

Medea's Daughters

Re-signifying the Self after Abandonment

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After Elena Ferrante's
The Days of Abandonment

Medea "se ne va. Avanti?" indurra' anche noi a metterci in cammino? Potremo "andare e basta, insieme, l'uno dietro l'altra, nell'orecchio il fragore delle pareti che crollano...?"

(Christa Wolf, *L'altra Medea*)¹

Medea, literally "the one who heals with her good advice," is the enchantress Circe's niece. Like Circe, she deals with magic and is the repository of ancient and deadly knowledge. She was seduced by the beauty of Jason. By choosing to help and to follow the foreigner she betrays her father and leaves the motherland, exile is her reward. She begins a journey trusting herself to the sea, "woman and culprit," and leaving behind a trail of blood. She uses her magic to help Jason, but once in Corinth her lover abandons her for the younger Creusa. Everything is against her: having been seduced (lat. *se(d) ducere*, to take away), being a foreigner, and, moreover, a woman who possesses knowledge, "magic". In Euripides' version of the myth she kills her children to take revenge on Jason, thus symbolically striking the patriarchal system. She then flees to Athens to seek Aegeus' hospitality. Medea embodies exile. She represents "the other", the different, the monstrous face of the feminine; she is *de facto* the deadly mother. She stands for the masculine fear of the feminine, and as such she is a male construction.

If Medea represents a construction of the patriarchal symbolic system, how can she speak to us? Adriana Cavarero in *In Spite of Plato* suggests to "steal" the female figures from the cultural context in which they are embedded and to replay them in the light of sexual difference. Christa Wolf in *Medea* affirms that to prompt the figure to talk we need to ask the right questions, so that it can "Detach itself from the darkness of mis-knowledge". Wolf's Medea is condemned to abjection, to expulsion from social space and time because she has uncovered the power structure on which patriarchy is based. "I, in what

place, I? Is it thinkable a world, a time in which I can feel good?" Medea's question echoes through the centuries, through the walls of time the voice of the mother reaches the daughters, the urgency of this question finds fertile soil for an attempt of answer in contemporary women's writing and consciousness.

Elena Ferrante's latest novel, *I giorni dell'abbandono*², explores the theme of the *Heroides* and makes it a central moment in the development of female subjectivity. At first, being abandoned is for the protagonist, Olga, synonym with paralysis, and, like the female figures elaborated by male creativity (Medea, Ariadne, Dido, etc...), she is incapable of reacting but through aggression and vengeance. The final result is, however, a psychological and emotional growth that leads the protagonist to the discovery of her own "real" identity and of the possibility of formation of a new subject. Olga experiments both the "sense of emptiness" caused by the "loss" of her husband and the "absence of sense" of an ontological and epistemological crisis. Ferrante claims that she wanted to tell "a story of destructuralization" because "whoever takes love away from us devastates the cultural construction that we have worked on all our life".³ This destruction brings the abandoned woman to contemplate inside herself a bundle of "relics" that Ferrante calls *frantumaglia* (flotsam and jetsam):

The *frantumaglia* is an unstable landscape, an aerial or watery mass of infinite relics that shows itself to the Self, brutally, as its real and sole interiority. The *frantumaglia* is the storehouse of time without the order of a plot, of a story. The *frantumaglia* is the effect of the sense of loss, when we have the certainty that everything that is stable, durable, an anchorage for our life, will soon join that landscape of detriments that we think we see.⁴

Ferrante's novel describes the abandoned woman's terrible discovery of the *frantumaglia* but, more important, is a story of re-signification of the shattered self. The experience of abandon-

ment makes Olga question her own identity and her perception of reality. She discovers that the palimpsests of subject formation are based on the subjection to social rules and rituals. The character undergoes an operation similar to the "critical de-subjection" described by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*.⁵ Butler also calls it "willingness *not* to be" but in Olga's case, since the situation is caused by an external agent (the husband abandoning her) I will call it "availability *not* to be" to stress the initial passivity. In the novel the act of abandonment casts the female figure into the reign of "frantumaglia" making it "available" to *not* be and, in a second moment, "willing" not to be. The abandoned woman takes up an active role when it critically recognizes the weight and necessity of social constructions in the formation of the self (the power of the law according to Althusser) and decides to re-enter the social by putting into effect what I will call "the fiction strategy". The new Olga re-subjects herself to the "power of the law" so that she can be in the social, but feigns to believe in its totalizing power of subject construction. Through this emotional and psychological growth she discovers the possibility of "being other", of an identity that does not depend on the masculine. This new female subject doesn't simply deny past female experiences in order to overcome them, to the contrary, it accepts and consciously integrates them to be able to look at a future that will not be pre-determined. According to Ferrante, being able to react to the pain of abandonment without breaking into pieces is a new trait of the modern woman. Ferrante's goal is explicitly to translate into writing the dynamics of this new female "skill" and thus to rewrite the ancient destiny of paralysis of the abandoned woman by providing the temporal dimension it always lacked: the future.

The novel exposes the fragility of a female subject who has chosen to live in the shadow of the partner, sacrificing her career to the roles of mother and wife. Olga's "living for the others" results in the lack of a life of her own. The abandonment marks the discovery of the absence of identity because love, the cultural construction that defined it, has been demolished. Olga experiments that abandonment is annulment, but at the same time she "reacts, gets up, live".

Because she perceives herself as the product of a new female history she finds the courage to rewrite her future. It is a rewriting that inevitably recalls mythical and literary situations. Simone De Beauvoir's *La Femme Rompue*, a reading of her youth, haunts Olga to the point that she needs to say out aloud "away from me the broken women!" Night after night, however, following the model of Ovid's *Heroides*, she writes Mario letters without knowing where to send them. They are long monologues that entreat dialogue, ask for explanations and answers, but exhaust themselves in the function of venting pain, they are a "crowd of dead words". Words are for Olga, a writer, the elements that order reality. In the pain of abandonment, however, they are deprived of their semantic function, and thus allow for "disorder" and weaken Olga's ability to interact with reality.

Writing is present in Olga's life in at least three different forms, and each coincides with a different "way of being"/identity. Before she got married she had produced a very successful novel and of her writing she had demanded "style". She hankered after a career as a natural outlet to her desire for narration. She traded style in for practicality and efficiency when, wife and mother, she loses herself in "natural" functions that disgust her. Her writing is now personal notes focused on "how I feel," jotted down intermittently on the accounting book. They are time and space stolen from a new condition whose uneasiness is expressed in the urgency of pinning down words among the aridity of numbers that signify the struggle with daily life. Consumed by her children, she feels violated by her husband who sees her only as mother. Writing after the abandonment is instrumental to the transformation of the character; it helps to resist and to understand. Abandonment has unhinged in her the classical rules of narration that require distance from the narrated object "I felt everything right on top of me, breath against breath". The abandoned woman cannot elaborate through narrative her new reality "I was lost in the where am I, in the what am I doing. I was mute beside the why" (107).

She is soon reminded of a "black figure" of her Neapolitan childhood. It is literally a "figure" because the woman in question is de-

personalized by the experience of abandonment "The woman lost everything, even the name, she became for everybody the *poverella*" (15), that poor woman. She was a neighbor, vivacious mother and wife that, once abandoned, withered, becoming "dry as a salted anchovy". The *poverella* (who drowned herself at Capo Miseno, appropriate Virgilian echo) functions now as a reminder of the necessity to get a strong grip on reality. The "black figure" appears in the midst of the crisis and dialogues with her. The object of narration of the past materializes and aspires to become the double of the protagonist:

What an idiot, I should absolutely not have spoken to her. A dialogue, in fact. As if I were writing my book and had in my head phantom people, characters. But I wasn't writing, nor was I under my mother's table telling myself the story of the *poverella*. [...] What a mistake. I had to anchor myself to things, accept their solidity, believe in their permanence. (114)

Olga needs to physically harm herself in order not to be trapped by the narrative of abandonment. She asks her daughter to poke her with a knife once in a while, so she doesn't get lost in her hallucinations: physical pain has the power to reconnect her to her body and to reality. One of the novelties of this character is precisely its conscious relation with the body. In *La frantumaglia* Ferrante states that Delia of *L'amore molesto*⁶ and Olga share at least one trait:

They are women that exercise a conscious surveillance on themselves. The women of the previous generation were controlled by their husbands, brothers, by the community, but they did not watch themselves, and if they did, they would imitate their keepers. Delia and Olga are instead the product of a new and very ancient form of surveillance that has to do with the need to expand their life.⁷

The writer derives her idea of "surveillance" from the latin *vigere* which implies the expansion of life and is inscribed in the root of "vigilant" and "wake". It is the surveillance of the pregnant woman and of the mother on her children, the ancient female watch on activities connected to life, a surveillance that means also "to impose, to contrast, to expand with all one's strength".

Female vital energy is simply *different* from the male one, and Ferrante underlines how important it is for women the "surveillance on themselves, on their own specificity," the "cure/care of their *vigor*".

Abandonment causes the shattering of the symbolic order established by the male subject. From object of surveillance the abandoned woman becomes free from surveillance and is thus placed outside the social sphere. If/when the woman learns to keep vigil on herself she acquires "agency" and characterizes herself not as object of rule imposition but as subject that self-imposes rules by choosing to live in the social. The desire to "live", the fight against the temptation to let go to the "drowsiness of the body stunned by sleep" state the right to live outside the models of the abandoned and broken women. The mother-daughter relationship affirms this right. The collaboration of the feminine in the present (Olga) and in the future (the daughter) is a partnership that works to prevent the female destinies of the past from taking up the stage. Olga recognizes the pain that marked women's destiny, she accepts and integrates it to her being but does not submit herself to it.

In the midst of the crisis Olga needs "to be narrated" in order to find the answer to "Who am I?" She is disgusted by her daughter's attempt at imitating her (the child had dressed up in her mother's clothes) because she does not recognize herself in that caricature. When she approaches the mirror to take her make up off, – almost an attempt to un-mask herself – she doesn't see her habitual image:

Thanks to the side panels of the mirror, I saw the two halves of my face separately, far apart, and I was drawn first by my right profile, then by the left. They were both completely unfamiliar to me [...] I recognized myself only in the image reflected by the big mirror [...]. (123)

Lacan defines the complete image that the subject acquires of itself as "The armour of an alienating identity, which will stamp with the rigidity of its structure the whole of the subject's mental development".⁸ This alienating identity of the subject is represented by Olga's frontal image:

If I had lived in the belief that I was the

frontal Olga, others had always attributed to me the shifting, uncertain welding of the two profiles, an inclusive image that I knew nothing about [...]. For Mario I-I shuddered-had never been Olga. The meanings, the meaning of her life-I suddenly understood-were only a dazzlement of late adolescence, my illusion of stability. (123-24)

Olga realizes that she had lived in a blunder dictated by the desire for definition. The word "adolescence", however, preludes to growth of the subject into adulthood. To this frontal, rigid image I propose to relate the Althusserian notion of reproduction of social relationships, specified as "reproduction of social skills".⁹ Subjectivity, understood as the experience lived and imagined by the subject, is derived from the material rituals through which subjects are constituted. Olga has identified herself with her role of mother and wife. In the attempt to be a perfect mother and wife, she acquired practice, experience, skill, total control of her actions that became rituals. Paradoxically, the rituals that she has mastered and make her feel comfortable in the social roles do not make her "free". Althusser maintains that "the school ...teaches 'know-how'... in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice".¹⁰ If, as Judith Butler suggests, we concentrate on the disjunctive particle "or", we can infer that the more we have control over a practice, the more we subject ourselves to the rules of the established order.¹¹ Submission is thus connected not to loss of control but to its acquisition. The reproduction of social relationships as reproduction of social practices becomes reproduction of submission. When the relationship with her husband falls apart, Olga desperately tries to hang on to the daily rituals that are losing meaning: to clean the house, to cook, to take care of the kids. She finally discovers their constricting nature underneath their reassuring façade:

What a mistake it had been to close off the meaning of my existence in the rites that Mario offered with cautious conjugal rapture. What a mistake it had been to entrust the sense of myself to his gratifications, his enthusiasms, to the ever more productive course of his life. (140)

On the other hand, those same practices allowed her to regain a sense of stability that she had lost. Ironically, one can have "conscious" manipulation of the structures of power only once he/she has obtained control over the dominating ideology. In this perspective, control and submission happen simultaneously and thus neither one nor the other is practiced by a *subject*. They are, however, the precondition for the possible birth of a subject. But what can validate this possibility? I suggest that the jamming of the social practices mechanism caused by the trauma of abandonment interrupts the simultaneity of control and submission and exposes to the gaze of the abandoned woman the "emptiness of meaning" and the *frantumaglia*.

The Althusserian interpretation of subject formation through practices and rituals necessarily implies the temporal dimension of materiality, a notion of time that abandonment unhinges because the abandoned woman has "fallen into" the emptiness of meaning of those practices and those rituals. Pain, which can disrupt the sense of temporality, is responsible for the "willingness not to be" of the abandoned woman: "Reason and memory had flaked off, sorrow that lasts too long is capable of this" (127). Olga understands that the frontal image reflected by the mirror is disintegrating itself. Only if she will get to know the two unfamiliar profiles, that cubist image of her, she will be able to build a new identity:

Starting now, if I wanted to make it, I had to trust myself to those two profiles, to their strangeness rather than to their familiarity, and moving on from there very slowly restore confidence in myself, make myself adult. (124)

If the stability of the subject is a blunder of adolescence, to become an adult subject is to accept the mobility of one's own subjectivity.

Mladen Dolar, commenting on the Freudian observations on the double, affirms that "a profound anxiety emerges as soon as the mirror other becomes independent, when it stops being a 'simple' reflection".¹² The realization of the narcissistic model brings to an immediate dissociation of gaze and recognition that then produces "a frightful anxiety, the crumbling of the subject's accustomed reality, the shattering of the basis of this world". It is the fear of going

mad that Olga experiments when talking to the *poverella* without having yet recognized her as her double. Olga's dread materializes in the mirror when she sees in her "half left face" the traits of the woman, mostly her pain, "her profile had squatted inside me who knows when". The acceptance of this recognition, starting with the observation of the "changing physiognomy of the secret sides" allows Olga to begin to construct an image of herself towards a "who" instead of a "what". At the end of the novel, when she talks of her relationship with her neighbor Carrano, Olga explains her "fiction strategy":

He was trying to communicate silently that, through his mysterious gift, he knew how to make meaning stronger, to invent a feeling of fullness and joy. I pretended to believe him and so we loved each other for a long time, in the days and months to come, quietly. (188)

Olga now knows that in order not to be broken by the circumstances of life we need to avoid to get trapped in a net of certainties. But certainties are necessary to live, this is why she *pretends* to believe him. To pretend to believe in the meaning of things, of feelings and relationships becomes the strategy to re-enter into sociality. It is a social sphere that, structured by the dynamic of control and submission, nourishes *what* one is. Olga re-enters with a "something more", the intuition of the "who I am" that needs to be jealously guarded and nourished.

The figure of the abandoned woman does not simply represent a danger necessary to the survival of the male symbolic system. It represents the possibility to think *outside* of that system and to re-articulate it. Olga can recognize in the mirror, in her image, Ariadne, Dido, Medea, *la poverella*... but she does not identify with them, they are a past "without blood". They are necessary, constituent but not defining. Olga, like Wolf's Medea, understands the power structure of the dominant ideology and consciously decides to subject herself to it. She has recognized in herself the desperation of the "mother" complaining for the lack of a place where to be able to be "I", but, by repeating like Wolf's Medea "I need to wake up. I need to open my eyes" she has managed to exercise surveillance on herself and to *decide* that the only way she can "feel good" is by pretending

to believe in the validity of social constructions, love included. To accept to be in the social but in a "fluid" way seems to be a possible solution for the feminine searching for an identity. A mobile identity, a glimpse of the "who" in the "what" defined by norms.

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Notes

- 1 Christa Wolf, *Medea*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- 2 *The Days of Abandonment*. Transl. by Ann Goldstein. Europa Editions, 2005.
- 3 Jesper Storgaard Jensen, interview with Elena Ferrante in *Weekend-avisen*, August 2003.
- 4 Elena Ferrante. *La frantumaglia*. Roma, Edizioni *e/o*, 2003, p. 109.
- 5 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford University Press, 1997.
- 6 Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto*. Roma, Edizioni *e/o*, 1989.
- 7 *La frantumaglia*, 113. My translation.
- 8 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I". in Slavoj Žižek *Mapping Ideology*. London-New York: Verso, 1994.
- 9 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)". In Slavoj Žižek's *Mapping Ideology*. 118.
- 10 Althusser, 118.
- 11 Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*.
- 12 Mladen Dolar "At First Sight". In *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 136.

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