

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came. If the desire translates into body self-modification, it is necessary to insert it into a narrative, especially if one wants that modification to have consequences for his or her identity.”] Elisa Arfini, “Istruzioni per diventare disabile: Un’analisi narrativa del progetto sul corpo transabile,” *Studi culturali* 3 (2010): 347.

<sup>141</sup> Similarly, in *Donna in guerra*, the metaphorical “lack” that Vanna is “lacking” can be understood as equivalent to (an understanding of) her oppression as a woman. In order to be “whole,” she must embrace that lack, must intimately know it, and then she is able to “overcome” it.

<sup>142</sup> Like the narratives of transability, even as Vanna’s narrative offers the possibility of “desiring disability,” it still operates by way of an ableist logic that privileges wholeness. The compulsion inherent within narrative itself is one that pushes inevitably for completeness, even where the “complete” state is one that is considered “incomplete” by societal standards.

<sup>143</sup> Lombardi describes Suna’s suicide as perhaps a last attempt at flight: “she jumps off a balcony, in a symbolic attempt to fly or, maybe, to return to the sea whence she came” (Lombardi, *Rooms With a View*, 116). Dalla Torre sees her death as a turning point for Vanna, and part of what precipitates her decision to leave her husband: “The relationship between husband and wife comes to a crisis when Vannina becomes pregnant and finds out that her best friend Suna has committed suicide. These two events represent a turning point in the woman’s life as she finds the courage to undergo an abortion and leave eventually Giacinto” (“French and Italian Feminist Exchanges,” 40). Dalla Torre’s formulation suggests a causal relationship between Suna’s death and Vanna’s freedom, one that is shared by most critics who have written on the novel.

<sup>144</sup> While Lazzaro-Weis sees Suna’s suicide as a result of her depression at having lost Santino (1988, 303); and Manson attributes it to her political failure (21), other critics are less sure of how to explain it. For example, Lombardi writes: “It is *interesting* how, as Suna slowly withers away, she actually becomes a source of strength and inspiration for Vannina. ... It is Suna’s death that *strangely* brings about Vannina’s rebirth: this is the message which, *somehow*, seems to lie at the core of *Donna in guerra*’s last pages” (Lombardi, *Rooms With a View*, 119, emphasis mine). There is no attempt to explain this “strange” occurrence, a fact which I argue is symptomatic of Suna’s repressed functional role as Vanna’s rehabilitative vehicle.



## Vanna's Dream: Queer Appropriations of Disability

After Suna's death, Vanna dreams that she is flying – a symbol throughout the novel of political liberation – but then she falls suddenly to the ground, breaking both of her legs: “Mi sono toccata i monconi straziati, piangendo, non solo per il dolore, ma perché non avrei più camminato” (266) [“I touched my mangled stumps, crying, not just because of the pain, but because I would never walk again.”] Vanna finally takes the “qualitative leap” that Vittorio advised was the only way to effect political change, and as he warned, “c'è da rompersi le gambe” [“you might break your legs.”] However, I argue that it is not the leap, or the flight itself, that constitutes Vanna's entrance into a newfound empowered state. It is instead the fall and, precisely, the breaking of her legs, that allows her to finally be “like” Suna in an explicitly corporeal way, as opposed to the purely metaphorical relation of similarity that initially bound them – a similarity based on an understanding of woman as (always already) disabled. Instead, it is the simulation of Suna's disability that enables a transfer of the disabled woman's knowledge – both in terms of feminist empowerment as well as of an expanded understanding of the possible ways of experiencing womanhood and sexuality.

Suna comes to Vanna in the dream and offers her crutches, a literalization of her prosthetic or metaphorical instrumentality à la Mitchell and Snyder, causing Suna instead to fall to the ground, immobile. Thus, in order for Vanna to be enabled and to move forward, Suna must be finally disabled in the most literal sense of the word, figured in the dream as being without crutches, and outside of the oneiric realm, as death. Suna's literal disability is thus passed on to Vanna in this moment but, by virtue of its placement within a dream, is transmuted yet again into a purely metaphorical disability, a state from which Vanna can “recover” simply by waking up.<sup>145</sup>

Bearing out the connection between disability and sexuality that I see as integral to instances of transability, the dream sequence contains an explicitly queer sexual exchange as well. In order to “thank” her, Vanna performs oral sex on Suna whose labia are figured as a conch shell that pours forth “a sweet milk”:

Mi sono chinata per aiutarla. Mi ha detto “vai, scimunita!” Volevo baciarla per ringraziarla. Mi sono chinata, ma al posto della sua faccia ho trovato il suo sesso: una conchiglia bianca di marmo dall'interno rosso, palpitante. Dalla conchiglia sgorgava un frotto di latte dolcissimo. Ho accostato le labbra; ho bevuto di quel latte che sapeva di alghe marine e bevendo sentivo che mi riempiva di forza, di coraggio. (266)

[I leaned over to help her. She told me: “go, you idiot!” I wanted to kiss her to thank her. I leaned over but in the place of her face, I found her sex: a marble-white shell with a red, pulsing interior. From the shell, a gush of sweet milk was

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<sup>145</sup> Again, McRuer offers a similar reading of a moment of “transfer” of disability in his reading of *As Good As It Gets* (in *Crip Theory*) where the disabled Melvin effectively transfers his disability to Simon, who, as both queer and now also disabled, frees Nicholson's character to pursue a hetero-able happy ending. Here, a distinct difference lies in the fact that the transfer occurs in the opposite direction, and, importantly, Vanna's assumption of Suna's disability happens in conjunction with her enactment of a queer sexual act. Instead of a heterosexual rehabilitation then, Vanna is given a queer and crip education so that she may escape the oppressive confines of her heterosexual union. It is precisely this movement *through* queer and crip states that interests me in the elaboration of transability as a critical tool.

pouring forth. I pursed my lips and I drank that milk that tasted of algae, and as I was drinking I felt that it was filling me with strength, with courage.]

After waking from this dream, Vanna finds the courage to leave her husband and abort an unwanted pregnancy, finally having internalized the lessons learned throughout the novel.<sup>146</sup> Thus it is through a kind of sexual, corporeal vampirism that Vanna is able to progress towards liberation while Suna's strength and vigor are taken from her. Vanna not only assumes Suna's disabled physical state, solidifying the notion that her (grounded) body be understood metaphorically as a figure for a certain brand of female power, she also appropriates Suna's sexual strength, literally being fed on her not-quite-maternal milk. Ironically, Vanna drinks from the very plural metonymic source that Suna sought to protect in a bid to secure her own survival, in a futile attempt to resist her metaphorical figuration and final erasure. Suna's position of disabled power is thus usurped and taken up by her nondisabled counterpart, canceling her disabled body from the text once its metaphorical function has been successfully fulfilled, while Vanna as "Woman" is liberated both from her subjugation, as well as from any trace of the powerful disabled vehicle that enabled her emancipation from it.

Those who have written on *Donna in guerra* tend to read the final line of the novel – "Ora sono sola e ho tutto da ricominciare" (269) [Now I am alone and I have everything to do again"] – as a declaration of Vanna's liberation and newfound independence from Giacinto.<sup>147</sup> However, I read in her words a reference to her freedom from Suna as well. The triangulation between the two women finally having been collapsed, Vanna has, through Suna's death, succeeded in appropriating the symbolic attributes that Suna's disabled body represents, while conveniently disavowing the material body that made her rehabilitation possible. Vanna's dream allows for a conflation of the two women's identities, transcending the (erroneous) metaphorical relation between them (woman = mutilated male = disabled), she adopts instead the second form of metaphorization (woman = disabled because oppressed) while disavowing the possibility of a disabled subjectivity that exists independently (of metaphorical relation). Thus, her liberation is gained through a temporary "experience" of disability that leads her to understand her own metaphorical "disablement," and allows her to resignify what it means to be a woman in the process.

While this process, so far, in some ways extends from my argument in chapter one, *Donna in guerra* offers an additional component that makes the logic of transability particularly explicit. For while Vanna moves towards and through a disabled state, so too does she move away from her position as a (stereotypical/docile/subjugated) woman, and thus, according to the

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<sup>146</sup> While my focus here is on the implications of Vanna's dream with regard to disability in particular, I'd like to point out that Dalla Torre offers a compelling reading of this dream sequence in relation to "queer nurture." She reads Vannina's dream as a resignifying of womanhood from one defined by motherhood to a womanhood defined by pleasure. She sees the dream as a parallel to Vannina's abortion – where the fluid flowing from Suna's vagina mirrors the blood that will mark her abortion in the following scene. For Dalla Torre, it is a refusal of motherhood that allows instead for women to be involved in queer bonds and new understandings of nurturing relationship. See Dalla Torre, "French and Italian Feminist Exchanges," 74-77.

<sup>147</sup> As Lombardi writes: "No obstacle, now, separates Vannina from her own emancipation, even though it will cost the life of a child she never desired to have" (Lombardi, *Rooms With a View*, 123). If we revise Teresa de Lauretis's argument in "Desire in Narrative" (1984) regarding the gendered structure of narrative to include disability, it is the disabled figure that occupies the position of obstacle or space that must be moved through. Ironically, in this case, Suna's own emancipated state serves as both guide or model and obstacle or monster (*sirena*). This is consistent with Kim Q. Hall's claim that feminists have often sought to distance themselves from any association with disability precisely because their subjugation has long been predicated on an understanding of woman as disabled.

logic of absolute difference, towards the (assertive, independent) position of a man, a movement that is partially supported by her engagement in a sexual relationship with Suna. While it is certainly problematic to propose that Vanna, in her journey toward independence is simply becoming more “man-like,” the text itself instructs its readers to understand this as one of the lessons imparted by Suna’s example. As “un poco uomo e un poco donna” [“a little bit man and a little bit woman”], Suna exists at a liminal point between two genders, another aspect of her hybridity that marks her as “undecidable.”<sup>148</sup> And it is in emulation of Suna that Vanna makes her transformation. It is this aspect of transability that I would like to underscore here: the movement towards disability necessitates (or allows) the movement away from one’s assigned gender.<sup>149</sup> At the same time, I would like to ask, along with Teresa de Lauretis, if it is possible to think of “una disidentificazione dalla femminilità che non dà luogo necessariamente al suo opposto, non diventa una identificazione con la mascolinità, ma si traduce in una forma di soggettività femminile che eccede la definizione fallica?” [“a disidentification from femininity that doesn’t give way necessarily to its opposite, that doesn’t become an identification with masculinity, but that translates into a form of feminine subjectivity that exceeds the phallic definition?”]<sup>150</sup>

Elena Dalla Torre suggests that Marco Mieli’s unconventional notion of “transessualità” might be apt in describing Vanna and Suna’s queer encounter, which she explains as “the ability to navigate the gender spectrum and experience sexual desire more fluidly.”<sup>151</sup> In Mieli’s own words:

In questo libro, io chiamerò *transessualità* la disposizione erotica polimorfa e ‘indifferenziata’ infantile, che la società reprime e che, nella vita adulta, ogni essere umano reca in sé allo stato di latenza oppure confinata negli abissi dell’inconscio sotto il giogo della rimozione. *Il termine ‘transessualità’ mi sembra il più adatto a esprimere, ad un tempo, la pluralità delle tendenze dell’Eros e l’ermafroditismo originario e profondo di ogni individuo.*<sup>152</sup>

[In this book, I will call *transsexuality* the infantile polymorphic and undifferentiated erotic disposition, which society represses and which, in

<sup>148</sup> See Robbie Voss, “Mermaid Musings or: ‘There is Not Enough Woman to Make Love to, and Too Much Fish to Fry,’” *Amsterdam Social Science* 4.1 (2012): 67-72,” on the mermaid as an example of Derrida’s “undecidable.”

<sup>149</sup> Manson, though she locates Suna’s power entirely in her crutches rather than in her body, notes that the act of flight in a dream, according to Freudian analysis, constitutes “women’s subconscious desire to resemble or become men.” She writes: “It is also of great symbolic value when Suna bequeaths her crutches to her friend, passing with them her strength as a woman and her beliefs and ideals about female liberation and emancipation. Vannina’s dream reflects her desire to escape the monotony and restrictive nature of her life as a married woman and the imagery that Maraini uses is extremely powerful. Flying in a dream is common, seen by Freud as symbolising the penis and as representing women’s subconscious desire to resemble or become men” (Manson, 20). I would add, however, that if the act of flight in Vanna’s dream marks the moment of trying to become (like) a man, that perhaps the fall from flight might be seen as the failure of that particular strategy and the need to emulate instead a disabled mode of being.

<sup>150</sup> De Lauretis, *Soggetti eccentrici*, 28. She will later answer this question, in part, with the help of Monique Wittig: “Però rifiutare di essere una donna non ci fa diventare uomo. Infine, dunque, ‘una lesbica *deve* essere qualcos’altro, non-donna e non-uomo” (56-7) [“But to refuse to be a woman doesn’t make us become men. In the end, therefore, ‘a lesbian *must* be something other, not-woman and not-man.”]

<sup>151</sup> Dalla Torre, “Between Men,” 128, n. 4.

<sup>152</sup> Mario Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 14, emphasis in the original.

adulthood, every human being carries within in a state that is latent or confined to the abysses of the unconscious under the yoke of repression. *The term “transsexuality” seems to me the most apt for expressing, at the same time, the plurality of the inclinations of Eros and the originary and profound hermaphroditism of every individual.*]

I propose that transability be understood as encompassing this version of *transessualità* or something close to it. Literary transability, as I am attempting to define it here, instrumentalizes disability in order to effect the kind of *transessualità* that Mieli describes. Whether we see Vanna’s transition as beginning from subjugated (“natural”) woman and ending at liberated, independent woman, or from woman to man, the point is clear: it is her adoption of disability that permits (or requires) that she transgress the boundaries of her gender. Transability thus acts to open the boundaries between genders while simultaneously reifying those between categories of disabled and non, once the disabled simulation has served its purpose.

As I have shown, the relation between these two women enacts a reversal of stereotypical disabled/non-disabled hierarchies, where the disabled (female) other is almost unilaterally cast as the dependent party. To quote Garland-Thomson once more, in her elaboration of the triangulation that occurs between disabled and non-disabled women, she describes narratives where a nondisabled “maternal benefactress” is elevated above a female disabled character, establishing a hierarchical relation where there is an assumption that care or assistance is required by the disabled woman. She writes: “While the various maternal benefactresses radiate a transcendent virtue, agency, and power, the disabled women become increasingly subjugated, despairing, and impotent” (1997, 82). Suna and Vanna, by contrast, initially suggest a possibility for an interdependent relation, though it may be hard to pinpoint what, if anything, Suna gains from her association with Vanna. Again, suggesting a reversal of the terms in Garland-Thomson’s triangulation, Vanna’s dream in the final pages of the novel suggests a maternal nourishment that flows from Suna to Vanna, instead of the other way around. Indeed, it may be this very reversal that introduces an anxiety into the text, one that is arguably the “cause” of Suna’s suicide. Thus, although it is Suna who begins in a position of power and agency, while Vannina is arguably initially “subjugated, despairing, and impotent,” by the novel’s end, their roles have been reversed: Vanna emerges independent and awakening to her own power and sexuality, while Suna takes her own life.<sup>153</sup> While the productive possibilities of disability are exploited to the fullest, the persistent reality of Suna’s disabled body cannot be sustained through the close of the novel. Thus, once Vanna has embodied the lesson she needs to learn from Suna, Suna’s own body is ejected from the text.

### **A Coda on *Donna in guerra***

What is lost in the bid to disassociate from disability, or even erase it entirely, in relation to feminism? Alison Kafer writes: “To eliminate disability is to eliminate the possibility of discovering alternative ways of being in the world, to foreclose the possibility of recognizing and valuing our interdependence” (235). Or, as Susan Wendell puts it: “people with disabilities have experiences, by virtue of their disabilities, which non-disabled people do not have, and which are sources of knowledge that is not directly accessible to non-disabled people” (68-69). It is this

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<sup>153</sup> Here, I would like to suggest that Teresa de Lauretis’s notion of a seduction into femininity might apply with regard to disability as well. Suna is effectively seduced into taking up the position that is expected of her as a disabled person – alone, depressed, and suicidal. See *Alice Doesn’t* (1984).

appropriately labeled “access” to knowledge that I am interested in with respect to the relationship between the disabled and nondisabled protagonists of Maraini’s novel. In a clever reversal of terms, here access is seen as lacking for nondisabled people, while it is disabled experience that allows for access, in this case, to knowledge. And while Wendell is not here referring to a specifically feminist knowledge, I understand her claim as extending to any number of experiential realms, but in particular, those having to do with social and power relations. In *Donna in guerra*, Suna, as disabled bearer of knowledge, serves as educator for Vanna, teaching her the basic tenets of feminism and aiding in her transformation from subjugation to liberation. Thus, the pedagogical role played by disabled characters means that the nondisabled are able to learn something essential to their transformation at the expense of the disabled character. This is a common occurrence in narratives of disability and may even masquerade as a “positive” or “productive” representation of disability, covering over a perpetuated ableism – *we* can learn such valuable lessons from *them*.<sup>154</sup> In the last instance, it is an understanding of disability as a tool for nondisabled self-actualization.<sup>155</sup>

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### “Se non è c(i)eca sarà slovacca”: Crossing Over to the Country of the Blind in Gabriele Pedullà’s “Miranda”

Gabriele Pedullà’s short story, “Miranda,” appears in the 2009 collection, *Lo spagnolo senza sforzo*, his first foray into fiction in a career largely dedicated to literary criticism and political theory. While Pedullà’s story may not display the obvious relationship to gender discrimination and feminism that *Donna in guerra* or *Marianna Ucrìa* does, I argue that the same mechanisms operative in those texts, that unite disability and femininity in metaphorical relation, are again in effect here, with some important differences. The logic of *transabilità* as it is played out here ostensibly functions not by way of an established similarity between the two characters based on gender, but instead hinges upon their difference in terms of ability. As with *Donna in guerra*, in Pedullà’s story, the able-bodied character in question – Stefi – does not explicitly desire an impaired state. However, I argue that she consciously imitates her blind friend, Miranda – even to the point of *simulating* blindness – in order to apprehend an alternative ontological and epistemological mode. As with Vanna in *Donna in guerra*, the (disabled) enlightenment that Stefi seeks is inextricable from the question of sexual desire and ultimately facilitates her own (albeit seemingly reluctant) experimentation in an ambiguous homosexual encounter with Miranda.

Upon first reading, it is not obvious that the two primary characters, Stefi and Miranda, can or should be interpreted as being in metaphorical relation to one another. Stefi is, for lack of a better word, a goody-two-shoes, somewhat lacking in self-esteem, who describes her burgeoning friendship with Miranda, a girl she meets at school who is blind and depicted as very smart, beautiful, and independent. If anything, it is the differences between the two that are highlighted and emphasized throughout the story. However, in his 2009 review of Pedullà’s collection of stories, Franco Cordelli notes that the literary sources of “Miranda” reveal a

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<sup>154</sup> Similar critiques in disability studies include narratives of “overcoming” and “inspiration porn,” which can include, as is the case here, examples of characters that challenge stereotypes in seemingly deep and abiding ways.

<sup>155</sup> This forces us to think as well about the ways that the literary scholar of disability studies (and here I include myself) *makes use of* disability in order to learn something about the text, about narrative, or indeed about “alternative modes of being.”

particular relationship between the two characters that otherwise might not be apparent. Cordelli writes:

Ho citato la Bachmann non a caso. La prima storia de *Lo spagnolo senza sforzo* è intitolata «Miranda», vale a dire come il personaggio di ‘Occhi felici’ della scrittrice austriaca. L’acostamento sarebbe arbitrario se non sapessi come il giovane Pedullà fu entusiasta dello spettacolo che ne trasse Giorgio Marini. Ma ugualmente arbitrario continuerebbe ad essere se la Miranda di Pedullà non fosse la stessa (o quasi la stessa) Miranda della Bachmann. Dico di più: se il nuovo racconto non fosse una continuazione, meglio che una variazione, di quella meravigliosa storia di mezzo secolo fa. Ne è una possibile continuazione sia dal punto di vista della vicenda sia (e di più) dal punto di vista dello stile.<sup>156</sup>

[My citation of [Ingeborg] Bachmann is not accidental. The first story in *Lo spagnolo senza sforzo* is titled “Miranda,” that is to say, just like the character from “Eyes to Wonder,” by the Austrian writer. The pairing would be arbitrary if I didn’t know that the young Pedullà was a huge fan of Giorgio Marini’s theater production of the story. But it would still continue to be arbitrary if it weren’t for the fact that Pedullà’s Miranda is the same (or almost the same) as Bachmann’s Miranda. And further: if the new story weren’t a continuation, not to say a variation, of that wonderful story from a half century ago. It is a possible continuation of it both from the point of view of the plot as well as from the point of view of style.]

As Cordelli makes clear, Pedullà’s “Miranda” was inspired by the character of the same name in Ingeborg Bachmann’s 1972 “Eyes to Wonder” [Ihr glücklichen Augen], a story in which the primary character, Miranda, is short-sighted but refuses to wear glasses in order to avoid seeing the injustice and ugliness of the world, “which,” writes Karen Achberger, “she finds repulsive.”<sup>157</sup> Cordelli goes on to explain what he understands as the relationship between the two “Mirandas”:

La Miranda austriaca era miope e, di conseguenza, di difficili rapporti con il mondo. La Miranda italiana è cieca ma le sue difficoltà sono trasferite all’amica Stefi. È come se il personaggio si fosse sdoppiato e noi ne seguissimo le vicende (ma sarebbe più giusto dire non-vicende) nel corso di un pomeriggio di primavera dedicato allo shopping: lo shopping di due amiche, una cieca e l’altra imbranata! che cosa può darsi di meno romanzesco?<sup>158</sup>

[The Austrian Miranda was myopic and, consequently, on difficult terms with the world. The Italian Miranda is blind but her difficulties are transferred to her friend

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<sup>156</sup> Franco Cordelli, “La grammatica dell’incomunicabilità in cinque racconti,” *Corriere della Sera*, 09 aprile 2009. Bachmann lived in Italy from 1953 to 1973. She published the Miranda story, “Eyes to Wonder,” (“Ihr glücklichen Augen”) in 1972 in the Collection: *Simultan: Erzählungen*.

<sup>157</sup> Karen Achberger, *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press: 1995), 153.

<sup>158</sup> Cordelli, “La grammatica dell’incomunicabilità.”

Stefi. It is as if she were split into two characters and we follow their actions (but it would be better to say non-actions) during the course of a spring afternoon dedicated to shopping: a shopping outing between two friends, one blind and the other a dolt! what could be less novelistic?]

As Cordelli makes clear, where Bachmann's original "Miranda" herself embodied both a literal and a metaphorical "defect" – short-sightedness in both senses of the word – in Pedullà's story, the metaphorical meaning is split from its literal source: Miranda retains the literal disability while Stefi embodies its metaphorical counterpart. Like *Donna in guerra*, a paradoxical relation is thus established whereby Stefi is meant to represent the characteristics that Miranda's disability symbolizes, while Miranda's character defies that relation by virtue of her non-similarity to a metaphorical short-sighted – or in this case blind – state.<sup>159</sup>

### ***Tra di loro: The Trouble with Difference***

Miranda, whose name is homonymous with the title of the story, is a student who befriends Stefi, a classmate at school. Pedullà's story centers on Stefi and Miranda's first social meeting outside of school, when they get together to go shopping for shoes. It is immediately clear that while the story is narrated in the third person, and Miranda bears the name of the story's title, it is Stefi's point of view that is aligned with the narrator's. The narration at times slips into free indirect discourse or seamlessly offers Stefi's thoughts to the reader without any punctuation to mark such shifts. Already then, in parallel to my argument regarding *Donna in guerra*, Stefi is infringing upon or inhabiting a textual space that is, in a sense, "Miranda's" – a formal appropriative move that will be borne out in the content of the story in various ways.

From its first pages, the text exhibits an obsessive preoccupation with the relation between the two characters, a relation that is troubled by the fact of Miranda's disability. It is Stefi who experiences discomfort at the rift this creates between them: "per quanto si ripeta che non c'è nessuna differenza sa bene che non è così e questo l'addolora, sempre, vorrebbe che *tra loro* fosse diverso, insomma che almeno *tra di loro* davvero non ci fosse nessuna differenza (almeno *tra di loro*)" (4, emphasis mine) ["however much she tells herself that there's no difference she knows that's not the case and it pains her, always, she wishes that *between them* it was different, that is that at least *between them* there really wasn't any difference (at least *between them*)."] The repetition of "tra loro"/"tra di loro" betrays an anxiety in the text about the relation between the two characters and sets up the notion that in some way Stefi and Miranda are, at once, both the same and not the same. Stefi's desire that things be *different* – i.e., that there *be no difference* between her and Miranda – already insinuates her desire for identification with Miranda, for an erasure of that which is different "tra di loro." At the same time, this oscillation between difference and identity alludes to an important understanding of identity categories that will remain operative throughout the text: while Miranda and Stefi belong to the same sex/gender category as women, they are definitively *not* part of the same category with respect to ability. And indeed, when Miranda asks Stefi to accompany her to buy shoes, Stefi insists that it is "normale," "normalissimo," for two girlfriends to go shopping together, an insistence that expresses a desire to include Miranda under the rubric of her other female friends

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<sup>159</sup> Hélène Cixous also found inspiration in Bachmann's Miranda for her essay, "Writing Blind: Conversation with the donkey," in *Stigmata* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Cixous' use of blindness (and/or myopia) is ambivalent, oscillating between the apparent endorsement of a blind writing mode and the rapture of the return to sight.

while at the same time betraying the conviction that she is fundamentally different from the others.

Much of the story focuses on Stefi's anxiety about how to relate to Miranda, given the fact of her blindness, and her curiosity about Miranda's mode of knowing and perceiving. She describes Miranda as having antennas: "per certe cose lei ha le antenne e nota sempre tutto (anche se non lo diresti mai)" (4) ["for certain things she has antennae and she always notices everything (even though you'd never think it)."] Miranda's disability is thus understood as rendering her in some way animalistic or perhaps machine-like, in particular with respect to her way of perceiving and apprehending information. For Stefi, who cannot understand how one might know something without the faculty of eyesight, Miranda is thus cast as outside of the human – as animal or superhuman.

Similarly, Stefi wonders how it is that Miranda is able to navigate through her environment and locate other people within it. She muses that she must have "un talento per i suoni o i campi magnetici [...] oppure il Gps per muoversi in città anche senza il bastone bianco o il cane" (13) ["a talent for sounds or magnetic fields ... or GPS for getting around downtown even without a white cane or a dog."] Stefi is particularly baffled by Miranda's ability to locate her when she hasn't spoken: "Miranda è fatta così, medianica e intuitiva, la parola dovrebbe essere questa, medianica (o intuitiva), perché a volte il modo in cui lei capta le cose per Stefi ha davvero del soprannaturale (a volte), come quando per esempio sembra sapere in anticipo dov'è seduta in classe anche se Stefania non ha aperto bocca" (32) ["That's the way Miranda is, psychic and intuitive, that must be it, psychic (or intuitive), because at times the way in which she understands things, for Stefi, is really supernatural (at times), like when for example she seems to know in advance where she's sitting in class even when Stefi hasn't said a word."] <sup>160</sup> Thus, Miranda need not rely on hearing another person's speech in order to respond and relate to them: without need for sight or hearing, Stefi can only locate Miranda's mode of perception in the realm of the "supernatural." As a *medium*, Miranda is figured as a psychic with special powers but also as a body to be possessed or inhabited, a conduit for information or knowledge. <sup>161</sup> Traditionally, a medium provides an avenue for traversing two realms – between the human and non-human, or even between the realms of life and death. These curiosities thus mark Miranda as possessing mysterious and enviable *abilities* while also revealing a sense that Miranda's way of relating (orienting, locating) is not only outside of the visual, but also outside of the auditory, and thus, considered external to the rational and symbolic realms entirely.

Indeed, when Stefi and Miranda go shopping, Stefi observes that Miranda's understanding of language is affected by her blindness: unable to see the colors of the shoes she is considering, she understands and weighs the various options based on words they are associated with, such as "mustard yellow" – a synesthetic association which effects a crossing

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<sup>160</sup> As with *Marianna Ucrìa*, the logic of the text cannot accept that one can function without a given sense and, therefore, it is assumed that she must be psychic or have supernatural powers in compensation. This episode repeats almost word-for-word Stefi's statement toward the beginning of the story, signaling the extent to which Stefi's character remains unchanged throughout the narrative with regard to her understanding of Miranda. Note the repetition both within the above statement as well as between it and this earlier instance: "neppure adesso Stefi comprende come faccia a sapere sempre esattamente dove è seduta e a raggiungerla anche se lei non ha ancora aperto bocca" (13) ["and again Stefi can't understand how she manages to always know exactly where she's sitting and come over to her even when she hasn't yet said a word."]

<sup>161</sup> This offers another way to think about transability – as a medium, she is a conduit for a transabled mode of knowing/experiencing – her body is a vehicle or spatial position that is open and available to the possession of a nondisabled other.



over from the visual realm to the gustatory. Miranda's ability to *taste* colors marks her way of perceiving as indirect and metonymic, while also inherently more physical and intimate.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, Stefi describes Miranda's way of "seeing" the shoes, which is to touch them, to feel the leather and the stitching, suggesting – in what amounts to a stereotyped and ableist representation – that Miranda's relationship to her surrounding environment is always already in some way more "sensual" than Stefi's. Here, in her first attempt at simulation, Stefi mimics Miranda, closing her eyes and touching the shoes, in an attempt to learn Miranda's "language" and to experience her way of interacting with the world.<sup>163</sup>

Part of what I am attempting to describe here is a certain "orientalism" that pervades Pedullà's narrative, through the narrator/Stefi's ethnographic gaze. The idea that Miranda's way of interacting with the world is inherently sensual (and thus also sexually excessive) invokes Enlightenment era "thought-experiments," such as those by French philosophers Condillac and Diderot, by which they sought to offer a deeper understanding of human experience and knowledge through speculation as to what life would be like without one or more senses. Indeed, Pedullà's story opens with a quotation from Condillac's *Traité des sensations* (1754), in which he imagines a "statue" who gains each sense faculty one by one, beginning with the sense of smell and ending with touch. Condillac claims that knowledge is a product of the senses, not something that springs from innate capacities, and he assigns a particularly crucial role to the sense of touch in this process. His claim is that sight alone is not enough to impart a consciousness of things as separate entities – it is touch that bestows a concept of form, and thus, of space. The fact that Pedullà begins his story with Condillac aligns his text with such thought-experiments, which, from a disability studies perspective, offer another example of ways that speculations about disabled experience are *used* in order to (supposedly) better understand the "normal" subject.<sup>164</sup>

While Stefi clearly perceives Miranda as operating in an alternative linguistic realm, Stefi disapproves of the other students' way of talking *about* Miranda: "per tutti lei è la cieca, semplicemente, quasi che Miranda non avesse un nome o un cognome come chiunque altro" (6) ["to everyone, she is simply the blind girl, as if Miranda didn't have a first or last name like anyone else."] Stefi, in her concern with political correctness (being sure, for example, to refer to Miranda as "non-vedente" [visually impaired, literally "non-seeing"] instead of "cieca" [blind]),

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<sup>162</sup> As Stefi notes, Miranda's way of understanding colors effectively evacuates the metaphorical quality of the terms used to describe them: "non sono che metafore prese alla lettera" (22) ["they're nothing but metaphors taken literally"], she marvels. Again, language becomes concretized and directly related to physical sensory experience rather than maintaining an abstract distance afforded (according to the logic of the text) by sight.

<sup>163</sup> Stefi's understanding of blind people as having a different language suggests that her attempts to understand Miranda be thought of as a process of *translation*. Jan Eric Olsén, in his study of nineteenth century practices in education of the blind, writes: "From the point of view of the sighted teachers, blindness was primarily understood as an unknown entity that was possible to understand via a process of sensuous translation. Only when translated could blindness become a subject of rehabilitation." Olsén, "Vicariates of the Eye: Blindness, Sense Substitution, and Writing Devices in the Nineteenth Century," *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 46.3 (2013): 87. Coming to it from the other side of this equation, Sicilian author and translator, Gesualdo Bufalino, has referred to the process of translation in terms of blindness. He says of the role of the translator: "il suo è un servizio, un'assistenza prestata da un vedente a uso dei non vedenti; qualcosa di simile a chi aiuta un cieco ad attraversare la strada. Dove per cecità si intende la barriera d'una lingua straniera" ["his is a service, an assistance granted by a sighted person for the use of the blind; something similar to a person who helps a blind person to cross the street. Where by blindness one understands the barrier of a foreign language."] See: Massimo Onofri, "Gesualdo Bufalino: autoritratto con personaggio," in *Nuove Effemeridi* 5.18 (1992): 31-32.

<sup>164</sup> See, also: Denis Diderot, "Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient" (1749).

in some ways proffers points of view held up within disability studies, though her stubborn inability to understand Miranda betrays an underlying refusal of difference. Stefi is described as “crocerossina,” one who is always helping others, but while she may have initially considered Miranda as another one of her pet projects, it is quickly clear that Miranda needs (or wants) no assistance from Stefi: “è più brava della maggior parte di loro, anche se non ci vede (e non nasconde di saperlo)” (6) [“she is smarter than the majority of them, even if she can’t see (and she doesn’t hide the fact that she knows it).”] Miranda’s ability is repeatedly emphasized throughout the text, although the disclaimer – “even if she can’t see” – betrays the narrator/Stefi’s assumption that one who is blind should not be so capable.

Throughout the story, Miranda – like Suna – is described as very able, confident, and sexual – and as one who attracts much attention: “una come Miranda per i corridoi della Luiss proprio non potevi fare a meno di notarla” (6-7) [“someone like Miranda in the halls of the Luiss you really couldn’t not notice.”] Miranda, as one you cannot help *but* notice, is both hypervisible and hypersexual. Indeed, like Suna, her sexuality is understood as inseparable from her disability. She tells Stefi: “siccome sono cieca pensano sia più facile scoparmi, culo e tette in saldo, mia cara, niente altro, ecco che cosa sono io per quelli lì” (10) [“since I’m blind they think it’s easier to fuck me, ass and tits on sale, my dear, nothing else, that’s what I am to them.”] In comparison with Stefi, who is portrayed as reserved, if not sexually repressed, “Miranda [...] appare nel complesso più vistosa e provocante” (7-8) [“Miranda appears on the whole more flashy and provocative.”] Here, the adjective “vistosa” carries a variety of meanings – cheap, garish, tawdry – but it also stems from the past participle of the Italian verb “vedere,” implying a kind of excess in the manner in which she is *seen*. Like Suna, Miranda provokes a sexualized version of what Garland-Thomson calls “the stare”: she is the object of both the gaze *and* the stare. The two become crossed and intertwined, impossible to separate. What is more, due to her impaired vision, Miranda literally cannot gaze back, making her the female sexual object par excellence, and causing the reader to participate in what is arguably a fetishistic portrayal of blindness.<sup>165</sup> However, where Miranda considers herself an easy conquest in the eyes of men, such a view does not correspond to the societal stereotype of disabled people as being *asexual*, as I have discussed at length above. In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers writes: “The preference for ability permeates nearly every value in human culture, including the ability to have sex.”<sup>166</sup> He then asks: “What is it about sex that bestows human status?” (140). We might interpret Miranda’s hypersexuality, then, as a bid for participation in the human – as a way of

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<sup>165</sup> Within feminist film theory – the site of the first theoretical articulations of the male gaze – blind female characters have been assumed to be categorically *without* a gaze. Reminding us of the psychoanalytic correlation between sight to desire – “In the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire” (561) – Linda Williams goes on to articulate the place of the blind female character in cinema: “Blindness ... signifies a perfect absence of desire, allowing the look of the male protagonist to regard the [blind] woman at the requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur’s pleasure, with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own.” Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, eds. Gerald Mast, et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 561-2. Conceptions of this sort feed into fetishistic attitudes towards blind women, and this story, with its blind-lesbian erotic undertones, walks the line between a *critique* of Stefi’s fetishistic orientaling and an *alignment* with it. More recent work in disability and film studies seeks to theorize a “blind gaze,” but still cast the blind gaze as signifying helplessness or vacancy rather than desire. See in particular: Johnson Cheu, “Seeing Blindness on Screen: The Cinematic Gaze of Blind Female Protagonists,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42.3 (2009): 480-496; and Georgina Kleege, “Blind Nightmares,” in *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1999), 43-66. Miranda’s “gaze” is, in part, a linguistically constructed one, imbedded in her name, Miranda, which stems from “mirare” – to stare, aim or gaze.

<sup>166</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 139.

“compensating” that in some way cancels out the disabling effects of living with an impairment, including discrimination or, in this case, assumptions of asexuality. However, I contend that a more complicated mechanism is also at work here.

In Miranda’s case, the logic of the articulation between disability and sexuality is figured in a pun made by Stefi’s boyfriend, Giorgio, regarding Miranda’s blindness. When Stefi tells Giorgio not to refer to Miranda as “cieca,” preferring the more politically-correct “non-vedente,” he retorts: “Se non è ceca sarà slovacca” (15) [“If she isn’t Czech, she must be Slovak.”] Playing on the homophonic relationship between *ceca* and *cieca*, the joke figures Miranda’s blindness as a kind of spatial and national belonging with categories that have clearly delineated borders.<sup>167</sup> In this particular case, the reference is to two nations that at one time made up one national entity – Czechoslovakia. I would like to suggest that this formulation (a nation split in two) provides a useful figure for the logic of sexual difference when complicated by disability. Where belonging to the female sex is, in heteronormative terms, to be opposed to the male sex, here, there is one nation (female) that has been split in two (female and able-bodied vs. female and disabled). Giorgio quips: “Miranda e Stefania come i famosi opposti che si attraggono?” [“Are Miranda and Stefania like the famous opposites that attract?”] and continues, “tu sei bionda e lei è mora, tu sei timida e lei è arrogante, tu ci vedi e lei è cieca” (14) [“you’re blonde and she’s brunette, you’re shy and she’s arrogant, you can see and she is blind.”] Giorgio clearly places the two women in different categories based on binaries that divide, in part, along lines of ability, as opposed to grouping them together based on their similarities, recalling again Garland-Thomson’s theory of triangulation between disabled and non-disabled women.<sup>168</sup> This formulation mirrors the preoccupation with difference that opens Pedullà’s story: Miranda is at once the same as Stefi and not the same, both female and not, both sexual and not. In this sense, Miranda’s lack of sight effectuates a cancelling of *all* binary divisions, allowing a traversal between various identity categories – male/female, animal/human, disabled/able-bodied – and suggesting that disability itself can always already be understood as a site for transability.

The connection between blindness and a certain ambiguity with regards to sexual difference is not unique to Pedullà’s story. In “Sex Education; Or, How the Blind Became Heterosexual,” Patrick White notes that, while in the first part of the twentieth century, sexual contact between blind people in institutions was expressly forbidden, and considered “immoral or sexually perverse,” in the seventies and eighties a new preoccupation with sex education for the blind came to the fore. In particular, authorities were concerned with how, in the absence of visual aids, to teach blind children the difference between the sexes, in order, as White contends, to assure the creation of a “proper” heterosexual desire. Unable to make recourse to touch for obvious reasons, it became paramount to teach children to recognize and differentiate *other* gendered traits – namely, tone of voice, an often unreliable cue. White astutely claims: “It is thus disturbing and disruptive even to consider that the blind might not experience sex and gender in

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<sup>167</sup> The figuring of disability, and blindness in particular, as a country or territory has a long tradition. The 1904 H.G. Wells story, “The Country of the Blind,” is among the most flagrant examples, and carries similar themes of orientalism and misunderstanding, though Wells’ story extends to an imperialist conclusion. See also: Susan Sontag on “the kingdom of the well” and “the kingdom of the sick” in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978); and Stephen Kuusisto, *Planet of the Blind* (1998).

<sup>168</sup> This also recalls Laplanche’s reading of Freud’s distinction between *diversity* and *difference* in *Problématiques II, Castration, symbolisations* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), esp. pp. 47-58. The Western predilection for the binary over the diverse causes a breakdown in the gender system in the face of disability. A new binary is thus formed within the category “woman” that copes with Miranda’s duality as both woman and not-woman, but causes new confusions, as I will show.

the same way as the sighted, since it suggests that our ostensibly objective understanding of sexuality is wholly dependent on a specific sensory apparatus.”<sup>169</sup> While the children to which White refers were instructed to simulate the behaviors and practices of the sighted, such as putting on makeup or dressing in a particular way in order to enforce heteronormative desires, in the case of Pedullà’s story, it is Stefi who mimics Miranda – just as in *Donna in guerra*, it was Vanna who emulated Suna – suggesting a movement in the opposite direction, and thus, an *undoing* of the heterosexual matrix. The idea that blindness bars the ability to differentiate between genders reveals the extent to which gender is a performance. Ironically, signifiers such as tone of voice or wearing perfume, are just as unreliable as those perceived via the sense of sight, such as clothes, hairstyle, or makeup.

### **Blind Reading in the Age of Material Reproduction**

Stefi and Miranda will engage in their own experiment with the relation between sight and sexuality when, after their shopping trip, they go back to Miranda’s house for tea. Stefi marvels at the number of books in Miranda’s library and notes the difference in their physical form to those made for sighted readers: “la diversa consistenza della carta, così spessa e rigida, così pesante, in una tonalità di bianco particolarmente spenta e comunque senza luce” (29) [“the different consistency of the paper, so thick and rigid, so heavy, in a particularly faded and dull shade of white.”] Placing this emphasis on the difference in their reading formats underscores the mutual unintelligibility that characterizes Stefi’s relationship to Miranda. At the same time, Stefi’s focus on the consistency of the pages in Miranda’s books shifts the reader’s focus to the material form of the book (here figured as heavy and dull), in a move that recalls Maraini’s *Marianna Ucrìa* and the recalcitrant materiality of Marianna’s form of communication. The paper of Miranda’s books, “così pesante,” signifies a hyper-materiality that recalls Mitchell and Snyder’s characterization of the insistently embodied nature of disability as – borrowing from Lacan – the “hard kernel” that “cannot be deconstructed away by the textual operations of even the most canny narratives or philosophical idealisms.”<sup>170</sup> Unable to get beyond the material form of the books, Stefi has no hope of accessing its content. “In questa nuova veste adesso Tolstoj appare persino più minaccioso. Quanti tomi saranno?” (29) [“In this new guise, now Tolstoy appears even more threatening. How many volumes are there?”] What should ostensibly be inconsequential to the content of the book – format, packaging – instead drastically alters the reading process (and thus the interpretive process) and becomes cause for inspection and curiosity, even threat. Stefi wonders what it would be like to read Braille – “ecco una delle mille cose di Miranda che non saprà mai” (32) [“another of the thousands of things about Miranda that she’ll never know”] – expressing again a sense of curiosity but also of the impossibility of understanding Miranda. Miranda’s foreign “language” makes Miranda herself illegible, uninterpretable.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Patrick White, “Sex Education; Or, How the Blind Became Heterosexual,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003), 140-1. See White’s article for a lengthy list of sources regarding sex education and the blind.

<sup>170</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” 206.

<sup>171</sup> Vanessa Warne argues that blind reading practices and the spread of blind literacy in nineteenth-century Britain served to highlight the *differences* between blind and sighted reading rather than their similarities as certain assimilationist advocates had hoped. See: Vanessa Warne, “So that the sense of touch may supply the want of sight”: Blind Reading and Nineteenth-Century British Print Culture,” in *Media Technology and Literature in the Nineteenth-Century: Image, Sound, and Touch*, eds. Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2011).

Miranda attempts to teach Stefi how to read using the Braille alphabet but Stefi is not able to make sense of it: she is unable to distinguish one letter from another. The heightened materiality of Miranda's books – the attention to their form – underscores the embodied nature of Miranda's way of reading, a reading that cannot be separated from touch, with the potential to expose the illusion that sighted reading takes place within a vacuum or need not rely in any way upon the body. Stefi, however, maintains the assertion that sighted reading is that which is natural, while Miranda's embodied reading is not. Miranda's way of reading is likened to her intuitive or "medianic" way of orienting herself in the world. Earlier in the story, Stefi notes that in order to keep up in school, Miranda uses a computer that translates print books to Braille, which she refers to as "cose da fantascienza" (13) ["something out of science fiction."] Miranda's way of reading, much like her way of perceiving other people, is figured as supernatural, or we might say "unnatural," recalling the discussion of Suna above.

What makes Miranda's mode of reading "unnatural" is, of course, the cultural assumption that reading must take place at the site of the eye and never with the hand.<sup>172</sup> The fact that Miranda utilizes the sense of touch in order to apprehend language collapses the safe distance that the eye affords and marks Miranda's reading process as sensuous and embodied, and thus "queer," in a variety of ways. The "difference" signaled by Miranda's books as well as her way of reading, seen by Stefi as threatening and unintelligible – as being resolutely *embodied* – is thus easily transferred to Stefi's perception of Miranda herself. As we will see, it is the embodied nature of Miranda's reading practice that allows for its easy slippage into a sexual practice in the following scene.

The description of Miranda's Braille books reinforces the impossibility of translation between Stefi's "language" and that of Miranda, emphasizing that Stefi by contrast is particularly inept at the language of touch, indirectly confirming a certain sexual repression or inexperience on Stefi's part. If the connection between reading Braille and a sexual kind of touch was not already clear, the following scene makes it explicit. After Stefi's failure at reading Braille, Miranda asks if she can touch Stefi's face, shifting the action of reading a book to a "reading" of Stefi's face and body, marking the two events as parallel practices, an association that has often been made in narrative theory, but that is here literalized.<sup>173</sup> Stefi explicitly associates Miranda's touch with moments of sexual intimacy with her boyfriend: "Stefi rimane zitta con gli occhi sigillati, esattamente come quando Giorgio la bacia" (36) ["Stefi stays quiet with her eyes sealed, exactly like when Giorgio kisses her."] Significantly, it is the fact that her eyes are closed that signals the similarity in these two events. Her own "blindness" in this moment thus automatically casts the scene in an erotic light.

After exploring Stefi's face, Miranda's hands travel down to Stefi's neck and she asks, "Posso?" ["May I?"]. Stefi is nervous but attempts to reassure herself that Miranda's question is "normal": "la domanda di un'amica che vuole conoscerla meglio soltanto per essere più amiche, dopo" (36) ["the question of a friend who wants to know her better just in order to be closer friends after."] Stefi's repetition of the word "amica" here seeks to reinstate the heterosexual

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<sup>172</sup> Again, see Warne, "So that the sense of touch may supply the want of sight"; as well as Lennard Davis, "Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modality," *College English* 57.8 (1995): 881-900; and *Enforcing Normalcy*. While Davis is concerned with theorizing deafness rather than blindness, his remarks about which sites of the body – ear, eye, hand or mouth – are culturally sanctioned to receive or originate language are valid here as well.

<sup>173</sup> See, for example: Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1979), cited by Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't*.

nature of their relationship, clearly at risk of being challenged. However, Stefi's inability to associate touch with anything other than an intimate caress puts her attempts at maintaining the illusion of a purely platonic exploration at risk: "Miranda sa essere molto delicata e la sfiora appena, quasi una carezza ma nemmeno, una carezza sarebbe troppo, e basterebbe convincersi davvero che per Miranda le mani sono gli occhi per superare l'impaccio di questa improvvisa intimità" (37) ["Miranda knows how to be very delicate and she barely brushes her, almost a caress but not even, a caress would be too much, and she need only convince herself that for Miranda hands are eyes in order to overcome the awkwardness of this sudden intimacy."] Stefi, significantly, invokes Miranda's disability in order to normalize their physical contact, using the excuse of Miranda's corporeal/sensory difference, and specifically the necessary inversion of body parts and their functions – le mani per gli occhi – in order to mitigate the threat of Miranda's encroachment into her body-space.

As Miranda's touch slowly shifts from a kind of "reading," or collecting of information, to a touch that is sexual, Stefi becomes more and more agitated. She tries to convince herself that there is nothing to be concerned about: "nulla di sconveniente nei polpastrelli di Miranda che corrono sul collo e già puntano al seno ma deviano poco prima e subito risalgono per poi ridiscendere con nuova decisione, più in basso e verso il seno. Ma è solo un attimo" (37) ["nothing improper in Miranda's fingertips running along her neck and already heading for her breast but changing direction just before and immediately heading up again only to then redescend with renewed determination, lower and towards her breast. But it's only a moment."] Here, it becomes unclear what precisely Miranda has or has not touched: What happened for "solo un attimo"? Did Miranda's hands actually reach their destination? The narrator's reticence or obfuscation of this point introduces an ambiguity into Stefi's experience, which will serve to allow her eventual disavowal of its veracity. In order to lessen her discomfort, Stefi casts about for plausible excuses for Miranda's behavior: "adesso si sente un po' confusa e continua a ripetersi che i ciechi hanno un modo tutto loro a comunicare, questo Stefi lo sa, un altro linguaggio, altri limiti e altri confini" (37) ["now she feels a bit confused and continues to repeat to herself that blind people have their own way of communicating, this Stefi knows, another language, other limits and other borders."] Again she repeats the various thematic delineations that have been presented throughout the story: blindness as necessitating another language, as a national body with borders or limits that are somehow different or unclear.

Here, I'd like to return for a moment to the discussion of non-literary transability above, which some medical professionals postulate may have to do with a misrecognition of the borders or limits of the body, a formulation that utilizes the metaphor of a "map" for understanding the body and its contours. According to one bioethics study, the transabled condition (or Body Integrity Identity Disorder) might be attributable to "a neurological conflict between a person's anatomy and body image, which could stem from damage to a part of the brain that constructs the body image in map-like form."<sup>174</sup> Leaving aside the question of whether this condition should or can be traced to a neurological cause, I find the idea of a mis-match (or mis-reading?) of the internal and external body maps to be potentially useful in thinking about Stefi's recourse to the language of borders. Stefi here seems to attribute a similar conflict or misrecognition between her own body image and that of Miranda – a disconnect that she explains by way of Miranda's lack of sight. In this way, understanding transability in the broader sense that I have described it in this chapter, Stefi's metaphor seems to suggest that Miranda's disability is already also an example of transability, where blindness creates a different understanding of the body

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<sup>174</sup> Müller, "Body Integrity Identity Disorder," 36.

and its limits or borders, a (mis)recognition that leads to the potential for same-sex intimacy. For Stefi, because Miranda is blind, she will by necessity have a different understanding of her own body, as well as of Stefi's, and most importantly, of the borders between them, the place where the two bodies meet.<sup>175</sup> Stefi thus relies on an understanding of Miranda as fundamentally different (because disabled) in order to normalize their sexual intimacy: *it is because she is blind that we have to touch each other in this way*. It is thus Miranda's disability – and Stefi's attempt at participating in Miranda's way of communicating – that ostensibly allows for or engenders same-sex desire, bearing out the logic of transability as I have defined it. Rather than a *sexual* difference as the catalyst for desire, in this case it is *a difference in ability* that situates the two women in separate categories, thereby allowing them to be “opposti che si attraggono,” as Giorgio jokingly remarked.<sup>176</sup>

This logic explains why the intimacy between the two women thus causes Stefi confusion as to Miranda's *gender*, signified by Stefi's understanding of Miranda's difference from, or identity with, Giorgio: “quelle dita che la sfiorano con una gentilezza che non è di Giorgio nemmeno quando Giorgio vuole e sa essere gentile, e che però al tempo stesso è Giorgio e non potrebbe essere che Giorgio perché soltanto a lui è permesso toccarla con tanta libertà” (37) [“those fingers that brush her with a gentleness that isn't Giorgio's not even when Giorgio wants and knows how to be gentle, and that however at the same time is Giorgio and couldn't be other than Giorgio because only he is allowed to touch her with such liberty.”] Claiming that Miranda's way of touching her is at first different from (“non è di Giorgio”), and then identical to, Giorgio's (“al tempo stesso è Giorgio”), marks an interesting slippage from similarity or belonging (di Giorgio) to identity (è Giorgio), while also highlighting the ambivalence imbedded in Miranda's touch. As both like Giorgio and not, Stefi understands Miranda as both participating in the male gender and not, much like Suna – “un poco uomo e un poco donna” [“a little bit man and a little bit woman.”]

Stefi continues in her comparison between Miranda's touching and that of Giorgio, noting: “non le sembrerebbe giusto che Miranda la toccasse come fa solo Giorgio e allora *l'importante è che sia diverso*, allora basta ricordarsi che Miranda è cieca e che per Miranda questo è il solo modo di vederla” (38, emphasis mine) [“it wouldn't seem right for Miranda to touch her as only Giorgio does and so *the important thing is that it be different*, so she need only

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<sup>175</sup> If we liken this understanding of the body (the “body-image”) to Teresa de Lauretis's reading of Freud's “body-ego” (“l'io-corpo” or “l'io corporeo”) in *Soggetti eccentrici*, then the *confine* or border between self and outside world delimits the zone of interplay between body and gender, both of which are, for de Lauretis, abstract forms that concretize in the subject, one social and one symbolic. She writes: “L'io-corpo, confine percettivo proiettato, non serve solo a delimitare o a contenere la morfologia di un sé immaginario, ma è anche quella parte dell'io che permette l'accesso al mondo esterno, al simbolico o alla significazione sociale. È un confine permeabile, una frontiera aperta (per così dire) tra il mondo esterno, il reale, gli altri, le istituzioni sociali, da un lato, e dall'altro il mondo interno della psiche, le pulsioni, l'inconscio, i meccanismi di difesa. In breve, possiamo divenire soggetti solo in quanto siamo corpi, ma se ci sentiamo un corpo ingenerato è solo in quanto siamo soggetti” (134) [“The body-ego, a projected perceptive border, serves not only to delimit or contain the morphology of an imaginary self, but it is also that part of the ego that permits access to the external world, to the symbolic or social signification. It is a permeable border, an open frontier (as it were) between the external world, the real, other people, social institutions, on one hand, and on the other, the internal world of the psyche, the drives, the unconscious, defense mechanisms. Briefly, we can become subjects only insofar as we are bodies, but if we feel that we are an engendered/gendered body it is only insofar as we are subjects.”] This understanding of the border between internal and external worlds as being the zone of interplay between subject and gender helps us to see how the alleged misrecognition of the confines of the body-image or body-ego would potentially lead to a disruption of gender confines as well.

<sup>176</sup> This episode is thus based on a (heteronormative) understanding of sexuality as necessarily built on difference.

remember that Miranda is blind and that for Miranda this is the only way of seeing her.”] Rather than Miranda’s difference from Giorgio being one of gender, here, Stefi clings to the importance of establishing Miranda’s difference from Giorgio as hinging upon the fact of her blindness, which, again, is what will allow her to normalize the way in which Miranda is touching her. While the logic of “split nations” I laid out above is what allows for same-sex intimacy, it is thus, at the same time, that difference that Stefi clings to as a barring *against* an interpretation of the experience as intimate or sexual. Miranda’s blindness is simultaneously both what opens the borders, so to speak, and that which acts as a cover for Stefi to hide behind.

In the name of *reciprocità* (or foreign relations?), Stefi then puts on a blindfold and takes a turn at “reading” Miranda’s face. As she is touching her, she senses that Miranda is about to kiss her and pushes her away, yelling, but is then embarrassed. “Stefi non vede ma è *come se vedesse tanto ne è sicura* (nonostante Miranda ancora non la tocchi)” (42, emphasis mine) [“Stefi can’t see but *it’s as if she can see she is so sure* (despite the fact that Miranda hasn’t yet touched her).”] Again, here Stefi is “blind” via simulation and accordingly, she perceives Miranda’s advance, not through sight, but vis-à-vis a kind of knowing that arises through instinct or intuition. However, the text still claims sight as the key to certain knowledge (“è come se vedesse tanto ne è sicura” [“it’s as if she can see she is so sure”]). Despite this initial certainty, Stefi then immediately starts to doubt the reliability of her intuition. Blindfolded, her usual mode of knowing is temporarily impaired and she is left in doubt as to the actual events that took place. “Stefi non se lo è sognato certo, pare incredibile ma è così, Miranda stava. Oppure no? Sì, sì, da non crederci, stava. Proprio Miranda” (42) [“Stefi didn’t dream it for sure, it seems incredible but it’s true, Miranda was there. Or maybe she wasn’t? Yes, yes, hard to believe, but she was there. It was really Miranda.”] Stefi becomes progressively less and less sure: “Ha sentito, cioè ha creduto di sentire...” [“She felt, that is, she thought she felt...”]; “perché adesso non ne è più sicura” (47) [“because now she is no longer sure.”] Thus, in attempting to emulate a blind mode of knowing or relating, Stefi loses her grasp of rational knowledge and ultimately rejects the lesson offered by her transabled experiment.

In her 1995 article, “Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight,” Deborah Britzman theorizes a kind of queer reading practice, as part of what she calls a “queer pedagogy.” Borrowing from Shoshana Felman, Britzman describes the practice of “reading for alterity” as beginning with “an acknowledgement of difference as the grounds of identity” and notes that “[t]o read is automatically to make a dialogic relation between a self and a text.”<sup>177</sup> In this context, both Miranda and Stefi offer themselves up to the other as “texts” to be read and interpreted via the language of touch. Miranda’s turn at “reading” Stefi makes Stefi uncomfortable but she escapes the encounter unperturbed. It is only once Stefi attempts to read Miranda – as both text and body, both Miranda and “Miranda” – that things begin to fall apart. Miranda’s unintelligibility, made doubly opaque by Stefi’s attempt at adopting her blind mode of perception – translates to an interpretation of (queer) sexual intentions on Miranda’s part that cause Stefi to end the experiment as well as the friendship.<sup>178</sup> Britzman goes on to describe a kind of reading, or indeed “thinking itself,” that “might take the risk of refusing to secure

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<sup>177</sup> Deborah Britzman, “Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight,” *Educational Theory*, 45.2 (1995), 163. See also: Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>178</sup> See Britzman, “Is there a queer pedagogy?”; and Viv Ellis on Britzman in “What Has Sexuality Got to Do with English Teaching?” in *Issues in English Teaching*, eds. Jon Davison and John Moss (London: Routledge, 2000), 221.



thought,” where reading is in some way “always about risking the self, about confronting one’s own theory of reading” (164). Stefi comes face-to-face with incertitude but cannot bear it, cannot bear to risk herself, or indeed, confront her own theory of reading – a reading that is inseparable from an understanding of the self as heterosexual and able-bodied.<sup>179</sup>

In the final scene of Pedullà’s story, Stefi goes to meet her other friends, leaving Miranda rejected and offended, their friendship ruined. Through the *medium* of Miranda’s body, Stefi is exposed to a different type of language, a different way of knowing that is physical and therefore (interpreted as being) inseparable from desire. Having temporarily inhabited Miranda’s blind modality, Stefi ultimately rejects the lessons learned through simulation, in order to protect the boundaries of a threatened heteronormativity. Rather than incorporate these new epistemological and phenomenological possibilities, Stefi seems not to have learned anything. Instead, her entire sense of knowledge and sense-making is undone. She flees the scene and finds her other friends, disavowing the reality of her own experience, and thus, by extension, the possibility of a blind or disabled mode of knowing. In the final line of the story, her friends wave to her as she arrives: “fanno cenno con la mano,” a gesture that communicates manually, but from afar, relying on the safe distance that sight affords and refusing the possibility for – or necessity of – touch.

### Can Transability Be Recuperated?

In order to further consider whether transability necessarily functions to close down the borders between disabled and nondisabled, rather than opening them as it might first appear, I would like to return for a moment to a discussion of the nonliterary transability community. Elisa Arfini notes that, while transability raises important ethical issues – both for medical professionals, as well as for those in the disabled community – the fact that one might want a disabled body suggests a marked shift in attitudes about which kinds of bodies are thought to be desirable.<sup>180</sup> She suggests transability as a starting point from which to conceive of the ways that a nondisabled person might want to identify as “crip”:

così come alcuni soggetti che praticano l’eterosessualità si identificano con il termine queer (cioè come froci), forse un giorno anche individui dotati di corpi normali vorranno identificarsi con il termine ‘crip’ (cioè come storpi), sottoscrivendo una concezione dell’identità fluida, molteplice, vulnerabile e – di conseguenza – insufficiente e inadatta ad essere di fondamento a una politica che viene dopo il soggetto.<sup>181</sup>

[j]ust as some subjects that practice heterosexuality identify themselves with the term queer (that is, as gay), perhaps one day individuals with normal bodies will want to identify themselves with the term “crip” (that is, as cripples), subscribing to a conception of identity that is fluid, multiple, vulnerable and – importantly –

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<sup>179</sup> Part of what I am interested in here is the idea of queer reading practices that can be defined as such because of physical, material, temporal, or other practical aspects, as opposed to those that are solely psychological, affective, or intellectual in nature, as described by Britzman. Or more aptly, I am interested in the ways the former translate into or necessitate the latter, suggesting that forms of corporeal difference can and do serve as catalyst or origin for such queer practices.

<sup>180</sup> See, for examples, the bioethics studies cited above, as well as: Alexandre Baril, “How Dare You Pretend to Be Disabled? The discounting of transabled people and their claims in disability movements and studies,” *Disability & Society*, Special Issue: *Disability: Who counts? What counts?* (2015, forthcoming).

<sup>181</sup> Arfini, “Sexing Disability,” 262.

insufficient and unsuited to act as the basis for a politics that comes after the subject.]

While I question the existence of “individui dotati di corpi normali,” the idea that people who are not identified as disabled might want to be identified as such is resonant with both the transabled community and recent theories in American disability studies.<sup>182</sup> The term “crip” has been most extensively theorized by McRuer who, as I have noted, has outlined the many ways in which queer theory and disability studies overlap and inform one another (2006). However, McRuer would appear to be critical of transability as a means to adopt a crip identity. In their Introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* entitled, “Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies,” McRuer and Abby Wilkerson elaborate four possible definitions of “desiring disability.” The first three – “universalizing dismissal,” “fetishistic appropriation,” and “exploitative truth of the system” – are discouraged by Wilkerson and McRuer. Transability would ostensibly fall within the category of “fetishistic appropriation,” which McRuer and Wilkerson have insisted ultimately acts to “reinforce the able-bodied/disabled binary,” ostensibly through a reification of binary terms.<sup>183</sup> Borrowing from queer theory that critiques rigid concepts of transgender or transsexuality, and seeks instead to rethink or blur the categories of a binary gender system, the idea that one might want to “appropriate” a disabled body implies that disabled and nondisabled are bounded and identifiable categories. In this way, “desiring disability” might in the end amount to “keeping disability in its place,” as McRuer and Wilkerson claim.<sup>184</sup>

McRuer and Wilkerson recommend instead a fourth type of desiring, which they describe as “a recognition that another world can exist in which an incredible variety of bodies and minds are valued and identities are shaped, where crips and queers have effectively (because repeatedly) displaced the able-bodied/disabled binary” (14). This brings us back to Mitchell and Snyder’s fleeting suggestion that the logic of narrative prosthesis might include a “reevaluation of an alternative mode of being,” a possibility left untheorized but that I take as potentially generative. While I am inclined to agree with Arfini that – fetishistic or not – transability marks a possible shift towards more positive and productive views of disability, McRuer and Wilkerson’s point should also be taken seriously. The fact that an individual might desire a disabled identity and reject an “able-bodied” one reinforces a notion of these categories as definite and distinct from one another, even as it arguably opens up new possibilities for “desiring disability.”

Transability understood as a literary phenomenon in the way I have described it in this chapter clearly departs from the non-literary phenomenon in a number of important ways, especially considering that the cases in question in this chapter involve temporary, reversible simulations (or even dreams) of disability, rather than a desire for or achievement of a permanently disabled state. However, I would like to borrow from McRuer and Wilkerson’s

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<sup>182</sup> Although Arfini has worked extensively on this phenomenon (2009, 2010), she does not theorize “transabilità” as a broader umbrella term. However, she does move from her discussion of transability to this more capacious and fluid conception of subjectivity made possible by such examples of desiring disability, implicitly suggesting a link between the two modes of thought. It is important to keep in mind the differences between identifying with “disabled” versus “crip” and the fact that both are distinct from forms of fetishizing or desiring disability, all of which Arfini seems to lump together.

<sup>183</sup> McRuer and Wilkerson, “Introduction,” 13. Although McRuer and Wilkerson do not explicitly mention transability in their typology, they do cite forms of sexual devoteism that are often associated with transability. I recognize that it is possible they do not, in fact, include some or all forms of transability within this rubric but for the purposes of my argument, as I will show, the same critique applies.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

concern the notion that even where one is seen as moving towards a state of disability, in what for Arfini and others amounts to a potential embracing of disability, the final outcome (in both literary and non-literary cases) arguably runs the risk of a reification of a firm boundary between disabled and nondisabled.

In the case of the fictional texts at issue in this chapter, I argue that where boundaries of ability are traversed, gender boundaries are productively obscured, and while the confines of disability are perhaps temporarily altered or displaced, in the texts analyzed here, they are reinstated in the last instance. The disabled characters in both Maraini's novel and Pedullà's story, as we have seen, ultimately disappear from the narrative frame, having performed their function as model or vehicle for gender transgression, via disability simulation. The normative constraints of gender are thus altered, troubled, rendered indistinct, while those of ability/disability are reinforced, as McRuer and Wilkerson warn against.

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Taking up McRuer and Wilkerson's call for a fourth type of "desiring disability," I would like to suggest Flavia Monceri's notion of "transgender" – as a transcendence rather than a transit, a going *beyond* gender rather than a travelling *between* two clearly defined gender poles – as a model for another way of defining "transability," that might also be thought as a *going beyond ability*, or to be more precise, beyond identification on the basis of ability.<sup>185</sup> In a sense, this is already part of the logic of transability: once it is conceived that the boundaries are traversable, the apparatus that would keep them separate is already made unstable.<sup>186</sup> Rather than a movement towards and through a state of disability, then, this understanding of transability offers the potential for a resistance to identification tout court. However, the texts analyzed in this chapter undo the very porousness that the transabled experiment affords by way of a final closure. Shifting the focus to alternative reading and writing practices, in the following chapter, I will explore a text that extends and expands the possibilities for ways of being that have the potential to displace the able-bodied/disabled binary in more profound and lasting ways.

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<sup>185</sup> See also Teresa de Lauretis, *Soggetti eccentrici*, in which she critiques transgender as a way beyond gender.

<sup>186</sup> For Suna, this alternative conception of transability might offer a way out of the binary logic of gender that would entrap her as forever between genders, while suggesting a mode of *non*-identification that would not mobilize her metaphorical entrapment. Transability, so conceived, also offers a way of thinking outside of the ordered whole narrative through an emphasis on practices over identification. See Noson, "From *superabilità* to *transabilità*": "Can a theory of 'transability' help us to imagine a subjectivity that is not bound to the capacity for self-narration and assumptions of integrity? I want to suggest that 'disability' more generally understood – as a mode of being, knowing and relating – might be thought of as a process or practice according to which identities are *not* forged or imposed, where the impulse to categorize, or definitively name, is short-circuited before it can begin. Thinking of disability not as an identity but as a *process* that undoes or disallows the forming of identity to begin with opens up new ways of thinking about subjectivity that do not seek per force to exclude, minimize or simplify difference."

### Chapter Three

#### From *Pharmakon* to Phantom Limb: (Over)writing Disability in Stefano Benni's *Achille piè veloce*

I turn now to *Achille piè veloce*, a novel by the popular novelist Stefano Benni (1947-), whose oeuvre, like Maraini's, features a striking number of characters that could be classified as disabled. So far I have focused on texts that feature female disabled characters, first arguing the importance of interpretations that include disability theory as opposed to understanding disability as a metaphor for the female subject, and then, in chapter two, showing the ways that considerations of disability, gender, and sexuality are inexorably intertwined. I would now like to explore to what extent the relationships I have explored thus far are relevant at the other end of the gender spectrum. What happens when the character in question is male? Do the same or similar mechanisms apply in terms of the canceling of gendered binaries? I will again consider the role of reading and writing as embodied practices, this time for a character who uses a computer to communicate, and will ask to what extent alternative communication practices are allowed by the logic of the text.

Where Maraini's disabled characters are, as I have argued in chapter one, subsumed by critics under a metaphorical understanding of woman as "disabled," Benni's characters are not so easily categorized. Benni's work is marked by an astute articulation between comic absurdity and political parody and his novels, stories, poems, and plays are replete with talking dogs, sirens, angels, devils, and hybrid dragon-buses, as well as characters who are chronically ill (*Elianto* (1996), *Margherita Dolcevita* (2005)), missing limbs ("Onehand Jack" (2003)), wheelchair-users (*Achille piè veloce* (2003)), and so on.<sup>187</sup> On the one hand, including disabled people within this panoply of "odd" and often fantastical characters risks lumping disability into a general notion of the "absurd," the abnormal, or even the supernatural, and one could certainly make the argument that they are meant to serve as elements of a social and political critique. However, it is my sense that Benni's favoring of such characters has, at least part of the time, a much more direct aim. As Benni himself has intimated in an interview with *SuperAbile Magazine*, when asked about his collaboration with various disability organizations in Italy:

Non lo so. Forse nei miei romanzi parlo spesso di chi è in difficoltà, di quelli che non hanno potere. Perciò mi capita di venir chiamato a partecipare al lavoro di persone che si battono a favore dei deboli, dagli immigrati ai minori abbandonati, dai disabili ai cosiddetti malati mentali. Lo faccio sempre con faticosa gioia, anche se c'è chi fa molto più di me e se per vincere certe durissime ingiustizie non basta certo un libro.<sup>188</sup>

[I don't know. Maybe in my novels I often talk about those who are in trouble, those who are powerless. For that reason I am often called to participate in the work of people who struggle in favor of the weak, from immigrants to abandoned

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<sup>187</sup> Benni's *sirena* story appears in *Il bar sotto il mare* (1987). "Il racconto della Sirena," or "Shimizé," focuses not on disability, gender, or embodiment, but on language play.

<sup>188</sup> Stefano Benni, "Ridere non è un crimine," interview with Antonella Patete, *SuperAbile Magazine* 0/Dec (2009): 12-13.

minors, from the disabled to the so-called mentally ill. I do it always with a weary joy, though there are others who do much more than me and to conquer certain difficult injustices a book is certainly not enough.]

Benni's statement reveals a direct involvement and investment in the social and political conditions that affect the lives of disabled people in Italy today and indeed the disabled protagonist of *Achille piè veloce*, the focus of this chapter, is modeled after a real person who was known and respected by the author, as Benni has noted in numerous interviews.<sup>189</sup> Thus, I argue that the focus on disability in *Achille piè veloce* serves – at least in part – to critique precisely those institutions, prejudices, and barriers to access that affect the lives of disabled people rather than serving solely as a metaphor for some social ill.

These considerations on their own render Benni's work, and particularly *Achille*, an important contribution to discourses of disability and efforts to move away from the misleading and reductive representations of disabled people often in circulation, marking a shift away from the kind of knee-jerk metaphorization of disability that disability scholars have argued is so often damaging, stereotyped and exclusionary.<sup>190</sup> However, this is not to say that the character Achille is meant to be a *realistic* representation of a disabled person or even of the real person he is modeled after, as Benni himself is careful to point out. *Achille piè veloce* is a highly fantastical novel and its characters often seem more like caricatures than “real” people. However, while perhaps not realistic in many ways, and decidedly problematic in others, Achille's character is much more nuanced and complex than many fictional representations of disabled people and grapples directly with the fact of his disability in a way that would not be possible for a character who is meant only to “stand in” for something else. Keeping these subtleties in mind, I argue that it is precisely the *literal* quality of Achille's character that enables his instrumentalization towards a different end, one that is primarily formal in nature, rather than semantic or moral, and that points specifically to the relationship between disability and narrative. Thus, where in chapter one, my aim was to show that the metaphorical treatment of *Marianna Ucria* closes down possibilities for other fruitful interpretations, here I claim that Achille is *explicitly* meant to represent a literal example of disability, a fact which will carry its own implications. Within the text, then, Achille's status as a “real” person “short-circuits” – to use Ato Quayson's term – metaphorical interpretations at the outset, allowing for a more immediate – yet also more complex – engagement with other types of hermeneutical possibilities.<sup>191</sup> Far from closing down the interpretive mechanism, exploring the lateral associations deriving from disability and disabled characters has the potential to generate an expansive network of interpretive

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<sup>189</sup> When asked by *SuperAbile* about Achille's character, Benni says: “L'ho conosciuto veramente e, quando è morto, mi è mancato e ho voluto raccontare la nostra amicizia, anche se trasfigurandola letterariamente. E così, anche se molte cose sono inventate e ricreate nel libro, al centro c'è il ricordo di una persona vera” (12) [“I knew him in real life and, when he died, I missed him and wanted to tell the story of our friendship, although I transformed it for literary purposes. And so, although many things are invented or recreated in the book, at the center is the memory of a real person.”] *SuperAbile's* editors refer to Benni as “il moderno cantore della disabilità” [“the modern bard of disability”], an epithet that may or may not be deserved but that signals a clear welcoming of Benni and his work within the disabled community in Italy, where very few public figures have taken up such issues, except where in the name of charity or pet causes (12).

<sup>190</sup> See, for example: Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, especially Chapter Two, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” 47-64.

<sup>191</sup> See Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*: “Aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability” (15).

possibilities that are not bound by the often reductive and hierarchical structure of a metaphorical relation.

At the same time, of course, both the metaphorical and literal levels are operative in any given literary representation, and thus I would argue that no narrative element should ever be interpreted solely by virtue of one to the exclusion of the other. As Michael Bérubé notes, “It is altogether queer that disability studies might suggest that the literary representation of disability *not* be read as the site of the figural.”<sup>192</sup> His point is well taken: the real issue for disability studies scholars is not the fact that a disabled character might be understood as a metaphor, but that representations of disability have been unproblematically understood *only* in terms of their metaphorical utility.<sup>193</sup> And to complicate matters further, in the particular case of Benni’s novel, the fact that the author names his primary characters “Achille” and “Ulisse” arguably necessitates an allegorical reading to a certain extent.<sup>194</sup>

Bérubé has convincingly argued that the function served by disabled characters is often not a metaphorical one, but one that is formal in nature and serves to mobilize, thwart, or highlight a narrative mechanism. In his reading of *The Woman Warrior*, Bérubé contends that the narrator’s revulsion upon encountering a man with an “intellectual disability” serves a narrative function in the text precisely because his disability is meant to be taken literally: “this revulsion is crucial to the functioning of the narrative of the text, and not because this man is made to serve as a figure for something else but because he isn’t.”<sup>195</sup> Bérubé argues that the man’s intellectual disability invokes the narrator’s encounter with the limits of narrative itself and presages the narrator’s own loss of narrative capacity. Achille similarly disrupts the relation between Benni’s primary (nondisabled) protagonist and the narrative, though as I will show, this is not because Achille *lacks* linguistic or narrative capacity – quite the contrary. It is Achille’s formidable talent in this area that causes Ulisse, a non-disabled, established writer suffering from writer’s block, to face his own authorial limitations.

The nondisabled protagonist of Benni’s novel, Ulisse, is a manuscript reader for a small, failing publishing house. He is contacted by Achille, who – Ulisse later learns – uses a wheelchair, is able to move only his head and hands, and, due to a rare disease and several botched operations, is also facially “disfigured.” Although Achille is able to speak, as his letter to Ulisse attests, he finds it difficult and tiring and so instead uses a computer in order to communicate. Thus, where Marianna Ucria writes longhand with pen and ink, the protagonist of Benni’s *Achille piè veloce* communicates via computer, typing his statements in written conversation, a fact which will complicate the conclusions drawn in chapter one regarding orality, textuality, and communication. Achille enlists Ulisse in a kind of collaborative writing process, where Ulisse provides the experiential content of the stories and Achille puts them into narrative form. In the end, Achille will commit suicide in order to avoid institutionalization, giving his manuscript over to Ulisse, and relinquishing any claim to authorship.

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<sup>192</sup> Bérubé, “Disability and Narrative,” 570.

<sup>193</sup> Amy Vidali, too, has argued for alternative modes of engaging with metaphor and disability. Rather than calling off metaphorical engagement altogether, she encourages the creation and use of “disability metaphors,” noting that it is impossible to disengage metaphor and disability. Vidali, “Seeing What We Know.” I still think it is worth keeping in mind that disability has been subject to a metaphorical erasure in ways that identities based on gender, sexuality and race often are not, though arguably such identities are still always meant to *signify* in a way that a normative or neutral character (read: white, male) is not. See also, Dolmage, “Between the Valley and the Field.”

<sup>194</sup> I will return to the various associations called up by their names further on in this chapter.

<sup>195</sup> Bérubé, “Disability and Narrative,” 571.

In the pages that follow, I will explore the slippery nature of the relation between Achille and Ulisse, between disabled and non-, and the accompanying implications for disabled subjectivity and narrative, working both with and against deconstructive and psychoanalytic modes of critique. As an alternative to these theories, which arguably can only conceive of disability in terms of lack, I will suggest, following Vivian Sobchack, a phenomenological approach – a theoretical mode that reserves a central role for the body in the realms of the discursive, the narratological, and the epistemological, while simultaneously questioning the possibility of separating the “real” from the fictional or phantasmagorical. I argue that interpreting the text through the lens of Sobchack’s theory allows Achille to take up his own subject position as both character and author, rather than serving a merely instrumental or supporting role in Ulisse’s narrative.

### **Narrative Curiosity and “*I cosidetti normali*”**

Disability theorists have noted the many ways that disabled characters are utilized within narrative to shore up the integrity of non-disabled characters and normative ideals.<sup>196</sup> As I have noted throughout the dissertation, Mitchell and Snyder have argued that narratives are often set in motion by the introduction of a lack associated with disability – a presumed deficiency that calls for either cure or death – which the narrative then sets about effecting. Alternatively, disabled characters are often instrumental in facilitating the formation of non-disabled characters, serving as a mirror, reflecting back to them a shadowy version of themselves – showing the way while simultaneously providing an example of what *not* to be. This is what I have been calling the “pedagogical” function of disability within narrative: as with narrative prosthesis, once the non-disabled protagonist has “learned the lesson” and the narrative has run its course, the disabled character is eradicated from the text.<sup>197</sup> Interestingly – and this is the case for Achille and Ulisse – in this version of narrative disability, it is the *non-disabled* character’s lack that inaugurates the narrative movement while the disabled character acts in support of the primary character’s journey toward wholeness or resolution.<sup>198</sup> Then once the non-disabled character reaches his or her desired state, the disabled character is expunged from the text.

In many instances, a seemingly less sinister – though perhaps equally problematic – factor is also at play in the motivation of a narrative. As I noted in chapter one, the demand for an explanation of one’s disability is often expressed under the guise of an onlooker’s genuine

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<sup>196</sup> Again, see Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*.

<sup>197</sup> Brenda Jo Brueggemann has discussed what she calls “pedagogical insight” as a product of her (disabled) presence in the classroom. She argues that “disability enables insight,” a decidedly more productive, positive vision of the pedagogical function of disability than that to which I refer here. See: Brenda Jo Brueggemann, “An Enabling Pedagogy: Meditations of Writing and Disability,” *JAC* 21.4 (2001), 795.

<sup>198</sup> As in Chapter Two, where Suna’s material immobilization is taken as a physical expression of Vanna’s metaphorical entrapment. One way of conceiving of this relation is that the disability of the disabled character is a material manifestation of the interior “lack” or “deficit” that besets the non-disabled character, a model that clearly equates disability and lack. In this case, Achille’s physical disability could be understood as a projected representation of Ulisse’s narrative incapacity. This is an intriguing relational pattern, in particular because the character that is physically disabled is, in both cases, particularly adept at that which is lacking in the “non-disabled” character. While this relation is arguably operative here, I would like to suggest the possibility that Achille’s narrative ability is not necessarily meant only to compensate for a physical lack. Instead, I argue that the narrative and the corporeal are inseparable and therefore one cannot stand in for the other. Achille’s narrative capacity grows out of his physical “lack,” meaning that it would be entirely illogical to state that his narrative skill stands in – or compensates for – a physical defect.

curiosity.<sup>199</sup> For many people with visible, stigmatized disabilities, other people's curiosity regarding one's condition – even when purportedly “good-natured” or “harmless” – is often experienced as an oppressive and alienating force that positions one's disability as a spectacle and reinforces a sense of otherness. However, with respect to narrative, curiosity is also part of what motivates a reader to read further or a writer to weave a particular story, as I noted in the case of Maraini and *Marianna Ucrìa*. While curiosity is arguably inseparable from various forms of judgment and prejudice, it thus also holds out the possibility for a more generative or creative way of encountering, perceiving, and understanding difference, particularly when translated into the literary realm.<sup>200</sup>

Disability as inciter of curiosity is thus one of the ways in which disability can be understood as a narrative mechanism rather than as a metaphor. This mechanism need not be understood as prosthetic, however, and indeed, according to recent trends in cognitive science and affect theory, can be thought of as integral to the process of cognition itself. Eve Sedgwick does not use the term “curiosity” per se, but does refer to both “motivation” and “interest” as bound up with affective and cognitive processes. She writes: “Tomkins's crucial move in identifying *interest* as an affect – one that's on a spectrum with excitement, and that has a distinctive role to play in (for instance) organizing perception as well as motivating exploration – draws an especially tight linkage between the systems of affect and cognition.”<sup>201</sup> Curiosity, or “interest,” is an integral part of the process by which people initiate and sustain intellectual (or indeed narrative) activity. This idea resonates with Mitchell and Snyder's claim as well: it is the presence of difference that incites curiosity and it is curiosity that instigates exploration, investigation and explication. A writer writes that which sparks interest and a reader reads for the same reason. As Mitchell and Snyder note, disability is almost guaranteed to spark the interest of readers and writers – as an irreducible difference, it activates the cognitive mechanism that signals the brain to pay attention.<sup>202</sup>

Achille's character plays upon this fact, appealing directly to Ulisse's curiosity in a bid to obtain a meeting with the manuscript reader. His initial letter to Ulisse, in a move that spells out the function of disability as narrative stimulus, lists several incentives, among which is the promise of his abnormality:

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<sup>199</sup> In regards to disability and curiosity, see: Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 47-76; Brueggemann, “An Enabling Pedagogy,” 814; Elizabeth DePoy and Stephen Gilson, “Disability as Microcosm: the Boundaries of the Human Body,” *Societies* 2 (2012): 302-316, especially p. 305.

<sup>200</sup> In contrast to Mitchell and Snyder's view, a focus on curiosity or interest does not necessarily depend upon a view of disability as inherently lacking, nor must it insist on the cure or eradication of difference. For Achille, this does end up being the case, but one can imagine other instances where curiosity might be cause for interest but not discrimination/exclusion (as, for instance, with *Marianna Ucrìa*).

<sup>201</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Affect Theory and Theory of Mind,” in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 146, emphasis in the original.

<sup>202</sup> For perspectives on the relation between cognitive science and literature, see: Irving Massey, *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), especially on the “appeal of the rare”; William Flesch's *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), in which he argues for “tracking” as the primary instinct that motivates an interest in literary characters over “identification”; and Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006). (Many thanks to Michael Bérubé for bringing these texts to my attention.) Of course, what the brain will understand as “different” and worthy of attention is arguably also socially constructed. While it may be true that the human brain is “wired” to pay attention to difference, it is, I would argue, still culturally determined which things will strike the brain as “different.”



*[A]ggiungo altri tre motivi. Se lei riuscisse a concepire nella sua testa una qualsiasi definizione di normalità in nessun modo io rientrerei nella sua definizione.*

*So che lei risponde a tutti quelli che le inviano uno scritto. Non è un atto di eroismo, ma è comunque una cosa rara.*

*Io posso scrivere poco e con fatica, e tra breve tempo non potrò più scrivere e ne morirò...<sup>203</sup>*

*[I will add three more reasons. If you were to conceive of any definition of normality, in no way would I fall into your definition.*

*I know that you respond to everyone who sends you a letter. It's not an act of heroism, but it's still a rare thing.*

*I can write very little and with difficulty, and before long I won't be able to write anymore and I'll die from it...]*

The first motive Achille lists is meant to incite Ulisse's curiosity: promising himself as a spectacle of abnormality, Achille assures Ulisse that he can in no way be included within the bounds of the term "normalcy." And indeed it is Achille's "accenni all'annormalità, alla difficoltà di spedire una lettera, di telefonare" (30) ["mentions of abnormality, of his difficulty in sending a letter, in using the phone"] that convince Ulisse to respond. Achille's repetition of the word "definizione," and his assurance that he will definitively *not* be included within it, drives home the incontrovertible fact of Achille's abnormality. However, his claim also more subtly points to the slippery nature of defining normalcy to begin with: he claims that he will not fall into *any* definition of normalcy – "una qualsiasi definizione" – implying that there is more than one possible definition, and that Ulisse likely has his own personal conception of what constitutes the "normal." A common line of reasoning in disability studies argues that, given the difficulty in defining normalcy, one cannot be definitively categorized as either normal or not-normal, breaking down this static binary division.<sup>204</sup> Giuseppe Pontiggia – author of *Nati due volte*, a fictionalized account of his experience as the father of a disabled child – formulates this idea as follows:

Chi è normale? Nessuno.

Quando si è feriti dalla diversità, la prima reazione non è di accettarla, ma di negarla. E lo si fa cominciando a negare la normalità. La normalità non esiste. Il lessico che riguarda diventa a un tratto reticente, ammiccante, vagamente sarcastico. Si usano, nel linguaggio orale, i segni di quello scritto: "I normali, tra virgolette." Oppure: "I cosiddetti normali."<sup>205</sup>

[Who is normal? No one.

When one is hurt by diversity, the first reaction is not to accept it, but to deny it. And one starts by denying normality. Normality doesn't exist. The lexicon used to describe it suddenly becomes reticent, sly, vaguely sarcastic.

<sup>203</sup> Stefano Benni, *Achille pié veloce* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), 27. All translations mine.

<sup>204</sup> On the construction of normalcy, see L. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*.

<sup>205</sup> Giuseppe Pontiggia, *Nati due volte* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 41. This quotation is often used as a kind of rally cry for disability activism in Italy.

One uses, in spoken language, the markings of the written: “Quote unquote normal people.” Or: “so-called normal people.”]

Pontiggia describes a phenomenon that closely approaches the logic of deconstruction: in order to contest the systematic oppression of difference, the norm must be revealed as illusory or unsteady. However, Pontiggia’s rendition is perhaps more *destructive* than *deconstructive*. The narrator’s claim is that difference – at least initially – is categorically *rejected* and that in order to effect that rejection, normality itself must be effectively erased. If the “normal” does not exist, then neither can difference, given that it depends on normality, is defined against it.<sup>206</sup> However, as Pontiggia’s account indicates, the “normal” does not in fact disappear altogether. It is instead qualified or signaled as false through the use of quotation marks. I would like to suggest that Pontiggia’s formulation, “Si usano, nel linguaggio orale, i segni di quello scritto,” is not insignificant here, and implies that perhaps *written* language is particularly suited to a representation of the paradoxical co-existence of the normal and not-normal, encapsulated in the use of the term, “normal,” when set in quotation marks. The materiality of text, translated into the materiality of gesture (making quotation marks in the air while speaking), effectuates a joining of the bodily or material with the conceptual – with the cognitive need for categorization that is represented by the word “normal.”<sup>207</sup> The quotation marks effectively signal that the thing described is simultaneously both normal and not normal.

Lennard Davis contends that the relationship between normality and abnormality must constantly be reasserted and reprocessed through narratives and other public media in order to reinforce what he calls “the hegemony of normalcy”: “This normalcy must constantly be enforced in public venues (like the novel), must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal” (44). Such images, Davis suggests, are not static at all, but regardless, normalcy will continue to exert its dominance, even as the definitions of normal and abnormal shift and mutate, a fact which would seem ostensibly to undo the force of normality, given that it is dependent on the illusions of stability and objective definability.<sup>208</sup>

Pontiggia, continuing his discussion of normality, will express a similar view, this time using the terms of the medical establishment, the site where the labels “normal” and “abnormal” are often initially assigned and repeatedly enforced:

La normalità – sottoposta ad analisi aggressive non meno che la diversità –  
rivela incrinature, crepe, deficienze, ritardi funzionali, intermittenze, anomalie.  
Tutto diventa eccezione e il bisogno della norma, allontanato dalla porta, si

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<sup>206</sup> While in many ways this logic mirrors that of deconstruction, I maintain that there is a significant difference here in that, for Pontiggia, this tendency is marked by a rejection or leveling out of difference: if we’re *all* different, then in the end *no one* is different. It has as its goal, then, a return to sameness that is antithetical to the deconstructionist project.

<sup>207</sup> I refer to text as material here in the sense that, as written language, it must be located in space (on a page or screen) whereas speech is arguably unlocalizable. Its source is the mouth, the vocal chords, air from the lungs, but it has no substance itself, except as sound waves.

<sup>208</sup> Mitchell and Snyder’s use of Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological* will also be relevant here. They invoke Canguilhem’s argument “that medicine’s decision in the nineteenth century to use a bodily ideal to assess an inherently dynamic and adaptive biology effectively surrendered any claim to scientific objectivity” (*Narrative Prosthesis*, 29). See also: Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn Fawcett and Robert Cohen (New York: Zone, 1991).

riaffaccia più temibile alla finestra. Si finisce per rafforzarlo, come un virus reso invulnerabile dalle cure per sopprimerlo. Non è negando le differenze che lo si combatte, ma modificando l'immagine della norma. (41-42)

[Normality – subjected to aggressive testing no less than diversity – reveals rifts, cracks, weaknesses, functional delays, inconsistencies, anomalies. Everything becomes an exception and the need for the norm, thrown out the door, reappears even more frightening at the window. It ends up being strengthened, like a virus rendered immune to the treatments used to suppress it. It's not by denying differences that one fights it, but by changing conceptions of the norm.]

While Pontiggia shrewdly inverts the terms of medical discourse to figure *normalcy* as a tenacious virus, the result is still clear: the obdurate norm will not be eradicated, despite its ever-changing form and myriad attempts at weakening its forces. Thus, even where Achille allows for the existence of multiple conceptions of normality, a concession that effectively undermines the possibility of a stable category “normal,” he is still able to assert with confidence that he will remain outside of any possible iteration of normalcy. While Pontiggia seems to imply that there is hope in changing “l'immagine della norma,” Davis's view suggests that it is precisely because of the constant transmutation of images of normalcy and abnormality, that normalcy is able to retain pride of place.

The quotation that opens *Achille piè veloce*, the source of which is enigmatically cited only as “Medèn” and about which I will say more further on, instructs the reader on how to approach the text on this score, beginning with one of the very catch phrases signaled by Pontiggia:

Cosa succede alle persone *cosiddette normali* quando incontrano di colpo un matto che urla o le investe di un delirio incomprensibile? Quando vedono qualcuno crollato a terra o inchiodato da uno spasmo sui gradini di una chiesa? Dopo l'incontro restano immobili, con un'espressione di disagio, di paura o di stordimento. Ma il loro volto è cambiato, è come se fossero state fotografate da una luce accecante, scuotono la testa, parlano da sole, per un attimo anche la loro normalità sembra incrinata. Cos'hanno visto nel lampo di quella luce, quale paesaggio, quale specchio, quale verità insostenibile che dimenticheranno subito dopo, ma la cui immagine resterà per sempre, in qualche recesso buio del loro cuore, nella biblioteca in fiamme della loro vita? (Medèn)<sup>209</sup>

[What happens to *so-called normal* people when they suddenly meet a crazy person who is yelling or who assails them with an incomprehensible hysteria? When they see someone collapsed on the ground or seized by convulsions on the steps of a church? After the encounter, they stand still, with an expression of embarrassment, of fear or in a daze. But their face is changed, it's as if they had been photographed by a blinding light. They shake their head, talk to themselves; for a minute their normality too seems compromised. What did they see in the flash of that light, what landscape, what mirror, what unbearable truth which they

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<sup>209</sup> Benni, *Achille*, 11, emphasis mine.

will forget immediately afterwards, but whose image will remain forever, in some dark recess of their heart, in the flaming library of their lives? (Medèn)]

From this citation, we understand that we are to read Achille as *specchio* [mirror]— as that which will change Ulisse and call his own “normalità” into question. The *immagine* that is glimpsed in that mirror, an image of the normal self become abnormal, is repressed but remains imprinted in some way upon the “so-called normal” subject. The “unbearable truth” that is revealed in that moment is, of course, the very fact that normality and abnormality are not distinct, separable categories. The conflation of the two is figured in Benni’s novel by the pairing of Achille and Ulisse, who, as we will see, are themselves not so easily read as separate entities/characters. This challenging of binaries at the formal level of the text – in the form of its textual components or characters – implies once again the particular efficacy of narrative – and especially the typed *written* form of narrative – in the undoing of such norms.

### “Mi ferisco con la penna”: Achille piè veloce and the Technologies of Writing

Achille, like Marianna, writes rather than speaking in order to communicate but uses a computer to write rather than pen and paper. In fact, Achille states that he is *unable* to write by hand due to minimal usage of his hands and spasms that preclude his control of a pen. Benni’s attention to various communicative modes impels the reader to remain cognizant of the fact – or process – of communication at all times. What are the implications of writing by hand versus on a computer? And what of writing with respect to speech? Is the content of communication dependent upon its medium? And what might such relations have to do with the legibility of certain characters over others?

In keeping with the Western Platonic tradition as critiqued by Derrida, and which I discuss at length in chapter one, we might consider typing on a computer to be the final term in the evolution of linguistic forms of expression, where speech is the most “originary,” because presumed to represent thought most immediately, followed by writing (by hand). Lastly, we might add printed type, which is ostensibly a further derivation of handwriting. Each form is meant to mimic and stand in for the former and thus, supposedly, becomes increasingly derivative as one moves down the chain.<sup>210</sup> Benni’s novel challenges such assumptions, reversing the implied chronological ordering of the various forms and placing text and speech on a level plane, though as I will show, they can never said to be entirely *equal*. Through the exclusive use of text, Achille’s character demands that the form of narrative be kept continually present throughout the reading process, a fact which is inseparable from his disabled status and which has profound implications for his role in the narrative.

The written quality of Achille’s typed dialogue is conveyed within Benni’s text by way of the use of italic font, a stylistic choice which has the effect of setting his contributions apart as different, while at the same time giving the impression that a certain *emphasis* or *urgency* accompanies his every statement. Like Marianna, Achille’s writing does not necessarily signal his bodily absence, insisting instead on the material or physical process of writing. In one

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<sup>210</sup> In *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, Jasper Neel puts it thusly: “In the classical notion, writing is tertiary. First there is thinking, then speaking serves as an instrument to represent thinking, and finally writing serves as an instrument to represent speaking. This means not only that writing remains exterior to and dependent on thinking, but also that all systems of signification remain exterior to and dependent on whatever they signify. Language, in other words, must come after, remain outside of, and depend absolutely on meaning.” Jasper Neel, *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 110.

episode, when Achille asks Ulisse to bring him a list of things that annoy him, the following dialogue ensues:

– Me li sono segnati – disse Ulisse – vuoi leggerli? Ma sono scritti male, a mano.

Achille sobbalzò sulla sedia e il collo si tese all'indietro per la rabbia.

*Uomo da poco! Cosa vuole dire male? Forse che le lettere non sono tutte uguali, incolonnate e obbedienti? Hai vocali che debordano, aste che decollano, scrittura che si inchina o si impenna, bordi panciuti, splendidi sgorbi e arabeschi megalomani? Hai la meravigliosa diversità di ogni lettera e parola? Questo è male per te?*

– Non capisco – disse Ulisse.

*Non capisci, sciocco? Io darei qualsiasi cosa per scrivere una sola parola con le mie mani, per poter fare a meno del computer. Ma se ci provo non so cosa mi succede, mi agito, mi blocco, tremo, buco il foglio e mi ferisco con la penna.*

– Mi dispiace...

*Vaffanculo, leggi.*<sup>211</sup>

[– I wrote them down – said Ulisse – do you want to read them? But they're written badly, by hand.

Achille jerked on the seat and his head stretched back in rage.

*Stupid man! What do you mean badly? Maybe that the letters aren't all the same, neatly aligned and obedient? That you have vowels that overflow, shafts that take flight, calligraphy that stoops or soars, pot-bellied borders, splendid scribbles and megalomaniac arabesques? That you have the marvelous diversity of every letter and word? This is bad to you?*

– I don't understand – said Ulisse.

*You don't understand, fool? I would give anything to write a single word with my hands, to be able to do without the computer. But when I try I don't know what happens to me, I flounder, I stall out, I shake, I make holes in the paper and stab myself with the pen.*

– I'm sorry...

*Fuck you, read.]*

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<sup>211</sup> Benni, *Achille*, 103-4.

For Achille, the inconsistencies inherent in writing by hand are what give it precedence over the uniformity of typed writing. The many variations of handwriting are markers of diversity and thus impart a certain aesthetic sensibility as well as the expression of a unique identity. Embedded in Achille's praise of the handwritten word is a celebration of non-normativity or difference from which one could easily extrapolate a celebration of diversity among people as well. But ironically, it is Achille's inability to express himself in this medium full of discrepancy and diversity that sets him apart as different, causing him to lament his lack of access to it.<sup>212</sup>

Benni's attention to different writing instruments emphasizes the fact that differences in formal composition exert a certain influence on both writer and the written product, not to mention the interaction between reader and text, or – in this case – between interlocutors (where interlocutors are necessarily readers and writers). As Vivian Sobchack notes: “[O]ur carnal use of particular and material writing instruments informs and contributes to the structure of our thought and its concrete expression.”<sup>213</sup> Achille's use of a computer has important consequences regarding the shape and content of his communications, marking his mode of “speech” as radically other. As one example, Achille tells Ulisse that he lives within the “tempo ... infinitamente lungo [delle parole] scritte” (70) [*“infinitely long temporality of the written word.”*] He tells Ulisse: “*Noterà che io ho scritto più di quanto lei abbia parlato. È in questo tempo che le chiedo di entrare*” (71) [*“You will note that I have written more than you have said. It is in this temporality that I ask you to enter.”*] Achille's mode of communication affords him the ability to say much more than speech would allow, and imbues his statements with a certain transparency, which I will discuss in the following pages. Significantly, he figures the “tempo delle parole scritte” as having a spatial dimension, as something one could enter into, suggesting a collapse of the temporal and spatial domains, and thus also those of form and content.

At the same time, it is Achille's use of a computer that obscures his identity. The pen is a “technology” that allows for the expression of one's particularity vis-à-vis handwriting, allowing for what Sobchack calls “graphological excess” (131).<sup>214</sup> By contrast, Achille's typed communication has the effect of erasing difference even as it broadcasts it. Where handwriting, like voice, is presumed unique to each individual, thus affording the possibility of recognition of the writer even in their absence, typeface lends itself instead to anonymity, a fact which will have important repercussions with regard to Achille's ability to retain his own writerly authority at the end of the novel.<sup>215</sup> I will say more about this later, but here I want to reiterate that it is thus, paradoxically, Achille's inability to express his own uniqueness, or difference, through the form of his writing that exposes his social and corporeal difference, i.e., his inability to use a pen.<sup>216</sup>

Benni's novel is clearly, in part, a critique of the world of writing and publishing. The fact that Achille uses a computer (as opposed to writing longhand) drives home the increasing

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<sup>212</sup> Achille's claim that if he attempts to write with a pen, he ends up wounding himself, speaks to the role of writing as *pharmakon* which I will return to further on.

<sup>213</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 111.

<sup>214</sup> Sobchack notes that graphological excess is also possible when writing on a computer but states that, nonetheless, using a computer has, for her, reduced “the physical sense of writing” – the “experience of language coursing through my body” – thus effectively lessening the connection between body and language (119).

<sup>215</sup> As writer *par excellence*, Achille is nonetheless divested of his writerly authority. Or perhaps one could say it is *because* his recourse to writing is necessary that he cannot or will not retain ownership of it. The typewritten form of his communications does not allow for authorial identification.

<sup>216</sup> Here, graphological excess or difference is to be understood as “normal” both within and without the text, while textual anonymity (or non-difference), in the form of typeface, is paradoxically what marks Achille's character as other.

dominance of the text form in both communication as well as the market of book publishing. This is, of course, becoming more and more the case, as texts now are created – and remain – on a computer screen (or Kindle screen) without ever being printed on a physical page or bound in a book. The fact that typed or digital communications are growing in prevalence suggests that perhaps Achille's mode of relating is not so "other" after all.<sup>217</sup> However, the fact that Achille would not be *able* to communicate without computer technology is crucial: his self-expression (as a subject) is dependent on the textual, book form. It is only via written/typed narrative that he is able to act as a subject within the narrative.

Where for Marianna, her written form of communication meant that both she and her interlocutor became writers and readers in the exchange of notes, in Achille's case, given that his hearing is not impaired, the conversations are asymmetrical: while Achille types and listens, his interlocutor speaks and reads. Thus, Achille is always the producer of text but never the reader (except perhaps of his own writing), and those who engage in conversation with him are cast as reader, never (or rarely) as writer. Ulisse's thoughts call attention to this asymmetry: "Lui scrive, io parlo, pensò. Gli artifici delle intonazioni, dei volumi, dei gesti, erano ingoiati dal buio [...] Le parole di Achille gli sembrarono venire da una trasparenza a cui lui non sarebbe mai arrivato" (65) ["'He writes, I speak,' he thought. The artifices of intonation, volume, gestures, were swallowed by the dark [...] Achille's words seemed to him to come from a transparency that he would never achieve."'] Here, what might otherwise be seen as markers of identity or meaning, Ulisse deems "artificial." By contrast, Achille's dialogue, understood as text both diegetically and extradiegetically, gives the appearance of transparency – of a one-to-one correlation or literalness at the formal linguistic level that leaves little room for interpretation, as opposed to the myriad possibilities for signification – as well as incongruence – carried by tone of voice, handwriting, or gesture. While this assumption will subsequently be undone, at first glance it would seem that Achille's words are more "literal" (*à la lettre*) and, thus, more direct and authentic, less subject to the vagaries and illusory tricks and turns of metaphor than Ulisse's spoken or handwritten ones.<sup>218</sup> The effect is a kind of anti-orality, a reversal of the classical hierarchy of speech over writing.

Benni himself is clearly playing with the relationship between textuality and orality throughout the novel: in the opening fantastical dream sequences, the various manuscripts in Ulisse's briefcase are personified, as each text transforms into a miniature version of its author and speaks its case, vying for attention (and publication). Throughout the text, there appears to be an explicit reversal at work of the relationship between text and speech as criticized by Derrida and Davis, which I outline in chapter one. Benni's text makes various attempts at thwarting the illusion of the "hearingness of narrative," and instead points continually to its *textual*-ness. In one episode, we witness the limitations of Ulisse's orality as means of expression: "Ulisse cercò di ridere ma non ci riuscì. Se avesse avuto il computer avrebbe potuto scrivere ahahah" (68) ["Ulisse tried to laugh but couldn't. If he had had a computer he could have written hahaha."'] This episode implies that voice, because beholden to the limits of the body, cannot offer a direct, honest, or transparent account of the self. The idea is that one can write what one cannot say, a notion that recalls Maraini's formulation of writing as a substitute

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<sup>217</sup> I will address this idea further in Chapter Four, in my discussion of Cristina Tonelli's *Sirena senza coda*, where social media and online chatting figure prominently.

<sup>218</sup> I place "literal" in quotation marks here to signal that the literalness of Achille's mode of communication still must be understood as occurring within the bounds of a literary text. It is thus "literal" according to the logic of the text, but must always be understood as fictional at the same time.

for the blocked spoken word. However, for Achille, as we have seen, even the pen depends on a certain bodily capacity that the computer does not. The computer, it would seem, allows for the direct expression of an interior state that need not be mediated by the body.<sup>219</sup> The (intact/pure) interior realm of thought is thus seemingly no longer bound by the (always defective/fallible) corporeal exterior. Achille embodies this possibility and, as one who has never had much if any capacity for speech, his writing is thus not to be understood as a derivative representation of a prior spoken linguistic expression. His words are to be understood as first and only *written*.

Another episode in particular attests to this inversion.<sup>220</sup> Ulisse has come to visit Achille and the two are in the midst of conversation, Ulisse speaking while Achille writes, as usual. Achille makes an error while typing and Ulisse mimics him. Again, the italic text represents Achille's writing:

*Non è quello che voglio, è quello che è! Siamo uguuaili, nel bene e nel male.*

– Okay – disse Ulisse – siamo uguu-ailiiii... (68)

*[It's not what I want, it's how it is! We're the saaeme, in the good and the bad.*

- Okay – said Ulisse – we're the saaa-aeme.]

Ulisse's oral repetition of Achille's writing casts the spoken word as that which follows after and imitates the written text, suggesting not only that the spoken word might be bypassed but that it might itself be derivative of an ordinary written word, as Derrida suggests.<sup>221</sup> Of particular significance here is the fact that the word in question is "uguali" [equal]: the subtext is that Achille and Ulisse are not in fact *uguali* – despite Ulisse's repetition of the phrase, including its error – if for no other reason than the fact that Ulisse remains in the realm of the spoken word and Achille in that of the written – a split that serves as a constant reminder of their larger difference as disabled and nondisabled. Taking their exchange out of the diegetic moment, however, at the level of the text itself, we see that in fact the statements of the two characters are *both* written/typed, and all that separates them is a question of font. The narrative being written in type serves to level out difference even as it continually reinforces it.

This episode, too, points up the fact that even typed communications are not immune to error, discrepancy, and diversity, as Achille so ardently claims.<sup>222</sup> Thus, even in the case of an "anonymous" technology, such as the computer, the inconsistencies and markers of difference that reveal one's particular identity do in fact come through, suggesting that Achille's relation to the computer and writing might not be so different from that of Ulisse to voice and speech.

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<sup>219</sup> Of course, this is not truly the case, as bodily participation is still a requirement in any form of writing, and in Achille's case, some movement of the hands is necessary in order to operate the computer. But a conception of the computer as allowing for an expression that is unfettered by the constraints of the body seems to be what the text suggests in this passage. Later in the novel, this idea will be complicated if not refuted entirely.

<sup>220</sup> That Achille is meant to act as a figure for inversions in general is clear from his joke about his namesake: "Mia madre mi bagnò nella vasca sbagliata. Sono invulnerabile solo nel tallone" (70) ["My mother bathed me in the wrong tub. I'm invincible only in my heel."]

<sup>221</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7.

<sup>222</sup> As Sobchack notes, graphological excess is present in the use of computers and typewriters as well, but it is only through handwriting that the contours of the marks themselves reveal the identity of their author, as opposed to questions of style, word choice, etc. (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 131, n. 41).



While it may seem that the computer affords absolute anonymity and freedom from the constraints of the body, it is of course Achille's particular corporeality that necessitates his use of the computer, thereby leading to his unique mode of communication and his literary production, and reinforcing once more the notion that the body and language cannot be separated. It is thus precisely the limits of the body that *allow for* a certain kind of narrative production as opposed to hindering it.

What is more, Benni's use of Homeric names for his primary characters evokes Homer himself, the blind poet, as well as the tradition of the blind bard or prophet. This offers another perspective from which to question assumptions regarding the "natural" or "originary" form of language and literature. Where the Homeric tales were conceived within an oral tradition, a mode which has no need for sight, Achille is dependent upon text, not only for his literary compositions but in his daily communications as well. While for the modern author, literature as text is allowable, as are letter- and email-writing, (all of which are forms that appear within Benni's novel), in-person communication via text is disallowed – a prohibition that is revealed to be both arbitrary and in constant flux, as communication technologies continue to change the norms of human interaction.

### **Parasitic Relations: Beyond Prosthesis**

Ulisse clearly prizes Achille's mode of communication over his own, and as we will see, he has personal motives for doing so. Ulisse, who has written and published one successful book, is suffering from writer's block, an affliction which appears to be linked to his inability to express himself (both verbally and sexually) to his girlfriend, Pilar (*aka* Penelope, continuing the Homeric associations): "[N]on riesco a scrivere una riga sulle emozioni che mi suscita. Una volta mi ha chiesto di scriverle una poesia e le ho portato una poesia di Majakovskij. Ho delegato" (40) ["I can't seem to write a single line about the emotions she invokes in me. Once she asked me to write her a poem and I brought her a poem by Mayakovsky. I delegated."] Ulisse's admission of "delegation" prepares us for the authorial partnership that will develop between Ulisse and Achille, and Ulisse's eventual appropriation of Achille's writing, in what will essentially amount to an act of plagiarism.

Achille, in converse relation to Ulisse, is a talented and prolific writer but claims to be lacking in real life experience – particularly sexual experience – and so enlists Ulisse to provide him with fodder for his literary production. He writes: "*Sto scrivendo un libro, forse di poco valore, ma ho bisogno di lei perché io ho le parole, ma non il mondo. È una storia d'amore ma io non ho mai conosciuto una ragazza*" (69-70) ["I'm writing a book, maybe of little worth, but I need you because I have the words, but not the world. It's a love story but I've never known a girl."] <sup>223</sup> What ensues is therefore not just a reader/writer relation, but a kind of collaborative writing process, where Ulisse experiences "il mondo" and Achille writes about it. Thus, Ulisse is aligned with the deed, or the act, while Achille represents the word. If we follow this line of logic, Achille stands in relation to Ulisse as signifier to signified and Achille thus serves – according to the narrative logic of the text – a prosthetic function in relation to Ulisse. <sup>224</sup> His

<sup>223</sup> Achille's claim of never having "known" a girl can be interpreted both literally and figuratively – as both never having met or been acquainted with a girl as well as never having had sexual contact with a girl.

<sup>224</sup> As signifier and signified, Achille and Ulisse are *uguali* but also not *uguali*, always paired but never quite lining up. According to this logic, at the end of the novel, following Achille's suicide and Ulisse's appropriation of his text, the signifier (Achille) becomes appropriated by the signified (Ulisse) as though the two were perfectly matched, as though they were part of a smooth, one-to-one relation. I do not mean here to conflate the signifier/signified relation

words effectively stand in for what Ulisse cannot bring into being via his own writing. One might say that Achille acts as prosthesis in two distinct ways: 1) his writing represents Ulisse's actions, thoughts and experiences; and 2) his writing stands in for Ulisse's *lack* of writing.

While this reading of the relationship between Achille and Ulisse offers a clear example of Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis – where that which is outside of the norm or is in need of “fixing” is what lends a narrative its initial impetus and its *raison d'être* – I contend that the relationship is more complicated than this interpretation allows, and shifts throughout the text. Rather than a “prosthetic” relation, the operative word in Benni's novel might instead be “parasitic.” At different times in the text, both Achille and Ulisse categorize writers and academics as parasites, which would suggest that Achille (as writer) stands in parasitic relation to Ulisse (as actor).<sup>225</sup> These roles shift throughout the text and at times are characterized instead as symbiotic.<sup>226</sup> Later, it is Ulisse who is described as drawing strength from Achille, reversing the parasitic relation.<sup>227</sup> As opposed to a (prosthetic) add-on that offers a certain amount of support, or the filling in of something that is (supposedly) lacking, the parasite depletes its host, using its resources for its own gain. Significantly, though, the parasitic relation is not contingent on an understanding of the self as whole, nor does it have as its aim the recovery of a prior integrity. These shifting relations speak to an apparent confusion or anxiety in the text about the relationship between writers, writing, and subject matter, as well as about which of these is the parasite and which the host.<sup>228</sup>

Whether parasitic or symbiotic, Achille, as writer, ostensibly appropriates Ulisse's experiences for his own narratives, rewriting Ulisse's life as his own. In each fantasized scenario, Achille writes his own character as temporarily disabled, unable to move anything but his hands and head, mirroring his real life condition. These scenarios normalize his disability by making it a *temporary* condition, having a different cause in each fantasy (a car accident or temporary illness, etc.). In each case, the condition is one from which he could easily recover. Thus, his disability becomes both overdetermined – having many different causes or conditions for its possibility – and is simultaneously negated *as* disability.<sup>229</sup> In keeping with the ideology of

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with that of the prosthesis. In fact, my intention will be to show the inadequacy of such facile attempts at overlaying. However, for my purposes here, it is important to postulate an initial equivalence of such terms, based on the function of “standing in for,” a relation that is complex, dynamic and variously manifested. See my note 37 in Chapter One on Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts*, for a discussion of the problematic usage of “prosthetic” in academic discourse.

<sup>225</sup> Ulisse, in dialogue with one of his manuscripts/authors, says: “Perché volete entrare in questo mondo di premi farseschi, di parassiti accademici, di cretini televisivi elevati a saggisti e di saggisti che aspirano a diventare cretini televisivi?” (21) [“Why do you want to join this world of farcical prizes, academic parasites, television idiots promoted to journalists and journalists that aspire to become television idiots?”] Derrida's critique of J. L. Austin's notion of “parasitic” language is apposite here as well. See: “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1988), in which Derrida shows that, rather than being reserved only for poetic language, in fact *all* language is “parasitic,” problematizing the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, poetic and “serious” language, as well as writing and speech.

<sup>226</sup> Again, Ulisse's miniature manuscript writers are characterized in ambivalent terms: “Così Ulisse si rese conto che le voci litigiose erano di due creature diciamo così suoi condomini, o parassiti, o simbiotici” (14) [“Thus Ulisse realized that the angry voices belonged to two creatures, let's call them his tenants, or parasites, or symbionts.”]

<sup>227</sup> “Achille gli dava forza” (116) [“Achille gave him strength.”]

<sup>228</sup> This also speaks to a certain conflation between author and character, namely Benni and his own subject matter – Achille – which I will discuss later in this chapter.

<sup>229</sup> According to many definitions, especially where benefits claims are at issue, “disability” is defined as a condition that is *not* temporary. For example, the Social Security Administration website lists the following as one of the requisites for being eligible for disability benefits: “Your disability has lasted or is expected to last for at least one

ability, in order to be the protagonist of his own story, Achille identifies himself with Ulisse, with one who is non-disabled.<sup>230</sup> In the first such scenario, Achille re-writes the story of Ulisse's first encounter with Pilar, the very episode that Ulisse had tried and failed to recount due to his writer's block:

Entrai nella libreria sotto casa mia con fatica. Due settimane prima ero caduto in motorino, e mi ero rotto la tibia. Perciò dovevo girare su una sedia a rotelle, con la gamba ingessata protesa in avanti, come il cannone di un carro armato. Avevo noleggiato una sedia modello Xanto, dotata di ruote piroettanti, motore dieci cavalli a dondolo, comando a joystick. Poteva danzare come una ballerina, impennarsi come un destriero, e persino andare in retromarcia.<sup>231</sup>

[I entered the bookstore under my house with difficulty. Two weeks earlier I had fallen on my scooter, and had broken my tibia. For that reason I had to get around in a wheelchair, with my plaster-encased leg protruding forward, like the cannon of an armed tank. I had rented a Xanthos model chair, decked out with pirouetting wheels, an oscillating 10 horsepower engine, joystick command. It could dance like a ballerina, rear up like a steed, and even go in reverse.]

On one hand, the fact that Achille effectively writes Ulisse's life enacts an interesting reversal of the conventional power dynamic between privileged author and marginalized subject matter. Achille, as wielder of words, holds the creative power, while Ulisse is left impotent, an analogy that is explicitly drawn in the text.<sup>232</sup> In Achille's story, that which could potentially impede his movement and his chances of a romantic encounter – his disability – is instead held up as cause for praise. His wheelchair as “destriero” positions him as a gallant knight, rather than pitiable victim, and his broken leg is figured as a cannon, “protesa in avanti,” transforming his (temporary) disablement into a phallic symbol of power and prowess. The use of “protesa” here in a phallic/sexual stance, recalls the relationship between *protesi* [prosthesis] and *protendere* [to

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year or to result in death.” See: *Social Security Administration*, <http://www.ssa.gov/dibplan/dqualify4.htm>. This temporal aspect is intended to mark the difference between a temporary injury or illness and a disability, but of course, as with most attempts at categorization, the boundaries prove to be arbitrary and changeable.

<sup>230</sup> For more on the “ideology of ability,” see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 9-11. While one could argue that the logic of Benni's text necessitates this compliance with the ideology of ability, it is my contention that Benni's novel simultaneously undoes such ideological norms, raising normative relations in order to critique them rather than reinforce them.

<sup>231</sup> Benni, *Achille*, 82. Notably, Achille's literary writing is not signaled using italic font as is his dialogue. Instead the first letter of the paragraph is embellished, like manuscripts of old. His fiction writing is thus coded as “normal” with respect to his conversational writing. Also of note is the fact that Achille writes Ulisse's story in the first person, further eliding the two characters.

<sup>232</sup> As one example: “Provò a scrivere qualcosa su Pilar, magari anche perfido e iroso, qualcosa contro di lei, contro le loro vampate di amore e lontananza, ma non gli uscirono che poche frasi senza passione. [...] Di un tratto si sentì vuoto e decise che non sarebbe tornato a trovare Achille” (Benni, *Achille*, 82) [“He tried to write something about Pilar, maybe even something mean and angry, something against her, against their explosions of love and distance, but nothing issued forth except for a few passionless phrases. [...] Suddenly, he felt empty and decided that he would not go back to see Achille.”] The association between writing and passion, coupled with the categorization of writer's block as a failure to make something “issue forth,” as well as Ulisse's sense of becoming “vuoto,” imply a reading of writerly impotence as sexual impotence. Immediately following this scene, Ulisse finds Achille's first story in his inbox, in which Achille writes an erotic anecdote about Pilar, essentially succeeding in doing what Ulisse cannot.

stick out/extend], suggesting in the Italian, a view of prosthesis that need not be thought as a replacement for that which is lacking, but is instead figured as a protrusion or stretching out – a material shift or mutation of form which potentially alters or enhances function. What is more, the term “impennarsi,” which Achille uses early on in the novel to describe the messiness of writing by hand, is here used in reference to his wheelchair, suggesting a parallel between the kind of productive and desirable difference found in the variability of handwriting and his own brand of physical difference.<sup>233</sup> The “penna” contained in *impennarsi* furthers this connection between disability and writing. His wheelchair is a “vehicle” that is at the same time a symbolic marker, a signifier of difference that can be coded either negatively or positively. This episode is thus a particularly illustrative example of how disability can serve, not as a metaphor for some condition or quality, but as a figure for writing itself, as a function of the narrative process. This relation suggests an understanding of disability as a condition/process that is inseparable from its own representation.

At the same time, the “penna” of *impennarsi* and the “gamba protesa in avanti” suggest that the relationship between disability and writing cannot be considered apart from the question of sexuality, in this case, particularly masculine sexuality. The line between linguistic and sexual activity is blurred in several instances in the novel, as Achille uses Ulisse’s experiences not only for his writing but also for his own sexual fantasies. In one scene, instead of writing, Achille begins to masturbate while Ulisse describes a sexual encounter with his girlfriend. In this scenario, it is Ulisse who is aligned with the word while Achille does the deed, so to speak, reversing the poles of their relation yet again. The interpretation of this scene is further complicated by the fact that the act of masturbating is, by normative standards, characterized as derivative of the “original” procreative event of sexual intercourse, putting pressure on the assumption of a certain type of sexual activity as being “natural” and others as perverse, categorizations that can easily be applied to narratives as well. When Achille interrupts the story, and Ulisse asks if he has become too excited, Achille responds: “*Non è mai troppo. Non voglio andare fino in fondo. Non è che mi vergogni. È che devo andare avanti io con la mia perversa purissima fantasia*” (108) [“It is never too much. I don’t want to see it through to the end. It’s not that I’m ashamed. It’s that I have to continue on myself with my own pure, perverse fantasy.”]<sup>234</sup> What Achille’s response suggests is that Ulisse’s narrative is not perverse *enough*, and that once again Achille’s creative powers surpass those of Ulisse. While Ulisse is able to recount lived sexual experience, Achille, because of his disability and his supposed status outside of the reality of lived experience, is capable of extending far beyond the bounds of reality, into fiction and

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<sup>233</sup> The name of Achille’s wheelchair, Xanthos, is a reference to the mythical Achilles’ horse who was immortal and given the power of speech by Hera. Achille’s wheelchair, the marker of his disability, is thus further aligned with his narrative powers. Like his computer, the wheelchair is a technology that extends from his body and allows him to navigate, both physically and narratively.

<sup>234</sup> Peter Brooks’s conception of narrative desire is relevant here, in particular the idea that reading can be equated with a kind of desire that is, in part, sexual: “We can, then, conceive of the reading of plot as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text. [...] Desire is in this view like Freud’s notion of Eros, a force including sexual desire but larger and more polymorphous” (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 37). Understanding *desire* as narrative motor (rather than disability as Mitchell and Snyder would have it) complicates the function of disability in narrative. What would it mean to say that disability and desire are equatable functions? Both are understood in the Western tradition to be based on lack, and yet pairing the terms disability and desire can lead to a powerful reevaluating of the potential for “desiring disability,” to use McRuer’s term, which he characterizes as, in part, the “desirability of a loss of composure.” See Robert McRuer, “Composing Bodies; or De-Composition: Queer Theory, Disability Studies, and Alternative Corporealities,” *JAC* 24.1 (2004), 50, where he explores the ways that narrative (and specifically composition), disability, and desire overlap in his notion of “de-composition.”

fantasy. An alignment is thus established between disability, literary prowess or creative capacity, and sexual perversity.

Achille's truncation of Ulisse's story before the climax frustrates a teleological notion of narrative. In contrast to Peter Brooks' formulation in *Reading for the Plot*, where "narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for* the end" (52), for Achille the point is not the final satisfaction but the perversity of an endless deferral. However, here, rather than a prolonging of the narrative in order to draw out the pleasure of anticipation, Achille prefers to end the narrative precisely at the height of "tumescence" (to use Brooks' word). Achille's particular form of perversity – both narrative and sexual – is thus characterized by a disregard for the outcome or finished product – is neither productive nor procreative.<sup>235</sup>

While unmistakably phallic in certain regards, Achille's brand of sexuality defies stereotypes of masculine enjoyment. In one passage, Achille boasts of having a particularly large penis ["un uccello portentoso"], which he fantasizes about elongating so that it might exit through the window and act in the world of its own accord. He imagines attaching a note to it that would read, "Il mio padrone è timido, io no. Faccia di me quello che vuole" (108) ["My owner is shy, not me. Do with me what you want."] In this imagined scenario, the anonymity of the written word allows for a sexual capacity and forwardness that would not be possible in a face-to-face interaction. The note attached to the phallus suggests that the fantasy of a mobile penis is to be understood as analogous to the role played by the written word – a "carnal" extension of the self, to use Sobchack's formulation, that is able to circulate freely in the social world, un beholden to the limits of one's particular corporeality while still remaining inextricably connected to it.<sup>236</sup> The linguistic phallus in Achille's fantasy significantly dissociates itself from its owner, again calling attention to the enjoyment of the word itself, regardless of authorial claim. What is more, the elongation of the phallus here is notably not a result of its owner's excitement, but is instead meant to allow for the delivery of a message/text, one that calls explicitly for the *reader's* enjoyment over that of the author.

Robert McRuer theorizes what he calls "de-composition," following Derrida, a mode of writing that places focus on the writing process rather than on the final outcome. McRuer argues that writing has been problematically understood as a process that is neat and orderly – separate from the body and its many contingencies – and given value only in terms of its end product, whereas in reality it is a messy, disordered process that resists closure and is wholly dependent on the "composing body," a body that for McRuer is inevitably queer and/or disabled.<sup>237</sup> The fact that Achille apparently has no interest in end products offers a possible way to understand his motivations for willingly giving over his manuscript to Ulisse, telling him to publish it under his own name. Achille's attitude towards his literary production suggests an attempt to shift focus from copyrights, sales and literary productivity to the practice of – and enjoyment in – writing itself. Rather than receive the accolades, money, and posterity owed to him, Achille opts out of the market economy of the literary arts and thus cannot "take credit" (in the literal, monetary sense) for his own work. Achille rejects his own authority and at the end of the novel, he dies in a questionable suicide while Ulisse takes the credit for his work. Achille's name is written on the

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<sup>235</sup> Of course, one could argue that Achille's refusal of closure only serves to heighten the pleasure of the final resolution. As Brooks puts it, "The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative" (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 104).

<sup>236</sup> I will return to a discussion of Sobchack's notion of language as "carnal extension" further on.

<sup>237</sup> McRuer, "Composing Bodies," 50.

final manuscript, but in pencil, a hand-written trace that is easily erasable, overwritten. In a final ironic twist, the one instance in which Achille succeeds in writing by hand causes his work to be left open for appropriation, rather than marking it with his indelible signature. This ineffectual attempt at marking his work is consistent with Achille's apparent disinterest in literary attribution, reinforcing the idea that narratives are meant to be enjoyed in the process of writing and reading, but not consumed as part of a market exchange.

Part of what makes the masturbatory scene described above perverse is precisely Achille's enjoyment of the narrative, a sexual enjoyment which implicates the author as well – in this case Ulisse – uniting the two in a queer bond, threaded through by the unfolding narrative. Achille's use of Ulisse's assistance in his sexual pleasure casts Ulisse this time in the role of prosthesis with respect to Achille. This inversion is one of the many instances in which *Achille piè veloce* presents a challenge to the stereotypical relation of disabled to non-disabled, while at the same time suggesting a parallel between sexual practices and reading and writing practices. Indeed, Achille repeatedly evades normative expectations regarding both gender and sexuality. He alludes numerous times to being bisexual and tells Ulisse that he fantasizes about cross-dressing: “*Mi piacerebbe molto, una volta, vestirmi di donna. Con sottoveste, calze e una bella parrucca. Immagino che sarei uno spettacolo considerevole. Mi sentirei quasi bello. L’hai mai preso nel culo?*” (89) [I would really like, sometime, to dress like a woman. With a slip, stockings and a nice wig. I think I'd be quite a spectacle. I would feel almost beautiful. Have you ever taken it in the ass?"] Achille's desire to cross-dress is transgressive not only because it goes against gender norms but also – and perhaps even more so – because it challenges the normative assumption that disabled people are devoid of sexuality or sexual identity. As Siebers notes:

If a disabled man tries cross-dressing, the result is different [i.e., it doesn't put his masculinity into question]. It indicates the presence of sexual desire where none was perceived to exist previously. It is only by appearing oversexed that the disabled man appears to be sexed at all. His effeminacy is not an offense against gender because he has no gender identity to offend. Rather, his effeminacy is an offense against the ideology of ability and its imperative that disabled people have no sexual existence.<sup>238</sup>

Again, because of his status as disabled, Achille is able to evade certain injunctions correlated to particular identities (e.g. that those who are gendered male must dress like men). Achille's question, “Have you ever taken it in the ass?”, raises the possibility of a same-sex erotic or sexual relationship between Achille and Ulisse, a transgression which is “allowable” because it is assumed that Achille will not, in the end, be capable of any real sexual advances. However, in the masturbation scene discussed above, a certain ambivalence is revealed regarding *collaboration*, not only with respect to writing practices, but also in relation to sexual practices, an issue that is quite relevant for many people within the disabled community.<sup>239</sup> The question of the permissibility of collaboration in Western society can also be extended to the basic activities of daily life: eating, going to the bathroom, etc.<sup>240</sup> In Achille's case, as for many others, it is

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<sup>238</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 175.

<sup>239</sup> On the use of sex surrogates in the disabled community, see for example: Mark O'Brien, “On Seeing a Sex Surrogate,” *The Sun* 174 (May 1990): n. pag. Web. 6 Jan 2014.

<sup>240</sup> Clearly, the social norms with respect to such activities, in particular with regards to *privacy*, vary greatly depending on the specific cultural context. However, the assumption that – beyond a certain age – one should be

ostensibly his disability that necessitates such collaborations, opening up possibilities for outcomes that would not be possible if undertaken by one person alone.<sup>241</sup> What Benni's novel suggests, through the oscillating figure of the parasite/symbiont, is that it is not so easy to classify one person as dependent and the other as the helper: the roles of parasite and host are unclear and easily reversible. What is more, I suggest that Benni's text makes a case for an understanding of writing and the writing process as always already in some way collaborative and thus always already a queer "de-composition," to use McRuer's formulation.

It is worth noting here that despite my characterization of Achille as the sole possessor of creative prowess in the novel, Ulisse's stories, recounted orally to Achille, are arguably just as essential to the writing process and Achille's eventual output. Rather than a simple inversion of hierarchies, then, where Achille is posited as superior (at least as a writer) to Ulisse, and writing itself is considered to take precedence over orality, in Benni's novel the two are intertwined in ways that are so complexly interwoven as to be inextricable. Achille needs Ulisse's stories in order to write his narratives, just as Ulisse needs Achille to write them. Likewise, ability and disability are mutually contingent and contextually inflected. Thus, even as Achille and Ulisse appear to be representative of two distinct sides of a coin, situated in binary relation to one another along a variety of axes, the defining markers of either side of such binaries continually shift and elide into one another, undoing the very possibility of a static dualistic understanding.

### **Overwriting: Disability as *Pharmakon***

I would like to offer Derrida's figure of the *pharmakon* as a way of thinking through this shifting binary relation between the characters of Achille and Ulisse. As that which is both remedy and poison, the *pharmakon* undoes normative delineations of good and bad and thwarts attempts at easy categorization. The term – "*farmakon*" in the Italian – appears several times within Benni's novel. In one instance, Achille bluffs that he has poisoned Ulisse with his medicine (called "Medèn"): "*È un farmakon molto forte, una fiala basta a fermare il mio furore, la tempesta del mio corpo, la ribellione dei miei nervi. Odio questa medicina, odio ogni volta che l'ho presa e che mi ha spento. Ma oggi è farmakon amico e complice. Una dose stenderebbe un uomo normale*" (127) ["*It's a very strong pharmakon, one vial is enough to curb my rage, the storm of my body, the rebellion of my nerves. I hate this medicine, I hate every time that I've taken it and it has placated me. But today it is a friendly and complicit pharmakon. One dose would knock a normal man out.*"]<sup>242</sup> Here, Achille not only explains the logic of the *pharmakon*

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autonomously able to carry out these actions without help is fairly ubiquitous and certainly relevant to Italian societal norms.

<sup>241</sup> I insist upon the term "collaboration" here in order to challenge the rhetoric of assistance and dependence that often characterizes ableist notions of disabled/non-disabled relations. Many disability theorists have written on the issue of dependence vs. autonomy and on the need for a conception of "interdependence." As one example, Mitchell and Snyder write: "While a focus of the 'independent living movement,' which we wholly endorse, has concentrated upon the goal of *autonomy* for disabled people, we would point out that the *interdependency* of disability living constitutes an important factor in achieved independence" (Mitchell & Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, xii). Similarly, others have claimed that interdependence characterizes the lives of the non-disabled as well in ways that are often unacknowledged or not considered as such.

<sup>242</sup> The term occurs twice prior to this episode. In one instance, it is most likely a reference to marijuana and is called upon as an aid for writing: "[Ulisse] riesumò un cicchino di un farmacon giamaicano su cui l'opinione pubblica si divide, e cercò di lavorare" (Benni, *Achille*, 81) ["Ulisse exhumed the butt of a Jamaican pharmakon about which public opinion is divided and tried to work."] Here, Ulisse tries again to write (about his girlfriend, Pilar) and is again unsuccessful, thus confirming the link between the *pharmakon* and the writing process, while simultaneously questioning its efficacy. Again, the fact that he attempts and fails to write about his girlfriend suggests a kind of

(as both remedy and poison), he reveals as well a division, where what serves as medicine or remedy for him (as a disabled person) acts as poison for “un uomo normale.” The binary oscillation of the *pharmakon* thus becomes externalized and concretized as two distinct entities, figured as the disabled and non-disabled subjects, respectively – further suggestion that Achille and Ulisse are meant to be read as two parts of the same whole, as terms that both oppose and elide into one another. The *pharmakon* itself as a figure manages to simultaneously contain both the sense of two autonomous, independent terms as well as a sense of these terms as inexorably bound one to the other.

In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida claims that translations of Plato that render *pharmakon* as “remedy” – thus omitting its opposite meaning and not allowing the contradiction to stand intact – have the effect of neutralizing “the very textuality of the translated text.” He writes: “the choice of only one of these renditions by the translator has as its first effect the neutralization of the citational play, of the ‘anagram,’ and, in the end, quite simply of the very textuality of the translated text.”<sup>243</sup> Benni, by contrast, does not “translate” the term, but uses it in its Italian spelling – *farmacon* – allowing the play of terms it carries within it to continue circulating freely, leaving the “textuality of the text” intact.

The name of Achille’s medicine, “*Medèn*,” will ring a bell for careful readers of Benni’s text. The epigraph that begins the novel – and which I quote earlier in this chapter – is cited as an excerpt from a book of the same title (*Medèn*). The same passage will appear again towards the end of the novel as the incipit to Achille’s own written text – a coincidence that suggests that the book we are reading (Stefano Benni’s *Achille piè veloce*) is in fact the very text that Achille is simultaneously writing.<sup>244</sup> *Medèn*, as both medicine/poison and *text*, bears out the very origins of the *pharmakon*, upon which Derrida bases his theory. As the story goes in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the god Theuth presents writing to King Thamus as an aid for memory, claiming that writing extends memory infinitely. King Thamus refuses the gift, however, saying it will instead produce forgetfulness, the opposite of its intended purpose: according to the logic of the *pharmakon*, once one’s thoughts are written down, one need not remember that which was written. Derrida’s play on the *pharmakon* is thus not only a play of opposites – as both remedy and poison: it is intrinsically a term that applies to writing itself. For Achille, the function of writing as *pharmakon* is made clear in the following passage: “Appena si mise a scrivere, gli spasmi si

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impotence that underscores the relation between Ulisse and Achille, complicating the binaries between action and inaction, sexual and asexual. In another episode where the term appears, Achille uses it to refer to Ulisse’s visits, thus invoking their collaborative writing process as well: “*Tra poco lei se ne andrà, per me è il momento del farmacon, del prolungamento dell’agonia*” (71) [“*In a little while you’ll go away, for me it’s the moment of the pharmakon, the prolonging of the agony.*”] These iterations of the term suggest a double movement: while Achille may act as *pharmakon*, he is also equally acted upon.

<sup>243</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 127.

<sup>244</sup> This is confirmed by the confusion of titles that ensues when Ulisse submits the manuscript enclosed in the medical leaflet for Achille’s medicine, prompting the publisher to suggest that he change the title from “*Medèn*” to something else. The fact that the opening epigraph of Benni’s novel still bears the name “*Medèn*” suggests that either the change did not take place, or that *Medèn* exists as a kind of parallel text to *Achille piè veloce*. We might think of it as both “paratext” and “hypotext,” to use Gérard Genette’s terminology. It is both front matter and source, in a recursive relationality that defies the (chrono)logical order of writing. Genette writes: “Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.” Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.



diradarono. Le dita di Achille si infilavano nei tasti con precisione e velocità” (65) [“As soon as he starts to write, the spasms die down. Achille’s fingers hit the keys with precision and speed.”] Like his *fiale* of Medèn-as-medicine, Achille’s engagement in the activity of writing, calms his spasms and enables him to move fluidly and calmly. Benni’s novel complicates this notion by showing that whether writing acts as poison or remedy is dependent upon the *form* of writing undertaken, particularly in regards to the instrument used, as well as on the particular individual’s corporeal makeup. As we have seen, writing by hand causes Achille to shake and spasm, even to injure himself, whereas here, writing on the computer calms his shaking.

I suggest further that Achille himself be read as a kind of *pharmakon* within the narrative, both aiding and hindering Ulisse’s writing process and, at the same time, resisting the possibility of definition. Like the *pharmakon*, Achille’s character is overdetermined: he is described as “incompiuto,” “una creatura mai vista,” “un uomo col sorriso da cane,” “una forma né di uomo né di animale, un nero fantasma indistinto” (65) [“incomplete,” “an unknown creature,” “a man with a dog’s smile,” “a form neither human nor animal, a dark indistinct phantom”]. The proliferation of descriptors reveals a certain anxiety that underlies the text with respect to the difficulty in containing Achille’s character, but also in the face of the process of writing itself: the narrative resists the imperative to make linguistic choices, to decide on one word over other possibilities. This is the logic of the *pharmakon*, which does not allow for a definitive choice to be made.

Symptomatic of this anxiety is Benni’s tendency to list synonymous terms, one after the other, in a manner that crowds the text, hindering the reader’s comprehension. We often find strung together the Italian, English, and French for a single word, betraying the narrator’s uncertainty in making definitive decisions regarding vocabulary. As one example, Benni writes: “Si trovava nella periferia o banlieue o hinterland, nella zona dei grandi magazzini o galleries o shopping center, i quali, lesquels, which, si intravedevano lontano nella nebbia, brouillard, fog, illuminati come transatlantici” (19) [He was out in the hinterland or banlieue or periferia, in the area with the big shopping centers or galleries or grandi magazzini, which, lesquels, i quali, could be glimpsed from afar in the fog, brouillard, nebbia, lit up like ocean liners.”] The overloading of metonymic associations that proliferate throughout the text suggest a kind of aphasia at the level of the text that causes a collapsing of the paradigmatic axis and a jumbling of similar or related terms.<sup>245</sup> According to the logic of linguistic structuralism, when functioning “correctly,” the paradigmatic axis excludes the possibility of two signifiers occupying the same position at the same time. One must be absent in order for the other to be present. Thus, associative relations necessitate the *absence* of all other signifiers in order for the chosen term to be *present*. Benni’s mode of writing, by contrast, allows for the “co-presence” of redundant or incompatible terms, undermining the injunction to be decisive. It is a stylistic choice that involves *not* making a choice, thereby thwarting the limitations dictated by the linguistic

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<sup>245</sup> Here, I refer to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language as put forth by Roman Jakobson in “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956). The paradigmatic axis is the vertical axis from which one chooses from a group of words (or signifiers) of the same category. The syntagmatic axis, on the other hand, represents the syntax of a sentence – the stringing together of the various parts of speech. Both axes are necessary in order for a language to signify. An important aspect of this structure for the argument I am making here is that the concept of paradigmatic relations refers to signifiers that are absent from the text. As Saussure puts it: “Syntagmatic relations hold *in praesentia*. They hold between two or more terms co-present in a sequence. Associative [paradigmatic] relations, on the contrary, hold *in absentia*.” Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1983), 122.

medium.<sup>246</sup> However, in so doing, a narrative excess is engendered, a form of what I am calling “overwriting,” that clutters the syntax of the text and frustrates the reader’s ability to scan fluidly, thereby calling attention to itself *as* text.<sup>247</sup> What this suggests is that the presence of disability undermines the possibility of fixed meaning within the text. The text uses it (like a crutch or drug) but then is undone by it, as the *pharmakon* switches over to its poisonous form.

Ulisse’s own case of aphasia is described in similar terms: “Ecco il problema. Non riesco a parlare di lei, a volte neanche con lei. Quando la vedo mi sento traboccare, franare, straripare, vorrei dirle milioni di cose, ma mi blocca” (40) [“This is the problem. I’m not able to speak about her, sometimes not even with her. When I see her I feel myself overflow, collapse, spill over, I’d like to tell her a million things, but I get blocked up.”] The block that Ulisse experiences in communicating with his girlfriend – and in writing – is described not in terms of a *lack* of words but instead as a kind of discursive overflow, an excess that disallows the possibility of communication. Ulisse’s instrumentalization of Achille’s prolific writing powers is thus not a prosthetic structure, in the narrow sense of a replacement for something lost. Achille’s writing, by contrast, does not stand in for Ulisse’s lack of words so much as it is able to make order out of discursive chaos. Putting into prose form that which for Ulisse is a jumble of signifiers, Achille does not fill in for something missing, but instead puts the words into comprehensible order, again suggesting a *formal* function rather than one of content.

It is significant that Ulisse uses the same term here to describe his linguistic block that Achille used regarding his inability to write with a pen – “mi blocca” – drawing a parallel between Achille’s utilization of the computer and Ulisse’s use of Achille. This suggests a different kind of prosthesis – a more expansive definition of the term that can include any number of technologies or assistive devices serving to support or enhance function for the user.<sup>248</sup> The catch is that for Ulisse, the “assistance” Achille provides in writing his stories for him has the effect of rendering Ulisse himself redundant. As ghostwriter, Achille produces the text that Ulisse will claim as his own, but in so doing, the need for Ulisse’s own production of text is effectively eliminated, recalling the effect described by King Thamus in Plato’s story. This is the *pharmakon* at work – Achille “fixes” Ulisse’s writing problem via a cure that does away with Ulisse’s need to write at all.

### **Nothing in Excess: Achille’s Narrative Overdose**

Like the linguistic structure described above, Achille and Ulisse themselves can also be regarded as co-present terms, occupying the same position as primary protagonist or “hero,” each of whom takes up certain functions lacking in the other. As I have already shown, Ulisse speaks while Achille writes; Ulisse carries on relationships with women but is unable to express himself in writing, whereas Achille is a master of linguistic expression. Given the conventional biases

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<sup>246</sup> The idea of language as structured in linear or grid form is critiqued by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere.

<sup>247</sup> “Overwriting,” as I am using it here, itself carries a variety of meanings. It can mean both “writing over,” as in replacing, or it can mean an excess of writing, which allows a variety of options to be included coterminously, causing an overabundance of words.

<sup>248</sup> As Sobchack notes, the “prosthetic” as a conceptual figure has become all but ubiquitous in theoretical discourse, and perhaps especially in New Media studies. In Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), all media are understood as prosthetic, in a metaphorical sense, an extension of the senses. Various attempts to return to a material, embodied conception of the prosthetic can be found in the collection, *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, eds. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

towards Ulisse's modes of being, in particular with regard to expectations of masculinity, I argue that Ulisse retains his position of centrality – of primary subjecthood – precisely by virtue of his participation in the oral mode. The Western tradition's repressed insistence on the *oral* quality of text – the “hearingness” as Davis puts it – suggests a view of language that is inextricably tied to the hearing, speaking (and present) body, whereas text allows for the “hearing” of words at a distance from their “speaker” or author, allowing for direct access to the realm of thought without recourse to the functions of speech and hearing.<sup>249</sup> Given that the oral mode is, at least in this sense, supposedly *more* physical or embodied than writing, not less, how do we reconcile the oral-centricity of the Western tradition with the understanding of language and body – or thought and body – as separate, a notion that is central to the Enlightenment understanding of subjectivity?<sup>250</sup> I argue that it is precisely by virtue of the fact that the written is (mis)taken for orality – that in that falsehood lies the moment of repression of the body, the voice become text.<sup>251</sup> Ulisse is thus able to make use of writing (and of Achille *as* a writing machine of sorts, albeit one who “uses” him in return), while remaining firmly within the realm of *logos*. Writing is thus produced in a kind of vacuum: the insistence upon the negative quality of text, its *absence*, is borne out in the denial of the mechanism – the embodied “technology” – that produced it. In order for Ulisse to claim Achille's writing as his own, Achille must disappear, allowing Ulisse to “produce” a finished novel without ever having to leave the realm of the oral. By this logic, Achille's character is eliminated in a bid to hide the evidence.

However, the damage – so to speak – is already done. Achille's very mode of writing has produced a text that boldly affirms its textuality at every turn. Thinking back to our discussion of Davis's “deafened modality” and the “hearingness” of narrative in chapter one, we note that Achille's statements (in text) are subject to a phenomenon similar to those of Marianna Ucria: wherever Achille's character engages in conversation, his half of the dialogue must be signaled as text, and therefore becomes “doubly written.” In Achille's case, the double-writtenness of the text takes on a double meaning, as it were, as we come to realize that the very text we are reading is meant to be understood as written not only by Stefano Benni, but by Achille himself. A kind of oscillation is thus set in motion whereby the two authors come to occupy the same position – not as co-authors or collaborators, but as two distinct entities that simultaneously inhabit a position that ostensibly can only allow for one possible occupant, thus replaying the relation between Achille and Ulisse. The doubly-written quality of Achille's typed communications bears out this authorial duplication, ever signaling the “textualness” or “writtenness” of the narrative. This is another way in which the text is “overwritten”: in this case, it is twice- or even three times-written: once by Benni, once by Achille, then apprehended by Ulisse.

The proliferation of similar linguistic terms extends as well to the Homeric names of the protagonists. While in the Homeric tales, Achilles and Ulysses are each heroes in their own right, here their roles become intertwined and blurred, calling into question the centrality of Ulisse as primary protagonist. Again, a definitive choice has not been made and so we end up with two heroes instead of one, each able to slide into the other due to their metonymic relation. However, when Achille's character dies, Ulisse will appropriate his story, restoring his primacy as central

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<sup>249</sup> Of course, in the process of reading text other senses take the fore – sight or touch – as I explore in Chapter Two.

<sup>250</sup> See Adriana Cavarero's “The Vocal Body” on the traditional Western conception of voice as incorporeal and directly tied to thought/conscience, etc.

<sup>251</sup> Importantly for disability studies, this foundational moment of repression builds a decidedly ableist form into the very history of letters, literature, and writing. Where speech is not available to a subject, all forms of language are presumed to be impaired or precluded.

protagonist, and “reuniting” word and deed, signifier and signified. Ulisse claims Achille’s manuscript as his own, an act of overwriting – here in the sense of “writing over” – that I argue is not an erasing but a kind of overlaying, which has the effect of suppressing or sublimating the other, but which never succeeds in eliminating it entirely.

To add yet another level of over-writing and writing-over, already Benni’s novel is a re-writing of the original Homeric tale, albeit grossly altered. Achille recounts the story as follows: “*Io e lei abbiamo nomi omerici. Achille ha la tragedia come destino. Mia madre mi bagnò nella vasca sbagliata. Sono invulnerabile solo nel tallone. Lei, Ulisse, ha per destino l’avventura e incontrare mostri*” (70) [“*You and I have Homeric names. Achilles has tragedy as his destiny. My mother bathed me in the wrong tub. I’m invincible only in my heel. You, Ulysses, have adventure and encounters with monsters as your destiny.*”] Achille simultaneously inhabits the role of hero of his own tragedy, as well as that of monster in Ulisse’s epic wanderings. Significantly, Ulisse’s tale follows its usual, familiar course – adventures, encounters with monsters – whereas Achille’s, in contrast to the Homeric tale, ends as soon as it begins. The “tragedia,” according to Achille, is not his eventual death, but is instead his *origin* and the origin of his disability: his birth. Of course, the very fact that the story is being told already undoes Achille’s pronouncement. His tale may be a tragedy but it does not end where it begins. It proceeds as long as it continues to be told, and as long as he continues to write it.

In *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Adriana Cavarero compares the figures of the Homeric Achilles and Ulysses, arguing that Achilles, who dies a youthful heroic death, represents the idea that narrative gains meaning based on its end, whereas Ulysses is able to carry the story on, propelling it forward. This reading offers the suggestion that perhaps we should see *Achille’s* as the normative narrative – with beginning, middle and end, according to Aristotelian definitions – while Ulisse’s perversely continues on and on without a linear trajectory. This idea troubles the oft-repeated notion that the character who dies within the narrative is effectively expunged from the text because considered in some way “unfit” to be a primary protagonist. From this perspective, by contrast, it is a character’s death that bestows meaning and importance upon him, in addition to heroic standing. Referring to the Homeric tale, Cavarero writes: “Achille muore giovane, al culmine di una grande azione e in quella piena e meritata gloria che, di fatto, gli ha concesso fama immortale” [“Achilles dies young, at the height of action and in the midst of that full and deserved glory that, de facto, bestowed immortal fame upon him.”]<sup>252</sup> In Benni’s novel, however, fame is not Achille’s fate after death, nor is it what he desires. Giving over his own story to another, Achille renounces any claims to authorial renown, showing instead a proclivity for anonymity and for cutting things short before they reach such great heights.<sup>253</sup> Thus, where Cavarero writes of the mythical Achille, “sceglie di ottenere con la morte uno stato durevole dell’identità” (43) [“he chooses in death to obtain a lasting identity”],

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<sup>252</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997), 42.

<sup>253</sup> When asked in an interview why he chose to use Homeric names, Benni responds: “Perché chi sono gli eroi oggi? Per caso i nostri miserabili politici, esibizionisti e pieni di privilegi? O forse i caduti in guerra, vittime bendate che muoiono senza nemmeno vedere in faccia il loro nemico, sacrificati agli interessi e alle bugie di qualche tiranno o petroliere paranoico? Io preferisco gli eroi quotidiani senza armi, che anche nella sofferenza riescono a mantenere un difficile spazio di generosità verso gli altri” [“Because who are the heroes today? By chance our miserable politicians, privileged exhibitionists? Or maybe the fallen in war, blindfolded victims who die without ever even seeing their enemy in the face, sacrificed to the interests and lies of some tyrant or paranoid oil tycoon? I prefer those daily heroes without weapons, that even in suffering manage to maintain a hard-won space of generosity towards other people.”] Stefano Benni, “I miei eroi sono disarmati,” interview by Luciana Sica, *La Repubblica*, 31 Dec. 2003.

for Benni's hero, by contrast, death assures instead only non-identity, as his story is subsumed into that of Ulisse. However, in typical Bennian oscillating fashion, while Ulisse may continue to live and act within the narrative, we, as readers, know that he is an impotent plagiarist and that his happy ending is procured at the expense of Achille's.

What is interesting is that not all readers understand as much. One reviewer writes of Benni's novel: "Un romanzo geniale, con un lieto fine coerentemente imperfetto: Ulisse non è ancora a casa, continua il viaggio e continua la guerra. Ma ha trovato il coraggio di alzare la matita come una spada, di amare il proprio respiro, di camminare a occhi aperti, conscio, almeno stavolta, di aver imparato qualcosa" ["A brilliant novel, with a fittingly imperfect happy ending: Ulysses is not yet home, he continues his journey and continues fighting the war. But he has found the courage to raise his pencil like a sword, to love his own breath, to walk with eyes open, aware, at least this time, of having learned something."] <sup>254</sup> Despite the fact that Achille wrote and even signed his own manuscript (albeit in pencil), it is Ulisse who is given the credit – by this reviewer as well as at the level of the plot – for having raised his pencil like a sword. Clearly, the logic deployed (yet also undone) by the text is powerful enough to convince even its reviewers that a disabled character could not possibly be an author. This same reviewer contends that it is a happy ending for Achille as well because, although he dies, at least he will not have to go into an institution: "Achille ha realizzato il suo desiderio, non sarà mai rinchiuso in una casa di cura." ["Achille's wish had come true: he would never be locked up in a nursing home."] The idea that he is "saved" from an undesired fate by death feeds directly into the logic of "better off dead," a common refrain in the disability rights community which refers to the argument often made in medical situations that a disabled person's life is not worth living. According to this eugenicist logic, the best possible outcome for a disabled person is death. This reviewer stops at the literal level of the text, taking Achille's words at face value, and neglects the more subtle layers of meaning in the text. In fact, I argue that Achille's death is perhaps not his final word after all, a claim which, as I will show, rests on the nature of the relationship between death and writing within Benni's text.

In Achille's first letter to Ulisse, he writes: "*Io posso scrivere poco e con fatica, e tra breve tempo non potrò più scrivere e ne morirò...*" (27) ["I can write very little and with difficulty and before long I won't be able to write anymore and I'll die from it..."] What may seem at first to be a hyperbolic claim – that he will die if he is not able to write – is actually quite literal. Achille's life and his writing are inseparable processes, speaking to the extent to which disability and narrative – in this case, explicitly disability and *written* narrative/the writing process – are intertwined. We have already seen the many ways in which narrative is dependent on disability. Here, Achille suggests a reciprocal structure whereby disability is equally dependent upon narrative. It is through narration that disability is discursively produced and perpetuated. Achille is caught in the trap of the *pharmakon* – he must continue writing himself, *and writing himself as disabled, as abnormal spectacle*, in order to survive. However, in order to write himself as disabled, he is constrained to disallow his own subject position and in the end he

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<sup>254</sup> Manuela Mellini, "Recensione di *Achille piè veloce*," in *Bollettino '900* n. 2, II Semestre (2003), <http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2003-ii/Mellini.html>. The language Mellini uses here in reference to Ulisse is taken directly from a passage in the novel which refers to *Achille's* victory: "Con fatica, con chissà quale lenta e trionfante fatica, c'era riuscito. Aveva scritto il suo nome con le sue mani. Il suo unico nome, che indicava il suo corpo e la sua storia. Con la spada di una piccola matita. Vittorioso, alla fine. Ecco perché tutto è stato scritto" (Benni, *Achille*, 230) ["With difficulty, with who knows what slow and triumphant difficulty, he had succeeded. He had written his name with his own hands. His unique name, which indicated his body and his story. With a small pencil for a sword. Victorious, in the end. That was why everything was written."]

must commit narrative suicide, writing himself out of the story entirely. He must continue taking his medicine (*Medèn*) in order to function, but that same medicine will, in the final instance, precipitate his demise. And indeed, in the end of the novel, he commits suicide by overdose.

A word about the title of Achille's text/medicine: in the Greek, "Μηδέν ἄγαν" (in the latinized alphabet, "Medèn ágan") literally translates to 'Nothing in excess,' or, more colloquially in English, "Everything in moderation." The reference already warns of Achille's fate: by overdosing in the final pages, Achille does not heed the axiomatic rule and thus suffers fatal consequences. Tellingly, however, Achille's title is a truncated version of the expression: the second term, *ágan* – meaning "very much" or "excess" – is left off, an ironic twist that, in barring excess, leaves instead only lack. *Medèn*, as a "nothing" that becomes "too much" via overdose, comes to hold both meanings within it, once again recalling the figure of the *pharmakon*. As both text and medicine, nothing and too much, remedy and poison, *Medèn* is that which prolongs Achille's life only to then take it away. The text as 'nothing' performs a cancellation of itself as text. Thus, we come to see how the written-ness of the narrative and the text's need to do away with the evidence of such written-ness is inextricably bound to the ideology of ability: Achille's death restores both the fallacy of the orality of the text and the primacy (and sole existence) of the able-bodied character/author. Again, as an overwriting that *over-rides*, text is an excess that erases as it is laid down.

Achille's narrative is overwritten and appropriated, but if we allow that it is he who is writing the story, then it is he who is authoring/authorizing the appropriation, and thus one could argue that he still maintains some form of control over it. Even at the level of the plot, he claims that he *wants* Ulisse to claim his manuscript as his own, that it is a gift. After having written his manuscript, Achille tells Ulisse: "*A mia madre, che mi ha aiutato a stamparlo, ho detto che è roba tua. Ed è vero. Tu hai ispirato, io ho raccontato, tu sei stato il Dio e io l'oracolo, tu l'estro e io il supporto, tu il Paraclete e io la Madonna. [...] Mettici la tua firma, pubblicalo, e se avrai successo goditelo*" (201) ["I told my mother, who helped me print it, that it was yours. And it's true. You were the inspiration and I the storyteller, you were God and I the oracle, you the impulse and I the support, you the Paraclete and I the Madonna [...] Sign it, publish it, and if it brings you success, enjoy it."] Again, this is consistent with Achille's "perverse" form of writing: his concern is with Ulisse's enjoyment and not his own success. He does not want to be published or enter into the market economy and, in this sense at least, he retains a certain authorial control, despite the fact that it may seem quite the contrary. The same can be said to apply in regards to his death: suicide, writing oneself off, is – put crudely – a way of "authoring" one's own death.<sup>255</sup> And if we follow this line of thinking, the fact that Achille continues to write events that occur *after* his death, we must question whether he, in fact, died at all. Achille is thus a ghostwriter turned ghost – a "phantom writer" that continues to exert his control over the narrative even after he has ostensibly been expunged from it. Achille is thus, like (his) text, a nothing that is something, an absence that is unmistakably present.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> On suicide as authorship, see Elizabeth Leake, *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth-century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

<sup>256</sup> Achille's name written on his final manuscript speaks to this notion: written in pencil and for once, notably, by hand, Achille's signature is both easily erasable and impossible to remove. The trace of his authorship is metonymically displaced from the position of author to the title of Benni's published novel, *Achille piè veloce*. However, instead of simply reading "Achille," Ulisse/Benni makes the addition of "piè veloce," an ironic addendum that once again seeks to erase the presence of disability from the text.

## Disability and the Mirror Stage: “Non posso dire...”

Achille, as the authorial voice that haunts the text, utilizes a mode of writing that partakes in what Carla Freccero has pinpointed as one aspect of the spectral: “Spectrality also acknowledges fantasy’s constitutive relation to experience. It suggests that fantasy is the mode of our experiential existence, that it mediates how we live our desire in the world.”<sup>257</sup> Achille’s fantastical tales incorporate and mutate Ulisse’s oral stories, turning the voice of the specter into a written/textual haunting. Ulisse recognizes himself in the stories told, despite the obvious identity markers that ostensibly apply only to Achille (the use of a wheelchair, paralysis, etc.). Achille’s spectral presence thus also serves as a reflection of Ulisse’s own abnormality, just as the opening epigraph from *Medèn* predicts. I think it is worth reproducing the citation again in part here: “Cosa succede alle persone cosiddette normali quando incontrano di colpo un matto che urla o le investe di un delirio incomprensibile? [...] Cos’hanno visto nel lampo di quella luce, quale paesaggio, quale specchio, quale verità insostenibile che dimenticheranno subito dopo, ma la cui immagine resterà per sempre” (11). The image in the mirror combined with the haunting trace of an image that will never disappear entirely invokes the etymological relation of the *spettro* [specter] and the *specchio* [mirror], the image that is at once both oneself and an other, both unfamiliar and utterly recognizable. Ulisse’s encounter with Achille forces him to see himself in a clearer light, suggesting that what haunts Ulisse is, in fact, not Achille, but his own unbearable image.

At the same time, the text is haunted by the ghost of the real person upon whom Achille’s character is based, the person Benni knew and modeled his character after. At the end of the novel, after Achille has died and Ulisse finds Achille’s faint signature on his manuscript, he addresses Achille in his thoughts: “Non so cosa dirti, Achille. Sì, il libro è mio, e io ti dimenticherò. E un giorno mi tornerai in mente. E questo diventerà altri libri” (230) [“I don’t know what to tell you, Achille. Yes, the book is mine, and I will forget you. And one day you’ll come to mind. And this will become other books.”] Here, Achille seems to be relegated to the realm of thought, as though he were perhaps in the end only a product of Ulisse’s imagination. The question of whether Achille is “real” or not is, perhaps, besides the point, although the final pages of the novel seem to shift towards an interpretation that would assign Achille to the role of literary inspiration, leaving Ulisse as sole author (despite Achille’s claim to the contrary). Benni’s voice is particularly perceptible in this final episode of the novel and the closest approximation to a “moral” or message is offered. In the last paragraphs, Ulisse thinks about Achille, “Al suo amico senza peso, così leggero da tenere in braccio, così adatto al volo. A quanta gioia era mancata a lui, a quelli come lui, a noi tutti ugualmente” (231) [“About his weightless friend, so light you could take him in your arms, so suited for flight. About the joy that was kept from him, from those like him, from all of us equally.”] The slippage from “lui” to “quelli come lui” and finally to “noi tutti” reveals a possible moral underpinning for Benni’s novel, suggesting that Achille is meant to be understood as a figure for humanity in general, and for all that is painful – without joy – in our lives. Indeed, in an interview with Luciana Sica, Benni states: “Dobbiamo accettarlo [Achille] nella sua integrità, proprio come il nostro dolore, che grida anche se vorremmo che dormisse, anche quando non vorremmo ascoltarlo” [“We must accept him [Achille] in his entirety, just like our pain, which yells even though we want it to

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<sup>257</sup> Carla Freccero, “Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies*, eds. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 196. Many thanks to Christopher Atwood for suggesting this connection.

sleep, even when we don't want to hear it.”<sup>258</sup> Achille thus begins to slide into a metaphorical figure after all: as an ephemeral symbol of pain, he loses his material reality and, like a ghost, inhabits “all of us.”<sup>259</sup>

The “noi tutti” invoked in the final paragraphs of the novel involves the reader in a relation with Achille which has up until this point existed only between Ulisse and Achille. Achille becomes the specter that haunts “us all” – the other in the mirror that inaugurates the novel in the opening citation from Medèn, and tells of what happens to those who encounter “abnormality.” Significantly, what the “normal” subject – i.e., the subject like “us” – sees in the mirror is thus, in this instance, not an illusion, but the authentic vision of their own fundamental abnormality, or their own pain and suffering.

This metaphorization of disability as commensurate with pain and suffering emerges from a psychoanalytic understanding of the body-image and its connection to inner states of suffering. The truth-revealing mirror that opens Benni's novel in one sense acts in contrast to the image of normalcy projected during Lacan's mirror stage. According to Lacan, it is during the mirror stage that the illusion of bodily integrity is formed by the subject. What was initially experienced by the baby as a jumble of drives, body parts and sensations (the *corps morcelé*), becomes constructed as an imaginary whole represented by the apparently unfragmented image in the mirror. The disabled body, read as the *corps morcelé*, rather than reflecting back the illusory wholeness described in Lacan's account, reveals instead “the unbearable truth” of the inexorable fragmentariness of the body/self. As Lennard Davis writes, “the disabled body is a direct *imago* of the repressed fragmented body. The disabled body causes a kind of hallucination of the mirror phase gone wrong.”<sup>260</sup> Referring back to my earlier discussion of curiosity then, Davis's understanding of the role of the disabled body within the mirror stage reveals a deeper motivation for the stimulus that is aroused by an encounter with difference. Davis continues, “the element of repulsion and fear associated with fragmentation and disability may in fact come from the very act of repressing the primal fragmentariness of the body” (141).<sup>261</sup> The *Medèn* passage intimates this very process – the image repressed in the dark recesses of the “normal” person's psyche is the very specter of his or her abnormality.<sup>262</sup> As Davis remarks, this mechanism sets up

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<sup>258</sup> In the same interview, Benni claims: “Achille sono io” [“I am Achille.”] He continues: “credo di aver scritto un libro su quello che c'è di doloroso, di oscuro, di pietrificato dentro ognuno di noi. Achille, eroe tragico della nostra quotidianità, mostra come ci sia un'immensa forza nei deboli che non è retorica evocare, perché è quella che tiene ancora insieme il mondo” (Benni, “I miei eroi sono disarmati,” n.p.) [“I believe I've written a book about that which is painful, dark, petrified inside each of us. Achille, tragic hero of our daily lives, shows how there is a great strength in the weak which I don't mean just rhetorically, because that's what holds the world together.”] Here, Benni seems to fall back on metaphorizing Achille, where disability comes to stand for the suffering that is “in all of us.”

<sup>259</sup> Proceeding with this interpretation, we might understand Achille not only as a personification of pain itself but as a figure for the process of writing that one undertakes in order to cope with, or make sense of, that pain. Again, the figure of the *pharmakon* is apposite: as both pain and therapy for pain, Achille represents both the ailment and its remedy.

<sup>260</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 139.

<sup>261</sup> Davis writes: “rather than seeing the object of desire, as controlled by the Other, the subject sees the true self of the fragmented body” (139). The fragmented body is thus “the body that precedes the ruse of identity and wholeness” (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 141).

<sup>262</sup> One could read the “normal” subject as in some way akin to Adriana Cavarero's theorization of the “neuro-universale” in “Sulla mostruosità del soggetto,” an important theoretical development for Italian feminist theory that reveals how the male gender stands in for the universal while the female must always be marked as female. Similarly, the “normal” subject is that which is unmarked and is assumed to represent the entirety of humanity (the “neuro-abile”?) The use of quotation marks has the effect of calling that universality into question even as it is reproduced. The question of monstrosity is particularly relevant for disability studies as it is a term often leveled at



a relation whereby the encounter with the disabled other is experienced by the non-disabled or “normal” subject as an occurrence of the *unheimlich*, as “something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only [in] the process of repression”(141).<sup>263</sup> Curiosity is thus not so much the product of a distanced yet interested subject’s encounter with difference, as it is that of the spark of remembrance of a self that has been (and must remain) repressed. Tobin Siebers makes a similar claim in *Disability Theory*, where he writes, “It has been claimed that the disabled body represents the image of the Other. In fact, the able body is the true image of the Other. It is a prop for the ego, a myth we all accept for the sake of enjoyment, for we all learn early on, as Lacan explains, to see the clumsiness and ineptitude of the body in the mirror as a picture of health – at least for a little while” (60). What Siebers and Davis’s formulations suggest is that the encounter with the disabled other threatens to undo the (relatively) successful repression that allows the “non-disabled” subject to maintain an illusion of integrity. In other words, it represents the threat of a total dissolution of the self. This threat is managed via a further repression that takes the form of any number of reactions: horror, pity, revulsion, fear, curiosity, or any combination of these. Such reactions allow the non-disabled subject to reinstate a certain necessary distance from the “abnormal” other, in order to protect the illusion of the self as whole.<sup>264</sup>

Achille’s character makes explicit the “threat” represented by the presence of disability within the context of the narrative. During his first meeting with Ulisse, he says (writes): “*In realtà io l’ho chiamata per ucciderla*” (69) [“*In reality, I called you here in order to kill you.*”] For a moment, Ulisse is frightened, unsure how to respond. Achille then reveals the joke: “*Scherzo. Cosa sarebbe la letteratura senza i cattivi e i mostri, senza colpi di scena e senza assassinii?*” [“*I’m kidding. What would literature be without bad guys and monsters, without plot twists and murders?*”]<sup>265</sup> Again, Achille names himself as a monster of literature, rather than as one of its heroes, as his name would suggest. As a disabled character, Achille calls attention to

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those who exhibit different forms of embodiment. A trend in many texts with disabled characters is to execute a reversal whereby the “normal” character, through the aid of the disabled character, comes to realize his or her own “monstrosity.” For example, in Benni: “La terra è un mostro - tuono l’uovo gigante - siamo tutti mostri!” (Benni, *Achille*, 173) [“The world is a monster – thundered the giant egg – we are all monsters!”]; and in Pontiggia, in reference to Paolo’s teacher: “Lei si sta convincendo, temo, che il bambino sia un mostro ... Temo che siamo noi una coppia di mostri, assillati dalla paura” (Pontiggia, *Nati due volte*, 102-3) [“She is starting to think, I fear, that the child is a monster. ... I’m afraid that it’s us who are a couple of monsters, plagued by fear.”] Where does this leave the disabled character? This is relevant to the discussion above as well because it shows the limitations of attempts to break down the idea of normal. As Achille’s character demonstrates, no matter how much the category of normal is weakened or questioned, it still will not include disability within its borders.

<sup>263</sup> Davis is quoting from Freud, “The Uncanny,” *Studies in Parapsychology* (New York: Collier, 1963), 47.

<sup>264</sup> A parallel can be drawn here between the idea that the image of the disabled body is a more “authentic” or “true” representation of the *corps morcelé* and the “transparency” of Achille’s written language discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In both cases, the suggestion is that disability enacts an unmasking or revelation of the illusory screens that comprise the (normate) subject’s identity, namely a) the imaginary wholeness of the body; and b) the ability of language/narrative to represent the subject. I hesitate to argue this here, however, because it seems to lead too easily to a mapping of the disabled subject onto the realm of the “Real,” whereas the “normal” subject retains his relationship to the Imaginary and the Symbolic, however neurotic it may be. Such a dynamic carries the risk of aligning disability with the “natural,” or even the animal, a trope that is all too common and has the effect of excluding the disabled subject categorically from social exchange and linguistic/intellectual mastery.

<sup>265</sup> By explicitly naming the elements necessary for a successful story as he introduces them, Benni creates a metanarrative commentary on the facility of narrative production, again a jab at the superficial workings of the publishing market. The fact that he puts Achille at the center of this self-conscious literary styling suggests the author’s awareness of the function of disability as that which excites curiosity in reading and propels the story forward.

the common literary trope that casts disabled characters as “bad guys,” temporarily fulfilling normative expectations that a disabled exterior in some way corresponds to a morally corrupt interior.<sup>266</sup>

In his monologue, Achille spells out the narrative function of disability – the role to which the disabled character is relegated, whether as villain or as a benign presence that still must in some way be “managed” due to the underlying threat represented by its mere existence, elucidating, further, the reason behind the narrative impulse to eradicate it from the text: “*Io posso ucciderla, deformarle quella bella faccia, scavare nella sua anima e farle capire che lei è su una sedia paralizzato, spiato dal dolore quanto me*” (71) [“*I can kill you, deform that beautiful face, dig deep in your soul and make you understand that you too are paralyzed in a chair, as plagued by pain as I am.*”] Achille’s threats of death, deformation and paralysis bring to light a mechanism that is usually left at the level of subtext, whereby the disabled character acts as a mirror for the non-disabled person, representing the inevitability of death and the ever-present potential for dismemberment, defect or harm. Making this narrative function explicit, Achille effectively defuses its ability to act covertly against his character. Instead he claims for himself a certain power, a conscious knowledge of his narrative function and of the effect he has on his non-disabled counterpart. At the same time, the sequencing of his statement indicates a movement from the threat of violence to a recognition (or imposition) of similarity, driving home the idea that what is perceived as a threat of death, the fear and repulsion aroused in the non-disabled subject, masks or represses an understanding of the self as similar to, or the same as, the other. As in the Hegelian dialectic, the other allows for the subject’s recognition of itself – for the very development of self-consciousness – while at the same time instigating a “life and death struggle” whereby one of the terms must be eliminated or subjugated in order for the other to retain/attain its status as subject.

Achille points to the importance of language in this process, as he continues: “*Posso far questo. Ma non posso alzarmi, darle la mano e dire: amico mio, ritorni pure a parlare con me*” (71) [“*I can do this. But I can’t stand up, give you my hand and say: my friend, come back soon and speak with me.*”]<sup>267</sup> The contrast between what Achille can and cannot do further illuminates his role within the narrative/dialectic. From this perspective, he is bound to the confines of philosophical symbolism, as a necessary component in a mechanism that ultimately excludes him from the particulars of discursive social interaction and relationship. As mirror to Ulisse, he is unable to take up his own subject position, to realize his own self-consciousness.

This episode offers further information regarding the effect that a disabled body has on the function of the mirror stage in the development of the social subject and ultimately reveals the limits of a psychoanalytic paradigm in relation to disability. By Lacan’s account, it is the misrecognition of the “whole” body in the mirror as the true image of the self – rather than the fragmented body experienced by the subject – that instigates the need for the Symbolic. Language then fills in the gap between what is felt and what is perceived in the mirror, the “I” becoming the new basis for identification. This self-relation functions in parallel with the external relation between self and other, first figured in the relationship between self and *mother*. Language allows for the continued communication between the self and other, once the

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<sup>266</sup> Some examples of disabled villains: Captain Ahab, one-eyed pirates, hunchbacked henchmen, limping assassins; a list which arguably continues from the lineage of the Cyclops, hybrids, and other monsters of Homeric myth.

<sup>267</sup> Achille is giving voice (so to speak) to his role in the development of self-consciousness for Ulisse. By “saying” (writing): “I cannot speak,” he accomplishes the seemingly impossible task of representing the paradoxical figure of the Hegelian dialectic in material human form.

separation between the two is registered by the subject. According to a psychoanalytic view, Achille's assertion that he cannot take Ulisse's hand and tell him to come back and speak with him points to the "failure" of the Symbolic to arise, a failure which then extends to an inability to establish social bonds. Following this line of thought to its logical conclusion, it is because Achille is concurrently both acting as disabled character and *acting out* his narrative function as Ulisse's mirroring other, that when he declares his own exclusion from linguistic/symbolic exchange, he simultaneously implicates Ulisse in this same exclusion, thus his suggestion that Ulisse too is paralyzed.<sup>268</sup> However, Ulisse manages to dodge this association, forcing the need for the Symbolic – for narrative explanation – back upon the disabled other, a move that is aided by the fact that the disabled/abnormal other is always already the focus of any narrative, according to the logic of narrative prosthesis. Where the disabled other obliges an encounter with the repressed fragmented body, the narrative that then ensues out of this relation begins not from the "I," but from the "You," and it is in the form of a question: "What happened to *you*?"<sup>269</sup> The "normal" subject projects all that is abnormal onto the disabled other and demands that it be accounted for/recounted. Thus, the disabled other finds himself in the paradoxical position of being one who must speak while simultaneously being denied the ability to take up the Symbolic on his own terms. I argue that Achille navigates this ostensibly irreconcilable opposition vis-à-vis his (almost) exclusive use of text in communication: text offers a way to "speak" without speaking.<sup>270</sup> Through the act of writing "Non posso dire...", Achille is able to express this paradox – the fact that his capacity for expression is inhibited.<sup>271</sup> While it would seem that Achille's bodily limitations preclude the possibility of speech – of taking up the Symbolic – his use of the computer offers a way around this impasse.<sup>272</sup>

Vivian Sobchack describes an alternate view of this process of language acquisition and identity formation that will be useful here. Whereas for Lacan, the entrance into the Symbolic seems to necessitate a severing of the body/language connection, Sobchack argues for a schema

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<sup>268</sup> This is concretized in Ulisse's writer's block.

<sup>269</sup> Here, I am drawing from: disability scholars such as Mitchell, Snyder, and Davis, who theorize a demand for narrative in the face of disability; Adriana Cavarero's notion that one's story must be narrated by an other in *Tu che mi guardi*; as well as Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*. See Chapter One for a more in-depth discussion.

<sup>270</sup> This is again the logic of *superabilità*. Where Marianna's telepathy allowed her to "hear" without hearing, Achille's computer allows him to "speak" without speaking, overcoming or compensating for what is viewed as a lack.

<sup>271</sup> It should be noted that Achille does not remain within the realm of the written word for the entirety of the novel. At one point, in a rare moment without his computer, he tells Ulisse that he is tired out from speaking. He tells him instead: "Ascolta i miei pensieri" (Benni, *Achille*, 154) ["Listen to my thoughts."] This reversal of Marianna Ucrìa's telepathic powers turns *superabilità* on its head, requiring that Ulisse – the able-bodied character – have superhuman powers in order to understand *him*. In his refusal of the logic of *superabilità*, Achille expresses instead his desire for the recognition of an *abilità* "normale" – the ability to "alzare la matita" and write. At the same time, one could say that artistic creation is already in some way a *superabilità* – an ability that is not available to the "average" person. In this sense, the cult or celebrity of the artist becomes linked to the common representation of disabled characters as godlike or otherworldly. As one example, Benni writes: "Ora l'amico sembrava una divinità immobile sul trono" (188) ["Now his friend seemed like an immobile divinity upon his throne."] Ulisse does not allow him to refuse divinization.

<sup>272</sup> Again, this is not to say that Achille's use of a computer avoids a corporeal relationship to linguistic expression. The computer interacts physically with Achille-as-writer, just as would the pen or speech, though the illusion of non-corporeality is easier to maintain. As we have already seen, writing by computer presents its own set of corporeal effects and interactions, different from those produced by writing by hand or speech. Relevant here, too, is the idea that a computer itself has a "brain" that might produce text independently of its supposed author, as well as debates regarding Facilitated Communication where the authenticity of disabled authorship has been questioned.

that allows the two to remain in conversation, so to speak.<sup>273</sup> She writes: “Unlike certain strains of psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology does not regard language only as a symbolic ‘substitute’ for being, but rather understands it also as a transcendent *carnal gesture* – that is, as an extension and elaboration of being that not only exteriorizes lived-body experience beyond its spatial and temporal boundaries but also is mimetic of its polymorphous structure.”<sup>274</sup> According to Sobchack’s account, the engagement of the subject with language not only does *not* suggest a preclusion of a certain bodily participation, it promotes an understanding of the two as dynamic and in reciprocal relationship, each mutually affecting the other. This dynamic, material relation allows for a reading of Achille that need not relegate his character to the function of mirroring other, as a prop in the identity formation of the nondisabled protagonist.<sup>275</sup> Instead, the act of writing – and this applies to Marianna Ucrìa as well – literalizes a view of the language/body relation as inexorably intertwined and insists upon the writerly presence of the disabled body-subject.<sup>276</sup>

Where the mirror stage has “gone wrong” – as Davis puts it – for the “normal” subject, the image in the mirror is thus actually *representative* of the subject’s internal, fragmented sense of self. There is therefore no disconnect, no misrecognition but instead only recognition. Thus, there is no need for the symbolic to cover over and fill in the spaces where self and image do not match. What then is the role of the Symbolic? Why *does* it arise? I argue, along with Sobchack, that the encounter with disability in Benni’s text allows for an alternative conception of the role of language in relation to the subject, as a carnal extension of the self – a pushing forward in a creative (even, perhaps, procreative) move towards the future, rather than a backward-looking attempt to cover over something lost.

Where body and language are mutually implicated and co-creative, the idea of an incompatible oscillation between signifier and signified is undone, providing a way out of that divide and suggesting that the word and the thing it describes (or the writer doing the describing) are not separable after all.<sup>277</sup> If the relation is not one of replacement then, of prosthetic

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<sup>273</sup> The idea is that, for Lacan, the Symbolic covers over that which is perceived as disconnected or lacking in the body, implying a necessary non-correlation between body and language, and necessitating a subject that is considered non-disabled. By contrast, the image of the disabled body in the mirror ostensibly is not subject to the same process of repression and illusion and therefore language need not “cover over” anything. This does not necessarily mean that the Symbolic will then not “arise”: instead, perhaps it will emerge via different means and to different ends than those put forward by Lacan.

<sup>274</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “Living a ‘Phantom Limb’: On the Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity,” *Body & Society* 16.3 (2010): 54.

<sup>275</sup> If we understand the body and language as necessarily separate, we perpetuate an understanding of the disabled subject, in this case Achille, as serving an instrumental role in the non-disabled subject’s developmental process, as a necessary but ultimately disposable tool in Ulisse’s process towards Symbolic formation. Alternatively, where language and body are inseparable and act in dynamic relation, Achille too is allowed Symbolic representation.

<sup>276</sup> Such arguments have been made regarding voice as well, especially in the context of feminist theory; see, in particular: Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); and *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-893; and Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi* and *A più voci*. (I will return to a discussion of these texts in regards to the relationship between voice and the female, disabled body in Chapter Four.) *Achille piè veloce*, by contrast, makes a case for the voice as untrue to the subject while suggesting that writing is the most integrated and authentic. The physical act of writing makes the role of the body in the production of language unavoidable, whereas speech supposedly maintains the illusion of evanescent thought, separate from the body.

<sup>277</sup> Lacan would not necessarily disagree with Sobchack’s characterization of the Symbolic. His theorization of “full speech” suggests a similarly corporeal form of expression, where the content of one’s utterance is less important

substitution, what might we look to as an alternate way of conceptualizing the relation between language and the body-subject?

### Phantom Limbs, Texts for No-thing

Rather than serving to fill in or substitute for a lack, Achille (and his text) operate in a much more nuanced and complex way within the narrative: they are each (and inseparably) both there and not there, both real and phantom, both something and nothing. In *Concerto for the Left Hand*, Michael Davidson suggests in passing that, in addition to narrative prosthesis, the role or function of disability in narrative might be likened to a phantom limb. He writes: “We might say that the phantom limb phenomenon is the affective response to narrative prosthesis, the way that trauma is experienced after the limb has been surgically removed and therapy undergone.”<sup>278</sup> Davidson’s subsequent discussion leaves this compelling possibility untheorized but I think it is worth exploring this notion further and imagining what the figure of the phantom limb may offer to a discussion of Benni’s text.<sup>279</sup> According to Davidson, the phantom limb is what remains of disability or the disabled character in the text once its purpose has been served and it has been excised from the narrative. It could thus perhaps be compared to Derrida’s “trace” – a presence that haunts the text, that is at once both present and absent, much like the spectral quality of Achille’s character described above. Davidson’s reference here to “trauma” suggests that he conceives of the phantom limb as a kind of coping with loss, or an inability to move on from a past event. According to such a view, Achille would be the phantom presence that recalls that which is absent, that recalls a former wholeness that has been traumatically lost, thereby once again aligning disability irrevocably with constitutive lack.<sup>280</sup>

In a drastically different account, Sobchack’s existential-phenomenological approach offers a way of theorizing the phantom limb that is not focused on lack or directed nostalgically towards the past. Sobchack’s study of the phantom limb follows from her own personal experience of having a leg amputated and later being fitted for a prosthetic leg. She uses the figure of the phantom limb to put pressure on the binary logic that governs psychoanalytic understandings of the body and its relationship to the imaginary and symbolic realms. Challenging the idea that it is possible to definitively separate the illusory from the real, Sobchack writes: “a phenomenological approach would also question the binary division of the ‘phantom’ from the ‘real’ as well as the hierarchy which privileges the latter over the former on the basis of solely objective criteria such as material presence, visibility and functionality” (53). According to Sobchack, the category “phantom” should not be disregarded, or set in opposition

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than the fact of engaging in a particular kind of speech within the (temporal and spatial) context of the psychoanalytic session. Full speech is performative and dependent upon the *act* of speech as well as the presence of spectators. This understanding of speech suggests that, at least in the context of this particular type of speech, body and language are in fact inexorably bound to one another. Full speech is a mode in which the signifier and signified are perfectly joined despite the fact that meaning (signified) and form (signifier) can still never be said to correspond in a one-to-one relation. Lacan’s notion of “full speech” is, of course, still dependent on an assumption that the subject will be capable of oral expression.

<sup>278</sup> Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand*, 60.

<sup>279</sup> While there are no missing limbs per se in *Achille piè veloce*, I argue that Achille acts as phantom in a variety of ways which, in seeking to complicate or imagine alternatives to Mitchell and Snyder’s narrative prosthesis, lend themselves to theorizing his presence as that of a phantom limb. I am thankful to the participants of Michael Bérubé’s seminar at the School of Criticism and Theory 2013. for helping me to think through these permutations.

<sup>280</sup> While I mean to argue an alternate vision here, I do think this formulation is consonant with Ulisse’s characterization of Achille as representative of the “gioia” “mancata... a noi tutti” [the joy we all lack].

to the real. Both the “real” leg and the “phantom” leg exert similarly “real” effects upon the subject, a fact which Sobchack demonstrates via her own post-operative experiences after having her left leg removed. She writes: “propped up on my sofa after surgery, looking at my body stretched out before me as an object, I could see ‘nothing’ there where my transparently absent left leg had been” (57). However, despite the *visual* absence of the leg, Sobchack describes the very real felt *presence* of what was now an absent limb. “Looking at the place from which the ‘thing’ that was my objective leg was absent, ‘no-thing’ was there. And, yet, the ‘dys-appearance’ of my leg, however vague its boundaries, was subjectively experienced as a sense of self-presence now and here” (58). The “no-thing” that Sobchack experiences is both a thing and not a thing – what she describes as “the presence of an absence” or a “dys-appearance” (58). The figure of the phantom limb might thus offer another way of understanding Achille’s text, *Medèn*: as a nothing that is something, both Achille and his text are simultaneously present and absent throughout the novel. His text is at once the text we are reading as well as the text that has been erased from the story, “overwritten” by both Benni’s text, *Achille piè veloce*, and by Ulisse’s text, just as Achille-as-author is substituted by Ulisse at the level of the plot and/or by Benni extra-diegetically.

For Sobchack, the continued felt presence of what is now absent is emphatically *not* about nostalgia – a longing or desire for what was lost. “Rather, its lengthening (not longing) is a mobilization of my motor capacities to fulfill a present intention” (62). Sobchack describes the sensation of the felt “no-thing” that is her phantom leg projecting itself to meet the ground, a felt sense that is rooted in the present, not the remembrance of limbs past. “Thus, the phenomenological ‘substitution’ of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is not a psychic substitution conceived in the negative terms of perceptual failure or psychic ‘mourning work’ or nostalgia for ‘some thing’ lost. Rather, it is a substitution bent on replacing ‘no thing’” (64). This is crucial for the logic of disability in Benni’s text. As phantom limb, rather than a substitution for something lost, or an effect of “trauma” as formulated by Davidson, Achille’s text is a substitution that replaces no-thing in both senses of the term: a) it does not replace anything (because Ulisse never wrote a text to begin with), making it instead a supplement or an *excess*; b) rather than replacing a nothing/an absence (that which Ulisse never wrote), employing Sobchack’s formulation, the focus is instead on the very real effects of the presence of this text (which is also absent). Despite its “nothingness,” *Medèn*/Achille’s text is arguably the only thing that is present to the reader as text, and thus it cannot be seen as properly replacing anything.

Perhaps more importantly, Achille himself, as the (phantom) figure of disability within the text, is thus not constrained to act in the service of Ulisse’s needs as primary character. Afforded a status that is equally “real,” Achille need not be relegated to a merely supporting role as prosthesis.<sup>281</sup> Or perhaps the figure of the prosthesis might also be rethought: rather than a replacement or substitution that restores wholeness, we might think of it in Sobchack’s terms, as a projection or “lengthening” that extends outward or downward. Thinking back to Achille’s story in which he rides his wheelchair-narrative like a warrior, his broken leg “*protesa in avanti*,” I would like to suggest that, in this case, the *protesi* might be refigured as instead *protesa*, as a protrusion that extends outward, that serves to alter, enhance or complement rather than to

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<sup>281</sup> Even in death, Achille arguably refuses to relinquish the narrative to Ulisse despite his seemingly willing acquiescence. His name appearing as the title of Benni’s text speaks to this notion. It is important to note that Sobchack still allows for a conception of the phantom limb as a substitution but it is ambiguous whether, what, and *with* what it actually substitutes.

restore, and that extends forward rather than nostalgically looking back. Likewise, the phantom limb is a presence that does not so much haunt as project towards a present or future ground.

Rather than being understood as a prosthetic stand in for an originary speech or thought, Achille's text, is, from its origin, written, and thus has a concrete, autonomous presence – like the phantom limb in Sobchack's formulation. It exerts real effects in its presence even as it is ostensibly absent, because representative of some "thing" that is not there. Achille's text is a substitution for "no-thing": it has its own presence that is not derivative of a prior, originary speech, that exists of its own accord. Likewise, Achille as disabled, can thus exist as originary, real, and fully invested with subjecthood as opposed to serving only as (distorted) mirror image of – or prosthetic support for – a non-disabled subject.

## Chapter Four

### *Sirena senza coda* and Other Tales: The Siren-Mermaid as Figure for Disability from Dante to Garlaschelli

I was compelled to flee from Italy, the siren in whose toils I lay  
bound, and by whom my being was about to be divided.  
–Goethe<sup>282</sup>

I find myself about to embark upon the most *chimerical* discourse  
that I have probably ever attempted, or that has ever tempted me.  
–Derrida, “The Animal that Therefore I Am”<sup>283</sup>

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that representations of disability in modern Italian literature inherently challenge conventions of gender and sexuality, canceling or troubling the boundary between binary gender categories. The logic I have described is one by which the categories of disability and gender are intrinsically linked to one another, such that where a shift is made from able-bodied to disabled within the category of disability, a reciprocal movement must occur between gender positions as well, from female to male or vice versa. Integral to this process, as I have described it, is a destabilization of narrative or discursive norms, which is necessitated by corporeal differences that affect movement, speech, and writing. Part of my aim has been to explore the ways that the production of discourse – through writing, reading, and speech – are bound to the body, as made visible through the disabled and/or gendered body.

Where the first three chapters of the dissertation negotiate this complex – of gender, sexuality, disability, and alternative reading, writing and speaking practices – through the analysis of fictional works, this final chapter turns to autobiographical works by disabled authors, centering on Italian women writers who have used the figure of the *sirena* – the siren or mermaid – to represent themselves. I did not set out to research mermaids or sirens: as is often the case where such things are concerned, they found me. My research has led me to a striking number of texts by disabled women writers that make use of the *sirena* metaphor as a way of figuring the disabled female subject. The texts include Mirella Santamato’s 1995 *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua* [I, Mermaid Out of Water]; Barbara Garlaschelli’s *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento* (2001) [Mermaid: Heavy Vehicle in Motion]; and the semi-autobiographical *Sirena senza coda* [Mermaid Without a Tail], from which my dissertation takes its name, which was co-written by Cristina Tonelli and Giancarlo Trapanese in 2009. Antonietta Laterza, a musician and multi-media artist who calls herself a “sirena postmoderna” [postmodern mermaid] or “sirena cyborg” [cyborg mermaid], chronicles her experiences with sexuality, prostitution, and disability in her

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<sup>282</sup> These words are attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Luise Mühlbach’s historical fiction, *Goethe and Schiller: An Historical Romance*, trans. Chapman Coleman (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1870), 229. Goethe’s own *Faust* features the Sirens among its characters.

<sup>283</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 392.



1989 musical, *Pelle di Sirena* [Mermaid Skin], later also adapted for film.<sup>284</sup> And the list goes on.<sup>285</sup>

The siren-mermaid is an interesting figure for disability for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the *sirena* is almost always gendered female and thus draws an explicit link between gender and disability, a connection that I have been exploring throughout this dissertation. However, in the case of the authors and texts treated in this chapter, the logic I describe above operates in the inverse – rather than the presence of disability acting to inaugurate or authorize a transgression of gender norms, in this final chapter, I will discuss cases where the authors’ desire for rehabilitation in terms of disability is effected vis-à-vis a rehabilitation in terms of gender, a move which acts to shore up gender norms, rather than transgress them, in the interest of reclaiming a valid and socially recognized subjectivity.

Complicating matters further is the fact that the *sirena* represents not only physical difference – the basis for the discrimination and barriers against which these subjects are struggling – but also narrative capacity or even narrative itself. As I will discuss further on, the siren has arguably always been a figure for narrative – at least from its Homeric origins – and has almost always been a female-gendered subject (apart from certain rare exceptions), but it was not until the feminist appropriations of the figure in the 60s and 70s that the *sirena* started to act as the *subject* of narratives themselves rather than as only their object, or as a foreign other that called out to a male speaker, writer, or narrator. Using the *sirena* as a figure for disability then poses a conundrum for some of these authors, for ironically the attainment of the acceptance and

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<sup>284</sup> Fictional texts include Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1975) and *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990), which I treat at length in the first chapters of the dissertation. The connection between disabled women and the mermaid figure is not unique to Italian literature. See, for example: the American television special, “Tell Them I’m a Mermaid” (1983); disabled artist Joy Corcoran’s “Wheelchair Mermaids”; Lady Gaga’s “Yuyi” and Bette Midler’s mermaids-in-wheelchairs chorus line for her performance of “New York, New York”; the play, *The Average-Sized Mermaid* (2008), written by Jessica Fleitman, as well as, most recently, Eileen Cronin’s *Mermaid: A Memoir of Resilience* (2014).

<sup>285</sup> See, for example, Cesarina Vighy’s *L’ultima estate* (Milan: TEADUE, 2012), in which La sirenetta makes a brief appearance: “Mi piacciono le favole: ci si trova sempre qualcosa che ti riguarda. Prendi la Sirenetta che perde la voce, il suo maggior fascino, in cambio di due piedi che a ogni passo la fanno soffrire come se camminasse su dei coltelli. E tutto per uno stupido principe. / Parlare e camminare: le due cose che i bambini imparano per prime, le due cose che mi sono state tolte senza ragione, nemmeno per uno stupido principe” (184) [“I like fairytales: you can always find something that pertains to you. Take the Little Mermaid who loses her voice, her primary allure, in exchange for two feet that with each step make her suffer as though she were walking on knives. And all for a stupid prince. / Speaking and walking: the two things that children learn first, the two things that have been taken from me without reason, not even for a stupid prince.”] Meri Lao, a self-described “sirenologist” who lives in Rome, identifies personally as a mermaid, which she links to physical injuries to her legs: “La mia nipotina è convinta che io sia stata una Sirena in gioventù e che poi, i diversi interventi agli arti inferiori mi abbiano trasformato la coda in normali gambe di donna. Ormai sono parecchi i medici che mi vedono come caso clinico di somatizzazione sirenica, e non solo i seguaci della medicina psicosomatica, ma persino un neurologo rigoroso che opera al cervello. Infatti, ne so qualcosa di traumi, fratture, interventi chirurgici, fili di Kirchner, ferri, viti, piastre di metallo, gessi, tutori, seggiole a rotelle, stampelle, bastoni e riabilitazioni. A oggi, sette di queste ‘sirenizzazioni.’ E poi dicono che *repetita juvant*” [“My granddaughter is convinced that I was a Sirena when I was young and that the various procedures I’ve undergone on my lower extremities have transformed my tail into the normal legs of a woman. By now there are quite a few doctors who see me as a clinical case of sirenic somaticization, and not only followers of psychosomatic medicine, but even a rigorous neurologist who works on the brain. In fact, I know all about traumas, fractures, surgical procedures, Kirchner pins, instruments, screws, metal plates, casts, braces, wheelchairs, crutches, canes, and rehabilitations. Up to now, seven of these ‘sirenizations.’ As they say, *repetita juvant*.”] Meri Lao, *SirenaLatina*, Colors Collector, Winter 2010/2011. Web. 15 Oct. 2014. <http://www.sirenalatina.com/agenda/colors-collector/>.

normalcy they so desire – effectuated through the rejection of difference and thus of a rejection of being *sirena* – would ostensibly entail the loss of the capacity to narrate entirely.

I invoke Derrida’s use of the chimera in this chapter’s epigraph as a corollary to the siren figure: as a hybrid figure, the Siren is of course already chimerical, and in the Italian, the word “sirena” refers to both the Homeric bird-woman as well as the later fish-formed mermaids, making the *sirena*, in effect, a hybrid of hybrids. At the same time, discourse itself, according to Derrida, is “chimerical,” a fact which will have great relevance for the objects of my study, especially where the question of voice – or lack of voice – and its relationship to the conferral of human status is concerned. While the focus of this dissertation as a whole is the relationship between disability, gender and narrative, in this chapter, I will argue that the division of these categories into binary pairs rests upon a wholly different binary opposition: that of the human and animal – a division that is embedded in the body of the *sirena* and is constructed around the question of language. In this way, it becomes clear that the figure of the *sirena* stands in for the question of humanity itself and the ways in which disabled subjects are routinely excluded from human status on the basis of corporeal difference. The siren-mermaid figure thus brings together all of the threads of this dissertation: disability, gender, sexuality, and discursive representation or its lack.

What is more, the *sirena* has a special claim to Italian soil (or perhaps its sea?) as well as a particularly rich history in Italian literature and philosophy, a fact that carries implications for the interpretation of the *sirena* figure as not only a disabled subject, but as a particularly Italian subject as well.<sup>286</sup> I will not have the space to fully address it here, but the larger literary arc to which the narratives I will discuss here belong reveals shifting narrative norms alongside a changing political and ideological landscape, all of which, I argue, are reflected in representations of siren-mermaids, from Homer to Dante, up to – most recently – Vladimir Luxuria’s trans politics and disability studies.

### **Sirens and Mermaids from Homer to Barthes**

Before turning to the relatively recent texts of my study, I would like to take a moment to mark a few of the appearances of the mermaid/siren figure within this rich history and some of the various symbolic meanings it has accrued, the resonances of which are heard and felt in each of the narratives I will discuss. Sirens and mermaids appear throughout the history of Italian literature and philosophy but are rarely noticed, a presence that lurks just below the surface of consciousness.<sup>287</sup> From its classical roots in Homer and Ovid to early mentions in Dante’s *Purgatorio* and Boccaccio’s *De genealogiis deorum*; from the *fiabe* of Capuana, Calvino and Gianni Rodari to the poetry of Ungaretti and Pascoli; from narratives by Marinetti, Mario

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<sup>286</sup> This is not to say that the figure of the mermaid does not appear in other national literatures or even in cultural representations of disability from other geographical and linguistic origins. Indeed, some of the most well known mermaid and siren stories come from elsewhere and the figure of the mermaid in a wheelchair appears frequently in the American context as well as perhaps others. I do mean to suggest that the particular history of the *sirena* in Italian literary and philosophical history carries various political and national meanings that are then carried over into more recent iterations of the siren myth in representations of gendered and disabled subjects.

<sup>287</sup> There are numerous full-length studies on the *sirena* in the Italian context, including: Maurizio Bettini and Luigi Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene. Immagini e racconti dalla Grecia ad oggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007); Meri Lao, *Le sirene: da Omero ai pompieri* (Rome: A. Rotundo Editore, 1985), and *Il libro delle sirene* (Rome: Di Renzo Editore, 2000); Loredana Mancini, *Il rovinoso incanto: Storie di Sirene antiche* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005); Elisabetta Moro, *La santa e la sirena: Sul mito di fondazione di Napoli* (Ischia: Imagaenaria, 2005) and *L’enigma delle sirene: due corpi, un nome* (Napoli: L’Ancora, 2008).

Soldati, Malaparte and Tomasi di Lampedusa to, most recently, Stefano Benni, Dacia Maraini, Maria Corti and Laura Pugno, iterations of this mythical beast dot the landscape of Italian literature. What is more, the *sirena*'s body subtends the very soil of the Italian peninsula: tradition holds that Odysseus sighted his sirens off the coast of Sorrento, and Naples was allegedly built upon the dead body of the siren Parthenope.

Contrary to popular opinion regarding the latter-day fishtailed mermaids, Homer's Sirens are known not for their physical beauty but for their seduction by way of a promise of knowledge:

“No one has ever sailed  
his black ship past here  
Without listening to the honeyed  
sound from our lips.  
He journeys on delighted  
and knows more than before.  
For we know everything  
that the Greeks and Trojans  
Suffered in wide Troy  
by the will of the gods.  
We know all that happens  
on the teeming earth.”<sup>288</sup>

What the Sirens promise to Ulysses is knowledge, not the pleasures of the flesh, and particularly knowledge of Ulysses's own past. As Pietro Pucci has argued, the syntax used in the Sirens' song echoes the poetic style of the *Iliad*, not the *Odyssey*, suggesting an alignment between the seduction of knowledge and that of narrative.<sup>289</sup> In this sense, the Sirens are aligned with the poet or writer, and their allure with narrative itself, though as we well know, they do not deliver on their promise, marking them instead as figures of deception and serving as a warning of the perils of a fixation on one's past triumphs. As the story goes, over time and across literary traditions, the *sirena* has transformed from the winged hybrids of antiquity promising knowledge and poetic fame to the beautiful fish-maidens of the sea, a metamorphosis which is as mysterious as it is overdetermined. This connection is lesser known in the Anglo context where the fish-woman has taken on the name “mermaid,” marking her separation from her Siren antecedents. In the Italian and other romance languages, however, the connection remains strong and is much theorized.<sup>290</sup>

The very name “sirena” has gone through as much analysis and transformation as the bodily image it invokes. Maurizio Bettini and Luigi Spina trace the various etymological possibilities from *seirào*, Greek for “to bind,” to *seirén*, meaning either a type of bee or a type of bird, to *Séirios*, the Dog Star.<sup>291</sup> Anthropologist Elisabetta Moro's research also draws a link to the Syrian goddess (“la dea Siria”), to which Syria, as both mythical place and modern nation,

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<sup>288</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 183.

<sup>289</sup> See Pietro Pucci, “The Song of the Sirens” in *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*, ed. Seth Schein (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996): 191-99; and *The Song of the Sirens: Essays on Homer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>290</sup> See especially Moro's *L'enigma delle sirene* and Lao (1985, 2000).

<sup>291</sup> Bettini and Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene*, 95-6.

owes its name, a connection already noted by Giambattista Vico in the *Scienza Nuova*, in which he writes that Partenope, the Siren who gave her name to Naples, “deve la sua origine senza contrasto alla voce ‘sir,’ che vuol dire ‘cantico’ ovvero canzone, la quale istessa voce ‘sir’ diede il nome a essa Siria”<sup>292</sup> [“owes her origin without a doubt to the term ‘sir’ which means ‘canticle’ or song, the same root of which ‘sir’ gave its name to Syria.”] In contrast to the classical Homeric Sirens who began as bird-women only to later transform into fish-women, Moro explains that the goddess Syria was understood from the beginning as a woman with a fish tail. Scholars trace the *sirena*’s morphological transformation to the medieval period, some attributing the influence of the Catholic church and its domestication of pagan figures. Meri Lao proposes the hypothesis that the transition occurred by way of a copyist’s error, transmuting *penne* [feathers] to *pinne* [fins], the image thus being irrevocably altered. Boccaccio, in *De genealogiis deorum*, acknowledges the existence of both forms: “furo no alla fine converse in marini monstri c’hanno la faccia di donzelle, et il corpo fino all’ombelico di femina, da indi in poi sono pesci, i quali dice Alberigo essere alati, et aver i piedi di gallina.”<sup>293</sup>

Even as early as the Anglo-Saxon work of unknown author, *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* – which was composed between the eighth and tenth century and counts Pliny, Virgil, Augustine and Isidore of Seville among its sources – the siren appears as a fish-formed girl.<sup>294</sup> Though rather than – or in addition to – a description of a physical monstrosity, the siren/sea-girl is evoked in this work as a figure for the descriptions themselves – as a metaliterary form that implies a correlation between the siren’s hybrid form and the duplicity inherent in language itself: “And first I will discuss those things which are in some part to be trusted, and then let each judge for himself the following material, because throughout these monster-filled caverns I shall paint a little picture of a sea-girl or siren, which if it has a head of reason is followed by all kinds of shaggy and scaly tales.”<sup>295</sup> So while the siren is here clearly understood as a fish-girl, her evocation serves to comment upon the author’s own composition, rather than a subject to be treated within it. As Andy Orchard notes, the model described by the author of the *Liber*, applies to the entirety of the work: “This model of the siren applies not simply to Book I, of course, but to the whole work, which commences by discussing monsters who share human shape and reason (Book I), and finishes by considering in turn tales (and tails!) both shaggy (Book II) and scaly (Book III)” (Orchard, 94). So thus not only is the sea-girl here a metaliterary figure for a certain kind of narrative, she is also the figure for metaliterarity itself, or as Barbara Spackman has put it in a different context, a “figure for figuration itself.”<sup>296</sup>

However, the notion of a seductive woman with the tail of a fish as a discursive figure was not unknown to the classical period either. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace invokes the figure in his critique of certain inferior poetic styles, by way of an analogy to painting:

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<sup>292</sup> Giambattista Vico, “Principi di una Scienza Nuova intorno alla Natura delle Nazioni,” in *Opere Vol. 2* (Milan: Mondadori, 1990), 1095 [Sc. N. 1725, (239)]. See Moro for a lengthy discussion of the term’s etymology: Moro, *L’enigma delle sirene*, 119, n. 4.

<sup>293</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *De genealogiis deorum*, trans. Giuseppe Betussi da Bassano (1547), 130v.

<sup>294</sup> On the *Liber monstrorum*, see Bettini and Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene*, and Mancini, *Il rovinoso incanto*.

<sup>295</sup> “Et de his primum eloquar quae sunt aliquo modo credenda et sequentem historiam sibi quisque discernat, quod per haec antra monstrorum marinae puellae quamdam formulam sirenae depingam, ut sit capite rationis quod tamen diuersorum generum hispidae squamosaeque sequuntur fabulae.” Citation and translation taken from Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 88. (This is from the opening passage of the *Liber*). See Bettini and Spina on the narrative figure of the siren.

<sup>296</sup> Spackman is here referring to the sirens of Maria Corti’s *Il canto delle sirene* (1989). See: Spackman, “Monstrous Knowledge,” 307.

If a painter were willing to join a horse's neck to a human head and spread on multicolored feathers, with different parts of the body brought in from anywhere and everywhere, so that *what starts out above as a beautiful woman ends up horribly as a black fish*, could you my friends, if you had been admitted to the spectacle, hold back your laughter? Believe me, dear Pisos, that very similar to such a painting would be a literary work in which meaningless images are fashioned, like the dreams of someone who is mentally ill, so that neither the foot nor head can be attributed to a single form.<sup>297</sup>

Here, the fish-woman is not explicitly given the name Siren, but she is employed as a figure for certain pitfalls of poetic composition, criticized by Horace. The siren in these examples is thus not a figure of feminine seduction and impending death, but one of narrative deception, mental illness, or even simply bad poetic taste.

One of the earliest and most well known appearances of the siren in Italian literature occurs in none other than Canto XIX of Dante's *Purgatorio*, and it marks one of the first examples where the siren seems to represent a more purely physical seduction in concordance with the sin of concupiscence. In this episode, a "femmina balba" [stuttering woman] comes to Dante-pilgrim in a dream and, under his gaze, she transforms into the beautiful and alluring "dolce serena" [sweet siren]. She entrances Dante, singing to him of her seduction of Ulysses and her ability to steer men off their course, and promising to satisfy his desires ("sí tutto l'appago!"):

mi venne in sogno una femmina balba  
ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta,  
con le man monche, e di colore scialba.

Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta  
le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,  
cosí lo sguardo mio le facea scorta

la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava  
in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto,  
com'amor vuol, cosí le colorava.

Poi ch'ella avea 'l parlar cosí disciolto,  
cominciava a cantar sí, che con pena  
da lei avrei mio intento rivolto.

«Io son», cantava, « io son dolce serena,  
che ' marinari in mezzo mar dismago;  
tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!

Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago  
al canto mio; e qual meco s'ausa,  
rado sen parte; sí tutto l'appago!».

Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa,

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<sup>297</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 19-18 BCE. Translation taken from: *Horace for Students of Literature: The "Ars Poetica" and Its Tradition*, eds. O.B. Hardison Jr. and Leon Golden, trans. Leon Golden (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1995), 7. The passage is also referenced by Moro in *L'Enigma delle sirene*, 14; and Bettini and Spina, *Il mito delle Sirene*, 138.

quand'una donna apparve santa e presta  
lunghezzo me per far colei confusa.

«O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?»,  
fieramente dicea; ed el venía  
con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta.

L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria  
fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre:  
quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscía. (*Purg.* XIX 7-33)<sup>298</sup>

[there came to me in a dream a female, stuttering,  
cross-eyed, and crooked on her feet, with stunted  
hands, and pallid in color.

I was gazing at her; and, as the sun strengthens  
cold limbs that the night weighs down, so my gaze  
loosed

her tongue, and then in a short while it  
straightened her entirely and gave color to her wan  
face, just as love desires.

Once her speech was loosened so, she began to  
sing in such a way that I could hardly have turned  
my attention from her.

“I am,” she was singing, “I am a sweet siren,  
who enchant the sailors on the deep sea, so full of  
pleasure am I to hear!

I turned Ulysses from his course, desirous of my  
song, and whoever becomes used to me rarely  
leaves me, so wholly do I satisfy him!”

Her mouth had not yet closed when there  
appeared a lady, holy and quick, alongside me, to  
confound her.

“O Virgil, Virgil, who is this?” she was saying  
fiercely; and he was approaching with his eyes  
fixed only on that virtuous one.

The other he seized and opened in front, tearing  
her clothes, and showed me her belly, which  
awakened me with the stench that issued from it.]

The interpretations of this episode are many, though most agree that the *serena* is representative of the sin of earthly appetite. However, interpretations that understand Dante's *dolce serena* as representative of narrative are found here as well. Naomi Yavneh makes a compelling case for understanding Dante's own role in the creation of the *serena* – through his gaze – as a warning against following one's own creation over that of God: “The ‘dolce serena’ is explicitly the pilgrim's own creation, fashioned first out of the previous day's discourse [...] and then, within the dream, out of the ‘femmina balba’ transformed by Dante's gaze. The transformation thus

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<sup>298</sup> All citations from Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, with translation and commentary by Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

presents the ‘serena’ not only as a figure for improper love but, even more significantly, as an idol; the pilgrim seeks to follow his own creation, his false ‘Beatrice,’ ‘nel mezzo mar,’ rather than the true mediatrix who will lead to salvation.”<sup>299</sup> Though Yavneh does not explicitly draw this link herself, as Dante’s own creation, in addition to being an idol, we might connect the siren and the warning she represents regarding the glorification of one’s own creation, to the *poetic* creation of the Dante-poet as well.<sup>300</sup>

Others have more explicitly noted the possible connection between Dante’s *serena* and classical representations of the siren as either narrative or knowledge. Dante’s sources for the siren story are thought to include Isidore of Seville, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Cicero’s *De finibus*, rather than Homer’s text itself, and as Teresa Caligiure and Luciano De Fiore have argued, Dante would have been familiar with Cicero’s understanding of the figure as promising knowledge and wisdom, but does not include that element in his own siren episode.<sup>301</sup> Caligiure, however, notes that Dante does not describe the siren’s physical appearance, but instead emphasizes the song she sings: “ma il poeta non si sofferma sull’aspetto esteriore dell’incantatrice, bensì, come Omero e Cicerone, sul messaggio del suo canto” (345, n. 31) [“but the poet does not linger on the exterior aspect of the enchantress, but rather, like Homer and Cicero, on the message of her song.”] Caligiure shifts the discourse from one of earthly pleasures to suggest that Dante’s siren episode refers as well to the salvific nature of divine poetry, in contrast to the deceptive nature of pagan poetry.<sup>302</sup>

However, as Barbara Spackman has argued, the distinction between the seduction of the flesh and that of knowledge, and indeed of narrative, are difficult to parse.<sup>303</sup> She cites the “femmina balba” as an example of the hermeneutic figure of the “enchantress-turned-hag,”

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<sup>299</sup> Naomi Yavneh, “Dante’s ‘dolce serena’ and the Monstrosity of the Female Body,” in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell, (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2001), 117.

<sup>300</sup> Yavneh goes on to argue that the “dolce serena” as a figure of female physicality and sexuality stands in for “the threat of all earthly, physical ties, of a desire not directed toward God” (Yavneh, “Dante’s ‘dolce serena,’” 124), and does not return to the question of what exactly we are to understand as Dante’s “own creation.” She does however suggest that the episode of the *femmina balba* might be understood as a replaying of the *Inferno*, where again it is Virgil who must reveal to Dante the disgusting truth of his own sinfulness: “Dante must smell her true, putrid nature, just as he must physically visit Hell in order to learn where his actions are leading him” (118).

<sup>301</sup> Teresa Caligiure, “La ‘femmina balba’ e la ‘dolce serena,’” *Rivista di Studi Danteschi* 4.2 (2004), 333. See also: Durling and Martinez’s notes to Canto XIX, p. 318; Luciano De Fiore, “Sirene tra logos e desiderio,” in *La mente, il corpo e i loro enigmi. Saggi di filosofia*, eds. Coccoli et al. (Rome: Stamen, 2007): 171-190; Yavneh, “Dante’s ‘dolce serena,’”; Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Il sogno della Sirena (*Purgatorio* XIX)” in *Il sogno raccontato. Atti del convegno internazionale di Rende (12-14 Nov 1992)*, eds. N. Merola and C. Verbaro (Vibo Valentia, Monteleone, 1995), 117-36.

<sup>302</sup> “Si ricordi poi che nella tradizione esegetica cristiana medievale il canto delle sirene veniva associato alla poesia pagana, accusata di simulare la verità. A tal proposito è frequentemente menzionata dalla critica dantesca come fonte per la scena onirica in questione la visione introduttiva del *De Consolatione philosophiae* di Boezio (i 1), dove le Sirene, muse poetiche, sono scacciate dalla Filosofia in quanto dispensatrici di falsi valori” (Caligiure, “La ‘femmina balba’ e la ‘dolce serena,’” 357-8) [“One will remember that in the medieval Christian exegetic tradition the song of the sirens is associated with pagan poetry, accused of faking the truth. For this reason, the introductory vision of Boezio in *De Consolatione philosophiae* is often mentioned in Dante criticism as a source for the oniric scene in question, where the Sirens, poetic muses, are chased out by Philosophy because they are dispensers of false truths.”]

<sup>303</sup> “Dante’s siren is a figure for the seduction of the senses rather than the seduction of the intellect, but the overlapping of siren and enchantress-turned-hag already points to a difficulty that is inherent in the figure of the siren: how to keep the two seductions apart? If a (hetero)sexual seduction is the figure for the “seduction” of the intellect, is not one seduction always “contaminated” by the other? Their symmetrical relation would suggest as much” (Spackman, “Monstrous Knowledge,” 309, n. 11).

where Virgil's unveiling of the *serena*'s ugly "truth" corresponds to an epistemological model that cannot accept the female body (and thus the body in general) as compatible with knowledge or knowing.<sup>304</sup>

What is of interest here is that the kind of reading that produces the "truth" of these figures (i.e., the "truth" that these are figures for truth) is itself dependent upon the hermeneutic model. It discards appearance and the literal in order to get to a "hidden," figural meaning. It "seems" that we are talking about enchantresses and hags but "in reality" we're talking about truth and artifice. In so doing, the literal embodiment of the metaphor is discarded in order to get to the truth of the tenor, which in turn is understood as untainted, in essence, by its vehicle. (268)

Spackman's theorization of the enchantress-turned-hag reveals the extent to which the discourses of truth, feminine sexuality, and narrative are bound to one another within the logic of the Western (read: male) literary tradition.

Of particular interest for my purposes here, is that Dante depicts the *femmina balba*, the hag that *precedes* the siren-enchantress of Dante's dream, in terms that are indisputably evocative of disability, both physical and vocal or discursive:

mi venne in sogno una femmina balba  
ne li occhi guercia, e sopra i piè distorta,  
con le man monche, e di colore scialba.<sup>305</sup>

As Caligiure relates, in the centuries that followed the writing of the *Commedia*, commentators would have understood such "defects" as signs of moral turpitude: "Notevole interesse ha pure suscitato la rappresentazione della 'femmina balba': gli antichi commentatori attribuivano un significato morale a ogni singolo difetto fisico; in tempi recenti le deformità sono state interpretate come figurazione simbolica dei sette vizi capitali" (336) ["The representation of the 'stuttering woman' has also raised notable interest: the commentators of old attributed a moral significance to every single physical defect; in recent times, her deformities have been interpreted as symbolic figures for the seven capital sins."] Dante's gaze "fixes" the woman's "deformities" and her speech impediment, transforming her into the *serena* of Homeric fame, and giving her back the voice she has lost, though immediately afterward, her new appearance is then exposed as a ruse by the *donna santa* who prompts Virgil to reveal her "stinking womb."

What all of this taken together suggests is that, whatever the various interpretive possibilities to be drawn from Dante's *serena* episode, they all rest upon a foundational construction of a disabled female body that is (at least temporarily) "cured" by Dante's gaze, whether that be understood as the poetic creation of a false beauty or a lustful projection of earthly desire. Thus, the metaphor of the siren, for its "truth" to be "revealed," must already be constructed upon a metaphor of disability, one that understands the disabled body as evil and sinful, whose deceitful putrescence reaches out to contaminate, not only the pilgrim's quest for

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<sup>304</sup> "Indeed, as transformed, monstrous, female bodies, the sirens are sisters of the enchantress-turned-hag; like her, they dramatize the relations between bodies and knowledge" (Spackman, "Monstrous Knowledge," 300-301).

<sup>305</sup> Charles Singleton translates "le man monche" as "maimed hands," rendering more clearly a sense of amputation. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 201, emphasis mine.



spiritual rebirth, but also truth, the female body, poetry, and narrative itself.

The “problem” of the body and its impediment to salvation is thus concretized in the disabled body, here aligned with the siren body, as two sides of the same sinful coin. As discourses and literary representations shift from those of the spiritual Christian vein to questions of science and enlightenment in the seventeenth through eighteenth centuries; to medical curiosity and positivism of the nineteenth; as well as the nationalistic discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *sirena* figure continues to signal both bodily and discursive difference, each of which are seen as having the power to derail the guiding ideologies of the given time and place.<sup>306</sup> Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, “The Little Mermaid,” marks a new trend in the *sirena* story, though the underlying logic is the same: here, she is the subject of her own journey, and is allowed to find her own Christian salvation through the sloughing off of not only her mermaid tail – which incidentally leaves her disabled, as though she were walking on sharp knives – but through an eventual complete denial of the body, as she transforms for a second time into the spirit-like “daughter of the air.”

It is not until the 1960s and 70s, with the advent of feminist appropriations of the figure, that the *sirena* begins to be celebrated as a subject in her own right, finding in her difference a correspondence to female empowerment.<sup>307</sup> Though even here dominant theories of narrative and language will disembodify the *sirena* once more, marking the *signifier* as siren, as Roland Barthes explicitly has. The notion of signifier as siren might easily map onto classical notions of the allure of language or narrative, enchanting its beholder only to reveal itself as arbitrary and empty, if at the same time a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Interestingly, for Barthes the siren-as-signifier is cited in particular as a figure for intertext: “The intertext is not necessarily a field of influences; rather it is a music of figures, metaphors, thought-words; it is the signifier as *siren*.”<sup>308</sup> He goes on to say that “the articulation of a period, of a work, into phases of development – though this be a matter of an imaginary operation – permits entering the interaction of intellectual communication: one makes oneself *intelligible*” (145). I find the idea of the siren as intertext compelling, as it suggests a different way of understanding the hybrid or composite nature of the siren in relation to narrative. As a figure that appears in more texts than can possibly be mentioned here or in any one text, and thus the intertextual element *par excellence*, it is also a figure for intertextuality itself. Given the futility of pinning down such a figure, I will end this cursory attempt at tracing a genealogy with a nod towards what I see as the most recent phase in the long arc of the *sirena*’s trajectory.

The texts I will discuss in the remainder of this chapter, insofar as they use the siren-mermaid as a way to represent the disabled body, ground the figure in a newfound materiality that has the potential to “correct” the conundrum presented by Spackman and others. This project perhaps began with the feminist texts of the 60s and 70s and continues with posthuman renderings such as Laura Pugno’s *Sirene*, though each with different implications and conclusions, themselves surely bound for overdetermination. It will be the task of the rest of this chapter to tease out the various threads of this complex knot as they relate to disability, gender, and narrative. I leave open the question as to whether these texts construct their own version of

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<sup>306</sup> This is an overly simplified and schematic summary; I do not have the space to explore the nuance and depth of this particular claim here, nor is it the scope of the current chapter, though I do plan to develop it elsewhere.

<sup>307</sup> See, for example: Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine Quits” (1961); and Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1975) which I discuss in Chapter Two; for Hélène Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the sirens become men; A few decades later, feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero will take up the figure in a number of texts which I will discuss further on in this chapter.

<sup>308</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 145.

an ideological foil from which the siren must always be seen to draw its listeners, or if they succeed in altering the structure of that logic.

### **The *Sirena* and the Disabled Female Body**

In the context of the texts I discuss in this chapter, the ambiguous morphology of the siren-mermaid reflects both an apprehension regarding the disabled female body – itself often coded as “monstrous” or grotesque – as well as an attempt to reconfigure that body as desirable and capable. For these women, it is important that the *sirena* represents not only physical beauty and allure, but also voice or narrative capacity, suggesting a necessary relationship between the body – as both female and disabled – and self-expression or representation. Within the context of feminist philosophy, the siren has appeared as a figure for a specifically female form of narration and knowledge. Adriana Cavarero writes:

Narratrici onniscenti, le Sirene di Omero presentano infatti un lato inammissibile per il sistema androcentrico. Esse usurpano la specialità maschile del *logos*. Si tratta, nel caso delle Sirene, ovviamente di un *logos* alquanto particolare, ossia di un *logos* poetico, narrativo, cantato e musicale che confligge con quello desonorizzato della filosofia. E tuttavia si tratta pur sempre di un *logos* nel quale la dimensione vocale del canto si accompagna alla dimensione semantica del mettere in parole un sapere.<sup>309</sup>

[As omniscient narrators, Homer’s Sirens in fact work to upset the androcentric system; they usurp the masculine specialty of *logos*. In the case of the Sirens, obviously, this is a highly particular *logos* – a poetic, narrative, sung, and musical *logos* that stands in opposition to the silent *logos* of philosophy. And yet it is still a *logos* in which the vocal dimension of song accompanies the semantic dimension in putting a knowledge into words.]<sup>310</sup>

According to Cavarero, over time the Sirens lost the semantic dimension of their song and became associated with a pure vocality, a loss which she associates with the shift from the bird-Siren to the fish-mermaid, and which corresponds to a conception of the female subject as exiled from the Symbolic, relegated to a wholly corporeal existence.<sup>311</sup> This metamorphosis is taken to

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<sup>309</sup> See: Adriana Cavarero, “The Fate of the Sirens,” in *A più voci*, 120.

<sup>310</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 107.

<sup>311</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein sees in the mermaid’s hybridity a monstrous portent of the ills that characterize “sexual arrangements” in 1970s society: “What this book’s title as a whole is meant to connote, then, is both (a) our longstanding general awareness of our uneasy, ambiguous position in the animal kingdom, and (b) a more specific awareness: that until we grow strong enough to renounce the pernicious prevailing forms of collaboration between the sexes, both man and woman will remain semi-human, monstrous.” Dinnerstein sees the mermaid as a symbol for the “human malaise” that is connected to these “sexual arrangements” and finds in the mermaid symbol, not empowerment but the very representation of the ills of sexual inequality: “The treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable female representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, lures voyagers to their doom.” While the Minotaur, “male representative of mindless, greedy power, insatiably devours live human flesh.” Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976), 5.

its extreme in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, in which the little mermaid loses her voice altogether.<sup>312</sup>

The subjects analyzed in my research – through their *writing* – challenge this idea of a pure orality as corresponding to the female subject, supposedly embodied by the figure of the fish-woman mermaid. I argue that the figure of the tail or *coda* is representative of both bodily difference and discursive excess: as a difference that points to that which is missing (i.e., legs), the tail speaks to the logic of lack that is common to discourses of femininity and disability, while also representing a possible advantage, depending on context or environment. The *textual* coda, by turn, exceeds the body of the text, implying a linguistic “compensation” that I see as integral to the process of bodily and narrative (re)configuration. The mermaid’s disability is contextual in that she can only be considered disabled when she is on land, a fact that corresponds to the social model conception of disability, by which disability is understood as the product of one’s environment (whether physical or social) rather than as a fault with the individual’s body. The mermaid is thus variously disabled or “super-able” depending on her environment, a fluidity that defies attempts to define disability in static terms.

The *sirena* is also, to a certain extent, a queer figure – the presence of a tail where there should be legs confounds the male gaze and begs the question as to whether she in fact possesses a vagina or is capable of procreating.<sup>313</sup> The mermaid’s *coda*, as stand-in for both the phallus and the writing pen, thus reveals a hybridity that bridges not only categories of ability, gender and species, but also those of oral and written language. Various binary relationships are mapped onto the *sirena*’s overdetermined body: “normal” and “abnormal”; disabled and non-disabled; man and woman; human and animal. This proliferation of binaries points to the complex mechanism that is at the heart of my argument: in order for the mermaid to become “normal,” (i.e., able-bodied), she must move towards one binary position at the expense of the other, a movement which will then by necessity effect a reciprocal movement among the other binary pairs as well. Thus, in order to become “human,” the disabled woman must first prove her femininity, renouncing her gender ambiguity. These movements will prove to be much more complicated than this description might suggest and it is one of the aims of this chapter to gauge the extent to which this logic can be disrupted.

### ***Sirena senza coda: Trapped in the Prison of the Body***

In this chapter, I will discuss Santamato’s *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*; Tonelli and Trapanese’s *Sirena senza coda*; and Garlaschelli’s *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento*. The first two texts grapple explicitly with the relationship between voice, sexuality, and physical disability, and each delineates the process by which the author is able to “reclaim” or “free” her voice, thereby restoring her “integrity” and identity. Each of the three authors, in part, effects this reclamation through sexual or romantic relationships with men, as well as via a vocation for

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<sup>312</sup> Other examples of silent sirens include those of Kafka’s “Silence of the Sirens” (1931) and Pascoli’s “Il vero” from *L’ultimo viaggio* (1904). For secondary criticism, see: Giuseppe Pucci, “Le sirene tra canto e silenzio: da Omero a John Cage,” *ClassicoContemporaneo* I (2014): 80-97; and Jacqueline Risset, *Il silenzio delle sirene. Percorsi di lettura nel Novecento francese* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006). See, as well, Cavarero’s *A più voci* on Kafka’s story as well as her reading of René Magritte’s painting, *The Collective Invention*, where the top half of the mermaid is a fish while the bottom is human: with a fish head, the *sirena* cannot speak.

<sup>313</sup> I have already begun to theorize the mermaid in Chapter Two of the dissertation in relation to Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* (1975), where Suna, the disabled protagonist, is compared throughout the novel to a *sirena*, because of her “abnormal” legs. Suna is an outwardly queer character who worries that her disability keeps her from being sexually attractive.

writing. However, it is here that the tales diverge. While each text repeatedly invokes the relationship between the exterior body and the interior mind or soul, Tonelli's story emphasizes her *interior* gifts of intelligence and compassion, which in the end lead her – and her love interest – to accept her physical *exterior*, while Santamato's text enacts a movement in the opposite direction, focusing mainly on the author's quest to prove herself physically and sexually as a means to acceptance of her *inner* self. Garlaschelli's *Sirena*, by contrast, exhibits the most nuanced approach, describing the author's process of becoming-*sirena* as a complex interaction between interior and exterior, as well as between self and other, altering in the process the reader's understanding of his or her own bodily participation in the text.

The autobiographical novel, *Sirena senza coda* (Mermaid Without a Tail, 2009), is co-written by Giancarlo Trapanese, a well-known journalist, and Cristina Tonelli, a young woman who, due to cerebral palsy, is unable to speak and uses a specialized computer program to communicate. This technology not only provides Tonelli with the means to communicate on a daily basis, it has also made her career as a writer possible. It is thus through the *necessity* of writing as a communicative aid that Tonelli found her vocation in the written word. Tonelli's disability informs and shapes the final products she creates, with the potential to challenge narrative norms that eschew collaborative writing or that dictate when, where, and how writing "should" or should not take place.<sup>314</sup> At the same time, the necessity of collaboration leaves Tonelli open to the influence and policing of her collaborators, a fact which I will argue limits the development of such generative possibilities.<sup>315</sup>

*Sirena senza coda* tells the story of Gemma Morelli, a girl with cerebral palsy who wins a writing competition, of which Giorgio Catanese is one of the judges. The two main characters are thinly disguised versions of the two authors: Catanese is clearly a stand-in for the primary author, Giancarlo Trapanese, and Gemma Morelli takes the place of Cristina Tonelli. The plot follows Catanese as he is repeatedly dumbfounded by Gemma's skill as a writer, noting almost obsessively the incongruence between her interior mental capacity and her exterior disabled body. Gemma, who, like Tonelli, is unable to speak and uses a computer in order to communicate, strikes up a friendship with Catanese's son, Riccardo, which predictably leads to a romantic involvement by the end of the novel. The blurb on the back of the book jacket gives an indication as to the tenor of the narrative:

La sirena è un essere speciale, incapace di muoversi sulla terra ma fatta per esplorare il mare più profondo con inesauribile curiosità, e il suo canto è

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<sup>314</sup> In a private correspondence with the author, she wrote: "Mi affatico abbastanza velocemente rispetto a tutti voi, quindi ho imparato a condensare i miei pensieri in poche frasi ma dense e cariche di messaggi" (Tonelli, email interview, 26 Nov. 2014) ["I tire rather quickly compared to you all, so I have learned to condense my thoughts into a few sentences that are dense and rich with messages."]

<sup>315</sup> The potential danger in assisted communication involves the possibility that the typed communication produced by the person in need of assistance may be influenced or even entirely controlled by the person assisting, whether they are conscious of it or not. This possibility is at the heart of the debate over Facilitated Communication, of which Douglas Biklen is a primary proponent. See: Douglas Biklen, "Communication unbound: Autism and praxis," *Harvard Educational Review* 60.3 (1990): 291–314; Douglas Biklen, *Communication unbound: How facilitated communication is changing traditional views of autism and ability-disability* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); Douglas Biklen and Donald N. Cardinal, eds. *Contested words, contested science: Unravelling the facilitated communication controversy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Nirmala Erevelles, "Voices of Silence: Foucault, Disability, and the Question of Self-Determination," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21.1 (2002): 17–35; and Biklen's response to Erevelles's article: Douglas Biklen, "Discussion," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22 (2003): 371–375.

irresistibile, più forte di qualsiasi diffidenza e paura. *Cristina*, imprigionata dalla nascita in un corpo imperfetto, è una sirena “senza coda” che finalmente ha liberato la sua voce, una voce costretta per anni al silenzio, con una forza comunicativa travolgente. *Gemma*, il personaggio che impersona Cristina è fatta di sofferenza e speranza, delusioni e “pezzi di cielo da conquistare,” con accanto i genitori, le amiche e Riccardo, che le fa battere il cuore. Ma soprattutto è fatta di parole, frasi scritte lentamente e a fatica che vanno dritte al cuore e pretendono attenzione, per gridare al mondo: «Sono qui! Sirena senza coda con tante cose da dire». Un inno alla speranza e alla vita.<sup>316</sup>

[The mermaid is a special being, incapable of moving on land but well-suited for exploring the deepest ocean with inexhaustible curiosity; and her song is irresistible, stronger than any diffidence or fear. *Cristina*, imprisoned from birth in an imperfect body, is a mermaid “without a tail” who has finally freed her voice – a voice consigned for years to silence – with an overwhelming communicative force. *Gemma*, the character who stands in for Cristina, is made of suffering and fear, disappointments and “pieces of heaven yet to conquer,” accompanied by her parents, her friends, and Riccardo, who makes her heart race. But most of all, she is made of words, sentences written slowly and with difficulty, that go straight to the heart and command attention, yelling at the world, “I am here! Mermaid Without a Tail with so many things to say.” A tribute to hope and to life.]

Much could be said about this gem of a jacket blurb. First, I’d like to note in particular the extent to which Cristina, though billed as co-author, is treated instead as a character within the novel. The line between Cristina and Gemma is so thin so as to be non-existent – a hybridization of character and author, subject and object, that will prove significant in a variety of ways.

Secondly, the figuring of Gemma’s body as a prison that houses – but will not let loose – her prodigious voice, is an interesting spin on Hans Christian Andersen’s famous fairytale. Here, her voice is not lost – in fact, it is quite present. The issue is that, insofar as it is “trapped inside,” no one *else* has access to it. It is thus a problem of legibility, and given that her eventual “voice” is freed through the use of *written* text, this legibility is, in Gemma’s case, quite literal.<sup>317</sup>

Gemma’s mother explains to Catanese, “grazie a un programma di comunicazione facilitata con una tastiera prima e un computer poi, capimmo che nostra figlia aveva un cervello normale, capace di apprendere come tutti, di provare emozioni e sensazioni come qualsiasi ragazza” (20) [“Thanks to a facilitated communication program with a keyboard initially and then a computer, we understood that our daughter had a normal brain, capable of understanding like everyone else, of feeling emotions and sensations like any young girl.”] The “cervello normale” that is trapped within a “defective exterior” is thus “freed” through a technological innovation, without which Gemma would be presumed to be without an interiority, without thoughts.

Claudio Imprudente, a prominent figure in Italian disability studies, who also has cerebral palsy, explains his own childhood experiences with people who assumed he was brain-dead, which he frames with the question, “pianta o persona?” [“plant or person?”]: “mi presento così

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<sup>316</sup> Giancarlo Trapanese and Cristina Tonelli, *Sirena senza coda* (Florence: Vallecchi, 2009), back jacket, emphasis mine. All translations from the Italian are mine.

<sup>317</sup> See my discussion in Chapter One of Christine Ashby’s “Whose ‘Voice’ is it Anyway?” in which she discusses the problematic use of “giving voice” as a metaphor for self-possession and self-expression.

facendo memoria di ciò che era stato detto a mia madre al momento della mia nascita: ‘Signora, guardi, suo figlio è vivo, ma resterà per sempre un vegetale.’ [...] Si tratta infatti di una questione che non riguarda solo me; tutte le persone disabili gravi vengono definite dei vegetali sin dalla nascita e così sono dunque costretti a presentarsi per il resto della loro vita”<sup>318</sup> [“I introduce myself this way remembering what they told my mother at the moment of my birth: ‘Look, your son is alive, but he will always be a vegetable.’ ... This is something that doesn’t pertain to just me; all severely disabled people are defined as vegetables at birth and are obliged to present themselves that way for the rest of their lives.”] The irony in Imprudente’s account is of course that by presenting himself as a “vegetable,” he already negates the label. As a “talking plant” (Imprudente does not actually speak but uses an alphabet board in order to communicate), Imprudente defies the fundamental criterion by which the human is separated from the non-human. In Gemma’s case, the mermaid figure as talking fish denotes the same ostensibly paradoxical confluence of attributes.<sup>319</sup>

There is a long philosophical tradition that understands the division of human and animal as one that is predicated on the question of language. However, as Agamben discusses in *L’Aperto: L’uomo e l’animale*, this is in fact a conflict or tension that exists within all human beings. Evoking both Aristotle and Xavier Bichat, Agamben describes the division of the human into a *vita* “organica” – also called a “*vita vegetativa*” [vegetative life] – and a “*vita-di-relazione*” [life-in-relation], what more familiarly might be termed simply the separation of body and mind. As Agamben describes it, organic life for Bichat “non è che la ripetizione di una serie di funzioni per così dire cieche e prive di coscienza (circolazione del sangue, respirazione, assimilazione, escrezione ecc.)” (23) [“is merely the repetition of, so to speak, blind and unconscious functions (the circulation of blood, respiration, assimilation, excretion, etc.)”], while the *vita-di-relazione* “è definita attraverso la relazione col mondo esterno”<sup>320</sup> [“is defined through its relation to the external world.”]<sup>321</sup> It is notably only once Gemma/Cristina is able to prove her *vita-di-relazione* that she is accepted as human, having previously been assumed to participate solely in the vegetative category. I will return to Agamben’s treatment of this division further on. First, I’d like to take a moment to discuss the treatment of Gemma’s *vita-di-relazione*, once it is freed via technology, within the logic of the novel.

### Voice and Text: The *coda umana*

Despite Tonelli’s name being listed as co-author, the story is narrated in turns by Catanese; Gemma’s mother, Lucia; and her love interest, Riccardo. It is unclear what role, if any, Tonelli had in the writing of the novel, aside from the reproduced text of her essays, letters and emails.<sup>322</sup> Thus, Gemma is never explicitly given a turn to narrate, relegating her voice to a secondary space, embedded within the narrations of those around her, much like the Sirens’ song within Odysseus’s narrative.<sup>323</sup> When Catanese first calls Gemma’s house to tell her she has won the competition, Gemma’s mother hesitates: “è in casa, ma vede, Gemma *non può parlare* al

<sup>318</sup> Claudio Imprudente, “Disabilità o diversabilità? Questo e altri interrogativi per riflettere insieme,” in *Diversabilità: Storie e dialoghi nell’anno europeo delle persone disabili* (Gardolo: Erickson, 2003), 10.

<sup>319</sup> Again, see Cavarero on Magritte’s mute fish.

<sup>320</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *L’Aperto: L’uomo e l’animale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), 23.

<sup>321</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 14-15.

<sup>322</sup> In a private correspondence I had with the author, she did not respond to my questions about her collaborative process with Trapanese.

<sup>323</sup> On the Sirens’ song as subsumed narrative, see: Doherty, *Siren Songs*, 62; and Pucci, *The Song of the Sirens*.

telefono, *non parla, lei non riesce a parlare*” (19) [“she’s home, but you see, Gemma can’t talk on the phone, she doesn’t speak, she isn’t able to speak”]. Lucia’s repetitive insistence regarding Gemma’s inability to speak reveals the extent to which this inability, the absence of voice, is central to the logic of the text.<sup>324</sup> Gemma’s own text is always mediated, never issuing forth directly from the site of enunciation, despite the fact that the printed medium of the book or text should prove ideal for such a task. Instead, her letters and essays are read before even the reader can see them, pre-screened by the careful eyes of both Catanese and her mother. In a particularly telling scene – the first instance in which we witness Gemma in conversation – Gemma’s mother, Lucia, reads her statement over her shoulder before she can finish writing it. Here, Lucia is narrating: “Mi siedo accanto a Gemma per leggere quello che ha scritto con il dito indice della mano sinistra che calca con veemenza sulla tastiera. ‘Che ha detto del tema esattamente...’ leggo mentre sta ancora digitando” (24) [“I sit next to Gemma so I can read what she has written with the index finger of her left hand which presses down with vehemence on the keyboard. ‘What did he say about the essay exactl...’ I read, while she is still typing.”] While we have already been introduced to Gemma from a distance, through her essays and emails, this is her first written statement *in presentia*, although even here, it is still not immediate, still referred – read even before it can be completed. The fact that Gemma’s mother reads her statement before she has finished typing it emphasizes the slowness of her mode of communication, suggesting that writing as a form is less efficient, and not as immediate, as oral speech, an assumption familiar to us from Western philosophical history and Derrida’s critique of it, in *Of Grammatology*.<sup>325</sup> In this case, it is further implied that writing removes one’s agency as a subject. Where you might expect to see Gemma’s comment introduced by “she said” or “Gemma wrote,” instead here you have “leggo” [I read] – Gemma’s statement thus becomes an action performed by her *mother*. Gemma, as one who can only be “read,” is – like her body and the visibly disabled body in general – a text to be deciphered.<sup>326</sup> This notion gives new meaning to the words on the back of the book jacket: “è fatta di parole.” She is *made* of words, not one who creates them. Thus, despite the fact that the novel claims repeatedly that her “voice” has been freed from the “prison” of her body, I would argue that the possibility of subjecthood for Gemma is precluded through to the end of the novel. Writing is, thus, paradoxically, that which finally allows Gemma to communicate with those around her, while at the same time her writing causes her to remain an object rather than an active subject. The written word brings her into existence as a subject only

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<sup>324</sup> By contrast, Lucia’s own voice is described as follows: “La voce della signora Lucia si è fatta inaspettatamente sicura e perfino gioiosa, mi trasmette una sensazione di positiva normalità” (Trapanese and Tonelli, *Sirena senza coda*, 20) [“Lucia’s voice became unexpectedly secure and even joyful, transmitting a sense of positive normality.”] As a surrogate for her daughter, the normality of Lucia’s voice reassures Catanese.

<sup>325</sup> This tension between the oral and the written forms is a thread throughout the dissertation. See: Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. This episode suggests that the argument I have made in Chapters One and Three of the dissertation regarding the present writing body of both Marianna Ucria and Achille does not hold true for Gemma (though I would argue that it does for Cristina).

<sup>326</sup> Here, I am referring to the idea that a disabled or different body is “read” by others, whether by way of diagnosis or other means of categorization. See, for instance: Terri Beth Miller, “‘Reading’ the Body of Terri Schiavo: Inscriptions of Power in Medical and Legal Discourse,” *Literature and Medicine* 28.1 (Spring 2009): 33-54. Modern disability studies takes its cue in this regard, in part, from Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic*, as well as Goffman’s *Stigma*: Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1975); Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

to then reinscribe her within the bounds of objecthood, as her every act of enunciation is appropriated before it can take shape.<sup>327</sup>

Gemma's own understanding of her relationship to the figure of the *sirena* speaks to this apparent paradox. When Catanese asks her about the significance of her chosen handle as a writer, "Sirena senza coda," she writes: "Devo dire che Sirena senza coda nasce dal mio io profondo perché come una sirena elegante nuota nel mare, lasciando una scia, io, anche se non ho la sua bellissima coda, lascio la mia scia ideale" (35) ["I must say that 'Sirena senza coda' comes out of my deepest self ('I') because, just as an elegant mermaid swims in the sea, leaving a wake, I too, although I don't have its beautiful tail, leave my own imaginary wake."] While perhaps she lacks a literal tail, she leaves her own "imaginary wake," which we are to understand as the mark left behind by her writing. Thus, her "tale" substitutes for her "tail" – it is *fatta di parole* rather than flesh. Gemma claims her own "io" through her writing but significantly locates it in the vanishing wake left by an (absent) materiality. Her sense of self as a subject is thus borne out of her physical difference – a difference which in her own terms is understood as an absence – as a being *senza* – imbedding her writing voice within a materiality that disappears as soon as it is laid down.

What is odd about this configuration is that, in absence of a tail, there is nothing to mark the *sirena* as a *sirena* – without a tail, all that is left of a mermaid is the top half, the half that is identified as human, and thus "normal." I suggest that Gemma's denial of the fleshy tail in favor of a discursive one amounts to a disavowal of the material disabled body that 'imprisons' her. It is only then by virtue of her linguistic capacity as a writer, her substitutive *tale*, that Gemma is identifiable as a *sirena*, and thus as different.<sup>328</sup> This is, of course, the other distinguishing feature of the Siren – the voice (or here, writing) – that intrigues and seduces those around her. According to the logic of the *coda* (as both tail and written supplement), Gemma lacks a literal voice but has instead a *metaphorical* "voice," gained through her access to writing via computer technology.<sup>329</sup> The vacillation of Gemma's tail/tale – as both there and not there; both body and language – speaks to the quality of her narrative as a whole. It is simultaneously both there and not, present on the page and yet disconnected from its author. Her "voice" is, in this sense, disembodied, reinforcing the notion of the inner self (voice, thought or mind) as disconnected from the outer "defective" body.<sup>330</sup> This logic recalls Kaja Silverman's discussion in *The Acoustic Mirror* of the disembodied voice of the male cinematic voice-over, which she claims "maintain[s] its source in a place apart from the camera, inaccessible to the gaze of either the cinematic apparatus or the viewing subject."<sup>331</sup> Silverman goes on to state that "the voice-over is privileged to the degree that it transcends the body. Conversely, it loses power and authority with

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<sup>327</sup> This is true for any subject, but heightened in Gemma's case. The difference inherent in her body already authorizes an act of interpretation for those around her, which acts in tension with the disavowal of the body that is ostensibly necessitated by the written form.

<sup>328</sup> For Gemma, like Achilles, this difference is borne out in her use of text to the exclusion of all other forms of communication.

<sup>329</sup> Indeed, during her first meeting with Catanese, Gemma says/writes: "la mia voce sono i miei pc" (Trapanese and Tonelli, *Sirena senza coda*, 35) [my computers are my voice.]

<sup>330</sup> This is consistent with an understanding of writing as being definitively separate from the body, which I critique in Chapters One and Three of the dissertation.

<sup>331</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 49. Further on, she writes, "the female voice has enormous conceptual and discursive range once it is freed from its claustral confinement within the female body" (186), so while I am here concerned with the "imprisonment" evoked as a result of disability, a similar condition arguably already applies to the female body as well.



every corporeal encroachment” (49). For Silverman, the female voice is not allowed to transcend the body to which it is attached, and I contend that the same is true for the “disabled” voice. Within the realm of text and technology, Gemma should ostensibly be able to hide her body from view, but as both female and disabled, she cannot escape the scrutinizing gaze of her co-author, whose obsessive descriptions of her body and its every tic undermine this potential for a disembodied vocal power. Significantly, Silverman does *not* theorize a special relationship between the female subject and voice or musicality, in contrast to Cavarero and Kristeva, a fact which has important implications for Gemma/Cristina insofar as she expresses herself via text, not voice.<sup>332</sup>

However, I would like to suggest that the inseparability of text (or voice) and body need *not* be appropriative and detrimental, or cause for a loss of power, as Silverman intimates. In an interview I recently conducted with the author, Tonelli expanded on her ideas about the *sirena* and the “imaginary wake”:

È delicata, fragile ma forte, è vulnerabile nel mondo degli umani ma è a suo agio e vigorosa nel suo mondo, ha questa coda che è speciale ma che non le permette di andare ovunque. E io mi sento così: nel mondo dei normodotati mi sento limitata e a disagio a volte, ma non quando ho una tastiera tra le mani, lei è il mio oceano. Attraverso la tastiera-coda lascio la scia dei miei pensieri messi per iscritto. Ecco il significato di scia ideale... la scia che sono in grado di lasciare con i miei pensieri e scritti tramite una tastiera...<sup>333</sup>

[She’s delicate, fragile but strong, she’s vulnerable in the world of humans but at ease and vigorous in her own world, she has this tail that is special but that doesn’t allow her to go everywhere. And I feel the same: in the world of the able-bodied I feel limited and uncomfortable at times, but not when I have a keyboard in my hands, it is my ocean. With my keyboard-tail I leave the wake of my thoughts put into writing. That’s the meaning of the imaginary wake... the wake that I’m able to leave with my thoughts and my writing using a keyboard.]

Rather than a *coda*, discursively produced, *fatta di parole*, in Tonelli’s extra-diegetic description, it becomes clearer that the *coda* for her is a writing *tool*. Instead of – or in addition to being – a vocal *tale*, it is the *coda* as technological writing *tool* that reinstates Tonelli’s *vita-di-relazione* over the *vita vegetativa*. The *coda* as *tastiera* restores Gemma’s agency as embodied writer, rather than existing only as text to be deciphered in her absence, encapsulated in the figure of the imaginary wake.

Notably, in this description, the *coda* thus takes on a third dimension. Adding to the

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<sup>332</sup> According to Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory: “There exist two signifying modalities that seem to permit the survival of rejection to the extent that they harmonize the shattering brought about by rejection, affirm it, and make it positive without suppressing it under paranoid paternal unity. The first of these modalities is *oralization*: a reunion with the mother’s body, which is no longer viewed as an engendering, hollow, and vaginated, expelling and rejecting body, but rather as a vocalic one – throat, voice, and breasts: music, rhythm, prosody, paragrams, and the matrix of the prophetic parabola; the Oedipus complex of a far-off incest, ‘signifying,’ the real if not reality [...] This oralization restrains the aggressivity of rejection through an attempted fusion with the mother’s body, a devouring fusion” (152-3). Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>333</sup> Email interview, December 10, 2014.

existing categories of animal (as a literal tail), human (as language/voice/tale), the *coda* is now also a prosthetic technology, which in a sense further signals its bearer's humanity.<sup>334</sup> As both language and body, as well as belonging to both animal and human, the *coda* thus challenges the philosophical tradition that would have the two as categorically incompatible. Gemma's *coda* then, is representative both of that which marks her as different, or not-quite-human, as well as being a figure for her writing tool, for the capacity for language – that which supposedly separates human from animal, elevating the human subject from inert matter to rational thinker. The *coda*, thus, in a sense, simultaneously both constitutes and negates her subjectivity; it both enables and limits her, hindering her ability to go to certain places within the world of the “normodotati,” while at the same time allowing her access to the realm of discourse and narrative.

Of course, the notion that Gemma's *coda*-as-language or writing tool is able to confirm her status as human is based on the assumption that language is not possible for the non-human or the animal, an assumption that has been challenged within a variety of discourses, but that still persists regardless. As Derrida has argued, and others such as Cary Wolfe have taken up, animals too have their own forms of language, not only among themselves but through forms of interspecies communication as well. Derrida's use of the term “animot” in place of “the animal” invokes the constructedness of the idea of “the animal” as separate from “the human,” as being itself a division imposed through language. At the same time, he claims that it is through language that one knows oneself to be an animal, an inversion that figures language and animality as *inseparable* rather than incompatible: “The *I* is anybody at all; *I* am anybody at all and anybody at all must be able to say ‘I’ to refer to herself, to his own singularity. Whosoever says ‘I’ or apprehends or poses him- or herself as an ‘I’ is a living animal” (417). The terms “animal” and ‘I’ thus each refer to both an irreducible singularity and an indeterminate generality.

*Ecce animot.* Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, and rather than a double clone or a portmanteau word, a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera waiting to be put to death by its Bellerophon. [...]

Chimaera was, as we know, the name of a flame-spitting monster. Her monstrousness derived precisely from the multiplicity of animals, of the *animot* in her (head and chest of a lion, entrails of a goat, tail of a dragon). (409)

As a hybrid monster, the *sirena*, like the chimaera, contains a multiplicity of animals within her (the fish-animal and human-animal in this case). As such, she too is a figure for the *animot* – the talking fish or body-that-reasons which metaphysics traditionally has found to be so unreasonable. In this way, it makes perfect sense that the *sirena*'s *coda* would signify *both* language *and* a participation in that which is animal. What Gemma's *coda* offers is a precisely a figure for Derrida's *animot* – a co-existence of language and animal, of *vita-di-relazione* and *vita*

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<sup>334</sup> Some might be tempted to see something like Donna Haraway's cyborg in this image, though disability studies offers important critiques and complications of the facile elision of the disabled body and its auxiliary technological aids with the cyborg. See, for example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” in *NWSA Journal* (Vol. 14, No. 3, 2002), 7; Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 44; and Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Others, like Antonietta Laterza, welcome the label and find it empowering.

*organica*. However, this figuring is still problematic for the subject that is without language, such as Cristina/Gemma *before* the discovery of her inner speaking animal. Derrida can help us here as well. For he goes on to say that the *animot* “would not be a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and *chimerical* it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation” (416, my emphasis). This idea has profound implications for a number of the subjects in the larger project of my dissertation, (most notably perhaps Marianna Ucrìa), and gets to the heart of a particular problematic issue within disability studies – namely how to represent or attribute (human) subjectivity to a living being who does not speak, write, or sign – who might be considered an animal of the non-talking kind, or even a vegetable. Conceiving of the absence of language *not* as a lack allows the human-animal-vegetable that does not speak (or write or sign) to retain value, and thus to be worthy of certain rights.<sup>335</sup>

Where the understanding of linguistic capacity as a basis for human status is revealed as erroneous, Derrida argues instead for a human-animal relation that would be established on a shared capacity for suffering, on a shared finitude.<sup>336</sup> His explanation of this point, using the language of inability, begins to take on the rhetoric of disability in a strikingly explicit manner. Derrida writes:

‘Can they suffer?’ amounts to asking ‘can they *not be able*?’ And what of this *inability* [*impouvoir*]?<sup>337</sup> What of the *vulnerability* felt on the basis of this *inability*? What is this *nonpower* at the heart of power? What is its quality or modality? How should one account for it? What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us? Being able to suffer is no longer a power, it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. (396)

I have highlighted the number of potential synonyms for disability that Derrida uses here. Though he never uses the term “handicap” – the French equivalent of disability – I would argue that this proliferation of terms centered around ability and its lack suggest that Derrida’s argument regarding the human and the animal is constructed precisely in terms of disability, and in particular, of *suffering* as a not-being-able. The association of suffering with “vulnerability” and ultimately “finitude” or mortality – has a certain logic to it. However, the “not being able” – the “inability” – that for Derrida appears to be synonymous in the same way, merits further consideration. This elision between suffering and not-being-able is potentially problematic for those who would not want to equate disability with suffering, and is an excellent illustration of how such terms are considered commensurate in our philosophical (and political) tradition. A lack of ability translates to a lack of power, which is understood as suffering. This is,

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<sup>335</sup> I’m aware of a possible objection to the elision of the categories of animal and disability in this way. In part, I am following Sunaura Taylor’s lead in “Beasts of Burden: Disability Studies and Animal Rights,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19.2 (2011): 191-222, in which she recuperates to a certain extent the oppressive historical association of disabled people with animals. At the same time, I am trying to tease out the possibilities for productive use of Derrida’s theory for disability studies. See also: Licia Carlson, “The Human as Just Another Animal: Madness, Disability, and Foucault’s Bestiary,” *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: At the Limits of Experience*, Eds. Corinne Painter and Christian Lotz (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007): 117-133.

<sup>336</sup> See also Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

<sup>337</sup> Inability would normally be translated as *incapacité*; disability too is translated at times as *incapacité*, though *handicap* is the more common term in French. “Impouvoir” here retains the sense of a *power* or authority that is associated with (certain) capacities and has also been translated into English as “impower” or “unpower.”

incidentally, one of the myths that disability theorists and activists, and to a certain extent the authors in this chapter, are working to dispel. The association of disability and suffering itself can be a matter of life and death, as Alison Kafer has pointed out: “The violent imposition of compulsory able-bodiedness can be seen even more clearly in hate crimes against people with disabilities and in cases such as that of Tracy Latimer, a young girl with cerebral palsy who was murdered by her father in 1993 because he found her ‘suffering’ to be unbearable.”<sup>338</sup> However, Derrida’s equation, by turning the terms on their heads, has the potential to offer something useful to disability studies in this regard. If suffering is understood, as Derrida suggests, as a basis for the *value* of a living being, then the eugenicist logic that would lead from disability to suffering to a life not worth living no longer holds sway.

Returning now to the question of gender, for Gemma that which she *cannot* do is presented in specifically gendered terms, terms that suggest a repressed sexuality: “sono una giovane donna, impossibilitata a compiere più della metà delle azioni della ‘categoria’ a cui appartengo” (67) [“I’m a young woman, prevented from being able to accomplish more than half of the actions of the ‘category’ to which I belong.”] Gemma’s use of the verb “impossibilitare” recalls Derrida’s *impouvoir* – a nonpower that itself becomes a possibility, which is here enacted vis-à-vis a non-participation in her gender category.<sup>339</sup> Like Suna, in Dacia Maraini’s *Donna in guerra*, Gemma is both woman and not-woman, both human and not-human, by virtue of the fact of her disability. The remainder of the novel tracks her journey towards normalcy, which is effected largely through her romantic involvement with Riccardo. We thus begin to see how the binary categories of man-woman and human-nonhuman are articulated on and through the question of disability. I will further develop this negotiation of categories by turning to a discussion of Mirella Santamato’s memoir, *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*, which offers a more explicit attention to the gendered aspect of this mechanism.

### **Mirella Santamato’s *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*: The Matter of Surgery**

Mirella Santamato’s *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*, a more decidedly autobiographical text, covers the long arc of the author’s life beginning from her infancy. The focus here is on Santamato’s account of her childhood experience with polio, and her mother’s obsession with her “guarigione” [healing], all too familiar in discourses of disability where the medical imperative to “cure” sends the message that disability must be eradicated at all costs. Santamato thus longs to be rid of her disability, which she calls her “coda di pesce” [fish tail], and to replace it with “normal” legs. Santamato’s story describes as well her struggle to see herself as a person worthy of romantic love and sexual attention, despite the negative messages she receives growing up that suggest this will never be possible for her. She, too, draws an explicit link between her lack of voice and a “defective” body, which she will eventually address through her own turn to writing, as a means to reclaim her “voice” and find an acceptance of both her inner and outer selves.

The relationship between mind and disabled body for Santamato is explained in the first pages of the memoir, when she describes the effects of polio on her body: “Il mio cervello mandava impulsi che non venivano più eseguiti. Le mie gambe erano trasformate in una materia

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<sup>338</sup> Alison Kafer. “Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15.3 (2003): 77-89, p. 80.

<sup>339</sup> The verb also suggests an obstacle that is imposed from without, as opposed to an incapacity located within the body or subject, which is consonant with the social model of disability.

inerte; inerte e inutile, appunto, come una ‘coda di pesce’<sup>340</sup> [“My brain was sending signals that were no longer being carried out. My legs had been transformed into inert matter; inert and useless, just like a fish tail.”] The distinct separation of mind and body again implies a kind of entrapment within a body that does not respond, though here the *coda di pesce* is – at least initially – aligned with the “defective” body, not language or writing as it was for Tonelli. As “inert matter,” the body is thus figured as incompatible with the realm of thought, *il cervello*, in a line of reasoning that is by now quite familiar. In order to restore function to her legs, Santamato wishes to have her “coda di pesce” surgically removed, a procedure that will presumably realign her interior and exterior selves. In figuring her disabled legs as a fish tail, Santamato suggests that the dividing line between the categories of able-bodied and disabled coincides with that which divides human and animal, leaving disability firmly on the side of the animal, here understood as “inert” and lifeless.

To return again to the discussion of *vita vegetale* and *vita-di-relazione*, in *L’Aperto* Agamben explains that the possibility of making an external division between the human and the animal stems precisely from an *internal* division: it is only possible to create the categories of human and animal because they both already exist within us:

La divisione della vita in vegetale e di relazione, organica e animale, animale e umana passa allora innanzi tutto all’interno del vivente uomo come una frontiera mobile e, senza quest’intima cesura, la stessa decisione di ciò che è umano e di ciò che non lo è non sarebbe probabilmente possibile. Solo perché qualcosa come una vita animale è stata separata all’interno dell’uomo, solo perché la distanza e la prossimità con l’animale sono state misurate e riconosciute innanzi tutto nel più intimo e vicino, è possibile opporre l’uomo agli altri viventi e, insieme, organizzare la complessa – e non sempre edificante – economia delle relazioni fra gli uomini e gli animali. (23-24)

[The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all within living man, as a mobile border, and without this intimate caesura the very decision between what is human and what is not would probably not be possible. It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex – and not always edifying – economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place. (15)]

For Santamato, this division, a “mobile border” between human and fish – is placed precisely along the lines of ability/disability, suggesting that disability is left, not only on the side of the animal, but also on the side of inert matter, irrevocably divorced from the brain and its active messaging. On the one hand, Agamben’s description of this internal division offers a way to deconstruct the disability/ability binary, by understanding both categories as always already constitutive of human life in general. On the other hand, the assumption that disability is equivalent to vegetative or animal life is clearly problematic. However, despite the fact that Santamato describes her disabled legs in terms that would suggest an equation between disability

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<sup>340</sup> Mirella Santamato, *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua*, (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 13.

and non-thinking flesh, her account suggests that the real problem is actually a matter of “communication” between her “vita animale or vegetale” and her *vita-di-relazione* or *cervello*. What disables her is thus located, not in her legs, but in the relation *between* body and mind. Agamben notes that the advances of modern medicine such as surgery and anesthesia are founded precisely on this division of the vegetative life and the relational self that is within each human being.<sup>341</sup> “I successi della chirurgia moderna e dell’anestesia si fondano, fra l’altro, proprio sulla possibilità di dividere e, insieme, articolare i due animali di Bichat” (23) [“The successes of modern surgery and anesthesia are founded upon, among other things, just this possibility of dividing and, at the same time, articulating Bichat’s two animals.”] The fact that the mind can be “put to sleep” while the body still lives rests on a similar obstruction of internal communication.

For Santamato, this loss of internal communication becomes externalized after her first attempt at “removing” her *coda di pesce*. Here she is describing the loss of self brought on by the experience of unrequited love:

Come nella favola della Sirenetta, avevo perso, o forse non avevo ancora  
acquisito, la capacità di esprimermi e di dire sempre e comunque la verità. Non  
ebbi il coraggio di parlare, mi adeguai alle sue paure e non dissi niente.  
La mia voce l’avevo data in pegno per riavere le gambe. (166)

[As in the fairytale of “The Little Mermaid,” I had lost, or maybe I still had yet to  
acquire, the capacity to express myself and to always and forever tell the truth. I  
didn’t have the courage to speak, I adapted to his fears and didn’t say anything.  
I had given up my voice in order to have my legs back.]

As in *Sirena senza coda*, the author’s lack of voice is understood as inextricably linked to her abnormal physical body, though in Santamato’s case, rather than being imprisoned by a “defective” exterior, her voice is silenced as a *result* of her endeavor to obtain “normal” legs. More directly evocative of Andersen’s story, Santamato thus implies that her voice was once there, but has since been removed in order that she might alter her body according to societal expectations, and the same is true regarding her legs: contrary to Andersen’s little mermaid, Santamato claims to want her legs *back*, implying that she was once human and desires to be restored to her original form. However, Santamato’s account then shifts in focus from her quest for normal legs and a normal body in terms of ability, to a quest for a decidedly *female* appearance and for sexual experience. For Santamato, true normalcy and “humanity” is gained through the proof that she can be an object of sexual desire. Again, the figure of the *sirena* is helpful in understanding this logic.

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<sup>341</sup> Agamben goes on to describe “i criteri della morte clinica” [“the criteria for clinical death”] as follows: “è una identificazione ulteriore di questa nuda vita – sconnessa da ogni attività cerebrale e per così dire da ogni soggetto – a decidere se un certo corpo possa essere considerato vivo” (Agamben, *L’Aperto*, 23) [“it is a further identification of this bare life – detached from any brain activity and, so to speak, from any subject – which decides whether a certain body can be considered alive” (15).] This is relevant both for Tonelli– who might have been called “a vegetable” prior to the discovery that her brain was “fully functional” but “trapped”; as well as for Santamato, whose *nuda vita* is ostensibly detached from her “cerebral activity.” Some have found Agamben’s “nuda vita” a helpful term with which to think about disability. See, as one perspective: Stefano Onnis, “Il dis-positivo: Dal diritto vigente alla nuda vita delle persone con disabilità intellettuale,” *Italian Journal of Disability Studies* 1.1 (2013): 109-132.

On the one hand, the representation of that which is human (the mermaid's upper body and its accompanying *cervello*) with a specifically female-gendered torso is highly problematic from the perspective of the Western enlightenment tradition, by which the female body is presumed incompatible with language and intelligence. As I have already discussed to some extent, Barbara Spackman has argued that the sirena might also be understood as a hybrid of mind and body, and more specifically of knowledge and the *female* body, which for the Western tradition "is necessarily monstrous."<sup>342</sup> This is, by some accounts, the underlying message to be drawn from Andersen's fairytale as well. In order to render herself acceptable to a patriarchal society, the little mermaid must give up her voice and alter her body to fit standards of femininity and docility. As Katrina Mann explains it: "The tale of The Little Mermaid speaks to the pickle that is female subjectivity as rendered by Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this version of female subjectivity, the female must permanently abandon the safety of the womb in order to enter the Symbolic through language. She subsequently discovers that the Symbolic is a culture that silences her presence by making of her an object to be interpreted rather than a speaking and agential person."<sup>343</sup> It is thus in the moment of passing into the Symbolic that the woman paradoxically must give up her voice, remaining an object within the phallogocentric order to which she has finally gained access.

The insertion of physical disability into the mind/body equation dramatically complicates the effects of this structure. Where the "normal" female body is sexually objectified, supposedly barring the possibility of an intelligent interior subject, the disabled female body incites instead either revulsion or non-sexual curiosity, according to the ableist logic of "the stare" as put forward by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.<sup>344</sup> What this suggests is that the disabled female subject is, at least partially, "freed" from the constraints of sexual objectification and oppression (though subject to a host of other oppressions and objectifications), allowing for the possibility of a female subject that is comprised of both mind and body.<sup>345</sup> Interestingly then, in the texts I am discussing here, the authors chronicle not so much the story of a physical (or medical) rehabilitation as a means to reclaiming a coveted state of "normalcy," as one might expect, though elements of that tale are present here as well. Instead, the stories center on the rehabilitation of *femminilità*, a move which in part requires the modeling of a certain kind of body, but more importantly reinstates a position of objecthood and subordination, for it is in objecthood that a woman finds and retains her identity as a human within the logic of the phallogocentric Symbolic order.<sup>346</sup> Thus, in order to shed the marker of her corporeal difference and be considered fully human, Santamato must take up an unambiguous gendered position, thereby ironically losing her status as a subject in the very moment she begins to reclaim it.

In light of this quest for *femminilità* [femininity], Santamato's hatred of her fish tail begins to take on a different meaning. As long as it is present, her femininity is disallowed, a

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<sup>342</sup> Spackman, "Monstrous Knowledge," 301.

<sup>343</sup> Katrina Mann, "'Like a Mood that Passes Into You': Amphibious Subjectivity in *The Piano*," *Michigan Feminist Studies* 15 (2001): n.p. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

<sup>344</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Two, according to Garland-Thomson's theory, the stare is a desexualized version of the gaze, transmuting the "sexual spectacle" of the normative female to the "grotesque" one of the disabled subject. See: Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*.

<sup>345</sup> Here, I refer to one of the more circulated tenets of disability studies in regards to sexuality – that disabled people are presumed to be asexual and sexually undesirable. For a concise discussion of this tendency, see: Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in disability narratives," *Sexualities* 14.4 (August 2011): 479-493.

<sup>346</sup> To be clear, I mean to hold out the possibility that an alternative to this psychoanalytic logic might understand femininity according to something other than the restrictive constraints of a patriarchal order.

foreclosure which she paradoxically figures as a castration: “la polio non aveva colpito e paralizzato dei muscoli, aveva colpito e paralizzato la mia femminilità, la mia essenza umana. Ero stata castrata a tutti i livelli” (180) [“The polio hadn’t affected and paralyzed my muscles, it had affected and paralyzed my femininity, my human essence. I had been castrated in every way.”] While according to Freudian logic, the woman is by definition castrated, here Santamato claims that it is her womanhood *itself* that has been castrated. The absence that should mark her femininity is denied her, instead being replaced by a very present *coda di pesce*. Rather than a castration via cutting off, hers is thus effected through an adding on, an excess of flesh that precludes her identity as a woman. In order to counteract this unwanted addition, she seeks at all costs to be rid of the “odiosa coda” [“hideous tail”], which she will attempt through the enactment of her own castration via surgery.<sup>347</sup> The *coda* is thus, I argue, a phallic appendage, suggesting a different form of hybridity present in the body of the *sirena*, one that combines both male and female, a conjoining that is already prefigured in the monstrous coupling of the female body with supposedly “male” knowledge. As with Suna in *Donna in guerra*, the mermaid’s tail is thus representative of *both* disability and the negation of a “normal” femininity.

The following episode will prove instructive on this score. In it, Santamato describes one of the experimental methods of therapy she underwent as a child with her Swedish physical therapist: “Mi aveva avvolto le gambe con molti numeri di ‘Grazia’ (di cui mia nonna era assidua lettrice), dopodiché me le aveva strettamente fasciate con robuste bende elastiche, rendendole simili a due salami bianchi, rigidi e duri” (18) [“She had wrapped my legs with a bunch of old editions of *Grazia* (of which my grandmother was an avid reader), after which she had bound them tightly with strong elastic bands, rendering them similar to two white salamis, stiff and hard.”] The description of her legs in such phallic terms suggests that her attempt at removing her *coda di pesce* is unsuccessful, causing two phalluses to appear where before there had been just one, like a Hydra whose head is cut off only to come back more numerous. Again, this numerical malfunction recalls Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, complicating the idea that the feminine sex is always dual in contrast to the solitary male phallus.<sup>348</sup> In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman writes: “What Irigaray advances [...] is the notion of a language which would be ‘adequate for the [female] body,’ a language capable of coexisting with that body as closely as the two lips of the vulva coexist. This is the obverse of the linguistic model proposed by Lacan, which stresses the incommensurability of signifier and body, the loss of the latter constituting the price which must be paid for access to the former” (144). This, in turn, is the “obverse” of the little mermaid story, where the mermaid must give up the signifier (her tail/tale/voice) in order to have the body that is required of her by phallogocentric standards – most importantly, a body that is unambiguously bestowed with a vagina. For the little mermaid, the proof of this lies precisely in the visibility of two legs, rather than the sexually ambiguous, or

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<sup>347</sup> Santamato’s anticipation of her surgery is notably likened to a bride waiting for her wedding day: “Mi preparavo ad affrontare gli interventi chirurgici con la stessa trepidazione con cui, di solito, una ragazza si prepara al giorno delle nozze” (Santamato, *Io, sirena*, 24) [I prepared to face the surgical procedures with the same trepidation with which, usually, a girl prepares for her wedding day.] On one hand, it is perhaps Santamato’s hope that surgery that will allow her to be “normal” enough to have a chance at marriage. On the other, according to the logic of compulsory hetero-ability, marriage itself is presented as a *cure* for disability. We might also equate Santamato’s excitement about her surgery as an anticipation of her entrance into womanhood, and thus as a loss of virginity. The surgical cut then might be compared to a breaking of the hymen as opposed to – or as well as – the castration of a phallus.

<sup>348</sup> I discuss Irigaray’s numerical distinction in relation to Maraini’s *Donna in guerra* in Chapter Two of the dissertation.



even phallic, *coda*. The two legs then, for a *sirena*, are the external visible marker of the hidden and internal vagina. The legs become the extension of the vulva, on display for the man's assurance, not tucked away for her own secret pleasure, as Irigaray would have it.

The medicalization of Santamato's mermaid body, which necessitates this separation of her legs, recalls a surgical procedure conducted in cases of what is known as "sirenomelia," also called Mermaid Syndrome or "mermaidism." The term refers to a condition by which the fetus fails to develop two separate legs and is instead born with one appendage with an appearance that resembles a tail.<sup>349</sup> There are only three known cases in recent years of children born with sirenomelia where the baby did not die within a few days of its birth. And in each of these recent cases, the child has been female.<sup>350</sup> While it is unclear whether the separation of the legs is necessary in doctors' efforts to save the life of the patient in these cases, there is suggestion that the procedure is at least partially cosmetic. In one case, the operating doctor is reported as saying: "We just need to finish up some touches on her lines. [...] You have to give some form to a mermaid and make her look as a normal person. This would be a cosmetic issue and we will proceed as needed."<sup>351</sup> At the same time, procedures are undertaken to reconstruct the vagina, which in most cases of sirenomelia is either non-existent or shares an opening with the anus and urethra. The imperative to separate the mermaid's legs thus fuses heteronormative fantasies of controlling the monstrous female body with the normalizing imperatives of medical cure, illustrating the extent to which ableist ideologies undergird and reinforce normative expectations regarding gender and sexuality, and vice versa. In other words, the rehabilitation of the "normal" body in medical terms is inexorably bound to a rehabilitation of femininity and sexuality.

Santamato's "salami bianchi" thus, from one perspective, could be said to mark the failure of her first attempt at the rehabilitation of her *femminilità*. Rather than restoring her dual sex, through the castration of her unitary *coda*, she instead finds herself in possession of two phallic appendages, no closer to her desired acceptance into the category of "woman" – if anything doubly marked as unfeminine. By a different account, however, Santamato's initial rehabilitation could be seen as being all *too* effective, revealing the extent to which the presence of the female sex, the supposedly hidden lips of the vulva, is in fact betrayed by the presence of

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<sup>349</sup> Examples of such fetuses are displayed in Leslie A. Fiedler's *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978), where he notes that certain fantastical monsters and beasts were perhaps taken directly from real-life examples of "monstrous births."

<sup>350</sup> Regarding one of these recent cases, a girl named Shiloh Pepin, one article states: "She had only one partially working kidney, no lower colon, no genital organs. And she was fused from the waist down. She was a mermaid baby." Laura Dolce, "Girl with Mermaid Syndrome Defies the Odds," *Seacoast Online*, 2 Aug 2007, accessed on 26 Oct. 2014. Without genitals, one might ask what precisely defines her as female, aside from possible chromosome testing, which is not mentioned in the article.

<sup>351</sup> The doctor in question here is Luis Rubio who was charged with treatment of Milagros Cerrón of Peru. See: "'Mermaid' Girl Takes First Steps Post-Surgery," *ABC News*, 25 Sept. 2006, accessed on 26 Oct. 2014. Another article connects Cerrón more explicitly to the Andersen fairy tale, noting that the surgery caused her to lose her capacity for speech: "Strangely, in gaining legs, she lost the ability to talk (sound familiar?). After her procedure on May 2005 [sic], doctors in Surquillo, Peru noted that some unknown psychological or physiological condition left Milagros unable to form proper speech patterns, leaving her mute." "Mermaids exist! (but are very rare)," *Airlats*, December 30, 2012, <http://www.airlats.com/mermaids-exist-but-are-very-rare/>. Her doctor is also quoted as saying: "It is normal that a child says 'mama' at the beginning, or 'papa,' but the girl instead of saying 'mama' was saying 'doctor.' Her first word was 'doctor.'" "A year after surgery, 'mermaid' baby takes steps," *NBC News*, April 28, 2006. [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/12527257/ns/health-childrens\\_health/t/year-after-surgery-mermaid-baby-takes-steps/#.VNKFgMZ93-8](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/12527257/ns/health-childrens_health/t/year-after-surgery-mermaid-baby-takes-steps/#.VNKFgMZ93-8). Substituting the doctor for the child's parents, on the symbolic level, suggests an understanding of Dr. Rubio, her surgeon, as playing a larger role in establishing her identity, a view that is commensurate with my argument here.

separate and separable legs. The woman's sex is thus never secret, but instead always and inexorably marked, existing for the pleasure of the male/other, not her own. Tellingly, Santamato's new carnal appendages are constructed out of issues of the women's magazine, *Grazia*, one of the foremost pillars of media that prescribe societal standards of femininity in Italy.<sup>352</sup> She is thus constructed through the Symbolic, like Cristina Tonelli, *fatta di parole*. As Kaja Silverman writes, "not only is the subject's relation to his or her body lived out through the mediation of discourse, but that body is itself coerced and molded by both representation and signification. Discursive bodies lean upon and mold real bodies in complex and manifold ways, of which gender is only one consequence" (146). For Santamato, this discursive molding is effected through norms of both femininity and ability. She is coerced by the discursive "normal" body – of both medical discourse as well as societal norms of femininity – which literally shape and mutate her physical body.

### Vladimir Luxuria's *Trans Coda*

At the same time, understanding the *coda di pesce* as a phallus suggests that Santamato's desire for its removal might be likened to a desire for gender reassignment surgery, an overlapping of disabled and trans identities that will recall the logic of transability that I discuss in Chapter Two.<sup>353</sup> In support of this correlation, I will turn briefly to another version of *La sirenetta* by Italian trans writer, politician, and public figure, Vladimir Luxuria. Luxuria's "La sirenetta nel cemento" describes the protagonist's transition from male (as Manuelito) to female (as Ofelia). While I will not have the space here to give a full treatment of Luxuria's tale, I will offer a few salient points that I think will help in teasing out the various implications of Santamato's story, beginning with the explicit correlation made by Ofelia between her penis and the *coda di pesce*: "Si accarezzava il corpo nudo e si riconosceva dalla vita in su, non accettava quel pene così bramato dai suoi clienti, era una inutile appendice di cui vergognarsi, come la pinna caudale della Sirenetta, anche lei si sentiva incompleta, ma non aveva trovato il coraggio e i soldi per affrontare l'operazione più impegnativa e la rettifica dei suoi genitali"<sup>354</sup> ["She caressed her naked body and recognized herself from the waist up, she didn't accept that penis so desired by her clients, it was a useless appendage of which she was ashamed, like the tail fin of the Little Mermaid, she too felt incomplete, but she hadn't yet found the courage and the money to face the more intensive operation and the correction of her genitals."] For Ofelia, like Santamato, it is the *removal* of an appendage that would make her complete. Ofelia's insistence on the uselessness of her *pene/pinna* despite its exchange value for her clients (as she is a prostitute), suggests a refusal of a phallic economy, and further reveals that the phallus itself is aligned not with the *logos* of a dominant (male) humanity, but instead with the animality of the fish tail – which for Ofelia, like Santamato, is figured as devoid of life and value.<sup>355</sup>

When she finally does have the operation, she has her vocal chords operated on at the same time, which perhaps predictably, leads to the loss of her voice: "La voce però non era

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<sup>352</sup> Note as well the genealogical nature of this structuring – it is her grandmother's magazine; and it is her mother who forces her to undergo this long series of medical treatments.

<sup>353</sup> This idea is rendered as well in her poem: "Vorrei trovare / un uomo / più uomo / di me" (Santamato, *Io, sirena*, 188) [I would like to find / a man / more man / than me.]

<sup>354</sup> Vladimir Luxuria, "La sirenetta nel cemento," *Le favole non dette* (Milan: Bompiani, 2009), 51-52, emphasis mine.

<sup>355</sup> Clearly, this is a false assumption that depends on context – the tail is not useless to the sirena, quite the contrary. It is only by virtue of her desire for human status that it becomes "useless".

tornata, l'operazione alle corde vocali non era riuscita, *poteva emettere solo suoni animaleschi per urlare dolore*" (67, emphasis mine) ["Her voice, however, did not return, the operation on her vocal chords was not successful, *she could only emit animalistic sounds* to express her pain."] In becoming woman, Ofelia thus does not become human as she was hoping; instead she becomes animal, no longer capable of producing human language. Ironically, in losing her fish tail, she further confirms her animality rather than accessing a human state, suggesting that perhaps the *coda/phallus* is the bearer of *logos* after all. Again, recalling Derrida's *animot*, it is the removal of the animal tail that necessitates the removal of language.

What is more, for Ofelia, this movement towards woman, towards animal, and away from language is figured as a moving towards *disability* as well: "Quando tentò di alzarsi in piedi [...] provò delle sofferenze acute come se camminasse su coltelli affilati. Non si scoraggiò, l'importante era sentirsi donna totalmente, *anche zoppicante e muta* avrebbe vinto la sua sfida" (67-68, emphasis mine) ["When she tried to get up ... she felt acute pain as if she were walking on sharpened knives. She didn't let herself get discouraged, the important thing was that she felt completely a woman, *even limping and mute* she would be victorious."] This is, in a sense, a reversal of the premise of Santamato's story, according to which she must get rid of her disability (*coda*) in order to be a woman. Here, instead it is becoming woman that *causes* Ofelia to be disabled. While on the one hand this confluence of binary reversals would seem to confirm stereotyped associations between woman and animality or woman as disabled, on the other, it suggests that Ofelia's surgery fails to give her access to the womanhood she so desires, a notion that is borne out at the end of the story. In the final pages, she learns that her beloved is already married and has a child, at which point she kills herself by drowning. Her return to the water evokes both The Little Mermaid as well as the Shakespearian source of her name, and implies that she remains a *sirena* through to the end.<sup>356</sup> The message underlying Luxuria's story (as well as perhaps Andersen's) is that taking such drastic measures in self-modification in order to fit into a certain societal category or norm will result in a complete loss of self.

While the final disablement of Luxuria's Ofelia may seem at odds with Santamato's story, I maintain that the two are in fact operating according to a parallel logic.<sup>357</sup> The difference lies in the use of disability as metaphor (in Luxuria's story) versus the literal bodily fact of disability (in Santamato). What is figured as disablement in "La sirenetta nel cemento" equates to a loss of self which for Santamato is at the heart of her final revelation regarding her disability. Her disability is not the *cause* of her lack of confidence or romantic relationships; "il vero handicap," as she calls it, is precisely that loss of self that societal prejudice causes: "L'handicap è un marchio, un pregiudizio, uno schema mentale condiviso da tutti, compresi gli stessi handicappati" (151) ["Disability is a stigma, a prejudice, a frame of mind shared by everyone, including disabled people themselves."] This *metaphorical* "handicap," of course, cannot be surgically removed, which suggests a subtle critique of a complete trust in medical

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<sup>356</sup> See Adriana Cavarero's treatment of Shakespeare's Ophelia and her figuring as a mermaid: "Come una sirena," in *Corpo in figure: Filosofia e politica della corporeità* (1995), 174.

<sup>357</sup> For a critique of the use of disability rhetoric in describing trans subjectivity, see Eli Clare: "I often hear trans people – most frequently folks who are using, or want to use, medical technology to reshape their bodies – name their transness a disability, a birth defect. They say, 'I should have easy access to good, respectful health care, just as other disabled people do. I simply need a cure.' The word *defect* always takes my breath away; it's a punch in the stomach. But before I get to that, I need to say the whole equation makes me incredulous, even as I work to respect the people who frame their transness this way. Do they *really* believe disability ensures decent – much less good and respectful – health care?" Eli Clare, "Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement," *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (2013): 262.

cures, and in surgery in particular as a means to effecting one's identity. As disabled trans theorist Eli Clare claims, "If trans people took up this disability rights lesson and defined ourselves on our own terms rather than through the lens of medicine, we'd still care about finding good doctors and getting good medical treatment, but our bodily truths wouldn't ultimately be medical truths."<sup>358</sup>

In Santamato's case, she finds that her surgery has been only partially successful, leaving her with the *appearance* of "normal" legs that are still lacking in function: "Le mie gambe rimanevano paralizzate; la bella forma non era sufficiente a reggermi in piedi come gli altri" (25) ["My legs remained paralyzed; their beautiful form wasn't enough to support me on my feet like everyone else."] She is now faced with a different kind of internal/external disconnect: while her exterior body now *appears* functional, "inside" it continues to bear the mark of disability. She writes: "La mia coda di pesce era ancora attaccata al mio corpo, anche se non si vedeva più" (206) ["My fish tail was still attached to my body, even if you couldn't see it anymore."] Like *Sirena senza coda*, Santamato thus both has and does not have a tail. And whether that tail is immediately visible as part of her exterior body, or is only revealed once she begins to walk, revealing her limp, its presence continues to affect her interior self in profound ways. Though the removal of Santamato's "tail" is unsuccessful, leaving her indelibly marked by her disability, its persistence suggests that she need not give up her voice after all. Again, if we understand the physical tail or *coda* as being commensurate with the *tale* as language or narrative, it is apparent that Santamato's voice and her *coda di pesce* are inexorably intertwined, and both are at turns either suppressed or made legible.<sup>359</sup>

The fact that the *coda di pesce* cannot be surgically removed suggests that disability is not so easily aligned with the "inert matter" of the vegetative body after all. Santamato's experience suggests that disability is not simply "located in the body," in the *vita vegetale*, nor in the relation between mind and body, but is instead central to her identity, in *vita-di-relazione*. However, for Santamato, this is not necessarily a positive realization, and she blames the "short-sightedness" of others for the construction of her disability. She writes: "Avevo fatto bene a non accettare il triste destino della Sirenetta che, privata della voce e dell'amore, si rigetta nelle acque del padre Oceano per disperdersi nella spuma del mare. Avevo fatto bene a riacquistare la mia voce, e a usarla per parlare di tutte quelle sirenette che la miopia umana ci fa vedere come infelici e 'deformi'" (254) ["I had done well not to accept the sad fate of the Little Mermaid who, without a voice and without love, throws herself back into the waters of father Ocean to dissolve into sea foam. I had done well to reclaim my voice, and to use it to speak of all the little mermaids that human myopia makes us see as unhappy and 'deformed.'"] Again, for Santamato, it is not that the bodies of those who are different are inherently "deformed." They are made that way only through the discrimination and judgment of those around them (and here she problematically uses a metaphor of short-sightedness). Given this reversal of perspectives, it is thus not up to Santamato to become human (or woman) through the manipulation of her own body. It is instead up to the surrounding society to change its way of "seeing."

With her tail still attached, Santamato is left at the intersection of the binaries with which we began: rather than executing a complete switch between poles, in the end, Santamato is *both* human and animal, male and female, disabled and not. She writes: "Mi era stata data in sorte la

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<sup>358</sup> Clare, "Body shame, body pride," 265.

<sup>359</sup> This fact challenges the idea that the female voice cannot be endowed with semantic content, a claim which Adriana Cavarero has critiqued in a number of places. See: Cavarero, *A più voci*; and Cavarero and Langione, "The Vocal Body."

doppia conoscenza di vivere la vita sia da persona perfettamente normale sia da handicappata; avevo passato il ponte che separa questi due mondi, conoscevo entrambi i linguaggi. Avrei fatto da ‘interprete,’ mostrando ad altri la strada” (212) [“I was given by fate the double awareness of living life both as a completely normal person and as handicapped; I had crossed the bridge that separates these two worlds, I knew both languages. I would be an ‘interpreter,’ showing others the way.”] As an interpreter between two worlds, Santamato is able to restore the *external* lines of communication that were previously blocked as a result of an *internal* binary division or caesura. At the same time, the idea that Santamato is able to interpret between these two worlds again invokes the idea that to be disabled means, in a sense, to speak a different language, one that is incomprehensible to the non-disabled. Like the mermaid, the disabled other is thus aligned with the foreigner or immigrant, as a visitor from another realm that is not only unknown but inaccessible to the non-disabled.

What is more, this citation calls attention to another common trope in narratives of disability (and of mermaids) – the idea that disability is a world unto itself, a territory that can be “visited,” either temporarily or permanently. In Chapter Two, I discussed this idea in terms of blindness, where the figuring of disability as another nation or country caused a division within gender categories, allowing for same-sex desire. Here, disability is placed in opposition to the country of “normality” – one of the themes that appears repeatedly in discourses of disability as well as throughout this dissertation – and Santamato’s ability to navigate between the two “countries” suggests yet another form of hybridity imbedded in the body of the *sirena*. This points up the fact that part of what makes the *sirena* attractive to these authors in their self-representations is that the *sirena*’s upper half is understood as being particularly adept at meeting standards of beauty and thus of normalcy – or perhaps in exhibiting an exceptional beauty that goes beyond the norm. In either case, the mermaid’s torso – as that which is human – allows for at least a partial participation in the normal. For Santamato, taking part in casual sexual relationships, modeling competitions, and runway shows gives her a certain credibility in the world of the normal and allows her to be taken seriously by the non-disabled. Where in Pedullà’s story, Stefi’s simulation of blindness allowed her temporary access to the (queer) realm of disability, for Santamato, her entry into the realm of normality requires a rigid adherence to the law of heterosexuality.

### **Barbara Garlaschelli’s *Sirena*: A Vibrant Matter**

I will turn now to the third text in this series of autobiographical mermaid narratives about disability, Barbara Garlaschelli’s *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento* (2001) [Mermaid: Heavy Vehicle in Motion]. Garlaschelli’s novel recounts her real-life experience of recovery and treatment after a swimming accident in 1981 that left her paralyzed and in a wheelchair. The “action” largely takes place in hospitals and clinics in both Italy and Germany where she undergoes surgeries, treatments, and rehabilitation therapies during the ten-month period before she is allowed to return home. Where Tonelli and Santamato both explicitly invoke the mermaid as metaphor throughout their narratives, Garlaschelli’s text only mentions it once, towards the end of the text, and only briefly. For that reason, the terms of my argument will shift in this final section – from questions of animality and the tail/tale/*coda*, which Garlaschelli does not explicitly evoke, to the issues of mind, body, voice and subjectivity that those discourses to some extent represent and which are still integral here.

Though perhaps Garlaschelli does not often overtly engage with the mermaid metaphor, the title of her novel encourages the reader to associate the entire story with the *sirena* figure, at

first perhaps only in the fact that her accident occurs under water, and with regard to the correlation between the *sirena*'s body and that of the physically disabled woman, as she "becomes" a woman who does not walk. However, as I will show, many of the themes brought forth in and around other *sirena* tales appear here as well, beginning with the invocation of an entry into a different world, as we saw at the close of Santamato's narrative. In Garlaschelli's initial account of her accident, she writes of diving into the water and hitting her head, after which she describes herself as having entered a new world, a world apart from the people on the shore: "Sono vicini, molto vicini, ma è come se fossero un altro mondo. Sono un altro mondo. Tu ancora non lo sai, ma hai attraversato una soglia e ora sei da un'altra parte"<sup>360</sup> ["They're close, very close, but it's as if they were another world. They *are* another world. You still don't know it, but you've crossed over a threshold and now you're somewhere else."] While here the separation is perhaps meant literally, the figurative significance is made clear repeatedly throughout the text, and this notion of the threshold will prove to be significant in a variety of ways, signifying her existence in a liminal space between the world of her old life and that of a new, disabled life.

Upon her entrance into this "new world," Garlaschelli must learn new ways of navigating, relating, and communicating, both with other people and with her environment. Her use of the metaphor of another world in the opening episode is enigmatic and ambiguous, due to the use of the verb *sono*, a homonymous term for both "I am" and "they are" in the Italian. The phrase "*sono un altro mondo*" can thus be translated as "*they are another world*" or as – alternatively – "*I am another world.*" The text is largely written in the second person, a fact to which I will return further on, but for now I would like to note the way that the narrator's address to the "tu" who is undergoing the experience recounted thus effectuates a split between the "io" and the "tu" that is paralleled by the split between "loro" and "tu." Thus, the entrance into the "world" of disability for Garlaschelli creates a separation between the self (in the water) and the other (on the shore), but at the same time, it establishes a barrier between the subject and itself – the "tu" and the "io." However, the particular phrasing – "*I am another world*" – suggests a notion of the subject, or perhaps the body, as itself an environment, a new world, to be explored and discovered, thus complicating an interpretation that would see this splitting of the self as an expression of a pathological self-alienation.

The idea that one must newly learn about and adapt to one's body and to one's surrounding environment after becoming disabled is one that is put forward by Matteo Schianchi, Italian historian of disability, and disability studies scholar James Berger, among others. As Berger writes: "The world itself, and one's own body, must be relearned," a process which he likens to a post-traumatic process of reconstruction.<sup>361</sup> Indeed, one could understand Garlaschelli's text as a description of precisely this process, as an account of both the pain she endured during her treatment as well as the process of learning and relearning her "new" body and how to interact with and navigate through her environment, a process that she clearly understands as integral to her becoming the person she is today. Her "novel" can thus be classified as what G. Thomas Couser, in his study of the genres of disability memoirs, has called

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<sup>360</sup> Barbara Garlaschelli, *Sirena: Mezzo pesante in movimento* (Milan: TEA, 2004), 11.

<sup>361</sup> James Berger, "Trauma Without Disability," 570. I have written about this elsewhere; see: Noson, "From superabilità to transabilità." See also: Matteo Schianchi, *La terza nazione del mondo: I disabili tra pregiudizio e realtà* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2009), 32.

a “narrative of rehabilitation.”<sup>362</sup> Garlaschelli describes needing to relearn daily tasks such as eating and writing: “Siccome le dita non riesci a muoverle è necessario imparare di nuovo, con tecniche diverse, a scrivere, ad afferrare gli oggetti, spostarli, sollevarli. L’abilità sostituisce la forza” (97) [“Since you’re not able to move your fingers, it’s necessary to learn again, with different techniques, to write, to grab objects, move them, lift them. Ability substitutes strength.”] While Fabio Ferrucci and others have described this learning process as being like that of an infant, a perspective that risks infantilizing the newly disabled adult, Garlaschelli notes that in order to “relearn” these tasks, she must use new techniques, indeed new *abilities*, that can substitute for her lack of muscle strength and control, highlighting that these abilities are *different* from those she learned as a child to which she has been accustomed for most of her life.<sup>363</sup> If this formulation points away from a comparison between herself and an infant or child, in other moments the text suggests exactly that. Towards the end of the novel, on her first trip outside of the clinic for months, she writes: “Osservi ogni cosa come fosse la prima volta. Non la prima volta fuori dalla clinica. La prima volta *fuori*. Nel mondo” (106) [“You observe each thing as if it were for the first time. Not the first time outside of the clinic. The first time *outside*. In the world.”] Here, she seems to be seeing the world as if for the first time as though with new eyes. And after almost a year in various hospitals and clinics, when she is finally released and able to go home she writes: “Hanno cercato di prepararti al meglio a una nuova vita. / Una nuova vita su una sedia a rotelle” (109) [“They have tried to prepare you as best as they can for a new life. A new life in a wheelchair.”] Garlaschelli’s accident and subsequent disablement are thus not presented as a “death of the self” as Schianchi has problematically claimed, but as a catalyst, as the condition of possibility for the construction of her current identity – an identity that is in some ways the same and in others quite different from that which came before.<sup>364</sup>

Garlaschelli figures this adaptation to the self in terms of normality, recalling the discussions of both Pontiggia and Achille, which I discuss in Chapter Three. The incompatibility of disability and normality is again highlighted here, when the doctor working with Garlaschelli tells her and the others in her rehabilitation clinic that they should consider themselves normal people: “*Normali*. Pensi che hai sempre detestato questa parola e non capisci per quali motivi la dovresti indossare ora, ora che la *distinzione* dagli altri si afferma visibilmente. Non è *normale* aggirarsi per il mondo su due ruote grandi e due piccole, e allora perché tentare una lotta che sarebbe perdente per affermare un valore di *normalità* che non ti è mai appartenuto?” (98) [“*Normal*. You think about how you’ve always hated that word and you don’t understand why you should want to adopt it now, now that the *distinction* between you and other people has become so visibly apparent. It’s not *normal* to go around the world on two big wheels and two small ones, so why should you fight a losing battle to affirm the value of a *normality* that has never belonged to you?”] However, where Achille firmly insisted that he would never be able to participate in the category of normality, Garlaschelli’s view shifts over time, and she comes to associate normality with the reaffirmation of her self and her life: “Non c’entra la rassegnazione. Al contrario, c’entra un’assoluta determinazione alla riconquista della vita. Della normalità. Della *mia* normalità. Che è fatta anche del non camminare, del non riuscire a muovere le dita

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<sup>362</sup> G. Thomas Couser, “Conflicting Paradigms: The Rhetorics of Disability Memoir,” in *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, eds. James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001): 78-91.

<sup>363</sup> See: Fabio Ferrucci, *La disabilità come relazione sociale: Gli approcci sociologici tra natura e cultura* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2004), 132.

<sup>364</sup> See Schianchi, *La terza nazione del mondo*, 37-40.

delle mani, del non sentire una parte del mio corpo e di molto altro. Ed è fatta di una nuova percezione del tempo e dello spazio, di me stessa e degli altri” (116-7) [“It’s not resignation. On the contrary, it’s an absolute determination to reconquer my life. Normality. *My* normality. Which includes not walking, not being able to move my fingers, not being able to feel part of my body and much more. It includes a new perception of time and of space, of myself and of others.”] By redefining normality, Garlaschelli not only accepts but comes to *celebrate* her new way of being in the world.

Berger describes this process as a form of “regeneration,” and indeed a rhetoric of rebirth subtends Garlaschelli’s narrative at times. Berger’s attention to the role of trauma in the experience of (especially late onset) disability suggests that trauma may be a necessary step in the development of the self, though this is perhaps an understanding that is fed by Christian notions of death and rebirth. However, it is of interest that the rhetoric of rebirth that attends Garlaschelli’s text enacts a reversal of those versions of the *sirena* story that present the dive down to the realm of the mermaid as analogous to either a death of the self or a descent into madness (and therefore a loss of the self), as in Oscar Wilde’s “The Fisherman and His Soul” (1892), Mario Soldati’s *La verità sul caso Motta* (1937), Marguerite Yourcenar’s “The Man Who Saw the Nereids” (1938), or Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s “Lighea” (1961), and perhaps, to a certain extent, Santamato’s *Io, sirena fuor d’acqua* as well. Where the encounter with the female other for the male protagonists of these earlier texts results in a dissolution of identity, for Santamato, as we have just seen, the *coda di pesce* represented an alterity present in the self, within her own body, which is rejected by the author and which she seeks to be rid of at all costs, despite the fact that it is also representative of voice and thus of identity. Though in the end she finds a way to negotiate between the normal and the “handicapped” parts of herself, Santamato never fully accepts the part of her that is different, that is marked by the *sirena*, displacing the “blame” for her “deformity” from herself to the limited perspective of society, still making recourse to mainstream standards of beauty in order to prove her acceptance in the world of humans. Garlaschelli’s relationship to her “new” disabled body is, as we will see, quite different and, I argue, the *sirena* figure and its accompanying significations, as presented in Garlaschelli’s text, thus change in important ways as well. In particular, Garlaschelli’s version of the *sirena* figure is much more rooted in the relationship between the body and the self, as well as between the body and its environment – both physical and social – as opposed to the disembodiment that is either desired or effected in Tonelli and Santamato’s texts.

Garlaschelli’s entry into the world of disability at the start of her narrative coincides with her entry into the water, a connection that justifies the use of the *sirena* image and, again, creates the initial association between the *sirena* and the disabled female subject. However, what is of particular importance for our understanding of Garlaschelli’s text is that, in contrast to Tonelli and Santamato, who were respectively either born *sirene* or became disabled at an early age and thus desired to “become women” later on, Garlaschelli’s entry into womanhood itself is understood as being concurrent with her “entry into” disability. To begin with, her age at the time of her accident is significant. She is fifteen – the same age as Andersen’s little mermaid when she decides to make her fateful transition from mermaid to woman. Jean Giraudoux’s *Ondine* is also fifteen when she meets Hans and desires to become his wife, as was Undine, the water nymph of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s eponymous story, itself a source for Andersen’s



tale.<sup>365</sup> One potential interpretation of these earlier tales is that these “mermaids” (adolescent girls) are wild and unsocialized as children and must at a certain age “become” women through a domestication process that will make them suitable for marriage. These marriage plots each go off the rails for different reasons but the moral is clear: in order to enter the world of “men” (and become a good Christian) a girl must give up her youthful mermaid ways. For Garlaschelli, however, the story unfolds in reverse: she becomes a *sirena* through her entry into a new watery world, at the age when she is beginning to “become” a woman through puberty, etc. This is the age when most people begin to forge significant relationships outside of the family, and, we learn, is just before Garlaschelli begins to think about her own sexuality. Rather than wishing to become woman – understood as equivalent to becoming *human* and therefore normal – as an antidote to disability, as was the case for Tonelli and Santamato, for Garlaschelli the new self that is found through becoming disabled – through becoming *sirena* – is presented as inseparable from the moment of becoming woman. Of course, the *sirena* as a figure for woman is not new – as we have seen in feminist texts that use the figure – but the important point to note here is that, for Garlaschelli, being woman and being disabled are not incompatible, but are instead inseparable, as two important aspects of her identity. This is a crucial difference from Tonelli and Santamato’s texts where womanhood and sexuality were used as a way to escape a disabled identity, in keeping with the (ableist) assumption that disability and femininity are mutually exclusive.

In contrast to Santamato’s desire to remove her fish tail, or Tonelli’s use of the *coda-tastiera* to communicate beyond her “defective” body, for Garlaschelli, the transition into *sirenitudine* occurs via a slow process of *learning* that is effectuated through both her disabled body and her relationships to other people. The idea of disability as a process is invoked by Tom Shakespeare in his discussion of narrative as a means to the construction of a disabled identity: “Disability as a positive identity is a process, to use Foucauldian language, where subjection opens up the possibility of subjectification.”<sup>366</sup> In the case of disability, this subjection is perhaps most often felt within the site of the medical establishment but is reinforced in many areas of society. However, Shakespeare’s point is that through collective action, such negative experiences can lead to the creation of a positive collective identity that forms in response to the negative and exclusionary discourses of an ableist society. I would add that, for Garlaschelli, this learning process is one of *self*-subjection, which results in the emergence of new forms of relation both to herself and others, both corporeally and discursively. At first this process has a violent undercurrent for Garlaschelli: “La parola d’ordine è: rieducazione. Sa tanto di nazista, ed è così in effetti che devi diventare rispetto al tuo corpo: una nazista che lo costringe a fare cose che non vorrebbe. Solo che lo fai per salvarlo e non per ucciderlo” (56) [“The operative word is: reeducation. It has a Nazi sound to it, and that is basically what you have to become with respect to your body: a Nazi that makes it do things it doesn’t want to do. Only you do it in order to save it, not to kill it.”] Later, as she learns to give her body over to the care of others, she finds that what at first seemed a question of control – or a lack thereof – is in fact that which provides the basis for love and relationship: “*Non si è più assoluti padroni del proprio corpo [...] Ho imparato con il tempo a capire che chi ti ama, chi ti vuole stare vicino, non ha problemi a*

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<sup>365</sup> Jean Giraudoux, *Ondine* (1938); Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Undine* (1811). On the influence of Fouqué on Andersen’s work, see: *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales: Volume One: A-F*, ed. Donald Haase, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 372.

<sup>366</sup> Tom Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity and Difference,” in *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability*, eds. Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1996), 94-113.

*gestire il tuo corpo [...] Ho imparato a lasciarmi toccare, aiutare, cullare. Amare. Amarmi” (77) [“One is no longer the absolute master of one’s own body ... I learned over time to understand that those who love you, those who want to be near you, have no problem with taking care of your body... I learned to let myself be touched, helped, cradled. Loved. And to love myself.”]* Garlaschelli’s sense of self runs counter to traditional concepts of the body as being the sole domain of an autonomous rational self. Giving her body over to those who care for her creates a reciprocal – even collective – sense of self that has repercussions for her relationship to herself and her own body as well. Relinquishing illusions of control and autonomy with respect to her body allows her to love and care for that body in the same way that those around her do.<sup>367</sup>

This understanding of the body as part of a collective community of care and control is reflected in Garlaschelli’s understanding of her text as well. In the “Author’s Note” at the close of the novel, she writes: “non l’ho vissuta come una storia ‘privata’. [...] È stata una storia collettiva, perché attorno a me si è mosso un mondo popolato da persone senza le quali non avrei potuto arrivare dove sono arrivata ed essere – nel bene e nel male – ciò che sono” (119) [“I didn’t experience it as a ‘private’ story ... It was a collective story, because a whole world has moved around me, populated by people without whom I would never have been able to get where I am, and to be – with the good and the bad – what I am.”] The mirroring of text and body through this idea of collective participation and care suggests the extent to which, again, the *sirena* represents a notion of narrative that is absolutely bound to the corporeal.<sup>368</sup> We saw this in different ways in regard to Tonelli and Santamato, but here the emphasis on the collective offers a different compelling perspective, suggesting a notion of subjectivity that is collectively constructed through the relational practices of both discourse and the care of the body.

In *La disabilità come relazione sociale*, Fabio Ferrucci proposes a notion of disability “as a social relation” that is, in part, based on narrative or discursive practices. “Un ancoraggio alla propria identità ... viene cercato nelle pratiche narrative condivise all’interno di una comunità di persone” (176) [“An anchoring of one’s identity ... is sought through the narrative practices shared within a community of people.”]<sup>369</sup> However, Ferrucci critiques the hard line social model of disability, noting the importance of including the relationship with one’s own body – what he calls the biological dimension – in any understanding of disability, rather than only acknowledging the social, the relationship between the disabled person and society: “il senso della disabilità dipende dalla relazione che essi hanno con il proprio corpo, e dunque con la dimensione organica” (44) [“the meaning of disability depends on the relation that disabled people have with their own bodies, and therefore with the biological realm.”]<sup>370</sup> While Ferrucci

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<sup>367</sup> This is not to say that autonomy is not still a valued and cultivated goal, as we see in Garlaschelli’s description of her reeducation process: “La mattina è dedicata al recupero dell’autonomia: lavarsi, vestirsi, truccarsi.” (97) [“The morning is dedicated to the recuperation of autonomy: washing, getting dressed, putting on makeup.”] She also intensely desires to be able to use a wheelchair independently and to be able to write easily without the use of auxiliary aids. However, at the same time, she adjusts to a new kind of interdependence with the people close to her.

<sup>368</sup> Again, here I am understanding the *sirena* as a figure for both Garlaschelli’s text – which the title itself instructs the reader to do – and for her body as disabled, which is more subtly suggested throughout.

<sup>369</sup> Thus, rather than looking to narrative *content* as the building blocks for identity, Ferrucci suggests that it is the practice of engaging in narratives with others, relationally, that lays the ground for reconstruction. Again, see: Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity and Difference.”

<sup>370</sup> Ferrucci elaborates on his position regarding the necessity to acknowledge the biological dimensions of disability – and pain in particular – in discussions of disability, again making reference to the most extreme versions of the social model that understand disability as entirely produced by social and environmental barriers. “L’inclusione della dimensione biologica da un lato è avvertita come rischiosa perché parlare di biologia, ammettere il dolore, confrontarsi con la menomazione permetterebbe ‘all’oppressore’ di affermare che la disabilità, dopo tutto, dipende

does not engage with the many theories of disability and the body that have complicated the more rigid and limited articulations of the social model he critiques, his focus on disability as a social relation that must also include the relation with the body is compelling.<sup>371</sup> I would like to elaborate further on this idea here by questioning the notion that it is possible to separate body and society at all: I suggest that the various relationships described by Ferrucci and by disability theorists – the relationship with the body, with the environment, and with society – operate according to similar logical mechanisms and inform one another in complex and unparsable ways. What is more, the inseparability of the body from the social, and/or from the discursive realm, will have repercussions with regard to the relationship between text, author, and reader as well.

Indeed, for Garlaschelli, it would seem that her body itself becomes part of both her environment – as an external object to be manipulated and treated – as well as part of a network of relations with other people. She describes the relation between her mind and body as any of a whole series of relationships between people: “il tuo corpo sembra essersi arreso alla vita. La tua mente, invece, è l’aguzzina, l’amante, la madre e il padre. Lo custodisce, lo corteggia, lo violenta, lo provoca, lo coccola. La tua mente vuole che il tuo corpo, in qualunque condizione, torni a vivere” (56) [“Your body seems to have given up. Your mind, on the other hand, is its taskmaster, its lover, its mother, and its father. It takes care of it, courts it, hurts it, provokes it, caresses it. Your mind wants your body – in whatever condition it may be – to return to life.”] Although initially it is predictably Garlaschelli’s mind that takes the active role, exerting its power over her lifeless body in a variety of ways, as the narrative progresses, the body begins to take on an agency of its own. “Piano piano il corpo torna ad appartenerti. Ancora non lo senti – e non lo sentirai mai più, non nel senso convenzionale del termine – ma ricominci a sentirlo tuo [...] lui torna a te, come un amante pentito. E come in tutte le storie d’amore che si rispettino, nei ritorni si perde sempre qualcosa” (61) [“Slowly your body starts to come back to you. You still don’t feel it – and you never will again, not in the conventional sense of the term – but you begin to feel again that it is yours ... it is returning to you, like a repentant lover. And as in all self-

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‘realmente’ dalle limitazioni fisiche” (64) [“The inclusion of the biological dimension on the one hand is seen as dangerous because to speak of biology, to admit pain, to face one’s impairment would allow ‘the oppressor’ to affirm that disability ‘really is’ based on physical limitations.”] Again, despite the fact that Ferrucci leaves out important developments within critical disability studies – Wendell, *The Rejected Body*; Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Tobin Siebers, “Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body,” *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 737-754; Gayle Salamon and most of the last decade of work within the context of American disability studies – that *do* take the physical dimension into account, I think that the idea of the experience of pain and other bodily needs, discomfort, etc. as integral to the process of the (re)construction of the disabled self and in particular a deeper understanding of how the “biological” or organic dimension *interacts* with the social and the discursive realms deserves further attention and is particularly relevant to Garlaschelli’s novel.

<sup>371</sup> In particular, Ferrucci suggests using a critical realist approach in thinking about disability and, specifically, he suggests Margaret Archer’s theory of social morphogenesis (1995) as a possible model: “una concezione relazionale e stratificata dell’identità sociale delle persone disabili, come quella elaborata dall’approccio morfogenetico” (Ferrucci, *La disabilità come relazione sociale*, 183) [“a relational and stratified conception of the social identity of people with disabilities, like that elaborated in the morphogenetic approach.”] Disappointingly, he does not go into detail in describing what this might look like. Interestingly, Archer’s theory uses a metaphor of biology in order to describe a social theory, which has to do with the reciprocal shifting interactions between structure and agency – between the social and the self. This approach has also been suggested by scholars in the Anglo-American context. See, for example: Simon J. Williams, “Is anybody there? Critical realism, chronic illness and the disability debate,” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 21.6 (1999): 797-819. Note in particular Williams’s critique of Tom Shakespeare and the social constructionist relegation of heterogeneity in impairment to the realm of “storytelling”.

respecting love stories, in the return something is always lost.”] The body, figured here as a lover, is no longer a passive (or inert) object upon which or through which the mind exerts its will. Instead, the body as lover is an active agent, one who is represented as coming home, as if from a journey. Figuring the body and mind as lovers suggests an equal attribution of influence and responsibility to both parties in the being of the subject, as part of a relational sociocorporeal entity.<sup>372</sup> The body in Garlaschelli’s text takes on many forms, some animate, some inanimate, some abstract: “Ma questo corpo è il tuo corpo. È il tuo bagaglio, la tua casa, i tuoi sogni, le tue illusioni, il tuo linguaggio segreto” (62) [“But this body is your body. It’s your suitcase, your house, your dreams, your illusions, your secret language.”] In this particular instance, the body begins as suitcase or house, a fairly typical understanding of the body as container or vehicle, but then shifts to dreams and illusions – what could be likened to a kind of Lacanian imago – an idea of the body that represents far more than a simple container, that serves as an expression of one’s inner desires or thoughts. Finally, the body as a “secret language” suggests yet another conception of the body that is consonant with the ideas I am exploring in this chapter – that the body itself be understood as capable of communication, as possessing a language or system of expression that signifies in relation to other bodies.

### **The Hybrid Text: Relationality as Narrative Form**

It is this relational quality that I want to pay attention to here, a structure that is reflected in the numerous hybrid forms that comprise the narrative itself. Garlaschelli’s *Sirena* – like the texts of both Santamato and Tonelli – exhibits a hybridity in narrative form that parallels the hybrid morphology of the siren’s body. In the case of Tonelli’s *Sirena senza coda*, that narrative hybridity took the form of a collaborative writing process (having more than one author), as well as a composite of genres (combining letters, email, texting and “standard” prose), thus challenging the integrity of conventional understandings of autonomous authorship and narrative categorization. In Garlaschelli’s text, similar hybridities characterize and inform the narrative. As one example, although only Garlaschelli is listed as author, the section titled “Le note di Renzo,” reproduces the notes written by her father during her time in the hospital. Secondly, the text alternates between two “voices,” interspersing the chronological narrative of Garlaschelli’s rehabilitation in hospitals with sections in italics that diverge from the dominant narrative.<sup>373</sup>

What is more, the majority of the novel is written in the second person, much like Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, suggesting a number of possible interpretations. While on the one hand, it is possible to view Garlaschelli’s use of the “tu” form as a symptom of a pathological disassociation from the self caused by the trauma of her accident and by the acquisition of disability, I contend that a more complex – and more productive – mechanism is at work here. Firstly, as I have already intimated, the “tu” address effectively splits the narrative “io,” causing a separation from the self that has long been understood as a necessary element of the narrative enterprise – even where the first person form is used, the “io” that writes is always already separate from the “io” recounted – and of the structure of rational consciousness itself.

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<sup>372</sup> Paul Zumthor coined this term, “sociocorporeal,” in the context of the oral performance of poetry. See: Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction* trans. Kathryn Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); and “Body and Performance,” trans. William Whobrey, in *Materialities of Communication*, eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). While Zumthor distinguishes the sociocorporeal from the written, I am here using it to describe a form of bodily sociality that can be represented both orally and textually.

<sup>373</sup> I will return to this structuring feature further on in the chapter.

Here, in contrast to Calvino's novel, where the "tu," the *Letto*, is unwittingly enlisted in the quest for the manuscript of the novel and thus the desire for the story, in Garlaschelli's narrative, the "tu" places the reader within the author's own autobiography, another way in which the text becomes an expression of a collective subjectivity. Rather than a comment on the nature of the making of stories and their dissemination or deconstruction as is Calvino's novel, Garlaschelli's text encourages a reflection on the making of *subjects*, and specifically disabled subjects, forcibly involving the reader in her own experience. The narrator interpellates her readers and, to a certain extent, "inflicts" her own trauma upon them, bringing them with her into the experience of her accident, the ensuing pain, discomfort, and paralysis, as well as her final recovery and (re)entry into a valued and valuable disabled life.

This particular employment of the "tu" address has a spatial and chronological dimension as well. It functions in Garlaschelli's text in response to the initial acquisition of disability that the narrative recounts, and I argue, specifically to the splitting of disability and normality into distinct, disparate realms. The subject position of the narrator, the "io," inhabits a space that represents disability – she has already made the transition into disabled subjecthood – while the "tu" still exists in the moments (or space) before and during the transition. By the end of the novel, the text returns to the first person and the "io" and the "tu" are integrated once more. This return to the self corresponds to a return home at the level of the plot and is made explicit by the narrator: "Si ritorna per le ragioni più diverse. Perché non si ha altro posto dove andare. Perché si deve. Perché si vuole. Perché per quanto si sia stati in giro è nel tornare che ci si ritrova. / Il mio ritorno contiene tutte queste ragioni" (113) ["People return for many different reasons. Because there's nowhere else to go. Because they have to. Because they want to. Because for however long they've been away, it's in returning that one finds oneself. / My return includes all of these reasons."] The integration of the split self in the final pages of the novel that is enacted at the pronoun level through the return to both the self and the "io" – like the redefinition of normality I discuss above – suggests a final acceptance of the self as disabled, a claiming as "io" that self that is paralyzed and uses a wheelchair, rather than creating a distance from it, through the use of the second person. At the same time, in the final pages the reader is incorporated *into* the narrator's "io," an occurrence that might not be possible had the reader not been addressed throughout the text as the subject of the narrative. Furthermore, returning to the "io" at the close of the novel establishes a continuity between the subject of the text's initial trauma and the productive and positive identity she claims for herself in the final pages. In this way, the productive possibility for new life that is thus represented by the *sirena* of Garlaschelli's text coincides with the regenerative and reconstructive capacity of narrative – indeed, the two are inseparable/mutually constitutive. At the same time, the reader and narrator form another instance of hybridity as the mutual subject of the text itself.

### **The Body as Site of Subjectivity: "But I digress..."**

As I have already mentioned, Garlaschelli's own narrative "voice" is split in two, not only through the use of the "io" and "tu," but also via a split in narrative *style* that is marked by a shift in typography from one section to the next – from roman to italic font – bearing a striking similarity to the narrative structure of Elio Vittorini's *Uomini e no*. Garlaschelli's use of this narrative device seems to suggest a similar disassociation from the traumatic reality of the present into the deeper psychological realm of fantasy, desire and imagination. However, where for Vittorini's protagonist, these episodes tended towards a nostalgic longing for an unattainable

past, for Garlaschelli, they open outward towards a rich and possible future – a future which for the writing “io” has already come to pass.

The italicized sections that interrupt the chronological “narrative of rehabilitation” are each entitled *CORPO* [BODY] and are numbered (*CORPO 1: Prima breve digressione*, *CORPO 2: Seconda breve digressione*, and so on).<sup>374</sup> These digressions stand outside of the flow of the narrative and contain reflections on various subjects: the narrator’s experience of time; the body; swimming; and sex; each of which has changed for her since her accident. Each gives a glimpse into how things are “now” or in some indistinct moment that is understood as being *after* – after the accident, or after the period of rehabilitation is over. Perhaps most significantly, in these sections the first person “io” is used, rather than the “tu,” suggesting a kind of dialogue between the “tu” of the narrator’s past and the “io” of the asynchronous digressions. Given that these interjections are given the title “Body,” the reader is thus encouraged to associate the *body* with the “io,” as opposed to understanding the mind as “io” and the body as “tu,” which would be more consonant with Western views of the body as the property of – or merely as container for – the governing mind, site of language and the subject. Instead, here the body becomes the site of subjectivity and it is the body that addresses and interpellates the mind.

The notion of a dialogue with the self is hinted at in the first “digression,” *CORPO 1*, in which Garlaschelli discusses the way in which her experience of time has changed in relation to others. She notes that for her time seems to have stopped while other people rush by at their usual speed – making it hard for them to slow down enough to speak to her: “[*P*]er parlarmi, per stare con me, sono costrette a rallentare sino a fermarsi. Così capita che ci si parli di più di quanto non sia mai accaduto prima” (30) [“In order to talk to me, to be with me, they have to slow down to the point of stopping. So it happens that you talk to yourself more than you ever had before.”] Garlaschelli’s observations regarding her changed relationship to time are consonant with theories of “crip time” that have been elaborated within disability communities and disability theory. As Alison Kafer writes,

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of “how long things take” are based on very particular minds and bodies. We can then understand the flexibility of crip time as being not only an accommodation to those who need “more” time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.<sup>375</sup>

What Kafer describes as a radical reimagining with the potential to upend one of the most basic principles structuring (ableist) reality, Garlaschelli presents as an opportunity for self-knowledge. She suggests that her newfound immobility (understood in terms of both literal motion as well as

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<sup>374</sup> “*BODY 1: First short digression*,” “*BODY 2: Second short digression*,” and so on.

<sup>375</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27. Kafer places crip time in opposition to what she calls “curative time,” which in the case of Garlaschelli’s novel, we might understand as corresponding to the rehabilitation narrative that governs the non-italicized chapters. “Within this frame of curative time, then, the only appropriate disabled mind/body is one cured or moving toward cure. Cure, in this context, most obviously signals the elimination of impairment but can also mean normalizing treatments that work to assimilate the disabled mind/body as much as possible. The questions animating a curative temporality include: Were you born that way? How much longer do you have to live this way? How long before they invent a cure? How long will a cure take? How soon before you recover?” (28).

the motion of time) leads not only to a changed relationship to other people, but also to an occasion for a discursive intimacy with the *self* that otherwise might not occur. Borrowing from Adriana Cavarero's theory in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, I would like to suggest that the construction of the *io/tu* dialogue in Garlaschelli's novel allows her to write her own story from the perspective of another, rather than needing her story to be told *by* an other, as Cavarero suggests. However, for Cavarero, even the narration of one's own story is an expression of the desire for another to tell it back to us: "io ti racconto la mia storia affinché tu possa raccontarmela. Il desiderio di narrazione del sé narrabile si manifesta in esercizi autobiografici per affidare al racconto dell'altra la propria storia" (*Tu che mi riguardi*, 147) ["I tell you my story so that you can tell it to me. The desire for the narration of the narratable self manifests itself in autobiographical exercises in order to entrust one's own story to another's telling."] The interweaving of the ethical and the narrative realms in Cavarero's theory comes out of an understanding of the self as constructed through the narratives of the other. For Garlaschelli, writing her own story *as though* it belonged to another here allows the notion of a split self to take on a connotation of self-care rather than one of self-alienation, and indeed, the usually ubiquitous love story is quite absent from Garlaschelli's narrative. However, at the same time, we might understand this self-splitting as an enactment or staging of the self-other relation that becomes so central to Garlaschelli's understanding of herself as disabled, through both her readers and her family and friendships communities. Returning for a moment to the original Sirens of Homeric fame, we might thus understand Garlaschelli's narrative as an expression of the desire to hear her own story told by another – a desire which is at the heart of the Sirens' song and of Odysseus's plan to have himself tied to the ship's mast in order to hear it. However, Garlaschelli, in a sense, manages to become the other to herself, to become the very Siren call that beckons to her, even as she opens herself out to become one with the reader and with the others in her community. In this sense, it is because of her disability, because of the imperative to slow down, that she is able to engage in an inner dialogue with the self that will, in turn, allow her to care for herself.

### **"Come ti senti?": Sensation, feeling, hearing**

I would now like to explore some of the ways that this dialogue with the self, between the *io* and *tu*, between body and mind, are depicted throughout Garlaschelli's narrative. At the start of the novel, just after her swimming accident, the narrator is asked: "Come ti senti?" (12) ["How do you feel?"], to which follows the reply: "'Non mi sento.' Ti esce una vocetta flebile, da bambina, da bambola, da qualcuno che è lontano. È strano, perché invece tu sei lì, proprio lì" (12) ["'I don't feel (myself).' A weak voice comes out of you, the voice of a little girl, a doll, someone far away. It's strange because in fact you are there, right there."] Garlaschelli's response ("non mi sento") is at first understood literally to mean that she cannot feel her body, due to paralysis. However, what is already a play on words – "How do you feel?" "I don't" – takes on an additional significance given the attention paid to the *voice* with which she replies. On one hand, the distance of her own voice supports a reading of the *tu/io* split as one of self-alienation, a disassociation that is figured both spatially (through distance) and aurally, manifested through the voice. However, given the polysemous nature of the verb *sentire*, the emphasis placed here on voice suggests yet another interpretation of Garlaschelli's *battuta*: rather than "I can't *feel* myself," we might understand the phrase instead as meaning "I can't *hear* myself." This severing of communication with the self coincides with the onset of Garlaschelli's disability and thus with the moment she "becomes" a *sirena*, and recalls the

discussion from Agamben's *L'Aperto* cited earlier in this chapter. Garlaschelli thus loses her voice as she *becomes* mermaid, rather than the other way around. However, the oscillation between *sentire* as hearing and *sentire* as feeling places the site of the voice within the body itself; it is a voice that is embedded in the body and that communicates with the self through non-linguistic means, not a literal voice that emanates from the subject through oral language.

At the same time, the proliferation of pronouns in this episode – *io, tu, qualcuno* – bespeaks a fragmentation of the subject and a loss of ability to locate the self. If I can no longer feel my body, is it still *me*? Once the felt sense of the body is cut off, what is there to separate self from other? From this perspective, the body itself has the potential to become radically other in relation to the “self.” In this sense, it is possible to understand the “tu” here as referring to the body – an undeniable physical presence (“tu sei lì, proprio lì”) that has ceased to make itself known. The “tu” is thus the body gone silent – a mute presence that no longer communicates. However, at the same time, I propose that the “tu” still be understood as functioning in an address to the reader, a doubling which suggests a striking new way of perceiving the relationship between author and reader or text and reader. The reader is, for the narrator/author, *a body that she cannot feel or hear*, a material presence that is at once silent and invisible, that she knows is there but that she cannot perceive. The reader is thus an entity that she interpellates into herself as subject, enfolding the reader's materiality into her own body in the process.

This understanding of the “tu” as both body and reader (and reader's body) creates a complex web of relations that weaves itself just under the surface of the text. In a dizzying overlay of representations, at the same time, the “tu” must also still refer to Garlaschelli's past self and *its* relationship to the body: “Continuano a ripetermi: ‘Non dimenticare il tuo corpo’. E tu ti sforzi di non farlo. Il piede. Sì, è lì. Il polpaccio, il ginocchio, la coscia, il ventre. Sì, non lo dimentichi e ti pare di sentirlo, anche se a sfiorarlo è come se non fosse tuo” (24) [“They continually tell you: ‘Don't forget your body.’ And you force yourself not to. Your foot. Yes, it's there. Your calf, your knee, your thigh, your stomach. Yes, you don't forget it and it seems to you that you feel it, even if when you run your hand over it, it's as though it doesn't belong to you.”] Like the phantom limb I theorize in Chapter Three, Garlaschelli's body is both there and not there, just as her past self is both there and not there. The same is true for the reader. Here, the contact with the self – invoked in the image of caressing her own skin – is also a contact with the other, and thus the line between subject and object, which is usually (normatively) concretized at the surface of the body's skin, becomes indistinct, emphasizing the extent to which one's own body is both part of the self and radically other. Once that boundary is opened and made porous, the various subjects and objects that make up the textual space of Garlaschelli's narrative are able to intermingle at will. The idea that one might relate to one's own body as one relates to another person, or vice versa, suggests an expression of an ethics of care that is based on response and dialogue and engenders new ways of relating in dialogue with the body itself. “Non hai mai ascoltato tanto il tuo corpo come adesso che ti pare diventato muto. Se ti toccano, non senti, ma dentro, dentro è tutto un gridare, saltare, sussultare” (52) [“You've never listened to your body so much as now that it has become mute. If they touch you, you don't feel it, but inside, inside is all yelling, jumping, trembling.”] Here, Garlaschelli represents the body as “mute” on the one hand, understood to mean without sensation as well as without movement, while on the inside it yells and jumps. The “silence” of her body thus correlates only with an external touch, a touch that has the effect of alienating her from others – it is as though the hand is touching a body that belongs to another. However, the body as experienced *from within* is not “silent” at all. This formulation is drastically different from Santamato's description



of the body as not responding to the mind's "commands." For Garlaschelli, it is not that the lines of communication between mind and body are severed tout court, but that certain avenues of communication are "silenced" while others continue to operate. The "voice" of the body is silenced in some ways but makes itself "heard" in others, is made "eloquent," to use Adorno's term. This implies that the body's voice is never entirely lost, but that a certain amount of work must be undertaken in order to learn to hear it, to hear/feel the body differently.

It is this learning process that is at the heart of Garlaschelli's novel, a process that continues well beyond the period of time covered by the chronological narrative of rehabilitation: "Imparare ad ascoltare il tuo corpo. Percepirlo. Tornare a godere di lui. Ci impiegherai quasi vent'anni. Ora sei solo all'inizio" (61) ["To learn to listen to your body. Perceive it. Enjoy it again. It will take you almost twenty years."] The twenty years it will take for Garlaschelli to complete this process of learning in relation to her body not coincidentally corresponds to the length of time it took her to write the book – from the time of her accident in 1981 until its publication in 2001. This parallel between body and text establishes a connection between writing and enjoyment of the body, where *listening* to the body is figured as both. We might surmise then that the writing of the text is what allows for this return to the body, bringing together the various strands of this chapter thus far, and suggesting once more that narrative and corporeality are intertwined and mutually dependent.

This process of active *listening* allows Garlaschelli to learn a new appreciation for her body, and leads her towards a sexual enjoyment of it (and supporting this reading of the body as an erotic other, in the Italian "it" can be rendered as "him," or *lui*). "*Non mi ero mai accorta prima che il corpo potesse parlare. Soprattutto, non mi ero mai accorta di saperlo ascoltare. Ora che parte della sensibilità se n'è andata, lo sento. Non mi è mai piaciuto particolarmente.*" (63) ["I had never realized before that the body could speak. Above all, I had never realized that I knew how to listen to it. Now that part of its sensation has gone away, I feel/hear it. I never liked it much before."] As both body and one who listens to the body, she is both Odysseus and the Siren – both the listener and the speaker – seducer and seduced.<sup>376</sup> What is more, the body for Garlaschelli becomes a companion, an other to whom she relates, in keeping with the bodily social relation that Ferrucci proposes and which I discuss above: "*Adesso mi ritrovo a osservarmi allo specchio e a provare per questo mio compagno di viaggio una struggente tenerezza*" (63) ["Now I find myself observing myself in the mirror and feeling for this traveling companion of mine a heart wrenching tenderness."] Understanding the body as companion – not container or inert matter – allows for a perspective of the self that incorporates the other into it without attempting to assimilate it, acknowledging in the process a multiplicity of aspects that are tied to the self, some material, some not. At the same time, it promotes a view of the body as animate, even as it is composed of matter; as decidedly *not* inert, even when lacking in sensation or paralyzed.

In the final CORPO digression, Garlaschelli relates a sexual experience with a male companion in similar terms. Again, the verb *sentire* is used, though this time the faculty of sight is introduced as a third possible avenue for feeling/hearing: "*Le sue mani mi stanno cercando. Le vedo, è il modo per sentirle*" (110) ["His hands are searching for me. I see them, it's my way of feeling them."] Here, she "feels" (or hears) with her eyes, in an instance of synesthesia that opens up the categories of sensory perception and allows them to meld into one another. The verb *sentire* for Garlaschelli traverses the boundaries of the senses: it can refer to feeling, hearing *and*

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<sup>376</sup> In a sense, it is this structure – the figuring of the self as both siren and seduced – that allows the metaphor to remain embodied, in contrast to the texts explored by Spackman and throughout this chapter.

seeing, expressing a multitude of ways to experience the world and the other. No one way is privileged, but instead they are activated in relation and in response to the experience, to the environment. They shift as the experience changes and develops, as the narrator makes recourse to whichever sensory channel is most efficient or, in this case, most pleasurable. As the sexual encounter progresses and her lover moves from an external caress to an internal penetration, Garlaschelli's *sentire* shifts from the visual mode to the feeling/hearing mode: "*Mi fa muovere come una ballerina. Sa che devo vedere. Sa che voglio guardarlo mentre viaggia sul mio corpo silenzioso. E quando è dentro di me non ho più bisogno di tenere gli occhi aperti per sentire il mio corpo cantare*" (110) ["*He makes me move like a ballerina. He knows that I need to see. He knows that I want to watch him as he travels along my silent body. And when he's inside me I no longer need to keep my eyes open to hear/feel my body sing.*"] Even in this most intimate of moments shared between herself and another person, the relation described in the final instance is that between her self and her body. Here, the body's communication is figured as not only vocal, but as a musical *cantare*.

The reader may notice that an important aspect of my earlier argument has fallen away in this final section, namely, the reciprocal logic between disability and gender that has structured and constrained both characters and authors throughout the dissertation. Indeed, it would seem that Garlaschelli's *Sirena* does not fall prey to this same mechanism, a fact which follows from my discussion of the simultaneous coincidence of her entry into both disability and womanhood. Where the two categories are no longer at odds, the logic ceases to function. This is not to say that Garlaschelli makes no reference to gendered norms or has no desire to conform to them – indeed, she mourns that she will no longer be able to walk on high heels, and she cites her vanity as an "ancora di salvezza" [lifeline]: "Se mi guarderanno, pensi, avranno qualcosa da guardare che non sarà una sedia a rotelle" (99) [If they stare at me, you think, they'll have something to look at that won't be a wheelchair."] In another episode, she envies a particularly beautiful woman she sees at the clinic, a woman who is herself in a wheelchair. What this last episode points up is that, for Garlaschelli, the fact of disability and the appreciation of beauty are finally allowed to be part of the same admiring gaze.<sup>377</sup>

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### A Coda on Voice

With the emphasis that is placed on voice and relationality in these texts, it is tempting to find a theoretical model in Cavarero's notion of voice as expression of *unicità* ["uniqueness"]. The danger in Cavarero's theory – her understanding of the female subject as uniquely suited to a relationality constructed on the "unicità" of voice – is that the subject who does not possess or use a voice is left out of that process of relationality:

Quanto al comunicarsi nella parola, nulla infatti comunica l'unicità più della voce. Ciò avviene non soltanto nella parola, e ancor prima della parola nei vocalizzi infantili che precedono e inaugurano la parola, ma soprattutto avviene secondo quel canone relazionale della risonanza che la musicalità di ogni lingua, in quanto lingua parlata, conserva. Dal punto di vista vocalico, il comunicarsi dei parlanti

<sup>377</sup> "Sei su una sedia a rotelle e ciò ti rende *diversa* dalla maggior parte delle persone. Ciò che comprendi con assoluta e potente lucidità è che questa diversità deve diventare la tua forza" (Garlaschelli, *Sirena*, 98-99) ["You're in a wheel chair and that renders you different from the majority of people. What you realize with absolute and powerful lucidity is that this diversity must become your strength."]

sta così nella sintonia di una doppia relazionalità. L'una riguarda l'unicità di una voce che è *per* l'orecchio, l'altra suona nella musicalità stessa della lingua. Ambedue hanno una sostanza fisica, corporea.<sup>378</sup>

[As for communicating with language, nothing in fact communicates uniqueness more than voice. This happens not just through words, but even before language, in the infantile vocalizations that precede and inaugurate language, but most of all it occurs according to that relational canon of resonance that the musicality of every language, insofar as it is a spoken language, conserves. From the vocal point of view, the communication between speakers lies in the harmony of a double relationality. One regards the uniqueness of a voice that is for the ear, the other lies in the musicality of that language itself. Both have a physical, bodily substance.]

If the literal voice is that which bestows *unicità* and gives a certain relational value to the subject, what are the implications for those without voices? It is here that I find a limit to the usefulness of Cavarero's theory in relation to the disabled subject. For while her intervention marks an important shift from the abstract concepts of logocentric thought to the vocality of an embodied knowledge, the reliance upon a literal voice excludes possible subjects even as it widens the circle for others. By contrast, the "voice" of Garlaschelli's body need not be voiced – just as the outer body need not move independently and autonomously through space: the inner trembling of the body is enough to communicate the message of ongoing life.

However, I have argued that this process is one that is bound up with narrative, whether or not that narrative is vocalized, a fact which still proposes problems with regards to a non-linguistic notion of subjectivity. And despite Garlaschelli's emphasis on collectivity and a certain melding with the other, she still privileges many of the traditional values of the enlightenment subject, such as autonomy, independence, and rationality. Interestingly, though, she finds opportunities to experience these normative states through arguably *non*-normative means.

Garlaschelli notes on numerous occasions that she is most comfortable in the water, where she is able to move freely, if only while lying on her back. "*Entrare in acqua, con un corpo nuovo. Un corpo che è libero persino da se stesso. Galleggia e si lascia avvolgere dal mare. Non ho paura. Non ho mai avuto paura del mare, nemmeno se è stato in mare che una parte della mia vita è finita*" (96) ["*Entering the water, with a new body. A body that is free even from itself. It floats and lets itself be enveloped by the sea. I am not afraid. I have never been afraid of the sea, even though it was in the sea that part of my life ended.*"] It is only in the water that Garlaschelli is able to experience this freedom of movement, without the aid of a wheelchair or other technology. It is easy to see the implicit reference to the mermaid here: her new body is most at home in the water, able to move freely in harmony with its environment. She equates this freedom with autonomy: "*Le braccia sono forti e in acqua ho tutta la resistenza, l'autonomia, la scioltezza che non ho e non avrò più sulla terraferma. Adoro la sensazione del mio corpo che dondola nel mare. Non è proprio libertà. È più liberazione*" (96) ["*My arms are strong and in the water I have all the endurance, autonomy, and agility that I don't have – and will never have again – on dry land. I adore the sensation of my body rocking in the sea. It's not exactly freedom. It's more like liberation.*"] While on the one hand, Garlaschelli valorizes the normative principle of autonomy as opposed to dependence (or interdependence), she puts into relief here

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<sup>378</sup> Cavarero, *A più voci*, 215.

the extent to which such ideals are based on the given context(s) in which we find ourselves. The environment of water is one that is particularly supportive of Garlaschelli and that allows her to feel liberated, while on land her movement is far more restricted. For others the opposite may be true. What this suggests is that the space in which we move, our particular environments, are part of the collectivity of influences and materialities that we are dependent upon. She is not wholly independent and autonomous in the water because she is dependent on the water itself to hold her up.

It is interesting that even here, she does not invoke the mermaid figure in name, choosing instead to allow it to glide below the surface of the text unmentioned. When she finally does explicitly invoke the *sirena* – as a figure for her new self – it is in the final pages of the novel and appears as one item in a list of figures that ostensibly describe her experience:

Avevo lasciato la mia casa reggendomi sulle gambe, ci tornavo spingendomi su una sedia a rotelle. In un anno, la vita aveva compiuto non solo un ciclo, ma una rivoluzione.

Ero morta e rinata.  
Una massa di carne e metallo.  
Un fiore appena sbocciato.  
Un mezzo pesante in movimento.  
Una sirena. (113)

[I had left home standing on my legs, I was returning pushing myself in a wheelchair. In a year, my life had completed not only a cycle, but a revolution.

I had died and was reborn.  
A mass of flesh and metal.  
A flower having just blossomed.  
A heavy vehicle in motion.  
A mermaid.]

The *sirena* is thus one among many possible hybridities and forms, and tellingly the mixture of images offered brings together metaphors of both the fleshly and feminine kind as well as the machinic and technological. Again, rather than adhere rigidly to one figural representation, she allows herself to shift her form in response to the requirements of the context and of the moment. The references to metal and machine suggest a kind of cyborg figure, which finds its concrete form in her wheelchair. Having left home on legs, she returns in a wheelchair, a different corporeality that is no less incarnate, no less feminine, than that which came before.

Indeed, Garlaschelli's wheelchair comes to be figured as part of herself, albeit a part that is at times separated from her in space: "Ti ritroverai spesso ... a contemplare la sedia a rotelle, a contemplare lo *spazio* – poco, pochissimo – che ti divide dal tuo mezzo di trasporto, quell'aggeggio che ormai è parte di te – domandandoti come sia possibile non riuscire a colmarlo" (81) ["You will find yourself often contemplating your wheelchair, contemplating the *space* – small, so small – that divides you from your means of transport, that contraption that is by now part of you – asking yourself how it could be possible that you can't overcome it."] While her means of transport is *part* of her, there is still a space that divides her from it. While on the one hand this episode drives home the fact of her dependence on others – her need for someone to bring her wheelchair closer or even to lift her and place her in it – it also suggests

that her sense of her own corporeality is growing to accommodate objects that are not attached to her body. The wheelchair, as an extension of her body, creates a spatial understanding of the body that is far more capacious than that which is bound by the skin. Where certain body parts are experienced as alien and external objects are incorporated into the body, Garlaschelli puts forward a much more expansive and fluid conception of the body and its boundaries.

This shifting sense of the body recalls the idea that even one's own skin may become othered through disability, but it is through that sense of alterity in the self that a new ethics of relationality might be forged. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, political philosopher Jane Bennett proposes a kind of environmentalism that is based on an understanding of the self as containing other non-human entities within it. She writes: "Vital materiality better captures an 'alien' quality of our own flesh, and in so doing reminds humans of the very *radical* character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman. My 'own' body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners" (112).<sup>379</sup> A similar sentiment is echoed in Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* where she theorizes what she calls "transcorporeality": "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment.'"<sup>380</sup> The theories put forward by Bennett and Alaimo carry a strong ethical element, for "what counts as self-interest shifts in a world of vital materialities" (Bennett, 113). An acknowledgement of the many different "bodies" that make up the self has radical implications for how we think about the disabled self as well – the various collectivities that make up the self at different levels (microscopic/cellular, prosthetic and technological, the social, the environmental) are all part of what constructs disability, whether medically or socially, whether bodily or linguistically.

I propose that Bennett's understanding of matter as "vibrant," rather than inert, might be useful in finding different ways to understand and represent the matter of the (disabled) body. "In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are 'embodied.' We are, rather, *an array of bodies*, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes" (112-3). Rather than a simple binary between the human and the animal, disabled and non-disabled subjects, mind and body, Bennett's notion of collective embodiment shifts the discourse to one of a multiplicity of human and non-human forms, whether organic, animate, material, mechanical, fishlike or not.

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What I have been suggesting through this final section of the dissertation is that Garlaschelli's iteration of the *sirena* might be thought of as representative of a dialogic relationship between the "self" and a communicative body (that is also the self), where the body's communication is not necessarily vocal – a kind of communication that is non-linguistic (or need not be linguistic) – which in turn leads to a kind of self-knowledge that is relational and that is borne out of matter. The dialogue between the "tu" and the "io" creates a back and forth motion that is both a conversation and an oscillation, weaving subject and object together, rippling outward like waves of sound to incorporate and penetrate the surrounding environment.

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<sup>379</sup> See: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>380</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

And like waves of sound, it functions as vibration, making a kind of music that may not be vocalized or heard, but that is nonetheless *felt*. The interaction between the self and the vibrant matter of the body need not be a linguistic one: the dialogic nature of the relation can take many forms. Regardless, the vibration it sets into motion – whether voiced or silent – is the very vibration of life.

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