Bildung and its Critique in Interwar Novels: a German-Italian Comparison

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Abstract

This thesis examines the problematic aspects of the *Bildungsroman* in interwar novels from German and Italian Literature, namely Massimo Bontempelli's *La vita intensa* (*Intense Life*, 1920) and *La vita operosa* (*Productive Life*, 1921), Erich Kästner's *Fabian* (1931), Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (*The Artificial Silk Girl*, 1932) and Ada Capuana's *La città nuova* (*The New City*, 1934). Engaging with *Bildungsroman* scholarship, I show that these novels reappraise the concept of *Bildung* and its ideological ramifications staging, within their specific national context, a tension between personal desire and society demands in the face of the complex process of modernization affecting Italian and German post-WWI society. This also involves an examination of how some of the motifs central to the genre, like the picaresque and the confessional, as well as the (arche)type of the Young Man and Young Woman from the Province, are reworked in the context of the city in the interwar years. My analysis highlights the ways in which these texts reappropriate, often ironically, an aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung* in the fight against institutionalized forms of self-cultivation in capitalist society, thus partaking in the modernist double gesture of recuperation and critique of *Bildung*. Moreover, the focus on the interweaving of gender and genre, shows how these novels problematize woman's claim to *Bildung* in a period of changing gender roles, debunking common assumptions about women's agency in patriarchal society. The emphasis on the open endings of most of these narratives aims at giving a new, more positive interpretation of these texts, challenging their common reading as anti-developmental narratives or as expression of the impasse dominating Europe and its literature in the sombre years between the two wars.

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Introduction

The Problem of *Bildung* and its Critique in Modernism

This thesis examines the problem of *Bildung* and the narrative methods for its exploration in novels of the 1920s and early 1930s from German and Italian literature, namely Massimo Bontempelli's *La vita intensa* (*The Intense Life*, 1920) and *La vita operosa* (*The Productive Life*, 1921), Erich Kästner's *Fabian* (1931), Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (*The Artificial Silk Girl*, 1932) and Ada Capuana's *La città nuova* (*The New City*, 1934).

My reading of the novels takes into account some of the complex processes of modernization which affected both Italy and Germany in the interwar years. Moreover, the emphasis placed on woman's claim to *Bildung* in the face of changing gender roles and the emergence of new models of femininity allows me to re-consider the gender dynamics at the heart of *Bildung* and to problematize female agency in patriarchal capitalist societies.

While the context of modernity and modernization is important, the focus on *Bildung* necessarily involves a consideration of how these novels relate to the literary genre which centers on it, that of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel staging the development of one person from youth to maturity via a troubled quest for identity and for finding one's place in the world, reconciling individual aspirations with society's expectation.[1]

Martin Swales has highlighted the problematic aspect of the *Bildungsroman* as the *raison d'être* of the genre:[2] the major novels of this tradition stage an unresolved tension between the complex inwardness of the individual and its potentiality and practical social reality – marriage, family, career, a necessary dimension of the hero's self-realization, which nevertheless implies a limitation of the self. This dialectic, according to Swales, is the source of the irony that he recognizes as the structural principle of the genre, starting from what he considers as the first example of this tradition, namely Wieland's *Agathon* (1767), where the narrator's irony calls into question traditional novel expectations and undermines the happy

[1] For a recent account of the genre across two hundred years and different countries, with a special attention to gender, LGBTQ and postcolonial experience, see Sarah Graham, ed., *A History of the Bildungsroman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[2] Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 12.

ending. This irony shapes, as I will show, more or less openly all the novels under consideration and reaches its climax in their (open) endings, as exemplified at most by Bontempelli's and Kästner's texts.[3]

Firstly, I will retrace briefly the history of the genre and the meaning of *Bildung*; secondly I will summarize the main threads of my inquiry.

The term *Bildungsroman*, commonly translated as 'novel of development', is one of the most controversial definitions in the vocabulary of literary studies. Coined by Karl von Morgenstern in the early 1820s, the term is mostly associated with the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. In his study on Schleiermacher, Dilthey pointed to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) as specimen text, showing human development in different stages of a lifetime: 'Göthes Werk zeigt menschliche Ausbildung in verschiedenen Stufen, Gestalten, Lebensepochen'.[4] Later on, in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1906) Dilthey underlined the role played by trial, friendship and love in the self's troubled quest for identity, which led eventually to finding one's place in the world.[5]

At the heart of the *Bildungsroman* lies the concept of *Bildung* (from 'das Bild'= 'image' or 'form'), which in German humanism indicated a process of organic growth, the formation of a unified and harmonious inner culture through both self-cultivation and outward influence. A similar definition has been given by Mikhail Bakhtin in his now classic study *The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism* (1936-38),[6] where the *Bildungsroman* is described as the novel of 'human emergence', which presents the 'image of man in the process of becoming' and in which the

[3] Swales, p. 29.

[4] 'Goethe's work shows human development in various phases, forms, stages of a lifetime'. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Leben Schleiermachers*, I Bd. (Berlin: Druck und Verlag von Georg Reimer,1870), p. 282.

[5] 'Von dem Wilhelm Meister und dem Hesperus ab stellen sie alle den Jüngling jener Tage dar; wie er in glücklicher Dämmerung in das Leben eintritt, nach verwandten Seelen sucht, der Freundschaft begegnet und der Liebe, wie er nun aber mit der harten Realität der Welt in Kampf gerät und so unter mannigfachen Lebenserfahrungen heranreift, sich selber findet und seiner Aufgabe in der Welt gewiß wird'. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1910), p. 3: 'Novels like *Wilhelm Meister* and *Hesperus* stage the youth of their time, whereby the protagonist enters life in blissful ignorance, searches for related souls, finds friendship and love and struggles with the hard realities of the world. Thus, through manifold life experiences, he matures and eventually finds himself and becomes aware of his place in the world' (my translation).

[6] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 10-59.

world is depicted as '*experience*, as a school through which every person must pass and derive one and the same result: one becomes more sober'.[7]

Modern studies on the subject take two opposite views, either denying the existence of the genre,[8] or, on the contrary, expanding the category to the point that each novel which recounts the development of a protagonist is considered an example of the genre.[9]

My approach to examining how these novels reappraise the concept of *Bildung* in the context of urban modernity has been informed by Gregory Castle's enlightening contribution to this issue. In his account Castle defines the history of the *Bildungsroman* as that of a genre 'in crisis'.[10] He recognizes that the concept of *Bildung*, while originating in the aesthetico-spiritual culture of late eighteenth-century Germany, from a confluence of Enlightenment humanism, new idealism and Protestant Pietism, underwent significant transformations over the nineteenth century, becoming more and more tied to pragmatic forms of social mobility and thus creating an ambivalent, at times contradictory relationship between individual desire and social demands. However, he maintains that modernists devise ways by which the failure of the subject to satisfy society's expectations could be transformed into new forms of identity, which seek to reinstate values of aesthetic education and individual freedom within processes of self-development.[11]

One way of doing this, Castle continues, is to recuperate the classical conception of *Bildung* and to use it for fighting against 'rationalized' forms of socialization in search of satisfying modes of self-cultivation. Pointing to the crisis of the Lockean notion of the subject as self-identical and continuous in the late eighteenth century, Castle identifies as its cause the new theories of education and self-cultivation (*Bildung*) which emerged from the confessional tradition, both secular and Christian, and which situate the self as part of the

7 Bakhtin, pp. 19-22.

8 Jürgen Jacobs has disputed it as an imperfectly realized, or better, an 'unfulfilled genre' ('unerfüllte Gattung') (*Wilhelm Meister und seine Brüder: Untersuchungen zum deutschen Bildungsroman* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1972, p. 271), while Marc Redfield has gone so far as to dismiss it as a 'phantom genre', corresponding to an ideological construction, rather than to any objective body of texts (*Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

9 For an exhaustive survey on the debate around the *Bildungsroman* genre in modernist studies see Tobias Boes, 'Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends', in *Literature Compass* 3/2 (2006), pp. 230-243: http://www.tobiasboes.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Boes_Modernist.pdf.

10 Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2006), p. 30.

11 Castle, p. 31.

Enlightenment project involving self-cultivation both through innate capacities and outward circumstances.[12] The new idea of subjectivity coming from this tradition of classical *Bildung*, which is at the heart of the *Bildungsroman*, is 'a harmonious and unified inner culture formed through social freedom and a secular aesthetic education'.[13]

In contrast with the majority of modernist studies on the *Bildungsroman*, which speak of inversion or opposition to the conventions of the form, Castle sees in modernism a rehabilitation of the idea of *Bildung*, based on the very critique of the *Bildungsroman* and its conciliatory paradigm, that is the reconciliation between the self and the external social world.[14] As this thesis seeks to show, the novels under consideration partake, in different ways, in what Castle has identified as the modernist double-gesture of critique of socially pragmatic *Bildung* and recuperation of aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung*.[15]

In the chapters that follow I will investigate the ways in which these novels interrogate, reappraise, and/or adopt an ironic attitude towards the notion of *Bildung*, in particular its socially pragmatic component, challenging the assumption that social success is the main indicator of a successful formation. On closer inspection, the recuperation of an aesthetic form of *Bildung,* rooted on an Humboldtian understanding of *Bildung* as a process of psychological and social growth based on a productive encounter between the free individual and the world, is not a naïve one; as I show, these novels enact a radical gesture in the reaffirmation of individual freedom and morality against the constriction of modern society and its structures of power.

Indeed, the novels chosen for analysis here both illustrate and address, in different ways, some of the problems surrounding *Bildung* in modern capitalist societies, while also displaying genuine admiration towards an ideal of *Bildung* as self-cultivation, based on the freedom to improve and express oneself fully and without constraint. At the same time, the novels deploy complex narrative structures that ensure Bildung is presented as a problem – drawing our attention to the very problem that Humboldt pointed out when he framed *Bildung* as a moral ideal to be achieved, not only through the individual's independent activities but also through external influence and connection with others.

12 Castle, p. 33.
13 Castle, p. 33.
14 Castle, p. 26.
15 Castle, p. 61.

Retracing the history of the *Bildungsroman*, Castle describes it as the literary genre that in the 1790s started to divert from more traditional forms of autobiographical narratives, whose hero, unlike the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, 'lacks any true process of becoming or real development'.[16] As said, the concept of *Bildung* has its roots in Pietism and thus the confessional element is paramount to it. Significantly, the confessional element is contained in chapter 6 of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre*, considered as the prototype of the genre (although, according to some, an imperfect one), 'Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele' ('Confessions of a Beautiful Soul'), and it is connected to gender. The 'Confessions' do not only emphasize the spiritual component of *Bildung*, highlighting the aspect of 'building' and formative power, it also illustrates the gender dynamics of aesthetic education and classical *Bildung*.

Hence, the consideration of how these novels reappropriate, in sometimes ironic ways, the narrative modes of the confessional, such as the typically female tradition of letter and diary writing, as a means of self-reflection and determination, allows me to show, particularly in the case of the two female-centred novels, how these texts interrogate and challenge the masculinist cultural hegemony that *Bildung* has come to signify in capitalist society.

As Castle notes, the Goethean model of self-development narrative reproduces the sex-gender system which confines woman to the world of inwardness, whereas male self-identity is to be achieved in engagement with the 'world of activity'.[17] In that sense, *Bildung* and its narrativization is a social phenomenon leading to the construction of male identity, which expresses confidence in the possibility of a reconciliation between the individual's aspirations for an aesthetic education and a benign authoritarian state. As this thesis aims to demonstrate, this reconciliation has become problematic in post-1918 reality, a period in which women were gaining freedom and growing access to the public sphere.

In order to show how these novels recuperate and re-appraise earlier, aesthetico-spiritual forms of *Bildung*, I rely in particular on Castle's argument that the overriding concern of the theorists of *Bildung* was aesthetic education, whereby moral reflection and action are an important part of what is understood by the concept of the 'aesthetic'.[18] Equally important is the

16 Castle, pp. 33-34.
17 Castle, p. 36.
18 Castle, p. 30.

reference to freedom and beauty, which is emphasized in the work of Humboldt and its contemporaries, so much so that the individual's attempt to form his personality is compared to the artist's creation of a masterpiece.[19] This creative component, which is also central in one of the *Bildungsroman*'s subgenre, the *Künstlerroman*, or novel of the artist, takes on new significance in the context of the city and modernization processes of capitalist society, as the two Italian novels clearly show.

Castle recognizes that modernity and modernization are categories particularly apt to understand the development of the concept of *Bildung* as they enable specific links between the subject and the cultural and social institutions that shape subjectivity.[20] However, while he aptly identifies a recuperation of the classical form of *Bildung* as central to the modernist project, he considers only novels from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and Irish literature, seeing in nineteenth-century England an ideal context for the transformation of the Goethean and Humboldtian ideals of aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung* into more pragmatic forms of socialization and social mobility.[21] Castle points in particular to John Stuart Mill's reflections on individualism and the role of social power as paramount to understand the framework within which *Bildung* developed 'new socially pragmatic criteria of viability'[22] that ultimately would displace the aesthetico-spiritual principles of harmonious inner culture and dialectical integration of self and society. As Franco Moretti points out, England's nineteenth century 'solid world, sure of itself and at ease in a continuity that fuses together 'tradition' and 'progress'',[23] transformed the desire to cultivate oneself into the desire for social success and for a social pedagogy that teaches young men and women 'the way of the world'. While most accounts on the genre have mainly focused on (nineteenth-century) German and English literature, my analysis of German and Italian novels from the Twenties and early Thirties aims to fill a gap in critical studies on modernist formative fictions.

As part of their critical re-appraisal of *Bildung*, and of the problem of social mobility and individual development central to the genre, the novels under consideration (re)address one of the most significant tropes in nineteenth-century formative fictions, namely their male and female protagonists'

19 Castle, pp. 30-31.
20 Castle, p. 31.
21 Castle, p. 47.
22 Castle, p. 50.
23 Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World*, new ed. (London; New York: Verso, 2000), p. 185.

migration from the province to the city. My analysis of how the novels rework the trope of the Young Man/Woman from the Province will consider the specific context of the post-war city and the institutionalization of self-cultivation (*Bildung*), placing particular emphasis on the aspects of work and love, which are central to the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Focusing on the role of the city as a key site for staging processes of personal and social development, I ground my account on Paul Sheehan's definition of the *Bildungsroman*: 'The typical *Bildungsroman* plot begins with the protagonist's childhood in the country or the provinces, a childhood marred by paternalistic constraint. To free his imagination from these fetters, the protagonist must escape to the city. […] It is experience of urban life that furnishes him with real education'.[24]

In examining reappraisals of *Bildung* and its ideological ramification in these novels from the interwar years, I rely on Castle's argument that the modernist *Bildungsroman*, typically, involve a process of *Bildung* which reaches back to classical modes, yet faces the impossibility of a harmonious, unified consciousness, or harmonious relationship with the social world. From this critique of *Bildung*, Castle continues, a new kind of subject was born in the early twentieth century, who rediscover the aesthetic dimension of self-cultivation and becomes conscious of the artificiality of the bourgeois self.[25] Particularly relevant for my enquiry is also Castle's assumption that in the era of high modernism, which he considers to cover the period 1922-1939, the concept of *Bildung* is 'decoupled from the *Bildungsroman* form and set into new narrative situations'.[26]

Significantly, Swales and other scholars to which I will refer throughout my analysis, recognize that the *Bildungsroman* has its roots in the novel of adventures, whose traditional episodic and providential plot is reappraised via a concern for the *Werden*, the inner potentialities of the central character in relation to the given social world. Relying on this, in my thesis I consider the ways in which these narratives reaccentuate the acknowledged picaresque matrix of the genre in the specific context of urban modernity and what role narratorial irony plays in the critical reappraisal of *Bildung*. Focusing on the open-endings of these narratives, I seek to show that the

[24] Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 2-3.
[25] Castle, pp. 66-67.
[26] Gregory Castle, 'Destinies of Bildung: Belatedness and the Modernist Novel', in *A History of the Modernist Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 483-450 (p. 496).

recuperation of an aesthetico-spiritual form of *Bildung* aims to (re)affirm true ethical values that got lost in capitalist mass societies. Bontempelli's and Kästner's protagonists embody at most the crisis of knowledge of those years in that they are two educated young men who are/become unemployed and struggle to find their place in post-war society. In Keun's and Capuana's novels, instead, the two women's path towards the awareness of what *Bildung* and the lack of it implies, leads them to agency and to autonomous life configurations, albeit within the limits of patriarchal society.

As the chapters that follow seek to demonstrate, a key effect of the double gesture at work in these novels is to render the concept of *Bildung* ambivalent and ambiguous. If, as mentioned, Swales has recognized 'pervasive tentativeness' and 'consistently sustained irresolution' as the defining features of the *Bildungsroman*,[27] my focus on the open endings also aims to show how these narratives cannot be easily subsumed under notions of success or failure by the subject to satisfy society's demands, and thus as anti-developmental narratives, as most critics have done; they have to be regarded, in my view, as an attempt at reinstituting, although precariously or ironically, value of freedom and aesthetic education against institutionalized forms of self-cultivation which hold sway in modern capitalist societies.

Another work which proves particularly relevant when dealing with the modernist *Bildungsroman* is Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), which offers a far-reaching analysis of the genre from a comparative perspective. Moretti identifies the *Bildungsroman* as the 'symbolic form of modernity',[28] namely a form through which 'a specific image of modernity' is connected to 'a specific material sign', namely youth, which he considers as 'modernity's essence' for its ability to 'accentuate' the dynamism and instability proper to this era. My account is informed by Moretti's understanding of the symbolic meaning of youth, which acquires not only ideological but also political dimension in the context of late Weimar Republic as well as post-war and Fascist Italy.

However, similarly to Castle, Moretti overlooks the core period of European modernism (1880-1940), as his focus is exclusively on nineteenth-century narratives, with Eliot's and Flaubert's novels considered as the last masterpieces of the genre. Moreover, when in 2000 Moretti expanded his study to include an appendix devoted to modernist works – 'A useless

[27] Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 30-35.
[28] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 5.

Longing for Myself: The Crisis of the European *Bildungsroman*, 1898-1914'[29] – he did so only to identify as late *Bildungsromane* novels written in the early twentieth century. Indeed, the First World War is identified as a pivotal event that put an end to this form and left space to 'real' modernist experimentation. While, as the novels under consideration thematize, processes of linear growth are hindered by war and the subsequent crisis of values, as well as the harsh social and economic conditions of post-war society, the assertion that 'in the end, nothing was left of the form of the *Bildungsroman*'[30] seems to me rather questionable, as this thesis seeks to demonstrate.

From Beautiful Souls to 'New Women'

As Castle notes, the Goethean model of self-development narrative reproduces the sex-gender system which confines woman to the world of inwardness, whereas male self-identity is to be achieved in engagement with the 'world of activity'.[31] In that sense, *Bildung* and its narrativization is a social phenomenon leading to the construction of male identity, which expresses confidence in the possibility of a reconciliation between the individual's aspirations for an aesthetic education and a benign authoritarian state. As this thesis aims to demonstrate, this reconciliation has become problematic in post-1918 reality, that is a period in which women were gaining freedom and growing access to the public sphere, which calls a reconsideration of the interweaving of genre and gender concerns.

Any account which deals with modern fictions of female development must necessarily engage with the now classic study *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (1983). Recognizing that even the broadest definition of the *Bildungsroman* presupposes a range of social options only available to men, the authors highlight the influence of gender on (nineteenth century) literary representations of development. While the editors maintain that female *Bildungsromane* often retain a connection to *Bildung*, they consider this connection as most often characterized by 'tensions', as the heroine's

[29] Moretti, pp. 229-245.
[30] Moretti, p. 244.
[31] Castle, p. 36.

developmental course is 'more conflicted, less direct' than the male one.[32] Significantly, they identify two predominant narrative patterns for female growth: the apprenticeship, which adopts the linear structure of the male *Bildungsroman*, showing development from childhood to maturity, and the awakening. The latter proves to be particularly relevant for modernist fiction as here development may be delayed, concealed in 'coded memories' or compressed into 'brief epiphanic moments'.[33] My examination of women's claim to *Bildung* takes as its starting point the recognition by Hirsch of the gender dynamic implied in the Goethean model. According to Hirsch, the Beautiful Soul's progressive withdrawal into her innermost self allows her to develop spiritually, emotionally and morally, but often at the expense of other aspects of selfhood. This 'plot of inner development' thus reinforces the dichotomization that propels man outside and confines woman inside, which defines female development in the nineteenth century novel.[34]

As part of my analysis, I consider how the confessional aspect of *Bildung*, is reflected, particularly in the two female novels, in both form, namely the diary and letter writing, and content, that is via the depiction of 'New Women' seeking for agency and self-determination in patriarchal capitalist societies. This latter aspect is connected to a re-conceptualization of *Bildung* as 'self-mastery' (Juliana de Albuquerque) that is the ability to apply 'means to ends', which pertain, in my view, to the female characters of these novels.

I thus consider how the paradigm of the Beautiful Soul is reworked, and also ironically played with, to subvert the male discourse of *Bildung* and how self-reflectiveness can lead, in the two female-authored novels, to the celebration of imagination and individual power over the rules of patriarchal society and to solutions previously unavailable to women, like that of art (*Künstleroman*).

Moreover, examining the declination of the Young Man's from the Provinces type along gender lines, allows me to highlight the significance of social mobility for women and the ways in which these narratives reject marriage as the conventional narrative resolution of women's formative journey throughout the nineteenth-century.

[32] Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover, N.H.; London: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 10-11.
[33] *The Voyage In*, p. 12.
[34] Marianne Hirsch, 'Spiritual *Bildung*: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm', in *The Voyage In*, pp. 23-48 (p. 26).

Building on *The Voyage In*, feminist critic Susan Fraiman has stressed the problem inherent in the term 'female *Bildungsroman*' itself and, in her reading of nineteenth-century British women's novels, highlights how the idea of 'an integrated identity' has become implausible due to notions of race, class and nationality, so that women are now 'dispersed' into a series of trajectories and different 'ongoing stories'.[36] Even though her study focuses only on women novelists writing in England between 1778 and 1860, Fraiman raises important questions about generic formulations of the *Bildungsroman* and the understanding of development they rely on. Underpinning her project is the intention to contest conventional assumptions about stories of becoming by focusing on women. Hence her emphasis on the 'counter-narratives' of these novels, the divergent stories that break up the apparently linear course of female developmental fiction.

Fraiman's view is useful for my argument, as it implies a sense of identity as 'conflicted and provisional, involving not one but many developmental narratives', which finds expression, in different ways, in the novels under consideration.[38] As the 'unbecoming' of the title suggests, a progressive development and coherent identity have become implausible (for women), who are now 'dispersed' into a series of trajectories and 'ongoing stories': '[…] these narratives do not simply proceed toward the destination of adulthood but go on themselves to constitute the adult self, which is always fluid and emergent'.[39] Significantly, she goes further and recognizes that what she calls 'plural formations',[40] i.e. the multiple narratives of individual development, goes beyond gender. In other words, not only female, but personal development in general may be mapped onto antagonistic plots that do not find a final conciliation, as the open, alternative life pattern of these novels' ending testify.

My analysis places particular emphasis on new gender roles, like the German, American-derived 'New Woman' (Neue Frau) and its Italian, less even, counterpart *Donna nuova*, in order to account for the complex ways in which women negotiated their own identity and a place for themselves in patriarchal societies. My work is framed within the canonical study of gender and modernism, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, which presents gender as a

[36] Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See particularly the 'Preface', p. xiii.
[38] Fraiman, p. 12.
[39] Fraiman, pp. xi-xiii.
[40] Fraiman, p. 12.

category constructed through cultural and social systems, as opposed to sex, which is a biological fact determined at conception.[41] While since the late 1970s, in the wake of second-wave feminism, the numbers of works by women writers included in the canon of modernism has kept on growing, the gender of modernist fictions of development surprisingly remain masculine in its privileged authors. The consideration of the interweaving of genre and gender issues in this thesis then highlights how gender represents a lively and fruitful category to explore issues of background, education and class and their influence on the new sense of self emerging out of the experience of urban modernity.

Outline of the Novels

The authors and novels I have chosen, which will be analyzed and discussed in detail in the following chapters, reflect the diverse cultural trends and complex set of literary responses to the conditions of modernity subsumed under the label of 'modernism(s)'.[42] While there is disagreement among critics concerning the chronological boundaries of modernism, most tend to locate it in the period between 1910 to 1940, with 1922 – the year of the publication of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* – seen as the high point of the movement. If in Great Britain the new cultural trends manifested relatively early, namely around 1910,[43] in Germany modernism was a rather belated phenomenon, conventionally identified with the Weimar Period, the years from the end of the First World War (1918) to the rise of Nazism (1933). Even though the critic Giacomo Debenedetti has identified the years 1921-1922 as capable of representing the establishment of 'modern' tendencies in Italian

[41] Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2007). See in particular her 'Introduction: A Retro-prospective on Gender in Modernism', pp. 1-22.

[42] For an account of the various modernisms see Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). Matei Calinescu tackles the complex task of clarifying the controversial terminological constellation of notions such as 'modern', 'modernity', 'modernism' in: *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

[43] Following Virginia Woolf's famous claim that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed'. See her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924) in: *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, Vol 1. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 319-337 (p. 320).

literature too,[44] modernism as historiographic category has always played a minor role in the Italian critical debate, at least if compared with the extensively used 'decadentism' to cover the same period.[45]

As modernists' formal experiments do not simply disavow the traditional form of the novel, I show that novels still linked to the conventions of realism also entail some experimental devices, be it in the form of parody (Keun, Kästner, Bontempelli) or as concerns with language and its crisis, complicating the very possibilities of narrative and meaning (Capuana, Bontempelli).

The selection of novels stems from the desire to bring into the critical discussion works normally absent from *Bildungsroman* scholarship. While the value of Bontempelli's work has been long appreciated, critics have focused mostly on his later production, dismissing his early works as juvenile jokes; Capuana's novel, which I could read in the national library of Florence, is instead generally unknown, as confirmed by the almost total absence of studies on it. Kästner's and Keun's works have been widely acknowledged, yet the many studies on these two novels have rarely foregrounded *Bildung* as an essential part of their critical potential, as I set out to do in this thesis.

I have chosen to focus on the Italian and German contexts as emblematic of complex processes of identity formation and modernization in two countries which where fraught by upheavals and social tensions in the period between the two wars, which led in both cases to a dictatorship. Moreover, all the novels make, in my view, a significant contribution to the modernist project of critical reappraisal of *Bildung*, accounting for the different strands of the *Bildungsroman* genre, such as the confessional and the picaresque, and the relationship between province and city, in the character's existential quest in the modern city.

Erich Kästner's *Fabian* (1931) and Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (*The Artificial Silk Girl*, 1932) are both strongly informed by their national context, that of the last years of the Weimar Republic. Given the

[44] 1922 was the year of the 'Esposizione d'arte italiana futurista' (Futurist Art Exposition) held in Bologna, as well as of Italo Svevo's completion of *La coscienza di Zeno*, which came out the following year. See about this Remo Ceserani's essay 'Italy and Modernity: Peculiarities and Contradictions' in Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni, eds., *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 35-62.

[45] For the problematic use of the term and its negative implications see e.g. Luca Somigli's essay about Italian modernism in Pericles Lewis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 75-93.

presence of a pronounced employee culture in interwar Germany, and particularly in Berlin, it is no surprise that both novels depict the trials of two *Angestellten* (white-collar workers) – hence their definition of *Angestelltenromane* – seeking fortune in the German metropolis of the 1930s. Although their attitude towards Berlin is quite different – the newcomer Doris projects on whatever she sees around her the shining beauty she wants to become, while Fabian is already experiencing disillusionment with his existential quest in the city – their trajectory shows what *Bildung* has become in a society dominated by sheer utilitarianism and commercialism.

By including in my corpus Massimo Bontempelli's connected micronovels of *La vita intensa* (*Intense Life*, 1920) and *La vita operosa* (*Productive Life*, 1921) and Ada Capuana's forgotten *La città nuova* (*The New City*, 1934), I aim to shed a new light on the debate around Italy's complex process of modernization in the interwar years, broadly corresponding with the Fascist dictatorship (1922-43).

Bontempelli's own trajectory from an initial affiliation with Futurism, evident in his early poetry, to the search for a more 'moderate' modernism, exemplified in his 'Novecento' project and in the practice of 'magical realism', is also exemplary of the complex dynamics of Italy's 'return to order' in the post-First World War period and the culture of Fascism. *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* resemble in both form and content Kästner's novel, as they present the same division into narrative units which follow the character's adventures in post-war Milan. What remains from Bontempelli's avant-garde experiments here is the attempt to avoid an over-realist style by drawing visionary elements into the description of the busy city life. This reflects Bontempelli's rejection of any naturalist stance in favour of a fiction which could convey a sense of 'stupore' (wonderment) in the practice of everyday life.

The choice of a novel like *La città nuova* (1934), set in a marginal location like Sicily under the Fascist regime, may surprise, yet it allows to reconsider the relationship between province/city, and thus periphery/center, in relation to women's claim to *Bildung* and its limits in patriarchal society. The novel shares similarities with that of Keun, starting from its division into three parts which mark the phases of the protagonist's becoming in and out of the city. Similarly to Doris, Gaetana lives in a provincial town, but perceives the limits of such background and eventually sets off for the city, in this case Catania.

This forgotten novel by the unknown Ada Capuana (a relative of the famous writer Luigi Capuana) needs to be read against the backdrop of Sicily's belated process of modernization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Significantly, while the city becomes the space where Gaetana can develop fully into a (new) woman, this evolution goes hand in hand with that of her hometown, the rural 'Granica' (from granaio=granary) which the new mayor Marco wants to transform into a city – 'the new city' to which the title alludes. The apparently open fascism of the novel – evident in its dedication to Fascist Italy ('Italianità Fascista') – is deceptive and is belied by the subtle ways in which the narrative exposes the contradictions of Fascist discourses about femininity and gender roles, staging a counter-narrative which gives voice to women's claim for self-determination and for a space for themselves in patriarchal society.

Chapter 1

Self-Reflection, Parody and *Bildung* in Massimo Bontempelli's *Vite*

In this chapter I examine the problem of *Bildung* and its ramifications in Bontempelli's *La vita intensa* (1920) and *La vita operosa* (1921),[46] which present some of the elements we will also find in the other novels examined in this thesis, such as the picaresque and the confessional, and here observed in the context of post-war Milan. I thus highlight how Bontempelli's apparently trivial works – as they deal with ordinary aspects of reality through a simple, at times even vulgar language – partake in the modernist double gesture of recuperation of aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung* and critique of socially pragmatic *Bildung*, through the depiction of the developmental trajectory of an educated Young Man within capitalist society. My analysis thus considers how the two elements of the trope of the Young Man, the romantic and the social, stage the tension between personal desire and social duty entailed in the *Bildungs*process.

As seen in the introduction, literary critics have more recently started to use the category of 'modernism' to describe Italian literature from before the Great War, against the long-established and omni-comprehensive label of 'decadentism' traditionally used by Italian literary historians.[47] While modernism is generally considered as a 'tendency' rather than a school or movement, Romano Luperini sees it flourishing in Italy in the years between the two wars, with Massimo Bontempelli among its main representatives.[48] In the same vein, Luca Somigli has highlighted that Massimo Bontempelli's work traverses Italian modernism from the futurist avant-garde to the 'return to order' in the post-First World War period and the culture of Fascism.[49]

Two of Bontempelli's major critics, Luigi Baldacci and Marinella Mascia Galateria, read *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* as expression of Bontempelli's early affiliation with Futurism, evident in their narrative form (which echoes futuristic synthetic theatre) and their parodical character. While Baldacci identifies a split between Bontempelli's (early) avant-garde

[46] All further references to the two works are from Bontempelli's *Opere scelte* (Meridiani Mondadori), edited by Luigi Baldacci. All translations are my own.

[47] On the broad use of the term see for instance Luca Somigli's and Mario Moroni's enlightening work *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

[48] 'Il modernismo italiano esiste', in Romano Luperini and Massimiliano Tortora, eds., *Sul modernismo italiano* (Napoli: Liguori, 2012), pp. 3-12.

[49] Luca Somigli, 'Modernism and the Quest for the Real: On Massimo Bontempelli's *Minnie la Candida*', in: *Italian Modernism*, pp. 309-350.

phase and that of the (later) return to order,[50] Mascia Galateria (re)evaluates these texts as a 'central moment' of his production, open to avant-garde hints and critical of literary tradition, as well as an example of magical realism *ante litteram*.[51] According to both critics, the structure of *La vita intensa*, with its 10 'romanzi sintetici' ('synthetic novels', or micronovels), can be associated to narrative modes proper to the futurist avant-garde,[52] although critically (re)appraised, while in *La vita operosa*, arguably a more complex work, it is possible to recognize the plot of a novel. While both texts are divided into sections which follow the protagonist's vicissitudes in Milan and share the same first-person narrator and ironical stance, *La vita intensa* appears from the onset as an autobiography.

The narrator sets out to write what happened to him one morning of the first year after the War while he was going from via San Paolo to the Galleria, in the center of the city, between 12 and 12.30. His adventures, which are meant for people who are neither 'too complicated' nor 'too simple' (7), provide a gallery of characters who are satirically typified – like the little muffled woman or the gentleman with the large suitcase – and give a demystified picture of Milan and its supposed 'intense' life. To add irony, the narrator recounts his attempts to make ends meet with different jobs, even unlikely ones, such as bird taxidermist, or the misadventure due to his vice of smoking and the neurasthenia caused by the lack of cigarettes. The last section borders on metafiction, reflecting on the process of writing, with all the characters of the various stories gathering at the narrator's house to reclaim their agency.

The opening of *La vita operosa* is different, as we find the protagonist back from the war front and trying to find his place in the chaos of post-war Milan.

[50] See the Introduction to Bontempelli's *Opere scelte*, pp. XI-XLIII (p. XV).

[51] Marinella Mascia Galateria, 'Parodia, paradosso e qualche favilla di verità', afterword to Massimo Bontempelli, *La vita intensa. La vita operosa* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), pp. 303-319 (p. 311). Similarly, one may argue that here the concept of *stracittà* (supercity), strongly associated to Bontempelli's journal '900' (1926-1929) and its group, finds early expression. In its anti-provincial, cosmopolitan character, *stracittà* was opposed to *strapaese* (supercountry), which gained the ascendancy in the 1930s and invoked the rural and original character of Fascism and the enduring qualities of peasant culture. While, to be sure, the two currents and their magazines (like 'Il Selvaggio' and 'L'Italiano' for *strapaese*) testify of the centrality of the urban-rural conflict under Fascism, this opposition seems to me not to play a central role here. See about this Luciano Troisio's now dated but still valid review of Italian literary magazines in the interwar years: *Le riviste di Strapaese e Stracittà: Il Selvaggio - L'Italiano - 900* (Treviso: Canova, 1975).

[52] In his Introduction Baldacci recalls Marinetti and his *8 anime in una bomba* as a model for *La vita intensa and La vita operosa* – although there are also French sources. *Ibid*., pp. XI-XLIII (p. XXV).

Here the critical look at contemporary society and its values sharpens: mesmerized at the sight of a young woman on the tram, he resolves, by way of an association of social ambition and sexual desire, to make money in order to satisfy his desire and to conform to present materialistic times. Hence the various attempts by the protagonist – unnamed, but described as belonging to the Milanese intelligentsia – to fit in the new 'industrious' society born in those years. He thus starts working in advertising and then move to the field of speculative building, passing through contact with the *parvenus* ('pescecani', literally 'sharks'): all of which fail as he proves unable to embrace the new culture of money and commodities.

While it has been acknowledged that, beyond the author's explicit rejection of naturalism, the overt irony brings the narrative to the level of parody, included that of other genres, like the adventure novel and the romance,[53] the relation of these works to the *Bildungsroman* tradition has been largely overlooked. Mascia Galateria devotes a valuable study to *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa*, uncovering works which she considers exemplary of the cultural atmosphere of the Twenties, yet she reads them mostly through the lens of the 'comic'.[54]

The ironic gulf is accentuated by the fact that the narrator is a *letterato* who applies his knowledge to read trivial situations and play with readers, giving them questionable tips. This happens for instance, at a textual level, through the use of quotations from literary works, which have also a disorienting effect on the reader – suffice to mention, by way of example, micronovel IV of *La vita intensa*, bearing the overtly ironical title of 'Il dramma del 31 Aprile' (48, a date which does not exist) – whose subtitle 'Delitto e Castigo' ('Crime and Punishment'), as the author humorously explains, recalls the title of Dostoevski's novel. Moreover, this adventure is introduced by a quotation on Milan and its street from elitist Italian poet and writer Ada Negri to create the set of the 'drama' (in one of those 'care vecchie vie della nostra Milano', 'old dear streets of our Milan', 48) near the Naviglio. This contributes to the game with the reader, who should expect a tragedy – an expectation reinforced by the narrator's stress on the 'drammatico', the strongly dramatic character of the novel (49) – only to discover that the

[53] Marinella Mascia Galateria, *Tecnica della sorpresa e romanzo comico di Massimo Bontempelli. Saggio su La vita intensa e la vita operosa* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1977).
[54] Galateria, p. 16.

protagonist of the drama is a tobacco shop, and the punishment is a mischief at the expense of a grim and stinking saleswoman (48-60).

The drama occurs in front of a 'Sali e tabacchi', a tobacco shop where a crowd of people gathers in great turmoil at 11 in the morning of 31st of April, quite surprisingly as the 'levata delle sigarette', the supply of cigarettes occurs always on Tuesday and it is Saturday. Reminding the tobacconist's odious manners on the last Tuesday, the protagonist enacts his revenge scheme: while the woman, dealing with a request, gives him the back, he changes with the pen the *e* of 'l*e*vata' (selling) with an *a*, 'l*a*vata' (bathed) on the sign behind the counter that says 'Levata il Martedì'. The sign next to the saleswoman thus reads now 'Lavata il martedì' ('Bathed on Tuesday', 58), a real bad play on words given that, as the narrator reminds, it is Saturday. The sign turns out to be the very cause of the final tragedy, which, as proper to the aforementioned 'dramatic' of the novel, ends with the death of the saleswoman's boyfriend and two mocking customers after a fight and the woman's subsequent suicide under the gaze of the crowd and of the protagonist, who like Raskolnikoff could not refrain from coming back where he has done the 'deed' (59).

In order to show how Bontempelli's texts depict a character's developmental trajectory, it is useful to retrace here briefly the roots of the *Bildungsroman*, with a stress on the confessional and the picaresque as key aspects of this tradition.

As already noted in the Introduction, the term *Bildung* originated in Germany in the nineteenth century, yet the genre of the *Bildungsroman* has a longer history and different genealogies. While its origin is generally traced back to the medieval tradition of the chivalric stories as well as the introspective practices of pietism, more recently critics have recognized another ancestry in the genre of the confessions, from Saint Augustine to Rousseau and Ippolito Nievo, and thus in autobiographical writings.

Since the Middle Ages, romance depicts the formative path of a young man, normally a *miles christianus* who has to find himself and his destiny, following the typical itinerary of the chivalric novel: through the *erranza*, in the sense of wandering but also erring, the young knight traces his way towards virtue and spiritual refinement. As Mario Domenichelli has pointed out, there is a noteworthy exception to these stories of formation of the *miles*, namely the tales of Troilus, who, *per armi e amori* (through love and prowess), finds himself eventually lost or defeated.

Interestingly, Domenichelli notes that this same path towards loss can be found in the narratives of the First World War and in twentieth-century formative fictions in general, in a sort of reverse-*Bildung* or *Verbildung* which brings the subject not to an affirmation of identity and integration into a community but to a realization of non-belonging.[55] Domenichelli also makes the relevant case that the novel of development does not originate around the French Revolution, as critics like Franco Moretti would have it, but in early modernity (sixteenth century), as a variant of the epic and the chivalric romance.[56] Grounding his definition of the genre in the Hegelian idea of a trajectory towards the achievement of identity and a sense of belonging to a class (the bourgeoise), Domenichelli identifies *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y sus fortunas y adversidades* (1525-1554) as first example of the genre, thus connecting the *Bildungsroman* to the picaresque tradition.

The picaresque matrix of the genre proves useful for the analysis of Bontempelli's micronovels, as, in my view, the protagonist of *Vite* can be considered a modernist picaro. In order to show how the picaresque interweaves with the developmental path of Bontempelli's protagonist and narrator of his story, I rely on A.K. Chanda's recognition of the picaro as the predecessor of the Young Man from the Provinces, a type to which the protagonists of the novels under consideration in my thesis somehow all belong. Likewise significant for my analysis, given the autobiographical form, is David Miles' connection of the Young Man trope to the confessional, which he considers as a mark of self-reflexivity and growing self-awareness, an aspect which I refer to in the first section of this chapter and which returns in various degrees, in relation to the problem of *Bildung*, in the novels I analyse later.[57]

In the first part of the chapter I seek to detect the picaresque matrix of Bontempelli's works, particularly of *La vita intensa*, showing that the narrative stages what Ulrich Wicks calls 'the essential picaresque situation': an antihero who tries, with his tricks and role playing, to survive in a

[55] Mario Domenichelli, 'Il romanzo di formazione nella tradizione europea', in: Maria Carla Papini, Daniele Fioretti, and Teresa Spignoli, eds., *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento* (Pisa: ETS, 2007), pp. 11-37, (p. 17).

[56] Domenichelli, p. 18.

[57] Similarly to Miles Chanda recognizes in Rousseau's autobiographical *Confession* the work in which we witness the transformation of the picaro into the Young Man from the Provinces. A.K. Chanda, 'The Young Man from the Provinces', *Comparative Literature*, 33.4 (1981), 321-341.

commercialized society where new values have replaced old ideals.[58] I highlight that the picaresque is used in relation to the romantic and the social by way of parody, to satirize post-war society and more significantly to stage the character's tension between personal desire and social demands.

In the second part, I examine the many attempts by the protagonist, a cultured man with classical *Bildun*g, to find a place in the new society. As we will see in Kästner's *Fabian*, the overt narratorial irony problematizes what *Bildung* has become in the face of modernization and mass consumer culture. In both novels the protagonist's trajectory is filtered through the experience of the war, but *La vita operosa* in particular is concerned with a reflection on what it means to become a man among the new men came to maturity at the time of postwar reconstruction. The novel also thematizes the rejection of work, which culminates in the final (non-)choice of the protagonist, and its ideological implications, an aspect which comes out in the other novels too.

In the last part, I focus on the ending of *La vita operosa* and on the protagonist's choice not to conform to socially accepted behaviors, which I consider as a progressive move, thus challenging the view of the protagonist's trajectory as a 'miserably failed attempt at integration'.[59]

1. A Picaro in Post-War Milan

In his essay devoted to the changing image of the protagonist in the German *Bildungsroman*, David H. Miles traces the literary hero's development from picaro, regarded as the 'unselfconscious adventurer or man of action', to confessor, the 'hero of personality growth' and introspection.[60]

Significantly, Miles detects this path in the founding work in the genre, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, as the first part of the novel, with Wilhelm joining an errand theatre company, follows a 'picaresque path'. While Wilhelm shows an aversion to reflection, it is the Tower Society which, in the second part, provides the novel with its educational dimension.

[58] Ulrich Wicks, 'The Nature of Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach', *PMLA*, 89.2 (1974), 240-249 (p. 242).
[59] Baldacci, p. XXII.
[60] David H. Miles, 'The Picaro's Journey to the Confessional: The Changing Image of the Hero in the German Bildungsroman', *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 89.5 (1974), 980-992.

A similar trajectory can be traced from *La vita intensa* to *La vita operosa*, as the protagonist develops from an initial picaresque status, gaining more awareness of himself and the reality around him. This is also reflected in the confessional mode of the narration: the 'soliloquio interno' ('internal monologue', 13) of the former text becomes in the latter a constant dialogue with his double, who, like in *Lazarillo*, embodies a sort of negative mentor, here tellingly called 'Dàimone'.

In order to show the picaresque matrix of the text, I rely on Wicks' modal approach to picaresque narrative, which is grounded on Robert Scholes' theory of 'fictional modes', considered as primitive narrative forms. As Wicks recalls, in Scholes' spectrum of 'ideal types' of narrative fiction, the picaresque is placed between satire and comedy, sharing affinities with both. The idea of a picaresque 'mode' allows, in Wicks' view, to account for a specific kind of narrative whose exclusive preoccupation is the exploration of the fictional world of the picaresque, and for a primitive fictional possibility which may be present in varying degrees of mixture with other modes, such as romance and satire, in much fiction.[61] Hence, dealing with what he considers the 'problem of the picaresque', Wicks defines the 'essential picaresque situation': an unheroic protagonist caught up in a chaotic world in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be both victim and exploiter of that world.[62]

Significantly, Wicks provides a list of attributes which qualifies a fictional work as picaresque, most of which, as I show, can be found in Bontempelli's novels. One of them is the 'panoramic structure', namely the knitting together of numerous single units, each one devoted to an adventure in the city, which we find in both *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa*. While *La vita operosa* is divided into chapters, *La vita intensa* presents, as mentioned, narrative inserts, which appear as independent 'micronovels', and if the chronology proceeding from one month to the next would seem to imply a linear progression, each unit has its own start and conclusion.[63] The 'continuous begins anew' in the landscape of the discontinuous recognized as proper to

[61] Robert Scholes, 'Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach trough Genre', *Novel*, 2 (1969), 101-111.

[62] Wicks, pp. 240-249.

[63] Patrizia Farinelli defines both *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* as 'antinovels', as the two texts dismantle the tenets of nineteenth-century novel. See 'Oltre il tempo attraverso il mito: Bontempelli e l'attuazione narrativa di un progetto teorico – da *Eva ultima* al *Viaggio d'Europa*', *Ars & Humanitas / Študije*, 6.2 (2012), 23-35.

the picaresque is thus paralleled narratively by the episodic form, which we find in both texts.

Another attribute of the picaresque mode is the first-person point of view as well as the split between an experiencing 'I' and a narrating 'I', and the ensuing irony between these two levels of the narration, to which, in the case of Bontempelli, a third one needs to be added. As Cinzia Gallo has rightly highlighted, there are three *statutes* of the 'I' in *La vita operosa*: the narrator, the autobiographical character and the fictive character, so that Bontempelli mixes the features of a fictional text and an autobiography, bordering on 'autofiction'.[64] In my analysis I also consider how the different status of the self is related to the discourse on *Bildung*: I thus show that the texts refer not only to the *Bildungs*process of the narrator-protagonist, but also to that of the autobiographical character (the author), who hints at his own artistic career, giving us a portrait of the artist as a young man. Hence both *La vita intensa*, explicitly in the micronovel 'Mio zio non era futurista' ('My uncle was not a futurist', 92), and *La vita operosa*, with its reflections on the role of the man of letters and of culture in the present time, share some motifs of the *Künstlerroman*,[65] the novel depicting the formation of the artist.

A relevant aspect in relation to the *Bildungsroman* tradition is the narrator's dialogue with his readers, which aims at 'educating' them but turns out to have comic effects. Significantly, Karl Morgenstern, one of the earliest theorists of the *Bildungsroman*, linked the word *Bildung* not only to the hero's development and experience, but also to that of the reader.[66] It is the narrator's ironical stance, and at times that of the Dàimone in *La vita operosa*, that serves this purpose – he addresses the reader to spare them some (love) scenes or useless details, or exposes (presumed) general wisdom and moral reflection. The narrator's tips to the reader are also quite comical, as they are the tricks for survival of an idler,[67] like when he explains the

[64] Cinzia Gallo, '*La vita operosa* di Massimo Bontempelli fra narrativa, autobiografia e «autofiction»', *Écho des études romanes*, 13.2 (2017), 147-159.

[65] The *Künstlerroman* is generally regarded, like the *Entwicklungsroman* – the novel of spiritual development – as a subgenre of the Bildungsroman. See e.g., Domenichelli, p. 27.

[66] Karl Morgenstern, *Über das Wesen des Bildungs*romans (Dorpat: Inländisches Museum, 1820). Again Mascia Galateria speaks of renewal of both the novel and the reader evident mostly in *La vita intensa*. See: *Racconti allo specchio. Studi bontempelliani* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2005), p. 16.

[67] As such, 'buono a nulla' (good-for-nothing) he is later defined, an expression which recalls Eichendorff's novella *Aus dem Leben eines taugenichts* (The Life of a Good for-nothing). Speaking of the 'romanticization of the bourgeois picaro', Chanda sees in the hero of Eichendorff's work one of the most celebrated examples of romantic picaro (Chanda, 323). Eichendorff's novel also shares similarities with

advantages of making a cigarette by oneself compared to buying it ready-made.

Critics have noticed that the 'scialo di triti fatti', the abundance of trivial facts from everyday life, is proper to modernism,[68] with the dominance of the 'momentaneo e fortuito' (the temporary and the fortuitous);[69] according to Wicks, these attributes are typical of the picaresque too. As my reading will show, the protagonist's adventures are ruled by chance and its likewise random encounters lead him in unlikely situations or even into the underworlds of the city; however, more significantly, they shed a light on what *Bildung* and ideals have become and on the role of the 'cultured people' in capitalist society. Moreover, although personal development is more evident in *La vita operosa*, also in *La vita intensa* we can see a growing self-awareness by the narrating self, as the seventh micronovel, devoted to Marinetti and futurism, and mostly the last chapter, which is a meta-literary reflection on writing, show.

As mentioned, the parody of other literary genres – like the romance, with its fusion of love story and adventure novel – is typical of the picaresque. The text's division into units, which resemble the one in Kästner's novel, as I show in the next chapter, corresponds to the adventures occasioned by the everyday of urban modernity. The narrator of *La vita intensa* plays from the start with reader and genre expectations, stating in the Preface the irrelevance of the facts that occurred to him one day, between 12 and 12.30, going from his house to the trattoria (8). While he is aware that readers of Dumas' and Bourget's novels will be disappointed by the lack of action or psychology in his tales, he claims the 'truthfulness' of his story – 'racconto fatti veri' (the book starts with these words, 'I tell true facts', 7) – just to disappoint the reader once again, given the unlikelihood of the narrated facts and the magical elements present in some adventures. If the triviality (of some) of the events and the ironical stance of the narrator/protagonist, both towards himself and the reality around him, appear from the start as the main thread of the narration, a significant role is played not only by the city of Milan but also by war. In the first line of the first chapter it is said: 'correva il primo anno del dopoguerra' ('it was the first year after the war', 8) and shortly later

Bontempelli's in the presence of comic-critical elements, and for breaking with the bourgeois ethos of work in the frame of an anti-active countermoral.

[68] Massimiliano Tortora, 'Zeno antieroe modernista', in *Sul modernismo italiano*, pp. 183-200 (p. 185).

[69] Luperini, p. 10.

we learn that the protagonist has been to the front and seems to regret his youth. To his friend Piero, who reproaches him for not being serious enough 'at his age', he responds that his age is like any other one, but he would prefer to be younger, as his 'compagni d'arme', his comrades, who were all between eighteen and twenty, which he judges 'unjust' (12).

In Wicks' view the picaresque stages a vast gallery of human types who appear as representatives of the landscape, and of whom satirical portraits are given. This is certainly true for *La vita intensa*, where the people the protagonists meets represents types more than characters, and are depicted with mocking irony, such as the 'donnina molto imbacuccata' ('a very muffled little woman', 8), a petit-bourgeois woman who is embarrassed to be seen consulting a doctor X, specialist in venereal diseases, or the 'signore con valigia grande' ('gentleman with the large suitcase', 10), a modest provincial who has come to the city with his best outfit but cannot afford a carriage.

In *La vita intensa* we find repeated situations in which 'chance', as well as a picaresque *carpe diem*, dominates. They reproduce what Wicks identifies as 'the picaro-landscape relationship', whereby each situation depicts, in different ways, a trajectory from exclusion to attempted inclusion and back to exclusion (outside-inside-outside).[70] One example of the dominance of chance is the last chapter of the first (micro)novel, 'Pari e Dispari' ('Odd and Even', 14). The protagonist and his friend Piero are unsure where to go for breakfast: after ruling out the caffè Savini, because it is full of *letterati* and clever people, they agree on casting lots: when they arrive in the Cathedral Square they look at the number of the first tram coming: if it is odd, they'll go to Cova, otherwise they'll go to Caffé Biffi. As the first tram they see has an odd number, they should go to Cova, instead, as the one-line conclusion reveals, the two good-for-nothings have themselves played with chance: 'Allora siamo andati al Biffi' ('then we went to Biffi', 15).

It must not be overlooked, however, that even the more apparently random situations are a way to reclaim the protagonist's freedom from social duties and constraints. Exemplary of this is the second micronovel entitled 'Il caso di forza maggiore' ('The case of force majeure', 16), which also plays with romance, as it starts with a letter to 'Signorina *Ardita*' – a mocking reference to the name of the journal where the text was published ('Ardita', which is also an adjective meaning 'bold'). Reassuring the lady who enjoyed reading the previous adventures at night in bed before sleeping and now

[70] Wicks, p. 245.

yearns for new ones, the author takes the opportunity to claim his intention to realize a 'cyclical narration' in the manner of Zola and Balzac, among whom he has the honor to be counted (17).

In the first chapter of this same unit he then goes on with a 'preliminare filosofico' ('a philosophical introduction'), which should be useful to the readers in many instances of life. He thus explains that the specific feature of modern time is not to be found in an object – and he provides a list of the modern ones, like the tram and the cinematograph – but in a fact or a 'spiritual' attitude. What is really modern, which the ancients may not have known (and to validate his theory he resorts to the fact that we do not find it in Roman and Greeks comedies), is 'l'appuntamento' ('*rendez-vous*', or appointment, 17).

All this serves to introduce the main event of the section, namely the 'mysterious *rendez-vous*' with his friend Piero, on the 10th of March, which the narrator will end up missing for apparently futile reasons as usual. Irony is given here by the fact that he is summoned to what seems an important appointment he cannot miss 'except for force majeure' as his friend explains in a note, to which he answers that he would certainly go 'except for force majeure'. While his mind gets lost in thinking of what 'force majeure' really means, his failure in fulfilling the commitment here is due to a chance encounter in the tram and by the bad luck of having finished the cigarettes. However, this missed appointment, which foretells the ending of *La vita operosa*, proves to be an occasion to reclaim the independence linked to his role of *letterato*, as the reference to the magazine that will publish the story testifies.

As in the typical picaresque situation, the protagonist's actions seem to be driven by chance: eager to arrive on time, he decides not to waste one second searching for the cigarettes, and to stop instead at the shop and buy them, yet they are 'fatally' finished (19). This is enough to make him lose faith in life, and yet he remains firm in his 'double commitment' of taking the tram and arriving on time to the meeting. However, an early taste of spring and his desire, awakened by some ladies passing by, make him numb. He manages to regain his love for life by way of one of his (nonsense) reasonings, namely reminding himself of his own superiority for waiting a tram while other people in Milan, and in the world, wait just for a phone call; this is worth to him a victory over pessimism, which is rewarded with the arrival of the tram just in front of him.

While the following chapter of the section 'Ogni due piedi c'è un'anima' ('Every two feet there is a soul', 20) starts with a reminder to the reader that the protagonist has finished his cigarettes – a fact which will have important consequences, as he explains – the situation on the tram mocks modern love encounters. Once inside, the narrator sits in the carriage and with his gaze meets, instead of eyes as one may expect, eight feet, a fact which leads him to assume that there are 'four souls' sitting in front of him (21). His attention is then caught by female shoes[72] and the transparent stockings which encourage his gaze to climb for almost 25 centimeters – as the narrator reckons in hindsight – up to the 'restless frill' of a violet skirt which, like the wave of a sea, 'nascondeva e risvelava, prometteva e negava' ('hid and revealed, promised and denied', 21). To rescue himself from that untimely upset, he searches for the woman's gaze and then looks for an excuse to talk to her, yet as soon as he speaks – 'scusi, le dà noia il fumo'? ('sorry, do you mind if I smoke?', 22) – he realizes his own idiocy given that he has no cigarettes with him. The situation is (unlikely) worsened by the laughs he hears all around in the carriage – which come, as he soon discovers, not from the other passengers but from the handles hanging up and, most evilly, from the white sign with 'smoking forbidden' above his seat (23).

He is then caught by a suicidal thought, but the woman soon rekindles him: she gets up and, before getting off, looks at him smiling a first time with her eyes, and then, once on the street, she turns to him and smiles again, this time with her mouth too, which is interpreted by the man as an invitation to follow her. However – as he reminds the readers and himself via a 'moral intermezzo' – he is writing an adventure novel and cannot divert from his purpose with upsetting love stories. He must then accomplish his 'dovere categorico, serio, fatale' ('categorical, serious, fatal duty', 24) and, following one 'dritta e predisposta linea d'azione' ('straight line of action'), go to the meeting – given that spiritual heights are achieved thanks to the 'moral restrain' which prevents men from run after a violet skirt seen on the tram. Unfortunately, his moral digression has made him lose his way and he finds himself at the last stop, as far from his destination as when he got on the tram at home. Taking the tram *à rebours*, he starts a soliloquy on the 'force

[72] It is worth noting that woman's shoes come back again in another (failed) erotic adventure, that with 'due occhi azzurri e una chioma bionda' ('two blue eyes and blond hair', in 'Due paia di scarpe', 80). This time the protagonist desists from approaching the angelic woman as soon as he realizes she wears broken shoes – a parody of *amor cortese*.

majeure' which would make his friend forgive his missed appointment, and after reasoning of the more (im)possible causes (a death, a serious accident) he concludes that the only valid reason to miss the appointment would be not an external circumstance, but an 'internal fact' (27). In line with the picaresque style of his reflection, this turns out to be that he would forget about the meeting – as forgetfulness is all interior and unconscious, it is 'the same with unconsciousness' ('si identifica con la incoscienza stessa', 27) as he explains calling on Cesare Lombroso to validate his theory.[73]

This adventure thus ends with him missing again the right stop and finishing the journey where it started, namely at his house. He eventually goes on foot to the place of the meeting but finds out that Piero has left Milan, taking with him the reason for that mysterious summoning. The last chapter has a meta-narrative twist, which also hints at the belief that literature can make up for a mistake. The protagonist, whom we now discover is called Massimo, like the author, feels sad for not seeing Piero anymore, to whom he cannot explain why he missed their appointment. However, he has a 'supreme hope': Piero, a young man of 'buoni costumi' ('good morals', 30) will certainly buy the journal and read the novel, hence one day he will show up and tell him finally what he wanted that morning, 10th of March, of that year. The episode also gives a critical insight into the conditions of urban modernity: if, as stated initially, the specific sign of present time is the *rendez-vous*, the accelerated rhythms of the city and the unexpected incidents it engenders make it difficult for someone to show up for that very appointment.

While in *La vita operosa* the reflection on the role of the man of letters in post-war society is more evidently connected to the discourse on *Bildung*, *La vita intensa* hints at the artistic trajectory of the (autobiographical) character. We also find here elements of the confessional tradition: in addition to acknowledged monologues and reflection, the protagonist retraces his personal trajectory, as in the fifth micronovel, telling events, from his youth 'candidamente' ('in a candid way', 61),[74] even if they are not totally true, such as his beginnings as a never-paid proofreader in a Publishing house. Moreover, if unlikely or 'surreal' situations are more apparent in *La vita operosa*, here too the narrator, describing Naples as 'una delle mie città

[73] This triggers a kind of stream-of-consciousness which flows from the memory of *L'uomo delinquent*e (*Criminal Man*) sold 'per due lire' (for nothing) to a law student to buy flowers for a woman named Graziella in Turin, although she did not show up.
[74] This is a telling adverb, considering that Bontempelli had devoted an essay to 'candore' (candor) and Pirandello, one of his masters (see *Pirandello o del candore*).

natali' ('one of my birthplaces', 62), warns the reader that he has the habit of changing birth place from time to time. The picaresque attributes of role-changing and 'three years of wandering life' in which the young man tries different occupations – some quite improbable like apprentice of a bird taxidermist, or aesthetic adviser for the clients of a dressmaker – mix with the fictive character of this autobiography.

The 'protean' nature of the picaro-protagonist, as well as the (meta)fictive character of the narration is accentuated at the last chapter of the sixth micronovel, 'Morte e Trasfigurazione' ('Death and Transfiguration'), titled 'Misterioso' ('Mysterious', 90). After losing all his jobs and spending some weeks light-heartedly – yet he manages to write a drama – thanks to a friend he is finally offered a job as editor of a major newspaper, but chance seems to work against him settling down. The night before his first day of work, once again the last cigarette, accidentally dropped on the floor, plunges him into sadness, which turns to despair as soon as he realizes that he must wait until the morning to buy a new packet. He takes a revolver and shoots three shots at his forehead. His new life starts many years later, when he will get married and begin writing novels (91), which he considers, with the usual irony, as the two ideal conditions for attaining peace of mind. Here, there is another hint at the meta-literary discourse which crosses the narration, in that the narrator reveals his function of character whose life is directed by the author of the story, an aspect which will be made most explicit in the last chapter.

Mascia Galateria has argued that *La vita intensa* is also a meta-novel as in the text the story of post-war Milan interweaves with that of the invention and the writing of the story. This aspect comes out most clearly in two micronovels: 'Mio zio non era futurista' ('My uncle was not a futurist') and the last one, which has the telling name of 'Romanzo dei romanzi' ('Novel of the novels'), which is the subtitle of the whole text too. In the latter the meditation on the author's literary trajectory, and more generally on the role of *letterato*, seems to find a temporary closure – the farewell to the reader is 'non definitivo' ('not definitive', 131) – and in some ways, paves the way for the following adventures of *La vita operosa*. While in 'Mio zio non era futurista' the author projects on his uncle his own literary trajectory from neoclassicism to futurism – including a visit to Marinetti's home –, in the last chapter all the characters of *La vita intensa* gather in the author's room and claim their autonomy. Here two foretelling aspects, which will become central in *La vita operosa*, are made explicit: first the splitting of the 'I' between the self as

writer, living man, and the 'other self', the character of the story (the autobiographical and the fictive character, in Cinzia Gallo's words). Interestingly, and this is the second foretelling element, the other self blames 'il porco vizio di voi romanzieri' (143), namely the bad habit of novelists to rule on their characters, directing their life, and expecting them to lead a logic, linear course. The real Demiurge, so the other self goes on, makes people and then 'la butta là': they have to get by on their own, as they say at the war front (143), a conclusion which foreshadows the very initial situation of *La vita operosa*, in which the protagonist-veteran is left to find his way in the chaos of the city.

There is also, however, another aspect linked to the *Bildungs*process of the character which has been largely overlooked. If the uncle embodies the literary projection of the protagonist, who is a young man trying to accomplish his duty (in this case helping his uncle to express his 'genius' fully), the last lines acquire a new meaning. The sentence 'Sta per scrivere. Io sto per agire…Proprio in quel momento scoppiò la guerra europea' ('He is about to write. I am about to act…in that very moment the European war broke out', 106) not only represents a critical stance towards futurism, as it has been pointed out, but also hints in my view at the broken developmental trajectory of the protagonist both as man and artist due to the war – 'luglio 1914' is also given relevance on the textual level in the chapter (104). In this sense, if, as most critics have argued, war has put into crisis self-development and its narration, *La vita operosa*, on which I focus in the following part, takes the discourse on *Bildung* further, redefining, through the usual irony, the relationship between the educated man and (post-war) society.

2. Urban Ethos and Irony of *Bildung*

The majority of critics tends to agree in considering *La vita operosa* as a more mature work than *La vita intensa*, seeing it as a novel whose aim is the ironic-critical representation of post-war bourgeois society, dominated by a consumerist logic and the urge for production.[75] While *La vita intensa* depicted the trials of a more or less conscious picaro trying to find an occupation, the 'adventures' of *La vita operosa* are occasioned by the specific socio-cultural conditions of post-war Italian society – as expressed

[75] Galateria, *Tecnica della sorpresa*, p. 58.

clearly in the subtitle: 'avventure del 19 a Milano' ('adventures of 1919 in Milan').

As mentioned, three planes intersect in the narration, which mixes the characters of an autobiography, a novel and an autofiction. While memories play an important role – the time of the story and that of the narration are not the same, as there is a gap of 4 months between the two – the autobiography has a fictive character, telling events which could never happen (hence the definition of 'autofiction').

Recognizing the developmental trajectory of the 'I' as character, critics have read the novel either as a 'tentativo d'integrazione che fallisce miseramente' ('a miserably failed attempt at an integration') or as the proof of the 'insufficienza dell'io', the inadequacy of the subject to face a complex reality and find his place in Italian modern society.[76] Simona Storchi has highlighted that the adventures in Milan assume the feature of a journey of discovery for the *letterato* in search of identity and of his place in a new society whose values and taste have deeply changed. However, if she recognizes that at the end of the novel the protagonist finds himself, she sees it simply as a 'maladjusted self' and reads the closure as a defeat of the young educated man by the city he had set out to 'conquer'.[77]

In this part, focusing on *Bildung* and the protagonist's trajectory in the city of Milan, I show that his very position of *letterato* with classical knowledge allows him to detect, under the surface of the city's fast pace and industrious life, the crisis and lack of value of postwar society. Moreover, while the critical social function of magical realism has been acknowledged,[78] I will consider what the resorting to another space and time, with the inclusion of magical elements, means in relation to the concern for *Bildung* and the role of the man of letters in modern society.

The novel opens with an interesting reworking, in the context of the war experience, of the *Bildungsroman* initial situation of a young man coming

[76] So Baldacci (p. xxii) and Gallo (p. 150).

[77] See: 'Conquering the city: the representation of Milan in Massimo Bontempelli's *La vita operosa*, *Modern Italy*, 7.2 (2002), 189-199.

[78] Amaryll Chanady aptly claims that magical realism 'gives free reign to the imagination while critically reflecting on the ailments of society and the predicament of the human condition'. In: 'Magic Realism Revisited: The Deconstruction of Antinomies', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 30.2 (2003), 429-445 (p. 442). Similarly, Bowers recognizes that the critical and subversive qualities of magical realism are hinted at in the term itself, as it brings together two opposite literary modes. Maggie Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 63.

from the province to search for his fortune in the city – a motif which runs, in different ways, in all the novels under examination in my thesis.

Here, however, the relationship province/city is re-shaped to express the disorientation of the protagonist, an ex-soldier who has just come back from the warfront, and the 'aperta campagna' ('open countryside', 149) to which the title of the first chapter alludes is the city of Milan in the aftermath of the war. The narrator recalls that at the school for officers he studied topography, one of the less bloody subjects, in a notebook which, like the Christian's catechism and the pamphlets of socialist propaganda, was structured in questions and answers. One chapter in particular, explained how to orientate oneself in the open countryside – quite a useful education given the present condition of the protagonist – yet it left one question unresolved. The textbook mentioned the compass, the watch during the day and the stars at night, or the trunks of trees, but it did not say how to find one's way around when the compass is lost and the watch broken, the sun is covered by clouds and there are no trees. In such cases, the majority concludes that there is only one lesson, valid both in war and peace: everyone does what they can (150).

If the knowledge he has acquired from the war proves not so useful when he finds himself in Milan, 'aperta campagna per le maggiori battaglie della vita' ('open countryside for the harshest battles of life', 151), his long absence puts him in the condition to enjoy at first the urban ethos. Significantly, the initial situation combines the romantic and the social in an interesting way: the desire of a woman motivates the protagonist to act in order to climb to the top and satisfy his needs. Implied in this is the consideration that in capitalist society money invests also (sexual) relationship, allowing men to buy whatever they want, included women.

The beauty of the girl passing by, a mesmerizing vision with her dense fur and her eyes 'made of carbon and light', cause an ecstasy in the protagonist, which leads him to the resolution of making money: 'qui bisogna trovar modo di fare molti quattrini' ('I need to find a way to make a lot of money', 151). This would seem easy in a productive city like Milan, and indeed immediately after golden waterfalls descend from the sky. However, while other men bow down easily to collect gold, he is not able to do the same, which reminds him that he is still new and has to learn, and that first of all he has to orient himself (153). To do so he goes to a café he used to haunt, which was known as a meeting place of the intellectual elite.

If in *La vita intensa* a game of poker is described as something which could not be missing from the gallery of modern life, here the game acquires a meaning in relation to *Bildung* and its critique.[79] Once he enters the café, instead of seeing groups discussing about arts, theatre and other 'high' things, as it used to be, he discerns through the smoke of the room four gentlemen around a table playing with cards *morra*, while two bored ladies follow the game eating pastries. If in the past he felt an outsider as he did not have a card testifying his belonging to the class of city intellectuals ('una tessera di intelletualità cittadina', 153), now his disorientation is even bigger: he feels 'più che mai senza bussola' ('totally lost', 155). Then, seeing in the next room young ladies of high society dancing fox-trot with mesmerizing moves, who embodies the new society born from modern work and from victory (156), he is reminded of his earlier decision: make money.

As in the café he could show his knowledge of *morra* thanks to a sergeant at the front, who had explained him all the tricks to succeed in the game, once in the streets he interprets what he sees through the experience of war too. The 'Volontà di vivere' ('Will to live', 156), shouting from carriages and trams, while men and women celebrate the 'saturnalia of victory', is born from the resignation to death of the last four years, as the protagonist reflects. Before he could go on, however, his Dàimone or Genius, who has been at his side from the beginning, pulls him by the sleeve and reminds him that he is not there to engage in philosophy or history, but to get oriented: hence he points to the posters showing images of hard work and, written everywhere on them, one word, the most visible: OGGI (TODAY), the new God (157).[80]

Simona Storchi has recognized as one of the main themes of *La vita operosa* the protagonist-writer's task of finding his place in the new society and to redefine his role, yet she overlooks the discourse on *Bildung* and how it relates to his urban trajectory. In *La vita operosa*, too, we find narratorial irony, which is accentuated by the moments in which the narrator-protagonist manifests his own erudition, raising philosophical questions, or meditating on the present reality, despite his double's will. This happens already in the first

[79] As Agata De Villi notes, game is a 'constant metaphor' in both *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* and is connected to the rule of chance. Agata Irene De Villi, 'Allegorie del moderno. Le passeggiate urbane di Bontempelli', *Sinestesieonline*, VII.22 (2018), 55-62, 57-58. She also speaks of the modern odyssey of the 'Ulisse bontempelliano', a convincing reference given the author's appreciation of James Joyce, whose work was published in the journal '900'.

[80] Religious imagery contributes to parody, as in the description of the Caffé Campari, compared to a church with its altar and priests-waiter passing by with votive offerings, which is the elected place to make deals in Milan.

chapter. After witnessing the spectacle of the 'Volontà di vivere' and the new religion born from the awareness of death, searching for reference points, he resorts to his literary knowledge. His Double leads him from the blinding light to the darkest shadow, hence to a small square, piazzetta Belgioioso, and they find themselves in front of Alessandro Manzoni's house. Feeling now more comfortable and perceiving the presence of the writer, the protagonist not only appeals to Manzoni as 'sacerdote dell'Equilibrio Profondo' ('Priest of deep balance', 158), but also mentions Raffaello, Machiavelli and Giuseppe Verdi, and asks what they would make of their works if they lived in the present. The question is left, however, unsolved, as Manzoni only knows the way of the world in the seventeenth century, an answer the protagonist deems apt to the writer's usual unwillingness to 'compromettersi' ('take a stand'). In return, the answer to the disappointed protagonist's question comes unexpectedly from behind a shutter that goes down shouting a very straight: 'Fregatene' ('Don't bother about that', 159), an irreverent answer which may hint at the uselessness of both asking such questions and appealing to old values. Finding in this call the confirmation of what he learned at the School for Officers – it is not really important to get oriented, it suffices to get by – the protagonist thus sets out to leave literary matters aside, and to adjust to the new urban ethos, paying his respects to the God Today.

According to Simona Storchi, making money is the thread that keeps together the different adventures of *La vita operosa*,[81] yet on closer look the narrative irony also calls into question (societal) assumptions concerning work and its usefulness.

It is the skeptical Dàimone who is given the task of explaining the difference between the two lives, which give the titles to Bontempelli's works too: the first one, 'la Vita Intensa', is the intense life of those who don't do anything, while the second one, 'la Vita Operosa', is the industrious life of those who show themselves to be very busy (a clearly ironic statement which means, in fact, that they are not). However, this time the protagonist rebels to the 'istinti soficistici e sterili' ('sophistic and sterile tendency', 162) of his mentor, and proposes to be optimistic and take advantage of the present time as it is a sunny day in January and the war is over. Shortly after, however, despite his good intentions, he continues his reflections, and this time resort to myth to read the present reality.

81 Storchi, p. 192.

Before warning the reader that this 'digression' has come not from him but from the Dàimone – with whom he has decided to break up totally –, another version of Hercules' story is narrated. Told by Alcmena that virtue is beautiful and vice horrible, when he found himself at a crossroads, Hercules chose the roughest way, sure of entering into vice, but when he realized his mistake, it was too late. Just as we do not know if Hercules would have become a semi god, or even a god, anyway without his twelve labors, so it is hard to say what would have been of Little Red Riding Hood if in the wood she had taken the shortest rather than the longest way which took her into the wolf's mouth. A parallel with society is drawn, to assert the value of an anti-activist way of life, opposed to the bourgeois ethic of work: the same goes indeed for those who, out of contingency or timidity, started the career of respectable people, and although they later regret it, can only resign to virtue for the rest of their life (163).

This reflection foreshadows the next adventure of the protagonist, who tries to embark on a career in advertising, where ideas are sold and paid for. Once he has reached via Alessandro Manzoni, he meets a lieutenant still wearing his grey-green uniform who greets him warmly, although the protagonist does not remember who he is. Gattoni is the name of the man, who had just graduated in engineering and wanted to join the state railways before the war, but now works for B.A.I.A., his brother's advertising company. Interestingly, the protagonist's lack of knowledge for what 'advertising' really means – not a small thing considering that nowadays all educated people know it – reminds him of the time he used to spend with *letterati*. As he did not dare to ask anything when they spoke with 'candid' conviction of a book or a theatre play he did not know, the same happens now that he hears the name B.A.I.A. This experience in advertising connects Bontempelli's texts, further, with Kästner's novel, which also features an educated young man working in this field. It also offers the author an occasion to reflect on the ideological ramifications of commodified culture, which has given rise not only to new practices such as B.A.I.A. enterprise, but also to new subjects of study, as the protagonist later learns.

If in *La vita intensa* the protagonist's occupation as proofreader for the Bollard publishing company was a (financial) failure, he decides now to accept his friend's offer, against his Dàimone's will, and embark on this new business in the hope that he can finally reach his objective and make money.

However, his literary interests – he whiles away time before meeting his future boss reading all the titles of the latest books in the shop windows of Treves and Baldini e Castoldi – makes him ill-suited to the task of 'selling' ideas and embrace the new culture. Exemplary of this is when, asked to set up a campaign for the launch of an alleged oriental shop, he starts to read all the literature on opium from Pliny and Baudelaire to De Quincey, which causes his boss, former judge Gattoni, to say scornfully that it all stinks of 'school and literature' ('[…] non sente come tutto questo puzza di letteratura? Di scuola e di letteratura, professorume e scrivaneria', 174). Besides reproaching him for not having recognized and dismissed such a shady business like the oriental shop, he concludes that he has not entered the spirit of the times and of 'Italy reborn' (169).

While the protagonist proves not to be able to fit into B.A.I.A – the greatest workshop of ideas for men who 'inventano producono vendono' ('invent produce sell'), hence all men who have understood the 'new life' (169) – his final act of quitting the job is, in my view, an affirmation of freedom rather than a defeat. Telling in this sense is the fact that the force majeure comes back in relation to his regained status of freedom, like in the missed appointment with his friend Piero: now in full agreement with his Dàimone, he writes a message to his boss Gattoni, in which he explains that he cannot keep his job due to 'forza maggiore' ('force majeure',176).

What has become of *Bildung*, also in its gender implications, is typified by Giovanna, a girl from Valdarno who six years before had been committed to reading and translating Rimbaud, while now takes singing lessons in Milan. As usual, the protagonist's *Bildung* leads him to read the changes of the present by resorting to literature. If music is now a more suitable occupation for women as making money is for men, Giovanna's 'modernity' is testified by the fact that she invites the protagonist to her house, promising she will not sing, as soon as she hears that he is into business and has ideas. Indeed she introduces him to two of her friends – 'the pescecane' (literally 'shark'), who belongs to the new bourgeoise who has made profit from the war, and a professor of 'merceologia' ('study of commodities', 179), a subject which, as Giovanna explains, is now what philosophy used to be. It is again Giovanna who, at the end of the protagonist's unproductive day which she had set up for him with the 'pescecane' in the hope they could work together, reproaches him with disappointment: 'non sarete mai buono a nulla' ('you will

always be a good-for-nothing', 191), a sentence echoed almost proudly by the Dàimone.

While this episode would seem to confirm the character's inability to fit in the new society – a society which he is not even able to understand as he initially exchanges the pescecane for the professor – his final rejection of working with the pescecane is a way to assert once more his freedom and ideals. It is also worth noticing that the pescecane, who thinks of himself and his kind not as the new bourgeoise but as a 'neutral energy reserve', and thus without a real identity, is called philosopher, and indeed he quotes Lucretius and predicts for the protagonist a long life of writing although culture is commodified nowadays and he may have to decide to keep his best works in the drawer (187).

Giovanna's case, as well as love encounters and their parody in both *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa*, shows that gender dynamics are portrayed in a way that contributes significantly to the debunking of modern mores enacted by the author. One example here is the section tellingly titled 'Patologico' ('Pathologic'), in chapter eight, which exposes how technology and modernization inflects even the most intimate relationships, an aspect already hinted at in the previous chapter, 'Laura lontana', on which I focus later.

Here the protagonist wakes up with a sentence in his mind he may have read the previous day on a newspaper: 'la standardizzazione del ferro' ('the standardization of iron', 264) and keeps wondering what that means while walking in the city. Annoyed by the sound of 'barbarian civilization' of those words which he does not understand, he finds no consolation even in the sight of fascinating creature passing by. In times of industrious life even the *passante* of Baudelairean memory has lost her charm, as the protagonist admits: if the most beautiful woman had drawn him to herself offering her mouth, he could have whispered languidly only but one word: 'standardizzati' ('standardize yourself', 265).

It is worth noting that the parody of genres enacted by in the novel also involves the confessional tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, reworking the gender dynamics of the Goethean model. If, as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, the female voice of the 'Confessions of a Beautiful Soul' articulated a spiritual (self) development, a response to 'diminishing social

circumstances',[82] the narration by the old woman with three girls the protagonist meets 'in certe vie oscure' ('in certain dark streets', 221) is very different. While the old one asks the protagonist and his friend Graziano to chaperone the girls, who are like daughters to her and are scared after having a bad experience, the 'risata scordata' ('out-of-tune laughter', 223) of two of them, and the third one who sleepwalks singing a lullaby in an unknown language, appear to be far from angelic. To their impoverished social circumstances – they have been evicted from a house where they worked 'honestly', as the old woman recounts – corresponds an even lower moral descent. Asking at first the protagonist and Graziano to find a place in a good house for the three girls, assuring them they will receive a good return for that, the old woman eventually must content herself with having two hosted for that night by Graziano. Significantly, the protagonist evades the madam's insistence by claiming that this is not his 'kind of business' (224), a rejection which further confirms his separation from the exchange logic of the city and the will to remain true to his ideals.

The debunking of romantic love, and its relation to modernization, is brought to the extreme in the seventh chapter, whose title 'Laura lontana' ('Distant Laura') is a reference to Petrarch's collection of poems *Canzoniere*, which has as its central theme the poet's impossible love for Laura, and is thus a revision of courtly love. Here, in a gloomy lakeside setting outside the city, the protagonist meets a strange couple of siblings, Bruno and Laura, and experiences Bruno's latest invention, lo *specchio allocatoptrotico*, a mirror which allows to see the place and person one speaks to (259). The protagonist is mesmerized by Laura, who with her dark deep eyes seems to have some hypnotic power on him. On the fourth day of his stay, the protagonist is led by Bruno to a cabin in the wood and gets a first glimpse of his invention – a headphone connected to a sort of microphone amplifying sounds – about which he is promised more information. However, he soon starts sensing that the two are *dissennati*, fools who may drive him mad too, a feeling confirmed when he is left alone with Laura and finds himself living a sort of uncanny idyll. While the woman appears more and more charming, his restlessness grows and he eventually decides to hurry his departure and

[82] Marianne Hirsch, 'Spiritual *Bildung*: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm', Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 23, 48.

free himself from her spell. Relieved to be back to the city after that countryside creepy retreat, however, to his surprise he finds Bruno waiting for him at the station. He is then led to an acoustically isolated cabinet which has a mirror on one of its walls where one can see the person they are speaking to, not only talking, but also moving, and living, so that distance is *abolished* (259).

Shortly after, it is Laura who materializes in front of him and as soon as their eyes meet, they experience an intense passion, penetrating into the depths of each other's soul. However, this closeness proves illusory: as he cannot reach out and touch her, so he soon feels that Laura is more distant than if he had only thought about her, without seeing her face or hearing her voice. When Laura eventually leans towards him, with her pale face and pleading mouth, he is inexplicably taken by fury and throws his chair against the glass, shuttering the mirror and thus the woman's image. After destroying the whole room, he wanders in a state of madness – 'invasato senza più pensiero o memoria' ('possessed without thoughts or memory', 262), which recalls Ariosto's furious Orlando, shivering in the scariest streets of the city like a beast for many days, before he can finally regain his mind.

Mascia Galateria has underscored that in *La vita operosa* the city acquires a powerful identity 'that constantly challenges that of the protagonist'.[83] In my view, the protagonist's relationship to the city is related to (self-)formation in that it serves to elaborate further on the concept of *Bildung*, as shown by the chapter on Belloveso. While critics have normally stressed that magical elements are used to expose the absurd of post-war Milan, I think that the building of 'another' city is also linked to the critical revision of *Bildung*, and with the claim for agency that we find, albeit in a different context, in Ada Capuana's novel *La città nuova* (*The New City*), on which I focus in the last chapter.

As Castle recalls, at the core of the concept of *Bildung* was the ideal of self-cultivation, which in Goethe's novel is expressed by the very metaphor of 'building': the world is spread out like a 'stone quarry', and man is compared to a 'builder' who should have formative power to transform this 'raw materials' into something which reflects the 'image in his mind'.[84] Hence, in this case the creation of a street devoted to Belloveso, the gallic founder of Milan, puts into practice the thoughts about the function of the artist and

[83] Galateria, *Parodia, Paradosso*, pp. 311-312.
[84] Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, 246. Quoted in Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2006), p. 35.

his relation to society, expressed early on by the narrator in his talk to Bruno. Moreover, the recourse to myth gives sense to the present reality as it retraces the 'Buildung' of the city – thus educating the same Milanesi who do not know who Belloveso is – and represents an attempt by the modern artist to engage in the world of activity.

The magical aspect of the episode is prefigured by the old man with a grey beard and almost 'spirited' white eyes ('due occhi bianchi quasi spiritati', 193) who approaches the protagonist on the tram asking the direction for via Belloveso, which nobody knows. After following him out of the tram, they take a carriage moved by 'occulte cagioni' ('secret causes', 196) which leads them from the metropolis to the suburbs. The entrance in the unknown outside the city resembles a descent to hell: the protagonist's soul 's'andava fasciando di lenta malinconia' ('was slowly wrapped by melancholy') as they go through ghostly streets of strange colour and 'spiriti crepuscolari' ('twilight spirits'); only when he hears human sounds again he regains consciousness.

After hearing the story of Milan's 'Buildung' from his 'prodigioso' compagno ('extraordinary companion', 197) who then disappears, he is haunted for days by violent visions of battles and sacrifices to the bloody God Hesus, and eventually resolves to find a way to pacify Belloveso's soul, and his own. If, when he was committed to classical studies, he would have written a tragedy on Belloveso, now, as suited to modern times, he comes out with 'un affare vasto e mirifico' ('a great and marvelous deal', 200): to dedicate a street to Belloveso, which he would build from scratch. Of course, that must be the newest and largest street, 'tutta di grattacieli, di grandi grattacieli, di grattacieli di cemento armato' ('all with skyscrapers, huge skyscrapers, skyscrapers made of reinforced concrete', 200). The project also includes the building of 36 houses of 50 floors each, including his own, as he would settle at number 18, right in the middle of via Belloveso (203).

Interestingly he writes a 'memoriale artistico storico finanziario politico' ('artistic historical financial political memorial', 203) containing a detailed plan of his creation, which, obviously, never sees the light: after three days of inactivity, the Dàimone, who missed all the 'planning' phase, reappears at his side. With the usual skepticism towards his ideas, the Genius welcomes a (fore)telling yawn as the best thing he did in the last days, pushing him to re-consider the usefulness of this creation. After making peace with his double, the protagonist thus concludes that is it not 'nationally' or 'politically' correct to bring back officially 'the moral capital of Italy' to a Gallic origin

(207). As we have seen so far, the texts problematize in different ways the role of the educated man in modern society, and more generally the conflict between the subject's needs and desires and the demands of a mechanized capitalist society.

This dialectic is resolved at the end of *La vita operosa*, where another important appointment, missed for random reasons, proves to have important ideological meaning connected to *Bildung* and its critique, as I show in the last part of this chapter.

3. The Idyll of the 'Good Man'

In his aforementioned study on the modernist *Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle recognizes that over the course of the nineteenth century the concept of *Bildung* became increasingly linked to pragmatic discourses of social recruitment and mobility, yet he highlights how modernists resisted this pragmatic model devising new ways in which the failure of the subject to satisfy society's demands could be revaluated and transformed into new forms of identity.[85]

While in the Goethean *Bildungs*plot self-development was achieved in an engagement with the 'world of activity', Humboldt's idea of *Bildung* implied a semiautonomous form of self-formation, to which aesthetic education was central. If moral reflection and action were key aspects of what was understood with the concept of 'aesthetic', freedom was likewise important in the cultivation of character and morals.

It should not surprise then that the modernist 'reflexive project' of the self, so Castle goes on, entails a recapture of the Humboldtian idea of *Bildung*, which is, at the same time, an immanent critique of (pragmatic) *Bildung* itself.[86] It is worth noting that Humboldt was deeply influenced by Greek ideals of *Bildung* as human perfection, whereby many-sidedness was integrated into a harmonious whole. Hence, *Bildung* was not intended as the achievement of self-cultivation in harmony with the state, but as a distanced position with respect to society, an autonomous selfhood. While the process of *Bildung* is not divorced, in Humboldt's view, from social institutions and relations, his humanistic pedagogy implies that the cultivated have the responsibility to educate the uncultivated ones.[87]

[85] Castle, p. 30.
[86] Castle, p. 32.
[87] Castle, p. 41.

In Bontempelli's text the recovering of (Humboldtian) *Bildung* intersects with the reflection on the role of the educated people in post-war society, as is made clear in the sixth chapter, devoted to Irene and her 'cenacolo platonico' ('platonic circle', 234). After witnessing some riots between fascists and communists in Piazza della Scala, the protagonist finds refuge in the inner court of a building and is offered a cigarette by a man who then, for the usual chain of random events, invites him to his boarding house. There he meets donna Irene, the landlady, and is introduced to her second husband and then to the first one, who live all together due to the housing shortage.

Significantly, if in both texts women have mostly secondary roles, here the woman is the very founder and head of an all-male circle, 'oasi di beati' (literally, 'oasis of blessed', 239) outside society and its rules. Indeed the protagonist, remembering the earlier political turmoil in the street, realizes he does not know where he is, in which street or area of the city, and feels 'fuori del tempo e del mondo' ('outside of time and the world', 233). After the political riots in the streets, the protagonist thus experiences the opposite extreme of non-commitment, which paves the way for his final resolution. The impression of being very far from the present reality is confirmed when he dines with the other eight guests: instead of talking of the post-war price increase as used to happen at any dining table, the main issue, voiced by the man who invited him, Gionata, is whether a door, endowed with sense and sensibility, would prefer being left open or closed. This leads to a series of metaphysical reflections on the door and its 'dissidio interiore' ('inner conflict', 236), which causes the protagonist's astonishment, while the others listen carefully. When he tries, as a new man committed to business, to bring Gionata's theories into the ground of the present political situation and starts to talk of the consequences of the war, he is abruptly interrupted with the call – Paghi! ('You must pay!', 238).

The protagonist thus discovers that in the circle of Irene there is a rule: it is forbidden to talk in any ways – seriously or with wit, long or briefly – of the present time, under penalty of paying two bottles of wine. Indeed that oasis of philosophers gathers the few who are satisfied with their condition, the ones who have not gained material advantages from recent historical turns, and thus not feel the urge of production. However, as the old intellectual elite played card in the café, the philosophers' attempt to escape time and space proves likewise useless. Any new talk ends indeed with penance, which is only an excuse to drink more, like in the case of the medievalist who hates

anything modern and, nostalgic for the Middle Ages, is happy to see that a new medieval phase has re-started since August 1914. Urged by a corporal need, the protagonist leaves the community in the same (unconscious) way he had arrived and finds himself again in a dark street, realizing he does not know how to find the way back to the blessed island of Irene.

While modernist challenges to subjectivity and linear time undermined the idea of unified selfhood implied in the *Bildungsroman*, critics such as Jeffrey Sammons and Martin Swales have highlighted the 'vexed question' of its ending.[88] According to Swales, what the major novels of this tradition show is not the achievement of goals but 'consistently sustained irresolution', which translates into open endings, as in the case of Bontempelli.[89] Moreover, he identifies irony as the structural principle of the major *Bildungsromane*, starting from Wieland's *Agathon* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. These novels – like Bontempelli's texts – set up a narrative irony that calls into question the plot-sequence, undermining any linear simple closure of the process of human growth and self-discovery.

What Swales states regarding Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, considered as one of the last examples of *Bildungsroman*, is valid for Bontempelli's *Vite*, and, in various ways, for the novels I analyse in the next chapters, too: it represents not simply an exploration and a critique of the tradition of *Bildung*, but also a 'precarious reinstatement' of it.[90] My reading of the ending of *La vita operosa*, to which I now turn, aims to contend with the prevailing view of the novel as the trajectory of a hero whose cultural background makes him ill-suited for an integration into the new society, and thus doomed to end inevitably in failure or defeat.

Mascia Galateria has recognized that the final rejection of the rules in the game of production and success is a choice by the protagonist, yet she has interpreted it as the sign of the ineptitude of the young man, who belongs to those passive characters typical of Italian post-war narrative, like Zeno Cosini, the protagonist of Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience*. While she admits that the protagonist's inability to gain something from his various commercial

[88] Sammons states that a Bildungsroman should have something to do with *Bildung*, but that 'it does not much matter whether the process of *Bildung* succeeds or fails, whether the protagonist achieves an accommodation with life and society or not': 'The Bildungsroman for Non-specialists: an Attempt at a Clarification', in James N. Hardin, ed., *Reflection and action. Essays on the Bildungsroman* (Columbia S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 26-45 (p. 41).

[89] Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 35.

[90] Swales, p. 125.

enterprises is 'a symptom and a defense' of difference and distinctness, she reads the end of the novel simply as the failure of the character who, instead of acting, seeks refuge in a 'subdolo sonno' ('devious sleep'). Likewise doomed is, in her view, the author's attempt to find his place in the consumerist modern society – hence his escape into 'trasfigurazione magica' ('magical transfiguration').[91]

The last chapter of *La vita operosa* is the one that most exposes the tension at the heart of the *Bildungsroman*, between self-cultivation and social integration into bourgeois society (which necessarily involves self-limitation). If in the last chapter of *La vita intensa* we witnessed the split between the I-author and the I-character/narrator, here the conflict between common man and philosopher (the Dàimone)[92] is resolved, as the author himself admits (278).

The chapter, tellingly titled 'Consolazione della filosofia' (Consolation of philosophy), starts with an ironic consideration of the 'solenne, invidiato ed esemplare collocamento nel mondo sociale' ('solemn, envied, exemplary place in the social world', 277) the protagonist would have gained if on the morning of the 22th of February of the first post-war year, he had gone to the meeting with an important person, Sua Eccellenza (277). This thought soon gives way to a finer one that recalls the Humboldtian ideal of self-sufficiency, involving a distanced position with respect to society, to which he adds the claim of being a writer. While, he realizes, waking up that morning would not have added anything to his personal biography – let alone to the History of the world – the writing of the book about his 'life of action', including this last adventure, can give peace to himself and the reader.

The Dàimone is given the task to summarize the protagonist's adventures – or, better: the many attempts at making money, all ending in a failure, which leads the mentor to state: 'tu nel tuo tempo hai fatto una passeggiata' ('in your time you have just taken a walk', 279). He is, however, happy to hear that his disciple has at least learned something: asked about the reason of his inability to act out his purposes, the protagonist does not blame bad luck or his own incapacity, but asserts an anti-activist counter-moral: 'perché la prima volta per non cominciare di venerdì ho rimandato a lunedì; e a farlo

[91] Galateria, *Parodia, Paradosso*, p. 310.

[92] Roselena Glielmo sees in the Dàimone the embodiment of the man of letters before his decision to 'go against his own nature' and join the industrious life of the city: *La traversata dell'ironia* (Guida: Napoli, 1994) p. 46.

apposta, il lunedì era il giorno 13 del mese' ('because the first time, so as not to start on a Friday, I postponed to Monday; and by coincidence Monday was the 13th [an unlucky day]', 279).

In that moment he receives a note from a friend, the secretary of an important minister, who arranged a meeting for him (very) early in the morning for something requiring his 'ingegno e attività' ('talent and work', 280). As in the initial note of *La vita intensa* from his friend Piero, in this case, too, he replies mechanically with the same last words written on it: 'A domattina, dunque; saluti' ('See you tomorrow morning, then; regards', 280) and then goes to bed after his disapproving Dàimone. While he lingers on the vision of himself becoming a 'new man' rising to power through a direct and shiny path, he is not able to fall asleep easily, unlike in his previous innocent nights, as the 'worm of ambition' has come to rest on his pillow and torments him with vile thoughts (281).

If the image of the 'donna impellicciata e profumata' ('perfumed woman with a fur', 284) he saw passing by in the streets on his first night in the city envelops him in a blissful ecstasy, making him forget about time, the choice of missing the appointment puts into practice the theories exposed by the Dàimone in the previous section, tellingly called 'Ethico' ('Ethic', 6). There the Dàimone takes for the first and only time a human shape before three men (one of them met by chance by the protagonist) who are arguing in the hall of the office of another important man, il Cavaliere, to whom they turn in the hope of achieving success. The Dàimone blames them for ignoring 'la vita dello spirito' ('spiritual life', 275), renouncing 'candidi piaceri' ('pure pleasures') for 'ragioni vili' ('base reasons'), that is in the name of their ambition. The satisfaction of material needs – money, job, sexual desire – makes them similar to beasts, which nevertheless, unlike men, do not know the spiritual life. Thinking of getting ahead, the Dàimone concludes, means being 'more beasts than the beasts', projecting indefinitely one's bestiality and going against Nature and History (275). While the three men mockingly ignored the Dàimone's advice, the protagonist eventually renounces any material gains the meeting with the 'Eccellenza' could have brought him, affirming once and for all his ideals and freedom from any social constraint. After enjoying his deserved sleep, he thus reconciles with his proud and happy Dàimone, now united forever in one single essence, and becomes a 'uomo giusto' ('a good man', 285).

In this chapter I have examined how Bontempelli's connected micronovels of *La vita intensa* and *La vita operosa* participate in the modernist critical revision of *Bildung*. In the first part I have showed how both texts present narrative modes proper to the picaresque, which has been recognized as one of the ancestors of the novel of development and reworks the confessional aspect of this tradition to depict the developmental trajectory of the narrator-protagonist in the context of post-war Milan. I have thus detected a growing self-awareneness from *La vita intensa* to *La vita operosa*, also reflected in the autobiographical form and the monologues and internal dialogues which give voice to the character's split-consciousness and the presence of a double. In the second part I have examined how the parody of literary genres like the romance, and the reworking of some elements of the trope of the Young Man from the Province, namely the social and the romantic, are related to *Bildung* and its critique, and to the reflection about the role of the man of letters in capitalist society. Finally, I have highlighted that the narratives exposes the tension between self-cultivation and social integration into bourgeois society that is implied in the *Bildungsroman*, recovering a form of aesthetic-spiritual *Bildung*, as shown by the ending of *La vita operosa*. The protagonist's choice not to conform to socially accepted behaviors, with the final gaining of a unified consciousness, shows Bontempelli's (precarious) reinstatement of an Humboldtian idea of *Bildung* with a stress on aesthetic education and freedom from social constraints. My reading has thus shed a new light on two underestimated texts in Bontempelli's wide production, showing the author's contribution to the question of self-formation in modernism, opposing their common reading as expression of the failure of the ill-suited *letterato* to face the complex reality of Italian post-war society.

Chapter 2

Ironies of *Bildung*: Reflection and Action in Erich Kästner's *Fabian*

In this chapter I consider aspects of *Bildung* in Erich Kästner's novel *Fabian* (1931). Set in the last years of Weimar Republic, the novel depicts the trajectory of the eponymous character from the province to Berlin and back again. While the importance of *Fabian* as a socially and critical text has now been acknowledged,[93] the representation of *Bildung* and its function in the novel has received little attention. I thus examine the ways in which Kästner's modernist novel enacts the double gesture of critique of socially pragmatic *Bildung* and recuperation of an earlier, classical form of aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung* outlined by Gregory Castle.[94] If, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the concept of 'aesthetic' entails both moral reflection and pragmatic action, I show that the narrative stages a tension between these poles, reproducing the dialectic of personal desire and social responsibility proper to the *Bildungsroman* genre, while also looking at the character's morality and distance from the logic of capitalist society with great irony, as the ending of the novel testifies.

A similar dialectic can also be seen in the novel's representation of gender dynamics, which has frequently been commented upon in the scholarship on Kästner's novel,[95] but not been regarded in correlation to *Bildung*.

Critical accounts of Kästner's novel have generally stressed the role of white-collar work, economic crisis and the emergence of mass culture in Weimar Berlin. Deborah Smail offers a useful approach in examining the circumstances affecting the character's trajectory, yet produces a reading that is in line with the main critical trends and interprets the narrative in terms of failure, or as a regressive move 'in socially ineffective spheres beyond the

[93] David R. Midgley speaks of 'critical realism', recognizing in the novel 'a positive critical potential' in relation to the social world of the time. See his *Writing Weimar: Critical Realism in German Literature, 1918-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 225.

[94] For a detailed account of modernism and the dialectic of *Bildung*, see Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), to which I refer more thoroughly in the introduction to this thesis.

[95] Richard McCormick claims, for instance, that *Fabian* portrays the autonomous expression of desire by women as a threat to male agency: *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity* (New York / Basingstoke: Palgrave 2007), p. 108. A similar view is shared by Suzanne Smith who focuses on the complex gender dynamics at play in the novel and on the representation of different gender roles. *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 182-183.

city'.[96] In a recent study, Simela Delianidou takes a fresh look at *Fabian*, recognizing that the novel problematizes the 'confusing mix of moral values' and the crisis of knowledge in the interwar years, yet she analyses it mostly from an economic perspective,[97] drawing on the theory and methodology of New Economic Criticism. In this way, the loss of moral values, visible at all levels of life, even the most intimate ones, is connected to the exchange value of money in advanced capitalist society.

Without denying the importance of money and its (symbolic) power in the novel, the consideration of the role of education and work in relation to *Bildung* allows me to reassess the critical potential of the novel, going beyond its common reading in terms of defeat or regression. This bias is reflected in the English edition of the novel, which recovers the original title chosen by the author – *Der Gang vor die Hunde* (*Going to the Dogs*) – thus foregrounding the idea that the main character is destined to fail. As I seek to demonstrate in my analysis, although the specific socio-economic conditions of late Weimar Berlin hinder the protagonist's process of development, the idea of a moral, desirable character formation persists and is (re-)affirmed, albeit ironically, at the end of the narration. Moreover, although pessimism would seem to prevail throughout the narration, Fabian is shown not to be totally disillusioned about humankind, and in particular, there is hope in children, as the final scene of the young boy swimming ashore while Fabian drowns testifies.

My account is informed by Manfred Engel's valuable study on the *Bildungsroman* and its variants, in which he tackles the complex task of giving a definition to a genre whose congenital defect lies, in the author's view, in its anachronistic origin.[98] If, as Engel aptly recognizes, there was a broad variety of themes, characters and literary modes, one common denominator among these texts was the concept of *Bildung* as a process of organic or quasi-organic development.

[96] Deborah Smail, *White-collar Workers, Mass Culture and Neue Sachlichkeit in Weimar Berlin* (Bern: P. Lang, 1999), p. 144.

[97] So much that she defines the novel an 'economic satire'. In my view, the satire of mass media, and in particular of journalism, is much stronger, and connected to the *Bildung* discourse. See 'The Moral Equation Works Out Differently: The Great Depression, the Crisis of Knowledge, and Value Order in Erich Kästner's *Fabian: The Story of a Moralist*', in Jill E. Twark, ed., *Invested Narratives: German Responses to Economic Crisis* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022), pp. 87-104.

[98] Manfred Engel, 'Variants of the Romantic Bildungsroman', in Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel and Bernard Dieterle, eds., *Romantic Prose Fiction* (Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008), pp. 263-295.

Interestingly, he recognizes as *the raison d'être* of the genre an anti-modernist impulse: for Engel, the concept of *Bildung* is inseparably linked to the idea of modern subjectivity but also to the awareness that the structures of modern society threaten or even hinder the development of a harmonious personality. As this thesis argues, this is connected to the modernist project of recuperation and revision of a classical concept of *Bildung*, a radical gesture which seeks to reinstate values of aesthetic education and individual freedom in processes of self-development, which we find, in different ways, in the novel under consideration.

Unlike Bontempelli's city novels, Fabian's story is told in the third person, yet the point of view is that of the protagonist, who like Bontempelli's main character belongs to the 'gebildete Bürgertum' the educated bourgeoisie, and works in advertising. As it features an Angestellter, a white-collar worker, as its protagonist, the novel, like that of Keun I analyse in the following chapter, has been considered thematically as *Angestelltenroman*, and formally as an expression of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), the trend of sober and objective appraisal of (post-war) German reality which came to dominate the arts and literature as a reaction to the excesses of expressionism.[100]

While the critical view of reality is that of Fabian, who exposes the unfulfilled promises of humanism and egalitarian principles of the Weimar Republic, the narratorial irony is directed, like in Bontempelli's micro-novels, at the protagonist too. This is already evident in Fabian self-presentation, which underscores the uncertainty of his condition and his belonging to the youth who has fought in the war, as his 'weak heart' testifies: 'Fabian, Jakob, 32 Jahre alt, Beruf wechselnd, zur Zeit Reklamefachmann, Schaperstraße 17, herzkrank, Haarfarbe braun. Was müssen Sie noch wissen? (13) ('Jacob Fabian, aged thirty-two, profession variable, at present advertising copywriter, 17, Schaperstrasse, weak heart, brown hair', 7).[101]

[100] Although Kästner disliked this literary style, his novel deploys a number of 'neusachliche Motive' and themes, such as the newspaper and advertising industries, and technology. For an insight into them and their influence on the narrative mode of *Fabian* see: Britta Jürgs, 'Neusachliche Zeitungsmacher, Frauen und alte Sentimentalitäten. Erich Kästner's Roman „Fabian. Die Geschichte eines Moralisten"', in Sabina Becker and Christoph Weiß, eds., *Neue Sachlichkeit im Roman. Neue Interpretationen zum Roman der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzer, 1995), pp. 195-211.

[101] All quotations are taken from the 2017 German edition of the novel published by Atrium Verlag, to which page number references refer. Translations into English are by Rodney Livingstone: *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012).

According to Martin Swales, as seen, narratorial irony is a structural principle of the *Bildungsroman*, as it brings into focus the complicated relationship between narrator and author.[102]

The importance of irony in the novel has been stressed by the same author. Indeed, in the preface added to the 1950 German edition, Kästner defined the novel 'eine Satire' (6) (a satire), which borders on caricature: 'Es beschreibt nicht, was war, sondern es übertreibt. Der Moralist pflegt seiner Epoche keinen Spiegel, sondern einen Zerrspiegel vorzuhalten. Die Karikatur, ein legitimes Kunstmittel, ist das Äußerste, was er vermag' (7) ('It does not describe what things were like; it exaggerates them. The moralist holds up not a mirror, but a distorting mirror to his age. Caricature, a legitimate artistic mode, is the furthest he can go', 4). The 'Zerrspiegel' the moralist holds up to his age is then both that of the author and his protagonist. As I show, the discourse of *Bildung*, and the double gesture connected to it, while making the 'Großstadsatire'[103] even sharper, reveals an ambivalent stance towards modernity and its values.

It is worth noting that this later preface was written with the aim of defending the book from the variety of judgements which, according to the author, had all misunderstood it. Not only does Kästner highlight the moral intent of his book, but also its educational purpose, necessitated by the historical phase Germany was going through: in the face of rising unemployment, economic crisis and the spiritual depression following it, he wanted to 'warnen' (6), namely 'warn' people about the abyss into which Germany, as well as the whole Europe, was in danger to falling.

This didactic aspect, which connects the novel to the *Bildungsroman* tradition,[104] is aptly recognized by Rodney Livingstone, who, in his introduction to the English edition of the novel, points out that Kästner feels that the evils of society are spiritual, rather than economic, a thought expressed in the novel too when Fabian ponders: 'Wollte er die Besserung der Zustände? Er wollte die Besserung der Menschen' (237) ('Did he want conditions to improve? He wanted men and women to improve', 154). These concerns lead Livingstone to connect the novel to a long tradition going back

[102] See 'Irony and the novel: Reflections on the German Bildungsroman', James N. Hardin, ed., *Reflection and Action. Essays on the Bildungsroman* (Columbia S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 26-45.
[103] As Jürgs defines it, 'Neusachliche Zeitungsmacher', p. 196.
[104] For an early account of this relationship, see Karl Morgenstern, *Über das Wesen des Bildungsroman* (1820); cf. also the discussion in the previous chapter of this thesis.

to Balzac's *Lost Illusions* (1837-1843) and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869) – each of which depicting a young man from the province who comes to the city to improve his conditions but soon becomes disillusioned and in most cases, return eventually to his provincial hometown. This trajectory from city to province and back again in Kästner's novel is reaccentuated by the *Bildung* discourse and the dialectic of freedom/desire and social obligations mentioned above.

Kästner's protagonist, more than Bontempelli's, thus embodies the Young Man from the Provinces, the literary type identified by Trilling and developed by Chanda. If, as Chanda would have it, the Young Man novel distinguishes itself from the *Bildungsroman* in that its essence is the conflict between hero and society, whereas the *Bildungsroman* strives towards harmony between the two poles, Kästner's and the other novels under consideration in this thesis prove that the dialectical harmony of this affirmation has become extremely problematic in modernism. However, as Castle points out, the failure of the subject to satisfy society's demands signals a successful resistance to institutionalized forms of self-cultivation, or *Bildung*, an aspect which emerges in various ways in the novels I analyse.[105]

Two features highlighted by Chanda prove particularly fruitful for my analysis of *Fabian*'s main character(s): the social and the romantic, as the Young Man from the Provinces is defined as a 'romantic social climber'. The stress on the 'romantic', so the critic goes on, distinguishes the Young Man from the bourgeois picaresque social climber, while the 'social' distance him from the romantic dreamers of nineteenth century fiction, whose idealistic aims transcend social goals. As I show, in *Fabian* both the romantic and the social are critically reappraised in relation to *Bildung* and the tension between personal desire and social roles it entails. Hence, in the first part of the chapter I will examine in which ways the Young Man trope interweaves with the character's tension between reflection and action staged throughout the narration.

In the previous chapter on Bontempelli's *Vite*, I retraced the origins of the *Bildungsroman* in medieval romance and in the genre of the confessions, highlighting its picaresque matrix. In Kästner's novel, the confessional is related to the dialectic of city and province and finds expression mostly in the letters Fabian exchanges with his mother, while the picaresque is reaccentuated, like in Bontempelli, by the episodic structure of the novel and

[105] See Castle, p. 30.

the apparent chance of some of the character's actions. While here the tendence to philosophical reflection prevails on the picaresque, I seek to demonstrate that the tension between reflection and action is resolved in a way that leads Fabian to act eventually, thus contending with the prevailing view of the character as passive.

Significantly, the Italian edition of *Fabian* was prefaced by Massimo Bontempelli, who saw in the novel the 'apocalyptic mood' (*tono d'apocalisse*) he detected in the European literature of those years – hence he defines *Fabian* 'apocalyptic novel'.[106] Although he appreciates the novel as a 'true document' of an epoch, Bontempelli seems to adhere to the prevalent line of criticism that does not recognize in the novel any form of redemption – be it personal or social.

While the majority of nineteenth-century Young Man novels depicted a trajectory from the province to the city and back again, with the protagonists' eventual return to their idyllic home in the province, the consideration of the pedagogical dynamics implied in the concept of *Bildung*, provide a much more complex relationship between country and province. Indeed, Fabian's return to the province is far from ideal, as once there he is reminded of his captivation in desire and the demands of patriarchal social roles.

Although Fabian's childhood can only be inferred through flashbacks and other narratorial strategies, he embodies the literary type of the Young Man who has come to Berlin from a provincial town with high expectations on his future. In the last part, we also get to know that he comes from a humble family, as his parents own a soap shop in town. However, despite his education and skills – he owns a doctorate and is called Doctor by his colleague –, given the economic crisis and the difficult living conditions in late Weimar Berlin, he finds himself with a low-paid job and a rented room at the widow Hohlfeld's miserable lodging house.

As mentioned, Fabian stands out from the outset as being inclined to (moral) reflection and in this sense embodies much more the type of the 'confessor' rather than the picaro, and the situations he faces are generally more 'likely'. However, the novel presents a 'panoramic structure' similar to Bontempelli's, namely the knitting together of single units, and, most significantly, the 'essential picaresque situation': an unheroic protagonist on

[106] See Massimo Bontempelli, 'Romanzo Apocalittico', in: Erich Kästner, *Fabian* (Milano: Bompiani, 1933), pp. IX-XIV.

an eternal journey of encounters in a chaotic world of which he is both victim and exploiter.[107]

The picaresque element is thus reaccentuated in both Bontempelli's and Kästner's novels by their compositional unit (made of sections and chapters); these can be seen to create what Tobias Boes, citing Joyce, calls the 'individuating rhythm of modernity', namely a temporal rhythm in which the modern city emerges as a site of identity formation.[108] This is expressed already in the first lines of the novel, when Fabian, sitting in a café passes through the headlines of the evening papers which summarize what happened in the city during the day: 'Abermals erfolglose Ministerpräsidentenwahl, Der Mord im Lainzer Tiergarten, Skandal im Städtischen Beschaffungsamt' ('Another Fiasco – Murder in Lainz Zoo – Scandal of Municipal Purchasing Board […]'). Likewise foretelling is Fabian's laconic comment: 'Das tägliche Pensum. Nichts Besonderes' (9) ('The usual thing. Nothing special', 5).

Interestingly, the first chapter bears striking resemblance to Bontempelli's first one, titled 'Pari o dispari' ('Odd and Even'), where the protagonist and his friend cast dices to decide which café to choose for breakfast. As in Milan cafés have become sort of worship places, like the famous café Campari with its alter and waiters compared to priests bringing offers, in *Fabian* one of the first chapter's headlines bear the telling title of 'Ein Keller als Orakel' ('a waiter as oracle'). The protagonist, finding himself in a café named Spalteholz, calls the waiter and asks him directly 'Soll ich hingehen oder nicht? (10) ('Shall I go or not?', 5), refusing to give the puzzled man any further explanation. While the waiter's answer is negative, Fabian decides to go anyways and is not able to explain to the irritated man why he even asked that, apart that he wished to know.

As in Bontempelli's picaresque texts, Fabian's actions do not always seem to follow a linear trajectory, as immediately after it turns out that he does not even know where he is. Like in *La vita intensa*, where the protagonist gets off a tram and then loses tracks of time and place, Fabian explains with a similar irony that you cannot know where you are if you take a bus at Wittenbergplatz and then a tram at Potsdam Bridge without knowing your destination, and then you get out twenty minutes later only because a

[107] Wicks, Ulrich, 'The Nature of Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach', *PMLA*, 89.2 (1974), 240-249, here p. 243.
[108] Tobias Boes, *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 134.

woman looks like Frederick the Great. Moreover, like Bontempelli's picaro, Fabian informs the reader that he has changed jobs, some of them quite unlikely,[109] such as, owner of a greengrocer's shop with the signboard 'Doktor Fabians Feinkosthandlung' (46) ('Dr Fabian – Delicatessen', 29), or auxiliary envelope-addresser at the municipal offices.[110]

In the following part I turn to examine what happens to the type of the Young Man from the Province in the context of 1930s Berlin; my reading will foreground the significance of the 'romantic' and the 'social' within the discourse of *Bildung*, and the resulting dialectic of personal desire and social responsibility. I will then turn to consider how irony, and the dialectic of sexual desire and social expectation, inflect the novel's gender dynamics; to examine these, I will look at how the novel represents common assumptions about women and their role in modern capitalist society. Finally, I will look at the last part of the novel, with Fabian's return to his hometown, and his eventual resort to an ideal 'other' space, in order to provide a more positive interpretation of the novel which challenges his reading in terms of defeat or regression.

1. A Young Man between Reflection and Action

The features of the Young Man from the Provinces, which are relevant for the tension between reflection and action staged in Kästner's novel are the Young Man's tragic career, the corruption of his romantic idealism, the transformation of his attitude towards his provincial origins and his complex relationship to other types of social achiever. According to Chanda what distinguishes the Young Man from other types of social climber, included the picaro, is the high conception he has of himself and his destiny.

Although Fabian does not seem to conform to the ideal of the type – he appears from the onset quite disillusioned with the Young Man's quest for 'wealth, beauty, and new and rare sensations'[111] in the city – on closer look

[109] Also, when he later loses his job as advertiser, he finds himself by chance working as car door opener in front of the Kaufhaus des Westens (p. 101).

[110] Moreover, the supposed title of his PhD dissertation sounds quite comic too: 'Hat Heinrich von Kleist gestottert?' (46). The satirical effect is also accentuated by the detail Fabian adds immediately after, explaining that his first intention was to demonstrate that Hans Sachs had flat feet, but that meant spending too much time in research.

[111] A.K. Chanda, 'The Young Man from the Provinces', *Comparative Literature*, 33 (Autumn 1981), no. 4, 321-341 (p. 328).

his attitude towards modern values is ambivalent. At times, one may wonder if Fabian can actually be considered a 'moralist' or if there is irony in this definition by the author. If, as Delianidou aptly points out, Kästner's novel shines a light on the confusing mix of moral values in interwar German society,[112] this ambiguity seems to apply to the protagonist and his own conception of morality. While he proves capable of selfless moral acts, towards Cornelia, and mostly children, his behavior in the sexual sphere is rather questionable: he rejects Irene Moll's advances, yet he keeps the keys of her house as he likes her, and takes advantage of an unhappy married woman to take revenge of Cornelia who has left him; moreover, back in his hometown, he has sex with a naïve prostitute who likes him and refuses to get paid.

Significantly, Chanda recognizes in the Young Man's yearning for pleasures a visionary quality which is evoked through elements of light. This finds expression quite at the beginning of the novel, in a passage which resembles the one in Bontempelli's *La vita operosa*, when golden waterfalls descended from the sky. In the Italian text, however, while other men bowed down easily to collect money, the protagonist proved unable to do the same, despite his resolution to make money to conform to the ethos of the productive Milan.

Berlin's cityscape is more somber than that of postwar Milan: the city is compared to a fairground and if also here thalers are showered down, they are made of aluminum and advertise a night club, signaling from the start the conflation of social ambition and sexual desire in Weimar Berlin. Moreover, while the sight of Milan lights and his inability to act reminds the Italian veteran that he has to 'learn' and find his way in the productive city, the effect on Fabian is quite different. The garish lights of the metropolis, poor copy of the stars in the sky, make him feel small and disoriented, hardly recognizing even himself: 'Wie klein der Mann war. Und mit dem war er identisch!' (11) ('How small the fellow was, and yet it was himself!', 6). This happens when Fabian bends to pick up one of the coins and reads the invitation to the Exotic Bar in Nollendorfplatz, promising 'Schöne Frauen, Nacktplastiken, Pension Condor im gleichen Hause' (11) ('Beautiful girls, Nude tableaux, Pension Condor in same house', 6).

While in Bontempelli's micronovels the confessional finds expression in the autobiographical form and the dialogues, both internal and with the

[112] Delianidou, p. 87.

character's double, the Dàimone, here the confessional is linked to the Young Man trope and accentuates the character's ambivalent attitude towards his provincial origins. Moreover, like in the Italian novel I analyse in the last chapter, here the conversations with his friend Labude, a sort of idealist and the character's double, play a key role in Fabian's self-awareness.

The letters Fabian receives from his mother give insight into provincial family life, bringing him back to childhood and to a natural, lost world, which is opposed to the fight for survival he experiences in the city. In the first one, the mother calls him 'mein gutes Kind' (49) ('my good boy', 30) and promises to send him back the laundry per post the following day. She also adds details about small events and reports conversations with people Fabian knows. It is interesting to note the perception his family and the fellow countrymen have of Fabian's condition in the city. While his mother's question whether Fabian likes his current work as advertising writer for a cigarette company sounds quite rhetorical, her answer to a fellow countrywoman's comment that it is a pity he writes such stuff makes it clear that his family has greater expectations about his future: 'Wer heute nicht verhungern will, und wer will das schon, der kann nicht warten, bis ihm der richtige Beruf durch den Schornstein fällt. Und dann habe ich noch gesagt, es ist ja nur ein Übergang' (49) ('if you don't want to starve nowadays – and who does – you can't wait for the right job to fall into your lap. And besides that, I told her it was only temporary', 31).

More significantly, the letters are relevant for the character's self-reflectiveness as they lead Fabian to reconsider his present condition of young man and to regret his decision to leave the province: 'Warum saß er hier in diesem fremden gottverlassenen Zimmer […] Warum saß er nicht zu Hause, bei seiner Mutter? Was hatte er hier in dieser Stadt, in diesem verrückt gewordenen Steinbaukasten, zu suchen?' (50) ('Why was he sitting here, in this strange, godforsaken room […] Why wasn't he sitting at home with his mother? What did he want here in this city, in this crazy mass of brickwork boxes?', 32). To his 'lächerliche Bedürfnis, anwesend zu sein' (50) ('ridiculous anxiety of being on the spot', 32) in the city, he thus opposes the linear path of those men who have stable jobs, get married, become fathers and truly believe they are doing something useful. Although Fabian is quite critical towards the utility of working and satisfying societal expectations, he also proves not to be able to evade the demands of patriarchal social roles,

as showed clearly when his mother visits him in Berlin. Having lost his job, rather than telling her the truth, he pretends to go to work as usual and asks his mother to pick him up outside the office acting the part with the porter's help.

It is worth noting that letters reappear at two turning points of the character's development, namely Cornelia's farewell to Fabian and Labude's death, which are both connected to the dialectic of personal desire and social roles outlined so far. In her letter, Cornelia explains 'objectively' her decision to become an actress, as well as Makart's kept woman, presenting it as a self-aware sacrifice that cannot be avoid if one wants to fit into society: 'Man kommt nur aus dem Dreck heraus, wenn man sich dreckig macht. Und wir wollen doch heraus!' (182) ('the only way to get out of the mud is to get yourself thoroughly muddy. And we do want to get out of it!', 119).

Significantly, in a reversal of gender roles, Cornelia still thinks she can be able to stay with Fabian, supporting him financially now that he has become unemployed. Fabian's reaction is revealing: blaming Cornelia for having icondemned him to remain 'inactive' ('Warum verdammte sie ihn zur Untätigkeit?', 184) when he finally felt he could act and accept responsibility, his male gaze sees her lying passively with a fat old man, her eyes closed in submission, an image which contrasts quite sharply with the picture of the proud woman Fabian will see in newspapers before he leaves the city. Later on, however, he ironically praises her for getting what she wanted from the onset in the city, which is a market where everything is exchanged: '»Überrascht dich das? Kamst du nicht deswegen nach Berlin? Hier wird getauscht. Wer haben will, muss hingeben, was er hat«' (199). ('Isn't this what you came in Berlin for? This city is a mart. If you want something you must give what you have', 130). While Fabian ruthlessly predicts to Cornelia a successful life in the city, yet warns her that the higher she climbs the greater the danger of falling ('Die Absturzgefahr nimmt zu, je höher man steigt', 200), his choice not to conform to this very logic and return to town is not a regression, but an attempt to stay true to his value, as I will show in the third part of the chapter.

The second turning point in which the confessional comes out is when, shortly later, he is informed that Labude has killed himself, leaving behind a long letter addressed to him. Labude writes about the rejection of his PhD thesis, which he considers his definite failure, both materially and psychologically, as it proves that, after his unfaithful fiancé Leda, also

University considers him ‘Ungenügend’ (209) (‘inadequate’, 136). Suicide is thus the only viable option left to those like him, who prove unable to satisfy societal expectations, as he clearly states: ‘ein in den Fächern Liebe und Beruf durchgefallener Menschheitskandidat’ (210) (‘a candidate for manhood who has failed in both subjects, love and work’, 137). His final confession, and sort of ‘moral’ legacy for Fabian, is that he should have become a teacher as children are the only ones who are ripe for ideals (‘für Ideale reif’, 210), a thought which foretells Fabian’s final act. It is also worth noting that together with the letter, Labude leaves Fabian some money for a holiday, which he will use to buy the ticket for the train back home.

As Chanda points out, the target of the Young Man’s aspiration is not just the city, but those classes in the city which are the repository of wealth, power and culture. Although Fabian’s irony is directed, as mentioned, at aspirations of social success, the drive for power of an educated young man leads him to haunt those intellectuals who have gained prominence in the city, such as journalists. In this sense Fabian, who works as advertiser in a cigarette company, has something in common with them as they all ‘prostitute’ their literary talent to the new media of advertising and journalism.

If in Bontempelli, and as I will show in the next chapter, in Keun’s novel, intellectuals mostly spend their time playing cards in a café, here they seem more engaged in the present reality as they work as newspaper editors. However, they make up news to hook readers and do not themselves believe what they write. Fabian meets one of them, the political editor Münzer, in the usual café he haunts with Labude, and is invited to follow him at what the editor calls their ‘Zirkus’ (28) (‘circus’, 17). In the newspaper head office Fabian learns that journalists betray people writing things they do not believe in or even making up news in case ‘something usable’ do not turn up to fill the columns and sell the magazine. To the apprentice Irrgang, puzzled at the news made up by Münzer of a street fighting in Calcutta bringing about fourteen dead and twenty-two injured, the editor teaches him a lesson: ‘Meldungen, deren Unwahrheit nicht oder erst nach Wochen festgestellt warden kann, sind war’ (32) (‘reports that are never proved untrue – or at least not for a week or so – are true’, 20). Moreover, as he explains later to Fabian, what is made up is not half as bad as what is left out – also revealing that they cannot comment in any ways on the government when reporting about that. If Münzer sleeps, to paraphrase Bontempelli, ‘den Schlaf des Ungerechten’ (34) (‘the sleep of the unjust’, 21), the crisis of intellectuals is

best embodied by the city editor Malmy,[113] who is aware that the system is wrong and serves it with devotion, because he likes rigid consistency and is a cynic.[114]

The same utilitarian logic seems to dominate advertising, the field where Fabian, like Bontempelli's protagonist, works; however, if the latter tried to apply his knowledge to the job, Fabian limits himself to do his duty, though he does not see any sense in that. This is also why, when he hears from his colleague Fischer that the company has started to dismiss its employees, he is not worried, as he considers this job one like any other. New media have replaced culture, as Fabian's acquaintance Zacharias explains: advertising does not serve anymore only the purpose of increasing the selling of material goods, but is at the service of 'Idealen' (176) ('ideals'). Significantly Zacharias embodies what society considers the 'model young man' ('ein junger Mann, wie er sein soll', 174), a driving force for the organization and his boss, his uniqueness rewarded with above average salary for a man of twenty-eight. Funnily enough, when Fabian finds himself unemployed and turns to him for a job, Zacharias suggests first that he becomes his personal assistant, in fact a sort of ghost-writer he will secretly (under)pay out of his own pocket, until there is a real vacancy in the newspaper. In an ironic twist, he shamelessly claims that using Fabian's brain he could become shortly a managing director, thus cheating the company too (117).

As it should have become now clear then, while irony is a structuring principle of the *Bildungsroman*, caricature and the 'distorting mirror' the author speaks of in the Preface are used to underscore what *Bildung* has become in commodified Weimar society. Beyond the insight into the new 'cultural' fields, this is also exemplified by the Kabarett der Anonymen (Anonymous Cabaret), directed by what the text describes as a plump Jew named Caligula, where semi-lunatics are paid a few marks for dancing and singing while the audience jeers at them. Here Fabian witnesses the performance of the 'fine' reciter Paul Müller, a lanky man in ragged clothes who tries to recite a ballad titled 'Die Todesfahrt' (79) ('The Death Drive', 52), which tells the story of Countess Hohenstein and her love for a handsome officer, which her father the Count disapproves. While the tragedy of the

[113] As well as by the sinologist who is arrested because he has been taking rare prints and pictures from the National Library and selling them (p. 35).

[114] Malmy has something in common with Fabian as, although he considers 'die Trägheit des Herzens' (35) ('spiritual sloth') the cause of all evil, he believes that men need to change themselves before things can change, a thought voiced later by Fabian too.

unlucky lovers is about to reach its climax, the reciter stands out in all his foolishness: initially bending to take the volleys of lump sugar thrown by the audience, in a tragi-comic climax he tries to catch them with the mouth while reciting the last stanza of his ballad. However, the audience soon loses interest and starts yelling at the 'ballad monger', who cannot but keep on reciting words unheard in the howling of the crowd, as to confirm his definite sell-out, and that of culture.

In Chanda's definition, the Young Man yearns for 'new and rare sensations' and is endowed with the sensibility to enjoy them. However, if the labelling of Fabian as a 'moralist' can be considered as part of the narratorial ironical game, then the character's attitude towards sexual freedom and the logic of commodification dominating the city is ambivalent. Indeed, Fabian wanders aimlessly at nights cultivating 'mixed emotions as a hobby' ('Er betrieb die gemischten Gefühle seit langem aus Liebhaberei', 19), with the aim of getting to know himself better, with surgical precision: 'Man war ein Chirurg, der die eigene Seele aufschnitt' (19), ('[he] was a surgeon, *dissecting* his own soul', 11).[115] He likes to haunt dance halls and clubs with Labude, like Haupt's, which they enjoy as they feel out of place. Here the irony is added by the fact that the two friends sit beside the barrier of the dance-floor, their table-telephone disconnected to avoid any contact, and engage in serious conversations, ignoring the spectacle of semi-naked women dancing together. On many of these occasions, Fabian appears as caught in between personal desire and society's expectations on a young man like him. Exemplary of this is when he meets Irene Moll, the man-eater and the most promiscuous woman depicted in the novel.

After witnessing the spectacle of the city-fairground mentioned above, Fabian gets off the train at Zoo and refuses the offers of a prostitute on the Joachimthalerstrasse, but then he heads to the address Herr Bertuch, his office manager has given to him, which is that of Frau Sommer's club – ironically designated as 'Ein Institut für geistige Annäherung' (9) ('a club for intellectual, or more exactly, spiritual contacts', 5). Here, he is approached by an aggressive tall blonde who pushes him to get a cab and come to her place after she has assaulted him on the way. At the woman's house, which has 'Moll' written on the doorbell, Fabian starts to get involved in the situation

[115] My emphasis. This is a telling verb considering that it is used later by Cornelia to describe her sexual 'deal' with the rich producer Makart.

– he holds her back and kisses her – yet they are interrupted by the arrival of a man, who turns out to be Frau Moll's husband.

The novel thematizes the conflict between personal desire and social demands also reflecting on the role of marriage in capitalist society, which is exposed as a social institution, deprived of ethical and moral values, as the Molls' case exemplifies.[116] To an astonished Fabian the solicitor Herr Moll explains that not only is he aware of his wife's various escapades, but he has also made a contract to regulate his wife's sexual needs. This also hints at a double irony: marriage has become nothing but a contract, deprived of passion, yet an agreement is needed to give free rein to one's desire.

It is worth noting that, while the 'moralist' Fabian rejects Herr Molls' proposal to become one their 'Freund' (23) (friend) with the possibility of getting even an income out of it, as he claims to be 'not qualified for the job' ('Ich eigne mich nicht für den Posten', 23), as Labude remarks he nevertheless keeps the keys of the house as he likes the lady. As his conversation with Labude shows, Fabian is quite aware that vocation and marriage are linked to the accomplishment of one's man duty, that is what society expects from a middle-class young man, yet he is aware that the precarious living conditions of Weimar society hinders that very accomplishment. He expresses this thought already when he first meets Cornelia Battenberg, who will then become his girlfriend for a short time. Significantly, he is then caught in this logic when his relationship with Cornelia works out and he starts to find a purpose to his life, considering 'sow[ing]' some seeds of ambition in the city, as in Berlin ambition 'bore fruit' quickly (80): 'Vielleicht sollte man doch eine kleine Tüte Ehrgeiz säen in dieser Stadt, wo Ehrgeiz so rasch Früchte trug' (123). He even jumps up from the bed in the middle of the night with a (re)gained motivation towards his boring job and exclaims: 'Ich werde die Annoncen leuchten lassen!' (123) ('I'll have the small advertisements illuminated', 80).

Another aspect paramount in the narrativization of *Bildung* is that of youth, as Franco Moretti has pointed out, which takes on new significance in the politically charged context of the interwar years.[117] In the novel Fabian's

[116] Another example of what hides behind bourgeois respectability is given by Labude's parents. The irony is even too evident when it is said that, if his mother spent much time in her country house in Lugano, his husband, a well-known barrister loved her more this way.

[117] Youth was central to both modernity and the *Bildungsroman* genre, as Franco Moretti has highlighted (see his *The Way of the World* and the introduction to this thesis). It represented a key issue during the uncertain years of Weimar Republic and the crisis of authority it entailed. For the images of German youth in political

conversations with Labude, who embodies the type of the romantic idealist, give voice to ideas concerning the role of young, educated men in society, but also show once again an ironic gulf between reflection and action. Labude blames the Fathers for the current economic and social crisis, and is convinced that the youth of the middle classes must do 'its duty', taking leaderships and reforming the whole system together. In Hamburg he meets a group of students, some of whom are members of the Socialist party, and he discusses ideas for political revolution, yet he is unable to translate his reformist thoughts into action . Funnily enough, expressing his concerns for Fabian's future, Labude prompts him to do something: 'Du müsstest endlich vorwärtskommen' (57) ('It's time you began to make some progress', 36), and suggests to earn money or power, yet he is not able to do anything. Fabian's answer, rather than inertia, reveals a mistrust of capitalist society and a critical stance towards work and its actual usefulness: 'Nehmen wir einmal an, ich sei der Träger einer Funktion. Wo ist das System, in dem ich funktionieren kann? […] Ob ich Adressen schreiben, Plakate bedichte oder mit Rotkohl handle, ist mir und is überhaupt gleichgültig. Sind das Aufgaben für einen erwachsenen Menschen? (57) ('Let us assume for the moment that I really have some function. Where is the system in which I can exercise it? […] It's a matter of indifference, to me and to the rest of the world, whether I address envelopes, write couplets for advertisements or deal in pickled red cabbage. Are these jobs for a grown man?', 37). His rejection of capitalism is quite strong, as he repeatedly claims not to be a capitalist – 'Ich bin kein Kapitalist, wiederhole ich dir!' (57).

However, if Fabian claims that his friend's dream of instilling a civic sense in the lower class and bringing the proletariat up is a 'utopia', on closer look he is not totally disillusioned with humanity and has a 'high' purpose: 'die Menschen anständig und vernünftig zu machen' (59) ('make people decent and sensible', 38). On some occasions he also shows to actually possess morality, mostly when he acts in favour or defence of children, as I show in the final section of this chapter.

While Chanda acknowledges that the Young Man has a 'certain fineness of spirit', an intelligent imagination which raises him above mediocrity, he

confrontation with society in the literature of the period, see: Katherine Larson Roper, 'Images of German Youth in Weimar Novels', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3 (1978), 499-516. As I show in the last chapter on Capuana, youth represented a key concept in Fascist rhetoric and propaganda.

also warns against a 'hypertrophy of romantic sensibility'[118] which would bring him to failure. It is worth noting that Fabian and Labude's passivity is ascribed to war that, like in Bontempelli, has cut off their education, and hence frozen their manly development: 'Erinnerst du dich? Wir schrieben Aufsätze und Diktate, wir lernten scheinbar, und es war gleichgültig, ob wir es taten oder unterließen. Wir sollten ja in den Krieg' (67) ('Do you remember? We wrote our essays and did our dictation, we appeared to be learning and it was a matter of complete indifference whether we worked or not. We were going to be called up', 44).

This inability to take an active stance to change things would seem to be later confirmed when the two friends witness a fight between a National Socialist and a Communist and intervene to separate them. While they accompany them on the cab to the hospital, they openly criticize both Parties, without taking a position or providing a viable alternative. [119]

According to Chanda, the young man's disillusion with his city experience is paralleled by the growing hold the province takes on his consciousness, anticipating his final return. As said, the province appears in turning points of Fabian's trajectory in the city, mostly via his mother's letters or when she visits him in Berlin. Another important passage that needs to be mentioned in this context is when Fabian receives a letter of dismissal from his office and starts strolling aimlessly until he ends up at the plateau of the Kreuzberg. Memories of his hard time as a philosophy student in Berlin mingle with the even more somber mood of his boarding school in town, made of Sunday sermons at the Martin Luther Church and the strict rules of a plump headmaster. This memory also foreshadows his visit to the old school on his return home, which entails a reflection on personal development and a critique of institutionalized forms of *Bildung*, as I will show in section 3 below.

The consideration of *Bildung* and gender, to which I turn in the second section, via the Young Man – and Woman – trope, allows to understand how Kästner's depiction of female sexuality does not simply hints at Weimar amorality, as most critics would have it, but discloses a complex gender dynamic at the core of the *Bildungsroman* genre, although always looked at with ironic distance.

[118] Chanda, p. 329.

[119] This episode also recalls the one in Bontempelli's *La vita operosa*, where the protagonist, after witnessing some political riots in the street seeks refuge in a 'philosophical' oasis outside of time and space.

2. New Women and (Un)sentimental Education

In his study on the Young Man novel, Chanda specifies that the protagonist can also be a young woman, yet he adds only two female centered novels from an earlier period (1850-1900) to his list of canonical texts. Moreover, further on, dealing with the 'romantic' element, he identifies two kinds of women who appear at crucial stages of the Young Man's career, namely the upper-class city bred and the lower class/provincial, thus stressing their instrumental role in the male's self-discovery.[120]

Pointing to John Smith's formulations, Castle notices how the narrativization of *Bildung* is a social phenomenon which leads to the construction of male identity by granting men access to self-representation in the patriarchal symbolic order. The consideration, in what follows, of how the Young Woman trope interacts with the discourse of *Bildung*, brings to light complex notions of femininity in Kästner's novel, challenging institutional – and thus patriarchal – cultivation of gender roles. Furthermore, the focus on gender dynamics allows me to (re)consider the social function of love and thus the institution of marriage, in relation to the dialectic of personal, and sexual, desire and society demands which runs through the novel.

As mentioned in the Introduction, in Goethe's work the spiritual aspect of *Bildung* comes out in the chapter devoted to the 'Beautiful Soul', who makes her appearance as the narrating voice of her own life's confessions. Scholars like Marianne Hirsch have argued that the female *Bildungs*plot in Goethe, although representing 'a creative response to impoverishing and diminishing social circumstances', remains subordinated to the male one.[121] Making a relevant case, which can be applied to Weimar discourse on women too, Catriona MacLeod recognizes that in Goethe's work the female characters represent aesthetic types which reflect male desires and fears, but are devoid of true independence and of their own inner life.[122] In her more recent study, Juliana de Albuquerque has stressed how 'Confessions of a Beautiful Soul' represents the first, and most sustained, exercise of self-reflection in

[120] Chanda, p. 337.
[121] Marianne Hirsch, 'Spiritual *Bildung*: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm', in Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 23-48, here pp. 31-32.
[122] Catriona MacLeod, *Embodying Ambiguity: Androgyny and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Keller* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

the novel, and that Wilhelm's encounter with the Beautiful Soul is a pivotal point in his growing self-awareness.

Albuquerque's reconsideration of gender roles in Goethe's work is grounded on an interesting notion of *Bildung* as self-mastery, that is how an individual, whether male or female, is able to respond to life's circumstances and master psychological traits within oneself and social demands imposed from without to achieve self-realization, which she sees attained not by the Beautiful Soul, but by Natalie, the woman who eventually becomes Wilhelm's wife. Interestingly, she considers the signal's feature of Natalie's character her ability to apply 'means to ends', identified by Goethe as the mark of progression and healthy individuality, as opposed to the Beautiful Soul's inability to act and sickness.[123]

Kästner's novel, like Keun's, places particular emphasis on the representation of emancipated womanhood, embodied by the 'New Woman', the urban and independent woman which was an essential part of German post-war society. While a few scholars have pointed to 'a conservative turn' concerning gender roles in the somber mood of the last years of the republic, in reality, modern and old notions of femininity co-existed, though not always harmoniously, and, as has been pointed out, Kästner's novel shows tensions between regressive and progressive ideas about womanhood and women's role in society.[124]

In this sense, while the main female characters, Cornelia Battenberg and Irene Moll, seem to fit into the two types outlined by Chanda, the lower-class/provincial and the upper-class/city-bred respectively, on closer examination the depiction of femininity in the novel is more nuanced. This is made apparent by Fabian's relationship with Cornelia, and more generally by the ambivalent depiction of the young woman he meets at the studio of the lesbian sculptress Ruth Reiter. Initially, Fabian is struck by the girl who does not fit into the lascivious surrounding and the other promiscuous women, and indeed she has just arrived in Berlin when got invited to her

[123] Juliana de Albuquerque, '"Meine Schwester Natalie ist hiervon ein lebhaftes Beispiel:" *Bildung* and Gender in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*', in Juliana de Albuquerque and Gert Hofmann, eds., *Anti/Idealism: Re-interpreting a German Discourse* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 27-48.

[124] About the New Woman as both a reality and a discourse which reflected social, political and economic changes of the time, see e.g.: Katharina von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis*: *Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: CA: University of California Press, 1997), as well as the aforementioned studies by McCormick and Smith. I will consider more closely the 'New Woman' question and the 'conservative turn' regarding ideas of womanhood in the last years of the Republic in the next chapter devoted to Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*.

studio to receive 'a little instruction' (67) ('zu Informationszwecken', 101), of which she claims to have had enough.

Significantly, Cornelia tells Fabian her own story, showing not only self-reflection but also a will to determine her own destiny. She may appear at first as the naïve country girl who, at twenty-five, has been seduced and abandoned twice by a man, 'wie ein Schirm, den man abisichtlich irgendwo vergisst' (101) (like an old umbrella that you forget somewhere on purpose', 67). However, she admits not to be an angel and is well aware of women's subordinate position and the self-sacrifice expected from them by patriarchal society. She hence blames men who are happy that women, like anything else, have become a commodity yet expect them to be in love, with all the obligations and no rights on their side. Cornelia's depiction of gender relations in which women are the weak part – they must come and go as men wish, cry when they are sent away and be blissful when they are allowed to come back – is quite telling; likewise significant is that she does not answer when Fabian asks the reason why she has come to Berlin. Indeed, Cornelia's path, as I will show, reverses traditional gender roles, leading her to self-determination.[126]

Similarly to Bontempelli's, throughout the novel common assumptions about romantic love are debunked: it is Labude's fiancée Leda who betrays him, while Cornelia throws Fabian apart to get a career and Frau Moll starts her own enterprise, opening a male-brothel for ladies of the high society. As she tells Fabian, Moll is proud of herself as she has dreamt since she was a young girl of owning such an enterprise: she gets money and can decide of men's life as she likes.[127]

To be sure, although emancipated womanhood is not openly condemned, there is narratorial irony towards it. As mentioned, in clinging to the belief that she can preserve her relationship with Fabian, Cornelia learns to 'anaesthetize' her sexual desires and accepts to be kept by an older rich

[126] As Suzanne Smith has rightly shown, the idea of prostitutes as rational workers and as bourgeois whores or 'cocottes' (*Kokotten*) took hold over the period and contributed to give a complex, more nuanced, picture of female sexuality in Weimar Berlin. She uses the term 'self-conscious commodities' to describe women, like Cornelia indeed, who attract men in order to get material benefits. Moreover, she shows how the discussion on prostitution was also used to criticize bourgeois conjugality. See: *Berlin Coquette,* pp. 18ff.

[127] Jürgs makes the relevant point that women embody in the novel the 'sachliche Prinzip', and appear more determined than men, yet her claim that 'Modernität und Sachlicheit' are associated with female immorality and aggressiveness seems to me too strong. She also recognizes that in the relationship between Fabian and Cornelia, under the surface of objectivity lies a sentimental 'core' (Jürgs, p. 205).

man, sleeping with him, as this is what makes one fit into modern commodified society. Irony is added here by the fact that educated young girls like Cornelia, who has a degree in Law, are ready to give up a career more related to their study to become film stars, yet an education is required to be part of Weimar display culture. Irony is sharper when it comes to the man-eater Irene Moll. While she repeatedly tries to seduce him to no avail, when Fabian meets her for the last time on his train back home, she humbles herself by confessing him that she loves him and begs him to run away with her.

Renny Harrigan's has observed that the (stereotype) of the emancipated woman aims to show the hopelessness and the loss of function of Weimar intellectuals.[128] This is testified in the novel by the opposition between Fabian's downward trajectory and Cornelia's social ascent, and more generally between man's inability to act and women's agency.

As Chanda points out, there are two ways in which the Young Man – and Woman – rises: through the adoption of a morally corrupting career and through the misuse of talents. Both is true for Cornelia's upward trajectory: she was supposed to start an apprenticeship in the copyright department of Makart's film company, yet ends up becoming his mistress in exchange for a role in his movie. This 'prostitution' of her talents, however, corresponds, on the personal level, to a growing self-awareness and determination. This is also demonstrated by her changing relationship to Fabian: on their first encounter, frightened at every corner of the city, she asks him to come up as she does not want to be alone in her miserable rented room. Moreover, while she is worried about what the man thinks of her, she places herself in a subordinate position, allowing him to come and go whenever he wants, as she does not want to be a burden. Later, her own disillusionment corresponds to a stronger will and the awareness of herself and her power on men and the reality around her. Although, as mentioned earlier, Cornelia considers her 'trade' with Makart a sort of self-sacrifice – 'Ich werde mir einbilden, der Arzt untersucht mich' (182) ('I shall pretend to myself I am being examined by a doctor', 119)[129] – she proves to understand the (market)

[128] 'Die emanzipierte Frau im deutschen Roman der Weimarer Republik', in James Elliot, Jürgen Pelzer and Carol Poore (eds.), *Stereotyp und Vorurteil in der Literatur. Untersuchungen zu Autoren des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1978), pp. 64-83, here pp. 71f.

[129] In one of the novel's ironic twists this is actually what happens to Fabian when he tries to take revenge of Cornelia with a woman he meets at the Amusement Park shortly later. After following the stranger to her house, they both undress but before

logic of contemporary society and to be much more suited to face it than Fabian. As said, she also takes an active role in their relationship in that, becoming the film magnate's kept woman she will improve her own condition to the advantage of Fabian too as she believes they can still be together. The narrative highlights this aspect – 'Sie hatte Arbeit. Sie verdiente Geld' (174) ('she had a job, she was earning money', 114) – in the very moment in which Fabian had become unemployed.

While, as seen, Irene Moll is almost ridiculed until the very end of the narration, the last image we get of Cornelia is quite different. At the station before leaving the city, Fabian sees Cornelia for the last time in a photograph which portrays her next to Makart in the newspaper which advertises her upcoming debut movie[130] and officially announces her success 'Juristin wird Filmstar' (239) ('From Law Student to Film Star', 152). It is worth noting that her social ascent is also ascribed to the fact that Cornelia, being educated, embodies 'einen neuen Modetyp, die intelligente deutsche Frau (239) ('the latest and most fashionable type, the intellectual German woman', 155). Her magnificent fur and the luxurious car she sits in sanction that she has succeeded in her quest for becoming someone, while Fabian appears as helpless as ever, looking at the picture as he is 'staring into a grave' (155) ('als betrachte er ein Grab', 239). This simile is striking and can be read in two ways: it indicates his disillusionment and, given the novel's ending with Fabian's own death, it adds irony to the narrative. After losing Cornelia and Labude, Fabian finds himself hopelessly alone in the city and decides to return to his hometown.

I now turn to consider more closely the ways in which the novel recovers a concept of (aesthetico-spiritual) *Bildung* via Fabian's moral actions, affirming, at the end of the narration, an idea of possible character formation through contact with the unspoiled nature, in Fabian's dream of retreating to the mountains, the Erzgebirge. I also place emphasis on Fabian's visit to his old school back in town, as it provides opportunity to reflect, further, on institutionalized forms of *Bildung* and their influence on young people,

they sleep together, she takes a torch and switches it on, examining Fabian's body like an 'wie ein alter Kassenarzt' (193).

[130] Tellingly titled *The Masks of Frau Z*. and staging a woman who must constantly change her identity to please her husband, who nevertheless ends up being the victim of his own plot. Significantly, if Fabian warns Cornelia against Makart, she is not worried as she considers the movie as an 'education' for life ('ein Privatkursus furs ganze Leben', 227).

showing Kästner's novel affinity with the (subgenre) of the *Erziehungsroman*, or novel of education.

3. 'Ein Mann werden'

Retracing the trajectory of the Young Man from the Provinces, Chanda recognizes that unlike the picaro, who rises and falls several times, the Young Man only rises and falls once. Moreover, although the Young Man's self-discovery creates the conditions for his happiness, he is either completely denied it or enjoys it for a brief period, eventually dying or living in a spiritual limbo. The end of the novel, with Fabian's climb into the river and the narrator's ironic comment – 'Lernt schwimmen!' (262) ('Learn to swim!', 171) – has been interpreted as the sign of the character's failure or inertia. However, framing the last part of the narration within the double gesture of recuperation of an aesthetic-spiritual form of *Bildung* allows me to offer a new interpretation of the novel.

According to Chanda, the Young Man's disillusionment with his quest for identity and for becoming someone in the city 'crystallizes' into commitment to values such as love, loyalty, simplicity, whose main repository is 'the bourgeois and romantic idyll of the pastoral family circle'.[131]

The Young Man usually returns to the provinces to marry their childhood love and bring up a family. While Kästner's novel would seem to follow this path, Fabian's return to his hometown is far from idyllic and the novel's critical view of the province is linked once again to *Bildung* and its critique, which also inflects the gender dynamic.

The majority of critics agree in claiming that over the 20th century novels of development either disappear or survive as stories of *Verbildung*, a 'reverse' *Bildung* which brings the subject to a realization of non-belonging.[132] In his perceptive study on Kästner, Hans Wagener detects in *Fabian* some of the genre concerns; however, although he recognizes that Fabian is not only a passive observer, but also tries to find a sense to his uncertain existence, he reads the novel as an anti-developmental narrative, 'a *Bildungsroman* turned on its head'.[133]

131 Chanda, p. 335.

132 See about this Mario Domenichelli's essay 'Il romanzo di formazione nella tradizione europea', which I refer to largely for the analysis of Bontempelli's texts in the previous chapter.

133 '[…] eine Art auf den Kopf gestellter Bildungsroman'. Hans Wagener, *Erich Kästner* (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1984), p. 54. Fabian's crisis stands, in his view,

Retracing the complex genesis of the *Lehrjahre* in his aforementioned study Manfred Engel identifies two different types of *Bildungsroman*: the *Theatralische Sendung*, the first (partial) version which belongs to the anthropological type of *Bildungsroman* of the Late Enlightenment, and the *Lehrjahre* which launched the new type of the Romantic *Bildungsroman*. Focusing on the symbolic links in Goethe's later work, Engel highlights that for the Romantics the success of character formation depended on the belief in a pre-established harmony between subject and object, between the individual and nature as a whole: only if one can find in nature the *antwortende Gegenbilder* ('corresponding counter-images', as with Goethe), they will be able to overcome the deep melancholy and the attitude of mistrust one feels in a disenchanted, mechanical universe.[134] Something similar to this transcendental postulate of a pre-established harmony between the self and the world finds expression in Fabian's dream of a resort to the Erzgebirge at the end of the novel. Before turning to that, I want to make a point concerning Fabian's morality and his ability to act in highly moral ways – thus reaffirming aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung*. In this sense, while Fabian's trajectory confirms Chanda's assumption that the Young Man's 'moral career is the reverse of his material career',[135] the 'moral' component is once again to be related to *Bildung* and its critical reappraisal.

Throughout the narration melancholy, if not pessimism seems to prevail, yet, on closer examination Fabian still has hope in humanity – as he tells Cornelia he waits for 'den Sieg der Anständigkeit' (112) ('the triumph of decency', 74) and he proves to be able to act selflessly. An example of this is when he hosts in his room the strange Professor Kollrepp, who, after inventing a machine for the textile industry that can replace the work of hundreds of men, has given anything away and lives as a homeless because he does not want to be responsible for people's misery.

Fabian's trust and good deeds are directed, nevertheless, mostly towards children. When his mother visits him in Berlin, to hide the fact that he has lost his job, he whiles away his time in Berlin's leading department store, the Kaufhaus des Westens. Here he witnesses a miserable scene whose victim is a poor child who has been caught while stealing an ash-tray. Fabian spares the little girl a sound punishment and takes her side: hearing that the

for the crisis of a whole society on the threshold of second world war, whereby the only hope for the future are children.

134 Engel, p. 273.

135 Chanda, p. 334.

trash is a gift for her dad's birthday he pays for it, although he has lost his job and has barely money for himself.[136]

Fabian's morality is also affirmed at the end of the novel, to which I now turn in order to consider the extent to which it can be read within the modernist critical reappraisal of *Bildung* in the search for satisfying modes of self-cultivation. Interestingly, and differently to the other novels I look at, *Fabian* problematizes the role of educational institutions in ways which resonates with the Humboldtian model of the university, with its stated aim of independent learning and the development of one's personality. Although Fabian's death would make him appear as unsuitable for society, I highlight that, similarly to Bontempelli's novel, the idea of becoming a 'good man', distant from society and its utilitarian logic, prevails at the end of the narration.

Back in his hometown, Fabian does not find genuine values, but narrow-mindedness and a logic not so different from the one dominating the city. The critical look on the province does not spare even women, who are either worn-down mothers or prostitutes miserably beaten. Even his parents appear quite distant: his father shows no sympathy for his son's unlucky condition – he admits he did not even know that Fabian had a friend – and does not refrain from commenting that at his age he had been already for long a family man, while his mother blames for his restlessness a lack of faith in God. While he is not able to get closer again with his first love Eva Kendler, now a worn-down wife and mother, Fabian ends up spending the night in the only one brothel in town with a former schoolmate who vents out his frustration beating prostitutes. Surprisingly, the only person with whom he seems to find closeness, although briefly, is a naïve prostitute, who gives him back the money after having sex, thus eschewing the exchange market logic of capitalism.

In the context of the critical reappraisal of *Bildung* Fabian's visit to his old school, a big grey building with corner towers looking as though it was filled to the roof 'mit Kindersorgen' (246) ('with the troubles of childhood', 160) deserves closer attention. Here the critic of the education system is quite harsh. Fabian enters the school only to find confirmation that year after year nothing changes, except for the pupils: the teachers' nicknames are the

[136] Likewise, that same day, he slips a twenty mark note in his mother's handbag before she leaves and gives Cornelia his last hundred-mark note to buy clothes for her film audition, as he believes that 'gute Tate lassen sich nicht stornieren. Die moralische Gleichung verläuft anders als die arithmetische' (163).

same, as well as the discipline and strict order marking the dull days. The school is blamed for promising freedom and justice, while it makes, in fact, obedient officials and narrow-minded bourgeois out of whole generations of children.

While they did not manage to do him any harm, Fabian reckons that some of his mates killed themselves, others died during the war, so that half of his class has gone. Also, his meeting with the old headmaster confirms how too little space and freedom the system allows the individual. If, as the master claims, 'Die Gerechten müssen viel leiden' (250) ('the righteous have much to bear', 162) in this hard time, he is not able to answer to Fabian's question on who are 'die Gerechten', and considers Fabian's own failure, and not the system's, the fact that he is unemployed. It is also quite telling that, hearing Fabian's lucid analysis of the crisis of contemporary society and its members, all he can do is to cast him away shouting he should 'round off' his personality (163) ('Runden Sie Ihre Persönlichkeit ab!", 251), which is what the school should do. The headmaster thus embodies the pettiness and hypocrisy of the entire system: set up to form good young men, it signally fails to do so; his vocal demand that they 'round off' their personality and fully adhere to social expectations only betrays the failure of that very system.

It is worth noting that the critic is also directed at the university, dominated by individualism and sheer competitiveness, as exemplified by Labude's case. Although the professor praises Labude's thesis, this happens when it is too late; moreover, his reaction against Weckerlin, the envious assistant who made Labude believe his thesis was rejected just to make a joke, is to discharge him, which seems quite a mild measure. All this leads Fabian to assert that his best friend's was not really a suicide, as it was an official in the Department of Middle High German to kill him ('Ein Subalternbeamter des Mittelhochdeutschen hatte den Freund umgebracht', 234).[137] At the same time, Fabian realizes later on that his friend's failure had been to give too much weight to his academic work, measuring his success and development as a man on that, and showing to trust more a colleague's judgement than his own skills.

There is some disagreement among critics on how to consider Fabian's death, whether to see it as an ultimate regression, or as a conscious, suicidal

[137] I find it quite symbolic that Labude's father destroys the portrait of Lessing hanging on the wall of the room where the corpse of his son lies (144).

act.[138] To be sure, there is great narratorial irony towards the hero, yet considering once again the tension between action and reflection outlined so far, the ending can acquire also another meaning. While Fabian's jump in the river appears, like that of Labude, 'ein tragischer Witz' (235) ('a tragic absurdity', 153), it can also be read as the attempt, although a belated one, to get out of the impasse and act; furthermore it hints at the hope and trust for the future generation of men: 'der kleine Junge', the little boy Fabian wants to rescue, is able to swim and saves himself.

There is also another aspect, related to ideals, that must not be overlooked. Like Bontempelli's hero, Fabian eventually refuses to 'sell' once again his intellectual talents and stay true to his values. Indeed, as at the end of *La vita operosa* the protagonist decided to miss the meeting with an important person who could securing him a career, so Fabian refuses to work for a right-wing newspaper, the *Daily Post*, thus becoming a 'ein nützliches Glied dieser Gesellschaft' (266), ('a useful member of society', 173) as his mother wants, at the prize of 'chloroforming' his conscience. Significantly, while he refuses to 'unterkriechen' (266) ('knuckle under', 173) for a safe niche and money – which was never the meaning of life for him, as he stresses – he decides to use what remains of Labude's inheritance to go to the Erzgebirge.

In this context, Fabian's last encounter with Irene Moll also proves that the Young Man's idealism has not been corrupted. While Fabian had already rejected Moll's offer to work for her as a secretary in her new enterprise, preferring to keep on opening car doors in front of the department store rather than becoming her kept man, his definitive refusal on the train back home of what would have been an easy escape from his troubles, further testifies of his ideals.

As mentioned, like in Bontempelli, the end of the narration recovers, an (Humboldtian) idea of self-formation, which involves a distant position with respect to society, yet a moral component is added here through Fabian's selfless act of rescuing the child who (he thinks) is drowning in the river.

This final jump is described with great narratorial irony – Fabian forgets he is not able to swim and dies while the child reaches safely to the shore –

[138] Julian Preece, for instance, interprets it as a suicide. See: 'Sex, Geschenke und Verwirrung in der Gattungsfrage: Silke Becker and Sven Hanuschek, eds., *Fabian* als Roman eines sanften Revolutionärs' in: *Erich Kästner und die Moderne* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2016), pp. 117-135.

yet it can still be regarded as an attempt at *doing* something, getting out of the inertia who made him 'wie das Kind beim Dreck' (267) ('like a child stuck in a bog', 174). While the protagonist of *La vita intensa* enjoys the sleep of the 'just man', Fabian's final dream, which resonates in the last lines of the novel, is that of a retreat in the solitude of the mountains, the Erzgebirge, removed even from the city of Dresden, where he could regain contact with himself and possibly become a man, finding a purpose to life: 'Vielleicht kam er dort oben zu sich. Vielleicht wurde er dort oben so etwas Ähnliches wie ein Mann. Vielleicht fand er auf den einsamen Waldpfaden ein Ziel, das den Einsatz lohnte' (267) ('Perhaps, up there, he would find himself again. Perhaps, up there, he would grow into the semblance of a man. Perhaps, on those lonely forest paths, he might find an object for which he could stake his life', 174).

In this chapter, I have examined how Kästner's novel participates in modernist double gesture of critique and recuperation of *Bildung*, reenacting the dialectic of personal desire and social responsibility it entails in the specific condition of late Weimar Berlin. Following the protagonist's trajectory from the province to the city and back again, I have showed how the literary type of the Young Man from the Province is reworked in light of the tension between reflection and action, looked at with the irony proper to the *Bildungsroman* genre. In the second part, I have examined how gender relations and the representation of femininity are inflected by the critical discourse on *Bildung*, which reverses traditional gender roles, giving voice to (new) women's claim to agency. Finally, focusing in particular on the novel's ending, I have tried to challenge the common view of *Fabian* in terms of regression or inertia, showing that an (Humboldtian) idea of self-cultivation, though depicted with narratorial irony, prevails in the last part of the novel and translates into a final action which re-instates freedom and self-determination in the face of societal demands and (genre) expectations.

Chapter 3

The New Woman's Play with *Bildung*: *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*

In this chapter I examine how the Young Woman's trope intersects with the dialectic of resistance and conformity outlined so far in another novel set in Berlin during the last year of the Weimar Republic, namely Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (*The Artificial Silk Girl*, 1932). I consider how the novel participates in the modernist project of reappraisal of *Bildung*, specifically, how it reworks some of the tropes and elements of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, such as the confessional and the picaresque, to stage a Young Woman's claim for *Bildung* in the harsh conditions of late Weimar society. I thus show that Keun's novel can be regarded as a critical inquiry into available options to women in modern consumerist society, which also reflects on how agency is determined by factors such as class and social background.

Similarly to Bontempelli's and Kästner's novels, there is narratorial irony towards the protagonist, and even more in this case towards her aspirations, given Doris' low social class and lack of education. However, an idea of *Bildung*, albeit referred to playfully or ironically, shapes her sense of self throughout the narration, deepening the awareness of herself and the reality around her. As I show, Doris' ability to play with roles, which in this case takes the form of masquerade, allows her to expose the double standard of (male) bourgeois society and lay claim to agency. On closer look, both the character's naivety and the Gefühlskälte, or 'cool conduct', are part of her masquerade, and a means through which Doris hopes to fulfil her aspiration of reaching the top in Weimer's consumerist society. Moreover, although Doris' dreams are mediated by popular culture (mostly movies), one must not overlook that she maintains from the onset a critical gaze towards the reality around her.

The novel is written in the form of a diary, hence Doris is also the narrator of her own story. The confessional mode, which, as we have seen, sets the novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, is paramount: far from being only an arty construction of self, some of the diary entries reveal a true tension between Doris' desires and needs and the demands of a capitalist society.

Unlike the two novels analysed in the previous chapters, Keun's does not present the division into units proper to the picaresque, yet the anecdotal unfolding of Doris adventures, first in her hometown and then in Berlin via

the encounters with men from different milieus, can be connected to the picaresque tradition too.

Although much literary criticism, especially from feminist and sociological perspectives, has recognised the novel's potential to reflect the social conditions of the time, it generally denies it, and its protagonist, any transformative intervention on the reality. Monika Shafi and Janet Ward have aptly recognized Doris' learning curve, yet they have underscored disillusionment with her quest for becoming someone as quintessential element of this process, thus denying the woman the possibility of freeing herself from her subordinate role in an essentially patriarchal society.[139] Moreover, if Ward aptly recognizes that Keun's protagonist provides us with a 'double metaphor' of self-subsumption and resistance to modern (surface) culture, she considers Doris' learned independence of thought and action as the eventual acquisition of the status of New Woman, overlooking how that tension is related to *Bildung*, a term which occurs in the narration.[140] As said in the previous chapter, 'aesthetic education' was central to the project of self-cultivation, or *Bildung*, of which moral reflection and action were key aspects; it is therefore significant that in the course of her city experience Doris learns to value people on a moral scale. Another aspect connected to the genre, which I have examined in the previous chapters in relation to the character's *Bildungs*path, is work, which in Keun's novel acquires a specific meaning as it is connected to how women's labour and their limited choice are determined by man' money in capitalist society. In this sense, Doris' (changing) attitude towards work is another marker of her progress as a moral and emotional being, as my analysis will highlight.

In her enlightening study, *Sentiment und Sachlichkeit*, Kerstin Barndt has called attention to the female new-objectivity aesthetic (Lebenskunst), stressing the importance of the New Woman Novel ('Roman der Neuen Frau'), which, originating in England at the turn of the century, acquired its specific generic features after the First World War in the construction of a middle sphere between mass culture and modernism. As Barndt aptly recognises, while in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century the 'Neue

[139] See Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press), pp. 85-86. Monika Shafi speaks of 'Desillusionierungsprozess', see: '«Aber das ist es ja eben, ich habe ja keine Meinesgleichen»: Identitätsprozeß und Zeitgeschichte in dem Roman "Das kunstseidene Mädchen" von Irmgard Keun', *Colloquia Germanica*, 21 (1988), no. 4, 314-325 (p. 317).

[140] Ward, p. 85.

Frau' was all but a promise, 'a Jahrhundertphantasie',[141] a figure at the threshold between old and new models of femininity, by the 1920s it had become a 'Massenphänomenon' reflecting the ambivalent feelings of freedom and fear brought about by modernization. As it has been acknowledged, behind the typically 'neusachlich' embrace of mass culture and Americanism, particularly film, lurked anxieties about the destabilization of traditional notions of class, nation and identity, with a pronounced preoccupation with sexuality and gender. While during and after the war new models of emancipated womanhood were emerging, from the androgynous Girl to the flapper-derived New Woman with her page-boy haircut, the famous 'Bubikopf', they were considered as symptoms to be analysed under the inspection of a 'sober', or 'cool' gaze, which was conventionally male.[142]

Barndt's account has the merit of going beyond the traditional polarisation of Sentiment and Sachlichkeit, which reproduced the gendered one feminine/masculine. Taking as her starting point Atina Grossman's consideration of the 'weibliche Gefühlskälte' as a typical feature of the New Woman, Barndt considers Sentiment und Sachlichkeit not as opposites, but as attitudes which determine at the same time the writing and reading of the New Woman. Likewise significant is the stress on the role of the female readership for the construction of a New Woman discourse, and thus on the educational purpose of the New Woman's novel, which connects the genre to the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Barndt devotes one part of her account to *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, highlighting the picaresque motif of the novel, yet she overlooks the irony and thus the critical potential of the text, and focuses mostly on Doris' writing and reading of the diary as a play with languages and codes, limiting Doris' knowledge to the art of seduction. In my analysis I show that Doris' diary and generally the act of writing, not only function as a critique of patriarchal society and the limitations it imposes on women, but represent an attempt by the woman to fashion herself and claim agency. While Doris' gradual understanding of what civilization has brought about and of what it means to be 'ein richtiger Mensch' (175) ('a real person', 153) is carried out with irony, a genuine admiration for how *Bildung* makes one seen/considered, as well as feelings of good-heartedness and solidarity are affirmed.

[141] Kerstin Barndt, *Sentiment und Sachlichkeit: der Roman der Neuen Frau in der Weimarer Republik* (Köln: Böhlau, 2003), p. 9.
[142] See about this e.g. Richard W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave 2007).

My account of the New Woman's trope and its ramifications is largely grounded on the collection of essays edited by Katharina von Ankum *Women in the Metropolis*, which aims to uncover 1920s and 1930s Berlin as 'the city of women', thus highlighting the crucial connection between modern city and gender.[143] Significantly, changing notions of womanhood in the cultural discourse are seen as a reflection of the shifting attitude towards modernization and consumerism in Weimar society. Disillusionment with American economic principles and ways of life in post-war Germany, and subsequent desire for a return to true 'Germanness', is thus paralleled by Von Ankum with the deconstruction of 'imported' models of femininity and with the attempt to return working women to 'Kinder und Küche'.[144] It is in this light that she reads Keun's novel as an anti-progressive narrative, in which the woman's attempt to resist the patriarchal structure of German society and the traditional gender roles it promoted is doomed. This reading reflects the general tendency in literary studies on Keun's novels, which highlight the aspects of sexual commodification and consumerism, confining the works to the field of popular literature. Although feminist criticism has now acknowledged that Keun's novel distances itself from the mass culture of the Angestellten and its literary promises of success, love and marriage, recognising Doris' ability to discern 'reality under the appearance',[145] they deny the woman any possibility of self-determination and autonomous life configuration in the patriarchal structure of Weimar society.[146]

To be sure, as mentioned, the novel stages an ironic gulf between Doris' limited understanding and her aspiration for *Bildung*, yet, Doris' wit and role-playing, which she directs towards men's flaws and hypocrisy, is a tool for resisting her subordinate position and claiming her freedom and rights to self-determination. Lending importance to *Bildung* and its multi-layered meanings allows me to demonstrate that Keun depicts a woman's process of self-awareness, albeit troubled by the social reality of the time and determinants such as class and education, which finally leads her to the choice of an alternative life configuration in a neo-urban orbit on the outskirt of the city. In doing so, I aim to challenge prevailing readings of the novel as a narrative

143 Katharina von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis*: *Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: CA: University of California Press, 1997).
144 Von Ankum, p. 2.
145 See Shafi, p. 317.
146 See e.g. Von Ankum's account in her collection, 'Gendered Urban Spaces in Irmgard Keun's Das Kunstseidene Mädchen', in *Women in the Metropolis*, pp. 162-184.

about female commodification or as an expression of the conservative turn regarding notions of femininity in early 1930s German society, and more generally as anti-developmental narrative.[147]

As the novel depicts the trajectory of Doris, who leaves the province to search for fortune in Berlin, in the first part of the chapter I consider how Doris' provincial background shapes her sense of self and sets her out for her city experience. I also stress the importance of Doris' theatre experience in her hometown, an episode largely overlooked by critics, which becomes relevant if considered as 'apprenticeship' for the masquerade she will enact in Berlin. Examining how the trope of the Young Woman is reworked in this context, I consider how the two elements stressed by Chanda, namely the 'romantic' and the 'social',[148] converge in the concept of 'Glanz' and take on new significance in relation to the woman's claim for *Bildung*. I then focus on Doris' 'masquerade' in Berlin, of which I highlight the emancipatory potential by framing it within the discourse of *Bildung* and the gender dynamics of Weimar society.

Finally, I turn to the novel's ending with the aim of challenging the prevalent view of Doris' trajectory as defeat or regression, and I examine what relation it bears with agency and the tension between conformity and resistance outlined so far. I thus show that, although Doris' quest for becoming someone in the city fails and leads to her becoming disillusioned, the novel opens up a new configuration for potential achievement of selfhood.

1. A Provincial Girl between 'Sentiment' and 'Sachlichkeit'

Like *Fabian*, Keun's novel has been regarded as both a work of New Objectivity and as *Angestelltenroman* given Doris' initial job as a typist – a typically female profession at the time. The new class of office employees was composed in large part by women as a consequence of war and inflation plaguing Germany in the early 1920s and of the need for economic independence of the young generation of women.

147 See e.g. Von Ankum, but also Doris Rosenstein, who speaks of 'Geschichte des Mißerfolgs' (Story of failure): '»Mit der Wirklichkeit auf du und du«? Zu Irmgard Keuns Romanen »Gilgi, eine von uns« und »Das kunstseidene Mädchen«', in Sabina Becker and Christoph Weiß, eds., *Neue Sachlichkeit im Roman. Neue Interpretationen zum Roman der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzer, 1995), pp. 273-290 (p. 287).

148 A.K. Chanda, 'The Young Man from the Provinces', *Comparative Literature*, 33 (Autumn 1981), no. 4, 321-341 (pp. 327-328).

The novel is divided into three parts which follow Doris' moves in and out of Berlin. At the beginning – 'Ende des Sommers und die mittlere Stadt' ('The End of Summer and the Mid-Size Town') – we find Doris in her provincial town, presumably Cologne, where she works as typist, despite her lack of proper education and dreams of a different life. While half of her wage goes to her alcoholic and unemployed father, Doris spends the rest on a new hat as she is aware that the outfit is extremely important for a girl 'das weiter will' and 'Ehrgeiz hat' (11) ('has ambition' and 'wants to get ahead', 5).[149]

As mentioned, the diary is the way through which Doris can construct a certain image of herself, playing with roles to parody men's social posture and supposed '*Bildung*', yet writing also shows her critical gaze and growing self-awareness and gives her strength in moments of despair.

A closer look at the diary entries reveals tensions between Sentiment and Sachlichkeit that are clustered around imagery and construction of a desirable self. This is already evident in one of the first entries, which gives the reader the image of the girl's appearance. Doris' perception – and fantasies – of herself and the world around her are strongly influenced by media, as shown by the will not to write a normal diary – that would be 'lächerlich' (ridiculous) for a trendy girl – but 'wie Film' (8) ('like a movie', 3). Hence, Doris resorts to the image of the popular American actress Colleen Moore, who looks like her were it not for Doris' perm and a more fashionable nose. At the same time, Doris's critical gaze and 'Sachlichkeit' comes out and is directed towards herself too. If looking in the mirror she notices that her left leg is wider than the right one, thinking of a proper beginning for her diary she opts for a dry and factual self-presentation: 'Ich heiße somit Doris und bin getauft und christlich und geboren. Wir leben im Jahre 1931' (10) ('My name is Doris and I'm baptized and Christian and born too. We are living in the year 1932', 4).

The tension between Sentiment and Sachlichkeit is also evident in Doris' attitude towards love, and in particular her first lover Hubert. Lying in bed under the moonlight and listening to the sound of a gramophone in the background, she feels the 'aura' of Hubert surrounding her and wishes he could see her shining in her nightgown. Here the two elements of the romantic and the social proper to the Young Man/Woman's trope seen so far

[149] All original quotations are taken from the 2004 expanded edition of the novel by Ullstein Buchverlage. Translations into English are by Katharina von Ankum from: *The Artificial Silk Girl* (Other Press: New York, 2002).

are hinted at in Doris' ambition of becoming someone and in her desire to be seen, which will be later epitomized by the concept of the 'Glanz' (namely a shine, or better, 'a shimmering beauty').

What is relevant is that Doris shows from the beginning to have a high conception of herself: she perceives that something 'Großartiges' (8), ('wonderful', 1) is happening inside of her, so much that she feels like writing a poem, yet, and here the irony is evident, she is too tired to make it rhyme. Doris's impression of being different, 'unusual' (2) – 'etwas Besonderes' (8) – is accentuated by her surrounding in town, in the first instance the office, as she is aware of having something more than 'Therese und den anderen Mädchen auf dem Büro' (8), the other girls from the office who have nothing special.

Significantly, to validate her impression of being special, Doris calls for both Hubert and Fräulein Vogelsang (literally bird-song), her school teacher who had that feeling after seeing her performing Goethe's poem *Erlkönig*, which links her with the world of nature and thus romanticism. This aspect also hints at the 'artist motif' in relation to the young woman's becoming: Doris defines herself' 'Künstlerin' (29), an artist, shortly after, when she starts working as an extra at the theatre and is convinced, at least at the beginning, that art is something 'Hohes' (35) ('lofty', 27) and thus can lift her up.

Doris distances herself even from her parents, who embarrass her with their dialect, whereas she claims to be able to speak without it. Significantly, as the 'richtiges Deutsch', the real, lively language in which she sets out to write her diary, is opposed to the stiff language of the office, so she states clearly that 'richtige *Bildung*' has nothing to do with commas (9), showing that her will to become someone involves an interrogation of what *Bildung* really implies.

Barndt has recognized that Doris' language, which she defines as a 'Kunstsprache', an artificial language drawing from different dialects, colloquial forms, as well as language of politics and media, has a central role for female identity construction. While she aptly defines Doris' ability to switch codes as a 'lively play with language', [150] I highlight that her supposed naivety and her appropriation of complex concepts has comic effects and additionally satirize patriarchal society and its facade, of which *Bildung* is part.

[150] The mimetical and colourful use of language is apparent in the novel, and Kerstin Barndt has recognised the central role of this 'Spiel mit dem Sprachen', the play with different language codes, in relation to the woman's identity construction. (Barndt, p. 286).

In the same way, Doris' cool, objective gaze, which is part of her mimicry and role playing, interacts with *Bildung* revealing its quality of artifice. What is at stake here is the rationalisation of society, which has brought about what Helmuth Lethen has defined the *Gefühlskälte*, the pose of cool conduct[151] which came to dominate relationships in the afterwar years. Exemplary of this is the episode of Doris' loss of virginity, when she got Hubert to do it despite his concerns, because she was aware that' 'einmal muß es ja doch sein' (19) ('there has to be a first time', 12). On closer look, this attitude proves to be a façade from both sides. Indeed, despite her statement Doris thinks that there must be some love involved – 'Etwas Liebe muß dabei sein' – as she explains to her friend's Therese – otherwise, how about 'die Ideale'? (10, ideals), and she also recalls on many occasions the song they were playing while she was with Hubert, *Das ist die Liebe der Matrosen*. Hubert's concerns, instead, have nothing to do with morality but with the fact that he does not want to have responsibilities towards the woman for being the first one.

Doris' critical gaze thus detects from the onset men's flaws and hypocrisy. Her will to prove that women can see through men better than they see themselves leads her to try to beat them at their own game. While this happens mostly in Berlin, Doris can already test herself in her hometown, first with her boss, renamed 'Pickelgesicht' (23) ('Pimple Face', 16), committing to give him a sensual look for every comma she misses (but she eventually gets fired after rejecting his most overt advances) and then with Herr Grönland. Although she likes the man, Doris plays 'the innocent creature' part by attaching rusty pins on her underwear to resist any temptation, so as to gain his esteem for her 'hohe Moral' ('lofty morals', 7) and get the golden wristwatch she desires without having to give herself to him. The novel recovers the 'picaresque' matrix of the *Bildungsroman* trough Doris' repeated seduction game at the expense of often 'gebildeten' men, who in an ironic twist, prove to be quite easily fooled. Doris expresses her surprise that a 'Studierter' (25), a learned man like her boss, cannot see his own flaws and is so dumb to let himself be deceived by an uneducated girl like her. Her repeated encounters with men and her role-playing thus serve to debunk common understanding about civilisation, as most of time those who have *Bildung* are the ones who have a narrow mind.

[151] See about that Helmut Lethen's classic study *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).

While, as I show in the second part, Doris' play with '*Bildung*' becomes paramount in Berlin, she learns to pretend in her hometown, when she gets a part as extra in the theatre.

The theatre experience, upon connecting the text to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, deserves closer scrutiny as it represents a sort of apprenticeship for the masquerade she enacts in the city, and also gives her a first glimpse in the double-standards and hierarchies linked to class and educational background in place in society. Indeed, while the actresses who have higher education compete for getting the part of a *vivandrière* and thus pronouncing on stage one sentence of a proletarian, off stage they look down on her as they do not consider her worthy. At the same time, if the promising aristocratic actress Mila von Trepper, after blaming Doris for not knowing Hebbel's play *Judith*, comments dryly that 'wird die Kunst immer mehr proletarisiert' (40) ('art is becoming more and more proletarian', 32), she turns friendly as soon as she hears that Doris has an affair with the director. In the theatre Doris learns the art of pretending and to use it to her advantage: not only does she make up an affair with Leo, the director of the play, in order to gain her colleagues' consideration, but also and more significantly, she hides her not knowing things, as she is aware that if you show your ignorance 'dann wird man nur unterdrükt' ('you only get oppressed', 27). Moreover, in picaresque style, Doris eventually gets the coveted sentence only by way of a trick, as she locks in the toilet the odious Trepper who should have uttered it on stage.

That the theatre enshrines class hierarchies is further confirmed when Doris gets an audition for entering drama school. The two directors ask many questions about her educational background and, after her unsuccessful attempt to perform *Erlkönig* as she does not remember the words, they suggest that she tries 'etwas Lustiges' (43) ('something comical', 35).

Doris had already experienced the fact that *Bildung* maintains society's hierarchy and contributes to gender and class inequalities when Hubert ended their affair after finishing his doctorate in physics. A power dynamic was in place in their relationship: while Doris genuinely loved him and 'accommodated' his ambitions ('auf Huberts Ehrgeiz ihn umgestellt', 20), the selfish Hubert ended their relationship just before her birthday without giving her any present, as that was never his thing. Moreover, he left her to marry a woman of his own class. If Doris tries to understand his reasons and works at her 'emotional adjustments' ('[…] arbeite innerlich an meiner Umstellung,

21), she also shows to be aware that he shares with her his moral double standards: although they both know that he is getting married out of interest as his wife-to-be is the daughter of a professor who can launch his career, he patronizes Doris about the importance of preserving her purity, because a 'decent man' wants to marry a virgin, talking proudly with the coldness of someone who has just 'licked out an entire can of cold cream' (14) ('als wenn er eine ganze Dose Niveaucreme aufgeleckt hätte', 21).

Both the theatre experience and the affair with Hubert are central for the multi-layered meaning the 'Glanz' and her aspirations acquire for Doris' quest for self-empowerment. Indeed, when she manages to succeed in the theatre, Doris hopes that Hubert can see her to show him that her ambitions has led her on top, thus levelling their inequalities and reversing the power dynamics between them. A further indicator that *Bildung* actually comes into play in Doris' aspirations is confirmed by the imagined revenge she takes at Hubert and his professor. She imagines meeting the famous Einstein, whose picture she has seen in a newspaper, and, wearing her most elegant dress and a fox collar, she believes she can charm him just by saying that H_20 is water – which is what she learned from Hubert – to the point that he will help her get a career in the film industry (19).

While critical studies on Keun have focused on Doris' dream of becoming someone as an expression of the wish to be famous and live the life of a 'material girl', it is necessary to look closely at what Glanz really means for Doris to acknowledge the full emancipatory potential of her aspirations. While Doris' idea of Glanz is explicitly linked to upward mobility, she also believes, at least initially, that social success can compensate for her lack of education, of which she is painfully aware. Significantly she states that she wants to be a 'Glanz, der oben ist' (45), a star that is 'at the top' (36), as she thinks that, in this way, it won't matter anymore if she does not know anything, as whatever a Glanz does is all right. It is also worth noticing that, if she is invited out by a rich industrialist, this is due to the fact that he believes her to be an established artist, like all her boyfriends who send her flowers filling the otherwise empty theatre on the night of the premiere. However, if Doris briefly enjoys success, she realizes very soon the flip side of being a 'Glanz' and how illusory and self-serving success can be. Significantly, when Hubert comes back because his plans have failed and he believes that Doris is having a career, her belief that social success can protect from pain proves erroneous. To be sure, the fact that he asks her money reverses the

traditional gender dynamics and gives Doris power, yet this does not make her feel any good. To her suggestion that they get back together in a peer relationship as they both have nothing, he does not hide his disappointment, which causes her disgust. Already sensing that he is nothing but a dead memory, their cold sexual encounter gives her the impression of having slept with a photograph. Painful as it is, this experience with Hubert proves educational in that it gives Doris an insight into the logic of exchange driving modern relationships, setting her up for her encounters in the city.

Keeping the 'Feh', the fur coat she had stolen from the theatre cloakroom to impress Hubert and leaving everything behind, Doris is now ready to flee and act out her masquerade in Berlin. If thanks to the theatre experience Doris came to realize what *Bildung*, and the lack of it, entails, the metropolis fuels her desire for self-improvement and upward social mobility, giving her a deeper knowledge of how *Bildung* affects power dynamics at different levels.

1.1. The Arrival in Berlin and the Wish for an 'Education'

While the aspect of upward mobility entailed in the Young Woman's dream of 'Glanz' and success is already hinted at in Doris' theatrical experience in her hometown, it comes to the foreground when she arrives in Berlin.

Katharina von Ankum has pointed out that popular women's novels in the early twentieth century reflected the moral threat that the city represented for naïve, young women from the countryside, many of whom were typists with dreams of fame, placing limitations to their struggle for emancipation. It is through this lens that she interprets Doris' trajectory as doomed, labelling the novel as the 'fictive life story of a fallen woman'.[152] To be sure, Doris' quest for self-realization is undermined by the difficult conditions of late Weimar Berlin, let alone her social background and lack of education; however, her trajectory in the city testifies to a young woman's creative intervention on the conditions of the time, and of the powerful assertion of her right to agency.

On her arrival in Berlin, Doris does not experience the shock of the newcomer, on the contrary she feels the city welcomes her warmly, embracing her like a 'Steppdecke' (67) ('a comforter', 55). By the same token, the many streets having nothing to do with each other, which replace the familiar ones of her hometown, far from disorienting her makes Berlin appear

[152] Von Ankum, p. 174.

‘eine fabelhafte Stadt’ (68) (‘a fabulous city’, 57). Even the busy station of Friedrichstraße, ‘wo sich ungeheures Leben tummelte’ (71), (‘where there is an incredible hustle-bustle’, 60), reinforces her feeling of belonging to the city and Doris lets herself be swept away by the colourful and lively crowd of people. Already sensing an exceptional excitement in the air, she thus ends up in front of the luxurious hotel Adlon, where she witnesses a political riot, with people shouting to the police until two French politicians appear on the balcony. Doris’ limited understanding of the political situation proves, on closer look, as artful as her ‘cool conduct’ and is thus part of her role playing aimed at debunking social posture and (male) hypocrisy. Eager to get a ‘politische (73) Aufklärung’ (‘a political education’, 63) she follows a man with a blue navy shirt, who works for the city. However, if Doris is genuinely interested in getting to know what the politicians had come for, and asks the man questions out of fear of her own ‘stupidity’, the official only tries to impress her by talking about himself and commenting on her eyes ‘wie Brombeeren’ (73) (‘like boysenberries’, 62).

While Doris’ possibilities are limited by her social class and subsequent concerns for economic survival, a painful awareness of lacking knowledge and the wish to improve herself punctuates her city experience. Indeed, her uneasiness for her lack of understanding comes out again later, when she witnesses another riot in a proletarian club behind Alexanderplatz. In those rooms full of books and Hebrew letters on the walls that she cannot read, Doris hears her chaperon talking to the worker, Else, without understanding anything and realizes how stupid it is that there are such ‘ungeheure Ereignisse’ (152) (‘enormous things’, 132) going on in the world she has no idea of. The voices she hears around are like a sleepy hum, and resting her head on Else’s shoulder, which smells like her mother, Doris can’t help falling asleep before she can tell them that she is not into politics – which is quite significant as she is aware that if one has to define oneself these days it is always about politics (‘[…] immer auf die Politik hin’, 152) . It must be noticed that, despite her claimed lack of understanding of politics and ‘Rasse’, Doris knows more than it may seem. Indeed, if seduction appears her most familiar sphere, she recognises that eroticism and politics go together ‘wegen der Rasse und der Überzeugung’ (135) (‘because of race and conviction’,118) and is disgusted of how politics infects relationships, to the point that she wants to ‘spuck’ drauf’ (46) (‘spit on it’, 37). Doris’ awareness that ‘Rasse ist eine Frage’ (46) (‘race is an issue’, 37) derives from her encounters with men

like the rich industrialist who, after noticing her curly hair asks if she is a Jew, and when she answers in the affirmative thinking she would please him, he turns out to be a nationalist and becomes hostile. While Doris' lies can turn against themselves, they also expose the hypocrisy of men, who withdraw their advances to young women not out of morality but to preserve a supposed hierarchy.

While at the beginning in moments of uncertainty and estrangement Doris' thought returns to her mother and her hometown, whose streets 'said hello' to her feet and where the streetlamp still carries what she playfully scratched on it eight years before, as her city experience proceeds, the province, and her beloved ones, start losing the hold they have on her consciousness. Her self-determination is always driven by her aspiration to get ahead or higher, which overcome any sentimental feelings, at least in Doris' intention: 'Ich liebe ja meine Mutter mit einer Sehnsucht und bin doch froh, daß ich fort bin in Berlin, und es ist eine Freiheit, ich werde ein Glanz' (94)('I do love my mother and I miss her, yet I'm so glad I'm away from home and in Berlin, and I'm free and am going to become a star', 81). Significantly, she defines this newly perceived self in relation to her provincial background, as she writes in her diary: 'Mein Leben ist Berlin, und ich bin Berlin. Und das ist doch eine mittlere Stadt, wo ich her bin, und ein Rheinland mit Industrie' (92) ('My life is Berlin and I'm Berlin. And it's a mid-size town after all, where I'm from, and the Rhineland with industry', 78).

The connection between the Glanz and her quest for empowerment in Berlin is made clear by Doris herself. The fur coat she has stolen and which becomes a sort of second skin in the city, does not represent only the commodification of the female body, as most critics have pointed out, but signals the potential acquisition of an upper status. Indeed, Doris' ideal of Glanz, far from being 'non-serious', is linked to her struggle for breaking free of her subordinate role: the fact of being in Berlin marks for her a step forward to the coveted social progress. As she is aware that lacking knowledge is like having no power, so she is convinced that once she is a star she won't have to worry about anything as 'nichts […] an Verlust und Verachtung' (45) ('no loss, no disdain', 37) can happen to her. Even when she feels that the city 'closes itself off', the desire for being a Berliner and belong there still prevails. Soon realizing that her mother cannot really understand how she feels as she is not surrounded by the same 'Fluidum' (61) ('aura', 51), in the Resi, with its table phones and mail chutes, Doris imagines answering the calls of

strangers with the attitude of a top manager, hence 'wahnsinnig gleichgültig' (90) ('completely blasé', 78). However, as I will show, during the course of her city experience Doris develops a more complex, and at times quite ambivalent consciousness towards herself and the reality around her. The tension between Doris' desires and needs on one side, and the demands of society on the other, is once again bound up with an idea and interrogation of the social effects of *Bildung*. On the one hand Doris feels the need to find real closeness with someone – '[…] jeder Mensch ein Ofen ist für mein Herz, was Heimweh hat…' (135) ('every human being is like a stove for my heart that is homesick', 118) – yet on the other hand she is aware that if you want to fit in and be a real Berliner something else is expected: 'Betrunken sein, mit Männern schlafen, viel Geld haben – das muß man wollen, und nichts anderes denken' (119) ('You have to be drunk to sleep with men, to have a lot of money – that's what you have to want and never think of anything else', 104).

It must be noticed that, even though she experiences disillusionment with the city and with her aspirations, unlike for Fabian, a return to the province never represents a viable option for Doris. Sitting in the waiting room at Bahnhof Zoo without certainties nor hopes she wonders what will become of her, yet she is quite firm in her will not to go backwards, as she has come to realise that that 'nicht gut war' (218) ('was no good', 192). Hence, although her provincial background plays a key role in Doris' perception of herself and the reality around her, her trajectory, as I show in the last part of the chapter, is far from reproducing the disillusioned retreat home of the naïve provincial girl dominating the social and cultural discourse of the time.

In this first part, I have examined the role Doris' provincial background plays in her evolving sense of self and in relation to her claim to *Bildung*. I now turn to look more closely at Doris' 'masquerade' in the city in order to show how the novel depicts a New Woman's quest for self-determination in the difficult conditions of late Weimar, engaging with notions of work, consumerism and womanhood in patriarchal society.

2. Woman's Masquerade and Berlin 'Glanz'

As seen, Doris' high expectations lead her to leave her constraining hometown and set off for Berlin to fulfil her dreams. The second part of the

novel, titled ‘Später Herbst – und die große Stadt’ (‘Late Fall and the Big City’) follows Doris’ trials in the metropolis, where she arrives in picaresque style with only 90 marks and the fur coat she has stolen. Keun’s novel has generally been regarded as a narrative of female commodification, documenting the reality of (woman’s) downward mobility in a time of severe economic depression. Highlighting the important role of the ‘Feh’, the fur coat which becomes a second skin in the city for Doris, most scholarship has situated the novel within the discourse that postulates the commodity character of the female body as a marker of modernity. While Gysela Argyle has aptly pointed to the tension staged in the novel between conformity and resistance to the rules of patriarchal society, she also considers the fur coat as a means of self-illusion and sees Doris’ progress as downward in that she exchanges her company and sex for material benefits.[153] To be sure, Doris’ need for economic survival troubles her claim for self-determination, yet, as I show, she uses her charm to get what she wants from men without having ultimately to ‘sell’ her body. Moreover, Doris’ role playing is not only motivated by a desire for material benefits, but also by her yearning for *Bildung* and for being on top, which leads her to search for ‘gebildete’ men and intellectual milieus in the hope this can lift her up despite her limited background.

In this part I thus highlight the emancipatory potential of Doris’ ‘masquerade’ in the city and the mimicry of the ‘Verhaltensweisen’, the cold behaviour driving (urban) relationships, as a means of eschewing the woman’s subordinate position and lay claim to self-determination. Moreover, I examine how the concept of *Bildung* intersects with notions of work in ways which reflect Doris’ complex stances towards the conditions engendered for women by modernity.

On her arrival in Berlin what strikes Doris is ‘das Gefunkel’, the sparkling lights in the west with its display windows and the ‘Lichtreklame’, the neon advertising that illuminates her and her fur coat (67). The element of ‘light’ is (fore)telling here, as Doris’ changing attitude towards the ‘Glanz’ and everything connected to it marks the stages of her process of self-awareness. The ‘Glanz’ is foreshadowed by the women Doris sees walking ‘mit hochmütigen Beinen’ (67) (‘with arrogant legs’, 56) and wearing moleskin

[153] ‘Loving Weimar Berlin with a Smile and Angst: Irmgard Keun und Christopher Isherwood’, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 35(4), 277-293, (p. 279).

furs along the Kurfürstendamm, the rich commercial street in the heart of West Berlin.

The novel's emphasis on appearance and fashion demands closer attention in relation to woman's identity construction in Weimar Berlin. While the modern metropolis represented the primary stage for the display of the female body, the turn to fashion, especially among white-collar workers and proletarians, can be regarded as 'a progressive move' allowing women to play with roles and (sexual) identities and to transgress old class and social boundaries.[154] Hence, seen from this perspective the artificial silk of the title acquires another potential meaning, as it would hint at the possibility of (upward) mobility for women from lower social classes, like Doris.[155] While the fur-coat makes Doris outwardly recognisable as a commodity, it also becomes, as said, the signifier for social success and, thus, for her claim to empowerment. Hence, if Doris embodies, like the female characters of Kästner's novel, what Suzanne Smith calls a 'self-conscious commodity',[156] her role-playing allows her to see through the functions of bürgerliche *Bildung*, or civilization, disobeying patriarchal codes of behaviour and contributing to her self-awareness.

Patrizia McBride has aptly connected the novel to the *Bildungsroman* tradition, of which it represents a 'parodic commentary' as it portrays a character who aspires to bourgeois affluence and respectability, while questioning that very bourgeois culture and its self-serving stiffness in the face of the new realities of mass culture and capitalism.[157] Significantly, if in the course of her city experience Doris learns to see through the surface appearance of Weimar glamour, this involves understanding the uses of *Bildung* in modern society. As the Glanz proves to be a projection, so *Bildung* is nothing but a façade which shuts off transition between classes and enshrines gender and class hierarchy. Simultaneously, a genuine admiration and yearning for *Bildung* and what it allows in modern society shapes Doris' sense of self and her quest for empowerment. This ambivalence around

[154] See Sabine Hake, 'In the Mirror of Fashion', in *Women in the Metropolis*, pp. 185-201 (p. 194).

[155] As Janet Ward points out, rayon, which she defines 'the most dynamic fashion material' of the 1920, 'democratized female dress like no other before'. (Ward, p. 86).

[156] Suzanne Smith, *Berlin Coquette: prostitution and the New German Woman*, 1890-1933 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 18

[157] Patrizia McBride, 'Learning to see in Irmgard Keun's *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*', *The German Quarterly*, 84.2 (Spring 2011), 220-238 (p. 223).

Bildung ensures Keun's novel participates in the modernist project of recuperation and critical reappraisal of *Bildung*.

A critical stance towards the commodification of culture engendered by the conditions of modernity emerges, for instance, in Doris' experience with the 'long-haired men' ('mit dem längerem Haaren von Männern', 103) von M at the Romanisches Café,[158] which she describes as extremely educational ('Ich bildete mich ungeheuer', 103), to the point of comparing it with the learning of a foreign language. The ironical stance here is obvious, considering that the 'gebildete Individualität', the intellectual elite, spend all day playing chess and criticizing everything, while Doris makes lists of foreign words whose meaning she has to find out on her own. If she feels an artist too in the company of the intellectuals and can look down on guys with beer bellies, the only thing she learns is what is a symbol, which, as the intellectuals 'explain' to her 'fits into any context' (90): 'ein Symbol ist das, was immer paßt' (105).

While the Romanisches Café and those who people it are considered as 'degenerate' by society ('herabgekommen', 103), the nadir of bourgeois *Bildung* in Berlin and its being coopted by entertainment is epitomised by the basement club where Doris ends up with a slimy type, renamed 'Schmiß' (145), Scarface (126). Here, in a grotesque scene which resembles Paul Müller's performance at the Anonymous Cabaret in *Fabian*, they witness the downfall of Herbert, a former journalist and member of the elite: he now gets one mark per night to burn a newspaper bag he holds on his nose, while kneeling down and making faces in Tyrolean pants to entertain the audience who laughs at him. If in Kästner's novel Fabian and Labude made conversations in night clubs, in this case Doris has to bear the Scarface who 'lectures' her about sex pretending it is 'serious science' ('Gespräche von strenger Wissenschaft über Erotik',147), and strives to hide her contempt to avoid confirming men's belief that 'Frauen denken sich immer was bei!' (147) ('women always have a dirty mind', 127).

McBride has pointed out that Doris undergoes an 'education in vision', as she learns to see through her own self-delusion, yet she considers agency as limited to taking charge of her own status as object of the male gaze, without challenging the dominant gender hierarchy.[159] By contrast, I show

[158] A famous café in West-Berlin, in the district of Charlottenburg, it was a meeting point for left-wings intellectuals until the Nazis' took control, and it was destroyed during WW2.

[159] McBride, p. 226.

that Doris' appropriation of a sober, male gaze is not only instrumental to detecting the flaws and double standards of Weimar society, but it is also a tool for reversing traditional gender dynamics and lay claim for her position as autonomous subject.

Exemplary of this is Doris' flânerie through Berlin with Herr Brenner, her neighbour and blind veteran she leads through Berlin, becoming his gaze and collecting images for him. At the beginning, Doris's roving eye projects the Glanz she wants to be on whatever she sees: everywhere swirling lights, the *Gloria Palast* shimmering like a castle, and then women with the newest hairstyle – the 'Windstoß' (102), ('windblown', 88) – with shiny eyes and black furs looking like actresses, and even herself walking fast with them in her soft fur. Doris thus produces dreamlike images – her eyes 'erwarten ein Ungeheures' (102) ('expecting the impossible', 88) – of herself and the city, which she claims as her own creation, 'resting in [her] lap' (87): 'Ich bringe ihm Berlin, das in meinem Schoß liegt' (100). However, while she tries to convince herself that everything is 'wunderbar' (105), wonderful, she soon detects misery and unhappiness lurking behind these dreamy projections. In the exotic scenario of Haus Vaterland, the lights reveal worn out faces of girls and men struggling to make ends meet in Berlin, which leads Doris to reflect on whether anybody is really happy in the city.

It is telling that, while Doris wants Brenner to like [her] Berlin, once on the streets the blind man senses that the city, with its misery and noisy crowds, is anything but 'krank' (118) ('sick', 103). Significantly, it is with Brenner, who cannot partake in the consumerist display culture of Berlin nor cast his gaze on her, that Doris finds emotional closeness, albeit briefly. Upon feeling a real joy for the hand-made wooden beads he gives her, she also (re)gains a homey impression when his hands move around her feet, warming her like the candles they used to lit at home for Christmas while singing *Silent Night, Holy Night*.

Doris' appropriation of a male, surgical gaze is brought to extreme when, answering to Brenner's question about what she looks like, she plays the part of an enormous man, a doctor who examines her body objectively: a nice figure, a bit thin but so the (modern) times require and black-brown eyes similar to the silk pompons of his mother. However, also here this 'sachlich' attitude gives soon way to a less objective description of herself, with Doris reclaiming her rights to give her own image of herself, as the switch to the first person signals. Here the usual irony is added in Doris' false prudishness:

she claims to be ashamed of talking about her stomach – which is white and 'erstklassig', 'first class' – and that she cannot go on talking about what's above the knees because 'Schenkel' is a 'furchtbar unanständiges Wort' (98) ('thighs is such a terribly naughty word', 85).

Doris' relationship with Brenner reverses the traditional gender dynamics which posits woman as the object of men's gaze and desire. On closer look, her various encounters with men prove to be a series of attempts to eschew their assaults and get what she wants without having to give herself to them, as the episode with 'der rote Mond', the Red Moon, the conservative writer who invites her home as his wife is on vacation, testifies. While he calls Doris 'Kleine' (79) ('little woman', 67) and feels superior because of his status and his 'Kultur', he does not hide that he has tenets such as 'Männer dürfen und Frauen dürfen nicht' (79) ('men can, women cannot',67), which causes her outraged reaction: 'Idiot!' (79). In the man's house full of books and expensive trinkets, the only thing Doris enjoys is the Danziger Goldwasser as it is like tiny pieces of gold in a pond, yet she refrains from catching them as she knows that would be 'so ungebildet' (80) ('highly uneducated', 68). On this occasion, Doris shows that she has started developing a more complex consciousness of gender dynamics, and wonders if there are men who respect women to the point that they can wait until they want to, thus letting women decide. The second time at the old man's house he leads her to the bedroom and lets Doris take one of his wife's undershirts from Bamberg silk only to attack her 'wie Sturmwind' (84), like a hurricane. To avoid his advances, Doris pretends to be curious of his most-acclaimed novel, easily getting him to read from it. Although Doris sets out, at least initially, to listen, she soon gets bored of old-fashioned braided maiden and vineyards without end and, as a reward, takes another of those undershirts. In a comical scene, while the proud man assures her every three pages that the novel is going to get refined, every five pages Doris takes another shirt and stuffs it under her dress, until none is left and she can escape with a swollen bust and the mocking excuse that she needs peace to reflect on what she has listened (85).

Suzanne Smith has made the relevant case that Keun's novel, despite being usually read as a 'women's novel', focuses less on women than on gender altogether, presenting via Doris' encounters in the city a broad spectrum of male characters.[160] While Doris' mimicry and subversive play

[160] Smith, p. 180.

with roles is enacted most clearly with men, I want to stress that the women she meets and the feelings of solidarity she develops for them deepens her self-awareness as an emotional and moral being.

On closer scrutiny, like Fabian, Doris has some conception of morality and believes in certain ideals from the outset, as shown by the conversations with Therese, her only female friend in her hometown. While her claim of being too 'moral' to let her suitor see that she has rusty pins under her dress sounds comical, she seriously warns Therese not to let someone talk to her in the street, as one owes oneself 'self-respect': 'man muß immerhin auf sich halten' (7). This also marks the difference between Doris and the ordinary office girl: if, for Therese, having ideals means being faithful to a penniless married man who, by her own admission will never get divorced, Doris dryly concludes that she is not 'that much into ideals' (4): 'so ideal bin ich wieder nicht' (10). However, it is evident that Therese represents a point of reference for Doris, who truly cares for her. Were it not for Therese, who is always curious of hearing Doris' stories, she would not have the impression of having such 'fabelhafte Erlebnisse' (18) ('fabulous adventures', 12) even in her hometown. More significantly, Doris shows that she appreciates Therese because she is alien to the logic of exchange which drives all relationships: while everybody wants 'so horribly much and loudly', it is a relief for Doris that Therese expects nothing.

In the city Doris' contact with women from different milieus gives her insights into different aspects of (new) womanhood, deepening her awareness of the limits of modern female condition. Furthermore, Doris' feelings of empathy and compassion towards other women lead her to behave in highly moral and selfless ways. This happens for instance when she arrives in Berlin and visits Therese's friend 'Margretchen' Weissbach, who struggles in her one-bedroom apartment with her unemployed husband and a baby in the womb. While the two women feels immediately close as they know they share the same condition, Doris calls the midwife and sits next to Margarete during the labour. Significantly, not only Doris pays the midwife despite having little money for her own survival, while Margarete's husband sits helplessly smoking cigarettes, but seeing the woman's suffering she also feels guilty she cannot share her pain. In particular, Doris' relationship with Tilli Scherer and later with the prostitute Hulla is paramount as it makes Doris realize that the promise of women's emancipation brought about by the conditions of modernity have not been held.

Tilli embodies a sort of double for Doris in that she also wants to become a star but does not get any part, yet she lets Doris stay at her place without asking for money, a generosity Doris exchanges with lending Tilli her beloved fur coat. While the two women's living condition is extremely precarious – they have nothing to eat and stay in bed as they are too hungry – their life changes for the worst when Tilli's husband, the 'harter' (hard), Albert (128), becomes unemployed and gets back home. Tilli has to start cleaning at a restaurant to keep the household and Doris' life is endangered as she has to leave without having anyone at all. Also, in this case Doris acts selflessly, and morally, in that she decides to withdraw despite Tilli's will and her own fear of what will become of her, when Albert starts to get closer to her, as she respects that 'ist doch Tilli ihrer' (122) ('he is Tilli's!', 106). Moreover, Doris shows to be more aware of women's rights and claims for gender equality in the sexual sphere: while Tilli blames men for wanting 'nur das' (99) ('only that one thing', 85), Doris states firmly that men and women have the same feelings and desires. The difference, even between women, is due to social determinants, as Doris comes to realize. As she expresses quite strongly later on, a young bourgeois woman who marries an old man for money and nothing else is judged differently than a woman from a lower class like Doris who sleeps with a man just because she likes him: while the former, with her 'pious look on her face' ('guckt fromm') is called a German mother and 'a decent woman' ('eine anständige Frau'), the latter is just 'a whore and a bitch' (73) ('eine Hure und ein Schwein', 85).

Doris gets to know more closely another aspect of modern womanhood when she meets Hulla, the prostitute living upstairs. If, early on, Doris believed that the life of a prostitute was more interesting than that of an office girl, as the first had at least her own 'Geschäft' (183), a business granting her independence, she now realizes that the picture is more complex and that men's money affects women's work in different ways.

Also living in Tilli's apartment complex are the pimp Rannowsky and the four girls who work for him and who only get beaten in return as he despises women and prefers his four goldfish to them. Doris' changing attitude towards one of them, Hulla, marks her further progress as a human being. While at the beginning she keeps her distance from the dyed-blonde woman with the vulgar attire as she feels superior to her, little by little Doris realizes that their condition is not so different. Looking at the poor woman's face with bandaids Doris cannot help being kind and gives her money for feeding the goldfish as

she realizes that, due to the man's violence on her, Hulla cannot work. It is via the contact with the 'Rannowsky's woman' that Doris starts to reflect on how men's money affects women's life, becoming aware that women's life is constrained by the rules of patriarchal society. This awareness finds confirmation when she meets the rich industrialist Gouda and goes to live for a while in his elegant apartment on the Kurfürstendamm. While appreciating not having to worry about surviving, Doris wonders what's the use of having a lot of money only for oneself, and once again acts selflessly using it to pay back Therese and send nine canaries to her mother who always wanted one. Moreover, thinking that as a Hulla what you get are 'Automaten' (125) ('automatons', 110) rather than real men, Doris comes to the realization that, in the end, she, and any woman, should want someone much worthier – a thought maybe nurtured by the many novels she now reads.

As Doris understands that Hulla is a victim of capitalist economy and the patriarchal rules of modern society, she gets closer to her. It is with her that Doris shares tears for the death of Rannowski's beloved goldfish Lolo, which Hulla kills to take revenge after discovering that the scar on her mouth will never go away. Doris' attempt to calm the terrified 'bandaid lady', who foresees her destiny when Rannowsky will discover what she has done, proves vain: Doris can only helplessly witness Hulla jumping out of the window and taking her life one moment before Rannowski enters the room. While with this act Hulla has at least managed to reassert her freedom, Doris is only left to blame men once more, whose money makes many women into Hullas.

In this part I have examined the multiple meanings the concept of Glanz acquires in relation to Doris' aspiration and claims for agency. Focusing on Doris' role-playing in the city, I have also considered how the novel engages with the discourse of *Bildung* and its critique, staging a tension between conformity and resistance to the rule of patriarchal society. In particular, I have shown how the relationship with other women, and the development of feelings of empathy and solidarity for them, contributes to the deepening of Doris' self-awareness. I now turn to the third part of the narration in order to show that Doris' awareness of herself, and of the female modern condition, grows larger as she gets a deeper insight into what *Bildung*, and the lack of it, implies. Moreover, focusing on the ending, of which I seek to offer an alternative reading, I highlight that Doris' choice, far from being a limitation

to her freedom, proves that she has reached full awareness of herself as a social and moral human being.

3. Work together in a ‘Laubenkolonie’

After leaving Tilli’s house, Doris finds herself in a sort of limbo, spending most of her time in the waiting room of Bahnhof Zoo without knowing what she wants. Here she meets Karl, a real Berliner with brassy ash-blonde hair and ‘mit ganz frechem Dialekt’ (149) (a ‘cheeky dialect’, 129), who goes around with his tray selling odd things. It is Karl who tells her about socialism and asks her to come and work with him in his ‘Laubenkolonie’, the garden colony on the outskirts of the city. Karl used to work as a fitter but now is unemployed like many young people, and looks at socialism with hope, seeing in it a possible way out of the ‘Schlamassel mit em dicken Ende’ (152) (the ‘big mess’ they live in, 131). While Doris initially refuses his offer because she has ‘Ehrgeiz’ (151) (‘ambition’, 131), Karl foresees for her a hard life on the street, opposing to the ‘Quatsch’, the nonsense ambitions of people who want to become someone without any effort a life of hard and honest work – ‘allerehrlichste Anstrengung und Arbeit’ (151). The aspect of work, which is opposed to Doris’ aspirations, becomes central in the last part of the narration and marks a further step in her process of self-awareness.

It is in this phase that Doris experiences first-hand the harshness of the city and its dwellers, and the risk of falling becomes real. While she still resists men who approach her on the street believing she is a prostitute and claims to be a lady, she sleeps one night in a cab as she has nowhere to go.

Shortly after, Doris hears of Tilli’s arrest due to her husband’s dirty trades from a common friend she is sitting with in a café; the same friend is taken by the police while Doris hides with Frau Molle, the restroom attendant. To Doris’ promise to return the favour, the woman replies dryly that someone ‘der mal bei’s Rutschen ist’ (150) (who has started to ‘slide’, 130) cannot easily get back on their feet, thus foretelling her definite fall.

When Doris would seem to be hitting rock bottom, resigned now to go around selling flowers and let someone talk to her ‘mit allem was zugehören’ (153) (‘and whatever else’,133) for money, she meets Ernst. The experience with Ernst, who belongs to the ‘gebildete Bürgertum’, the educated and cultured bourgeoisie, deserves closer scrutiny in the last part of my analysis as it gives Doris a deeper insight into the uses of *Bildung* and what

'civilization' has brought about. It is worth noting that, while Ernst, who has been left by his wife and feels alone, offers Doris a safe haven, entering the man's apartment she feels uncomfortable for her subordinate position. As the cold marble does not welcome her, so she does not like standing 'machtlos' (156) ('powerless') while the landlord masters his many keys, which puts him in the position of holding 'the upper hand' (135) – 'das gibt him Überlegenheit' (156).

Doris experiences something new with Ernst, as this relationship reverses the logic of exchange which used to hold sway in her previous encounters with men. It has been stressed that at Ernst's house Doris gives up her mobility and (sexual) freedom for the 'limited experiential sphere of the housewife', which confines her outings in the city to shopping and walks with him in the evening.[161] I want to highlight, however, that it is thanks to her encounter with the bourgeois man that Doris gets to know better how *Bildung*, and the lack of it, make one considered in modern capitalist society.

It is worth noting that, at the advertiser's house, where every object displays something of 'good family' (140) ('hat viel von besserer Familie', 161), written on it, Doris seems to forget about her past and does not find any words to talk about herself. If she speaks very little and in an 'educated' manner (144) ('gebildet', 165) to impress him, she also tries to find emotional closeness with the man, in the first instance by showing him her diary. This passage is telling as it makes clear Doris' ambivalence between her wish for being true to herself and the attempt to conform to Ernst, and societal, standards. While she is more concerned with covering her weaknesses and the moments in which she felt 'different', she refuses to be the 'silly civilized product' (153) ('alberne zivilisierte Einbildung', 176) Ernst wants to make of her. Indeed, Ernst is shown to cling on to stiff bourgeois concepts of respectability and morality, which underpin his conviction that men like him who always did their duty have to patiently bear the inadequacies and flaws of women like his wife who 'laufen wohl immer mal fort, (165) ('like to run away', 144). This leads him to believe that Doris has naively fled from home without realising how dangerous Berlin was and advises her to write to her parents. Moreover, if his idea of 'Sittsamkeit', decency, implies not wanting to be paid back for giving Doris shelter, he expects her to clean and take care of the house. In the same way, believing Doris to be an innocent girl and claiming to be glad she has met him 'just in time', Ernst tries to convince her

[161] Von Ankum, p. 178.

to return the stolen coat and to find a job, both things she rejects firmly. To add further irony and prove the fictitious character of Ernst's bourgeois respectability, the books on his bedside table are all works by writers who challenged bourgeois morality and praised sexual freedom – like Baudelaire and Sappho.

It is worth noting that, after getting to know more about Doris' story, Ernst wants to have a 'Gespräch', a serious talk which for him means giving Doris a lecture on the ethics of work. This conversation is relevant as work intersects here closely with *Bildung* in ways which shows Doris' attempt to (re)claim her value and a space for herself, countering the logic of exchange dominating capitalist society.

While she is aware that her lack of *Bildung* won't earn her much more than an unfulfilling job and only 120 marks for an eight-hour working day, she enjoys doing the housework because that is detached from money and allows her to do something for the good of another person. Significantly, keeping house Doris learns to 'economize' and becomes aware of money's worth, to the point that when Ernst gives her money to buy red velvet as his wife used to do, Doris purchases a goose and cooks it.

Hence, at this stage, Doris starts to see the difference between working for money, which keeps one in a subordinate position and is the main option for a girl of her standing, and working for free. This consideration is relevant at it leads Doris to her final decision of working together with a man outside the city, free of any kind of charge (be it sex or money).

It must be noticed that, although detecting Ernst's flaws and stiffness, Doris has a genuine admiration for the *Bildung* he possesses as she thinks that having *Bildung* can make one gain (self-)consideration, and compensate for the lack of social position or money. Indeed, she hopes that getting closer to him would give her an education – 'Vielleicht macht er mir auch eine Bildung dann' (196).

At the same time, Doris comes slowly to realize that, while her prospects are limited by her lowly background, things are not better for women of higher classes, as Doris' insights into Ernst's wife's condition demonstrate. In her diary notes, Doris is initially envious of Hanne's higher culture and elegance, yet playing the wife part she starts to understand why the woman was unhappy and becomes aware of how marriage represses not only woman's sexuality, but also other meaningful forms of female self-expression. As at the man's house Doris does not have much to write in her diary anymore so

Ernst's wife sacrificed her dreams of becoming a dancer to marry him, thus losing her ability to create something out of her 'inner self' (166) ('Schaffenkönnen aus sich selbst heraus', 190), as Doris realizes.

Even if Doris claims to enjoy the housework, she seems to give higher value to independence and shows that she has a low consideration of marriage from early on, as emerges when she describes her parents. While her mother works in a theatre cloakroom and still has a certain style from the days when 'she had a life', Doris sees the cause of her downfall in her father, 'eine jahrelange Leiche' (27) ('dead body', 20) who only acts in the company of other women, or when he loses his temper at home. It is also worth mentioning that, by her own admission, Doris refuses to read the book by the Dutch doctor Hendrik van de Velde Therese gave her (172), which is arguably his famous treatise *Ideal Marriage*, a sort of manual highlighting the technique of eroticism as the art for a lasting marriage.

It becomes then clearer what Glanz means for Doris' quest for empowerment and self-determination. In Doris' perception the Glanz brings with it not only a (superficial) status of being glamorous and beautiful, but also the idea of being independent. To the uneventful married life of a Lorchen Grünlich, who has settled down and is content with the bourgeois routine of baking a simple *Gugelhupf* cake for her family on a Sunday, Doris opposes the elegant women dressed in ermine and with Parisian scents she sees walking in the streets of Berlin. Significantly, if even the luxury Hotel Adlon bows down to them, and they sleep on refined pillows exhaling crowns from their mouth, these women shine with their own light and although diplomats and rich men want them, they do not need anyone as they are their 'own entourage' (70) – ('sie sind ihre eigne Umgebung', 82). It must be recalled here that the meaning *Kunstseide*, 'artificial silk' is given by Doris herself is strictly connected to this idea of self-determination and independence. As she explains to Brenner when she leads him through Berlin, women should never wear artificial silk when they are with a man, as 'it wrinkles too quickly' (94) ('die zerknautscht dann so schnell', 109) ruining the woman's skin. Hence, while *Reine Seide*, pure silk, makes her think of her past love Hubert and his passionate kiss, the artificial silk she wears and which defines her, and women of her class, is a signifier of Doris' quest for (sexual) autonomy and her will to stand on her own feet.

In light of this, Doris' decision to leave Ernst's house and let him get back together with his wife can be seen not as a defeat, or a failure in her quest

for love, but a choice driven by the awareness that social boundaries cannot be easily overcome. What breaks Doris' romantic dream is less the fact that Ernst says his wife's name while kissing her by candlelight than the realisation that, to be kept by a man with a stable income is the easiest way of life, maybe too easy for a girl like Doris who needs 'more of a challenge'. While the life of a Hanne has come to a 'standstill', Doris refuses to be constrained in the role of wife – a telling image in this sense is that of Doris who, running the vacuum cleaner in the house, breaks the 'wife's picture' (150): 'Aus versehen mache ich das bild von der Frau mal eben kaputt' (172).

Anyway, it would be unwise to underestimate the importance of Doris' feelings towards Ernst for her self-betterment. Reassured by his moss-like voice and by his kindness, she wants him to read her diary as she genuinely feels the need to open herself to him – 'Ich will richtig als Doris hier sein' (175) ('I want to be the real Doris here', 153) – without playing any part. Moreover, her feelings lead her to behave selflessly when she tries to convince Hanne to come back home, and accepts, at least in theory, to return the fur as he asked.

It has been noticed, as said, that Doris' life with Ernst limits her flânerie to brief outings for shopping, yet the episode of the street market needs closer scrutiny when considering Doris' growing self-awareness. The vivacity of the street and the words she hears from the vendors, which make her feel full of life, contrast sharply with the silent coldness and the sterility of her household with Ernst. Significantly, in the market Doris meets Herr Kreuzweisser, Karl's father, who sells salmon at one of the stands and gives her a card from his son. If Doris genuinely likes Karl's bold words – as she admits she always gets on so well with him – they make her realize the distance between her and Ernst, who do not enjoy the same things instead: 'Wir finden ja aber gar nicht dasselbe schön' (201). Likewise significant is that it is Karl's mocking reminder of her ambitions – 'Haste noch immer dein Ehrgeiz – kannste mich mal' (200) ('You still got your ambition – kiss my…', 176) – while she is fulfilling her homemaker's duties, which makes Doris understand how attainable her wish for having an education is: 'Vater unser, mach mir noch mit einem Wunder eine feine *Bildung* – das übrige kann ich ja selbst machen mit Schminke' (202-203) ('Heavenly Father, perform a miracle and give me an education – I can do the rest myself with make up', 177).

The last part of the narration reveals that Doris' stance towards *Bildung* is rather ambivalent. Looking at the many books on Ernst's shelves and

thinking of the fact that he, like his wife Hanne, has higher education, whereas she only went to lower-level school, Doris doubts herself. However, similarly to Fabian, she also openly questions the validity of such *Bildung*, intended as scholarly education (it is translated in English as 'education'), in favour of a broader idea of personal development. As she reflects, while at school they can teach you to speak a foreign language or to cook and embroider, how to get along alone in harsh conditions or to feel empathy for others, hence to be 'ein richtiger Mensch', a real human being, you can only learn by experiencing it first-hand, as Doris has done.

After leaving Ernst's house, Doris finds herself again without hopes or certainties about herself and her future. I would like to stress that, in my view, her final 'Schwebezustand' (uncertain position), which Shafi connects to the specific condition of women trying to negotiate a space for themselves in a patriarchal society,[162] is also to be understood in relation to *Bildung*. Indeed, Doris' feeling of non-belonging stems from the realization that the lack of *Bildung* dooms her to be with someone 'ohne Bildung', uneducated like her, although she would never get used to them, and yet someone 'mit Bildung', would never get used to her (217). While Doris' destiny is unsure, her final choice seems to be the flight to the 'Laubenkolonie', the garden colony on the outskirts where she can work together with Karl:

Und werde jetzt doch erst losfahren, den Karl suchen, er wollte mich ja immer – und werde ihm sagen: Karl wollen wir zusammen arbeiten, ich will deine Ziege melken und Augen in deine kleinen Puppen nähen, ich will mich gewöhnen an dich mit allem, was dabei ist – du mußt mir nur Ruhe lassen und Zeit… (218).

I'm going to look for Karl after all, he always wanted me – and I'll say to him: Karl, let's work together. I will milk your goat and stitch eyes on your little dolls, and I will get used to you with everything that's involved – but you have to give me time and you have to leave me alone... (191).

Katharina von Ankum has made the relevant case that 1930s Germany witnessed disillusionment with modernization, which was paralleled by the deconstruction of the American myth of the 'New Woman'. Significantly, she recognises that the return to more traditional gender roles (namely those of

[162] Shafi, p. 324.

wife and mother) was paralleled by a reorientation towards the provinces and away from the city.[163]

The narrative makes it clear that the space of the garden colony and a life of work there functions in overt opposition to a life in the streets. When Doris first meets Karl, the native Berliner who is always in a good mood, he asks her to leave her fur coat – as shown, the symbol of Doris' identification with a commodity – to come and work 'honestly' with him in his cottage: 'Warum der Pelz' – komm mit mir, helf mir 'n bißchen, arbeete mit mir' (149) ('Why that fur coat? Come with me, help me a little, work with me', 129). 'Laubenkolonien' emerged in the 1860s and were a product of a nascent socialist movement growing out of a working-class self-organization, and thus were part of a proletarian urban culture.[164]

The fact that the Laubenkolonie is politically charged is confirmed by Karl's overt sympathy with socialism, and indeed the kind of relationship that Doris seems to set up with him shares affinities with the socialist sexual utopia.

As suggested, Karl depicts this life outside the city as an alternative to prostitution, which he considers as the only possibility for a girl 'so niedlich im Gesichte und auch sonst (149) (with 'such a cute face and all the rest', 130). While I agree that Doris' giving up her glamorous dreams in the city implies a refusal to commodify her body,[165] I suggest that this does not represent a regression, or the acceptance of a traditional, male-defined life pattern, as von Ankum would have it.[166] The novel leaves different options open to Doris, like that of becoming a Glanz – she has not given back the fur eventually – or even a prostitute, as she has realized that a Hulla may be a better person than a star. Although she still thinks of Ernst, she finally decides to look for Karl, yet the kind of relationship she (re)conceives with him is far from conventional. While Doris accepts to work *together with* Karl for what it seems mutual support rather than money, she is also quite determined to give him some time 'ohne Erotik' (without sex) as she has learned that

163 See her introduction to *Women in the Metropolis*, pp. 2-3.

164 On the history of allotment gardens in Germany, from their origins in the 1860s Schrebergärten to their clearances under the 'Neues Bauen' housing programme between 1924 and 1930 see e.g. Mark Hobbs, 'Farmers on notice': the threat faced by Weimar's Berlin garden colonies in the face of the city Neues Bauen housing programme, in *Urban History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (May 2012), 263-284.

165 See McCormick, p. 145.

166 This has been in part recognized by Monika Shafi, who considers Doris' ending as a move out of the patriarchal system ('nicht mehr den patriarchalischen Rollenmustern folgend'), yet not as a real possibility of autonomy. Shafi, pp. 314-325.

sexuality goes together with love – 'Das ist die Liebe' (217) ('That's love, 191). As McCormick has recognised, Doris' final decision can be seen as expression of a class-conscious solidarity in that she accepts a companionship with a man of her same class, eschewing the logic of monetary exchange which dominates in Berlin.[167] Hence, while Doris in the city has always been only das 'Mädchen vom Wartesaal' (210), the girl waiting for becoming someone, the Laubenkolonie is the space where she can assert her value as human being and her autonomy in the sexual and working spheres, realizing herself fully.

In this chapter I have examined how Keun's novel participates in the modernist critical reappraisal of *Bildung*, depicting a Young Woman's claim for agency in the difficult conditions of Weimar patriarchal society. Framing the novel within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, I have thus considered how some of the motifs of the genre, like the confessional and the picaresque, are reconceived in light of woman's sense of self. As the novel, like *Fabian*, depicts a Young Woman's trajectory from the province to the city, I have stressed how the two elements proper to the Young Man/Woman type, the romantic and the social, are reaccentuated via the concept of the 'Glanz' and its multi-layered significance in relation to *Bildung*. Finally, foregrounding the novel's ending, I have tried to demonstrate that Doris' final choice represents an autonomous life configuration, and not a regression or a male-defined pattern as most critics would have it. Showing that Doris can definitively assert her value of individual and her (sexual) autonomy in a peer relationship, working with a man of her same social class in a garden colony out of the city and its monetary logic, I have thus tried to offer a fresh critical perspective on the question of female identity formation which accounts for the new womanhood emerging out of the experience of modernity.

[167] Yet he reads it once again as 'a measure of shrinking possibilities, especially for women, as the Weimar economy collapsed'. McCormick, p. 145.

Chapter 4

Bildung on the Edge, the Edge of *Bildung*: Ada Capuana's *La città nuova*

After examining how the Young Woman's trope intersects with notions of female agency and the tension between personal desire and social demands in Weimar Berlin, I now turn to consider what women's claim for *Bildung* entails in *La città nuova* (*The New City*, 1934) by the largely forgotten Italian writer Ada Capuana. Although the story unfolds in the peripheral location of Sicily during Fascist dictatorship, the text shares similarities in both form and content with Keun's novel in its division into three parts – each one called 'Tempo' – which follow the protagonist's move from her rural town to the city. Moreover, as in Keun, the woman's ambivalent position between conformity and resistance is related to *Bildung* and, in this case, to ideas of womanhood in the context of Fascist rule. As for Doris, the protagonist Gaetana's claim for agency and self-determination involves role-playing in the city, which in this case also implies crossing gender boundaries. My reading aims to show how such a novel of Italian literature, so far considered minor, participates in fact in the modernist critical reappraisal of *Bildung* reflecting on its potential and limits in relation to Fascist discourse on women's role in post-war society.

In the first part of the chapter I examine what significance the relationship centre/periphery takes in the context of Fascist rule. I thus show what *Bildung*, mostly for women, entails under Fascist dictatorship and how the concept is reworked in relation to urban space and changing gender roles which affected Italy during the interwar years. I also stress the role played by conversation, linked to youth and ideals, for a recuperation of the aesthetico-spiritual *Bildung* which Gregory Castle recognizes as central to the modernist project.

If the woman's potential self-determination seems to be limited by her background and the Fascist ideals, I show that the city, albeit a smaller one in this case, is the place where Gaetana can play with roles, like Doris, fashioning herself. In this sense, Capuana's novel also stages a tension between personal desire and social demands, which punctuates the young woman's path and leads to her liminal position in the end. While the novel seems to depict a linear developmental trajectory, with the woman's eventual

integration into Fascist society, in fact it critically reappraises the limits of *Bildung* and the options available for women in Italian patriarchal society.

My account is grounded in Marina Zancan's work *Il doppio itinerario della scrittura*, which traces the history of women's writing in modern and contemporary Italy, taking two facts as the starting points of her inquiry: the first is the undeniable absence of women, who have always remained external to the canon of Italian literature, emerging at best as rare presences in its critical and historiographical discourse.[168] The second is, instead, the *presence* of a female subjectivity actively involved in the practice of writing. In particular, in the twentieth century the role gained by women in the cultural sphere is recognized as only one of the effects of the complex modernization of the country. However, as Zancan points out, the growth of literary society assimilates this new presence without changing *de facto* its (male) system of values. Hence, the absence of women from literary history proves to be actually a 'removed presence' (*presenza rimossa*).[169] While this 'radical removal' (*rimozione drastica*)[170] of female subjectivity from historical memory is ascribed to modern times, in particular to Francesco De Sanctis' *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, Benedetto Croce is given the merit of uncovering female literature at the beginning of the twentieth century.[171] However, Croce's choice to include women in his critical analysis, given the strong visibility of women intellectuals in those years, reproduces the well-rehearsed duality which (dis)locates the feminine in the private sphere of sensibility: acknowledging formal incompleteness as natural to any writing by women, their work, read through the lens of a self-representing subjectivity, is considered by Croce as minor, entrusted with the task of narrating the (partial) reality of feelings and emotions.

Hence the third question raised by Zancan, that of the point of view taken to challenge the linearity of tradition and to retrace the double itinerary of women's writing: the one that delineates the space of experience, memory and imagination presiding over the origin of their writing and the other, which

168 Marina Zancan, *Il doppio itinerario della scrittura. La donna nella tradizione letteraria italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), p. X.

169 Zancan, p. XII.

170 Zancan, p. XIII.

171 De Sanctis' *Letteratura*, a monumental work in 6 volumes started in 1914, meant to provide the historical identity of the newborn nation and celebrated male thought and memory, and the modern new state, asserting the dualism private/public which differentiated women's duties from men's rights. Croce's contributions in his journal 'La critica' initiated a systematic discourse on female subjectivity and its writing in the early 20th century.

marks their transition into literary history. Significantly, if the point of view is necessarily alternative to the dominant one and 'conflicting' with it, this, however does not imply taking the feminine simply as otherness to the masculine, as its opposite pole, as Zancan explains. In order to bring to the fore female subjectivity as an 'itinerant' subjectivity, in between different experiences, roles and languages Zancan relies on Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'nomadic subject',[172] referring to an autonomous subjectivity which validates 'multiple and provisional' configurations and which I see at stake in the woman's becoming depicted by Capuana and in the inconclusiveness of its plot.[173]

Significantly, Zancan identifies a paradigm shift for the history of Italian culture in the years between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a part of the ruling class and of the intellectual elite started to define a concept of *nation* which went hand in hand with a redefinition of values and social roles. After Italy had become a nation and particularly in the decades between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century – that is the years of the rise of the emancipatory movement – the intertwining of female and male imagery foregrounded the definition of sexual and social roles as power struggle. Given the centrality of the family for the national bourgeoisie, woman is charged with both ideological and narrative functions. Hence, if the idea of the nation entails a progressive and moderate development, the assumption of family as the ideal place for the integration of conflicts and interiorization of hierarchies and roles is legitimized by the appeal to the most profound and natural feelings, those of the family, which the figure of *sposa-madre* (wife-mother) exemplifies. Underpinning the model of the 'donna nuova' (new woman) as wife and mother which Fascism appropriates, is thus the idea of female nature fulfilling itself at best in the private sphere of the family. Hence, Fascist rhetoric uses a term which, as we have seen, in the German context meant basically the opposite, namely the emancipated modern woman; and yet, in my view, this is also telling as it hints from the start at the double-sidedness from the side of the Regime' propaganda concerning women's

[172] Rosi Braidotti defines 'nomad', or 'nomadic consciousness' her own configuration of an alternative subjectivity, or better subjectivities, a culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and the feminist subject in particular. Significantly, the notion of 'nomad' takes into account the simultaneous occurrence of variables such as class, gender, race. See *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[173] Zancan, pp. XVII-XVIII.

and their role in the Fascist State, as this chapter highlights. As Victoria De Grazia has aptly pointed out, Fascism's rule largely coincided with the development of modern notions of girlhood also in Italy, and the post-war generations of women, especially in the middle classes, enjoyed pleasures unknown to their mothers, as mass culture brought about commercialized and freer sexual and social customs in Italy too.[174]

Significantly, Zancan sees as the turning point in the intense debate around the model of 'donna nuova' the publication of Sibilla Aleramo's autobiography *Una donna* (*A Woman*, 1906), which represented a detachment from the culture of the maternal on which normative womanhood relied. The transgressive nature of Aleramo's figure and writing epitomized the autonomy of female thought and the visibility women were gaining in post-unitary Italian society. Likewise significant is the recognition by Zancan of Aleramo's lesson for the second generation of twentieth-century Italian writers – those active in the interwar years and onwards – for what concerns the intersection of literary genres and 'tipologie di scrittura del privato',[175] namely private writings like letters and diaries. In Capuana's novel, the confessional mode takes the form of letters the young woman, like Doris, writes mostly to her grandmother while she is in the city, and thus testify to her ambivalent position towards her (provincial) background and to her growing self-awareness and reflexivity.[176]

The 'removed presence' of women Zancan speaks of is also reflected in the *Bildungsroman* scholarship. While, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Italian literature finds generally little mention in European studies on the topic, critics seem to agree in seeing in the genre of the confessions the direct ancestor of the (Italian) *Bildungsroman*,[177] with Collodi's *Pinocchio*

[174] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.

[175] De Grazia, p. 107.

[176] While the importance of Aleramo's figure for women writers is undeniable, and it is quite likely Capuana knew *Una donna*, the two texts do not share apparent similarities, apart from the division in 3 parts. In Aleramo's autobiographical novel, the first-person narrator discards the naturalistic style which Capuana's novel still preserves.

[177] For an account of the Italian novel of development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Maria Carla Papini, Daniele Fioretti and Teresa Spignoli, eds., *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento* (Pisa: ETS, 2007). A similar argument regarding the confessions as ancestor to the novel of development is made by David Miles, 'The Picaro's Journey to the Confessional: The Changing Image of the Hero in the German Bildungsroman', *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 89.5 (1974), 980-92. In his essay on the eighteenth-century Italian novel of development, 'Alla ricerca del romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento italiano', Guido Baldi states that there was no novel such

and Ippolito Nievo's rewriting of the chivalric romance, *Le confessioni di un Italiano*, as the first examples of the Italian novel of development. While the pre-unification Italian novel of development depicted the optimistic education of the New Italian, in the years after the unification the developmental path of a young man, and in rarer cases, of a young woman, ends with a defeat be it in the form of suicide or in any cases in death, a failure standing clearly for the deep delusion towards the ideals which fueled the national revolution.

Interestingly, in the few novels centered on women, like those of Neera (Anna Zuccari), considered as a 'protofeminist writer', female destiny seems doomed due to the burden of a provincial bourgeoise background.[178] Likewise significant is that, in most accounts of twentieth century Italian novels which pertain, albeit with their new, multiple variations (*plurime declinazioni*),[179] to the genre no female writer is mentioned, with the only exception of Elsa Morante and her *Isola di Arturo*, for which, however, one needs to wait until the 1950s.

As Ada Capuana's case shows,[180] women's literature under Fascism perfectly fits the picture drawn by Zancan. The choice of this forgotten novel serves to illustrate how the peculiar situation of Sicily, between modernization and tradition, intersects with the discourse on *Bildung* and the critical inquiry into available options for women's agency in post-war Italy. Mariella Muscariello aptly speaks of the 'fertile paradox' (*fertile paradosso*) of Sicilian literature: the geographic marginality of the island and its subsequent distance from the places where debates on the culture of the *Nuova Italia* took place did not prevent Sicilian writers from becoming, in different ways, 'modern'.[181] It is the framework of the Enlightenment, so the critic goes on, which explains the openness of Sicilian writers to Stendhal, Flaubert and Zola, as well as to German romanticism and the England of Virginia Woolf.

the Bildungsroman in its pure form, but always as 'hybridized' with other genres, such as the historical novel (*I promessi sposi*, *Le confessioni di un italiano*), the adventure novel (*Pinocchio*). In: *Il romanzo di formazione*, pp. 39-55.

178 Baldi, p. 51

179 So Clelia Martignoni, 'Per il romanzo di formazione nel Novecento italiano: linee, orientamenti', sviluppi, in *Il romanzo di formazione*, pp. 57-92 (p. 51). To be sure, the consideration that many twentieth-century novels of development end in ambiguous ways, with deferrals and suspensions, remains valid.

180 I am indebted to Museo Luigi Capuana in Mineo for the information I got on Ada Capuana, who was a great-granddaughter of the writer Luigi Capuana and lived for most of her life in Rome.

181 Mariella Muscariello, *Paradigmi siciliani*. *Saggi di letteratura dell'Otto e del Novecento* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2018), p. 9.

In literary histories of Sicilian literature, Luigi Pirandello and Leonardo Sciascia are acknowledged as the most representative authors of the twentieth century, after the two great narrators of *verismo*, Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga.[182] Moreover, the only female author mentioned by Muscariello is Maria Messina, whose style in novels like *Alla deriva* (1920) has been associated to that of Colette. In the work of Maria Messina, whom Ada Capuana may likely have known, the models of Sicilian culture interacted, in the wake of Pirandello, with European suggestions. Interestingly, Messina depicts stories of isolation which have bourgeoise women as their protagonists, struggling between the oppressive yet reassuring inner space of the family or marital home and the outer space where only alienation and fragmentation of the self awaits them. While elements of verism are still present in both Messina and Capuana, the latter seems to overcome the duality depicted by the former, and to stage a more complex, contradictory female developmental process from the space of the house and her hometown to the city of Catania. If the influence of European avant-garde and in particular futurism was strong for Sicilian writers, likewise significant was the relationship between centre and periphery, continually reshaped in light of new, emerging issues. In Capuana's apparently Fascist novel, the protagonist's movement in and out of the city intersects with notions of new and old womanhood and changing gender dynamics in the face of modernization and mass culture, allowing for a multifaceted self to emerge out of Fascist apparently conservative politics.

A great contribution to the issue of women silenced presence in literary history for the period under consideration has been made by Robin Pickering-Iazzi. In her volume *Unspeakable Women*, taking the gap in critical studies on the subject under the Regime as the starting point, the critic brings to light a large number of neglected works by both acclaimed and less known Italian authors in the Twenties and Thirties.[183] As she points out, the reason for the repression of women's (literary) voices needs to be found in the conservative scope of Fascist politics, which promoted the family as the smallest unit of the State and thus limited women's personal wishes and desires. As mentioned, Fascist ideology promoted the ideal of woman as

[182] See, for instance, among the many anthologies of Sicilian literature, the monumental *Storia della Sicilia*, 2nd edn., 11 vols (Roma: Editalia, 2000), vol. 8: *Pensiero e cultura letteraria dell'Ottocento e del Novecento*.

[183] Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Unspeakable Women: Selected Short Stories Written by Italian Women During Fascism* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993). See in particular the *Introduction,* pp. 3-21.

sposa e madre esemplare (examplary wife and mother), re-codifing the model of the *Nuova Italiana*,[184] the new Italian woman, as the only means by which women could fulfil their political, social and natural mission in the State. Significantly, Pickering-Iazzi highlights that, although the Regime did not enact a systematic policy to repress literary endeavours, it nevertheless conducted a campaign in its publications to *domesticate* women writing, presenting the intellectual woman as an 'unnatural', masculinized and diseased figure.[185] However, the growing number of images of modern women studying, working and challenging traditional gender roles, which circulated in famous daily newspapers, as Pickering-Iazzi notes, raises doubts on the effectiveness of Fascist propaganda on women's sense of self and ideals. Similarly to the rest of Europe, in the early 1900s and mostly during World War I, Italian women had gained socioeconomic mobility in urban sites: lower-class women from rural areas had moved to the city, mostly Milan, to find work in factories and in the clothing industry, while middle-class women were employed as bookkeepers, typists and secretaries or teachers.

Pickering-Iazzi's study has the merit of uncovering the overlooked contribution of female authors to Italian life and culture, focusing on their representation of diverse images of femininity erased by the Fascist model of womanhood and on the search for new expressive means to voice the intimate nature of female subjects and their everyday practice. However, although she considers, next to established and critically acclaimed authors like Ada Negri and Grazia Deledda, younger writers who are mostly absent from literary history, her study only focuses on the short fiction which appeared in the cultural pages of the major Italian newspapers over the years of Fascist rule.

While the coexistence of progressive and reactionary elements in Fascist ideology has been now acknowledged,[186] this comes out clearly when one considers the land projects and the plan of city renewal enacted by the

[184] See about this also De Grazia.

[185] Robin Pickering-Iazzi, ed., *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. XVI.

[186] While historian Jeffrey Heff coined the term 'reactionary modernism' already in 1980s to describe the values and institutions of Nazi Fascism, David Roberts argues that 'by now it is widely held that fascism was not some revolt against modernity but the quest for an alternative modernity'. In: David D. Roberts, *Fascist interactions: proposals for a new approach to fascism and its era, 1919-1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2016) p. 7. Mussolini himself defined Fascism as a 'revolution of reaction'.

Regime and significantly connected to the woman question.[187] The key moment of Fascist's 'conservative turn' is generally identified in Mussolini's 'Ascension Day Speech', delivered on May 26, 1927, which, marking the beginning of a political agenda for years to come, was directed at regulating both city and woman. Indeed, in his speech the Duce defines urbanism, with particular reference to the industrial centres of the peninsula, namely Turin and Milan, as the main cause for the *sterility* of the Italian population. Hence the series of related reforms enacted by the Regime, such as the demographic campaign and the *bonifica* projects (or land reclamation), aimed at ruralizing the peninsula, as well as plans for the transformation and renovation of many Italian cities. However, the Regime's 'empty the city campaign' and the making of ruralism into one of its main tenets were not devoid of contradictions. Indeed, if on the one hand Mussolini praised peasant life and aimed his reforms at the countryside, on the other he tried to reshape cities with fascists signs, as he was aware that the urban centres were the bearer of Fascist signs and would gain him esteem and consideration abroad.

In her article 'Topographies of Disease and Desire: Mapping the City in Fascist Italy', [188] Flora Ghezzo has aptly recognized that in the late Twenties no Italian city had reached the size of most European metropolises – although, one must notice, in the interwar years the number of centres which had reached over 100,000 inhabitants had significantly grown compared with the situation at the beginning of the century. Ghezzo's article is enlightening because it draws attention to the Regime's 'anti-urban crusade', a campaign which found expression in the daily press and Fascist journals and used the foreign city, in particular Paris and Berlin, as a screen on to which to project psycho-political fears.

Similarly to (late) Weimar Germany, the deconstruction of new model of femininity and the promotion of traditional gender roles was thus paralleled in Italy by a re-orientation towards the country, and the Fascist's attempt to 'ruralize' the peninsula. Indeed if one of the Duce's main concerns was the

[187] For a detailed account of the Fascist project of land and city renewal, the *bonifica*, see the now dated but still valid (and nearly the only) account by Riccardo Mariani, *Fascismo e città nu*ove (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976), to which I am indebted. Ruth Ben-Ghiat also recognizes that the concept of reclamation was a central component of the Fascist discourse of modernity and of its modernization strategy. See: *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 4-6.

[188] Flora Ghezzo, 'Topographies of Disease and Desire: Mapping the City in Fascist Italy', *MLN*, 125 (January 2010), 195-222.

demographic question, that is the sinking birth rate in the 1920s, this was unequivocally recognized as the 'the woman question'. Journalistic discourse presented the subversion of traditional gender and social boundaries lurking in the city as the major danger, which had as its worst consequence a 'masculinization' of woman, in the wake of American models of femininity. Hence, the image of modern, urban female types became the catalyst of (male) socio-political anxieties. The city, like Rome and Milan, was seen as the site of artful femininity linked to mass consumer culture.[189]

As Ghezzo notes, the connection between (female) bodies and cities in Fascist discourse is evident in the use of specific words to describe urban interventions. The renovation of towns and cities implied not only new constructions but also the demolition of unhealthy densely populated areas, and this was implicitly gendered as female through the word *sventramento*, literally 'disembowel' but containing in itself *ventre*, the Italian word for the woman's womb. Thus the urban renovation was coded, at a metaphorical level, as the eradication of the sterile womb of the emancipated metropolitan woman and its replacement with a healthy, reproductive body.[190]

Situating Capuana's text within the hegemonic discourse which linked urban space and (deviant) femininity, I aim to show that an apparently Fascist novel insinuates, via the *Bildungs*process of its protagonist, a counter-discourse which challenges the normative view of women's role in modern (Italian) society. Beyond the seeming adherence to the Fascist demiurge's will to shape both (woman)'s body and space, in its depiction of woman's becoming, the narrative gives rise to mechanisms of resistance and female empowerment.[191] At the same time, Gaetana's trajectory and the role played

[189] This view was shared by *strapaesani* who saw themselves as defending rural Italy against the cultural contamination of foreign influences. As Lara Pucci has pointed out, although the cultural movement of *strapaese* sought to define itself in opposition to 'alternative manifestations of fascisms', such as what they named *stracittà* (about this concept, see chapter 1, p. 21), *strapaese*'s ruralism must not be understood simply as a rejection of modernization. Indeed, fearing the standardizing effect of mass-culture and of the Regime's homogenizing practices, *strapaesani* invoked peasant culture as a source for national regeneration. See: 'Remapping the Rural: The Ideological Geographies of *Strapaese*', in: Angela dalle Vacche, ed., *Film, Art, New Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 178-195. While in Capuana's novel the conflict urban-rural is more central than in Bontempelli's, the text reveals a nuanced picture proving the contradictions of Fascist ideology and practice. Moreover, I do not deem these concepts to be relevant for my analysis as I focus on how the relationship between the province and the city affects the woman's becoming.

[190] Ghezzo, p. 207.

[191] Capuana's text thus belongs to the tradition of women's novels described by Patricia Meyer Spacks as marked by 'subterranean challenges' to truths they appear to accept. *The Female Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 317.

by women in the novel expose the contradictions inherent in the Fascist politics of controlling female subjects, incorporating them into national life and its institutions.

In the first part of the chapter, I examine how the polarity country/city is reaccentuated in the context of the Fascist modernization of Sicily, and reflected in the young woman's troubled quest for freedom from her constrained background. Interestingly, the 'New Woman' type interplays with the specifically Fascist concept of *donna nuova* in ways which underscore the Regime's ambivalent stance towards women.

In the second part I focus on the city as the key stage for the emergence of a new, freer self for the woman, foregrounding the role played by letters and by other women, and a growing sense of 'sisterhood', in her self-awareness. Finally, I focus on the novel's ending and the protagonist's ambiguous position as head of a Fascist group, the *Fascio*, and still an unmarried woman, to demonstrate that Capuana's text challenges the notion of linear development and normative womanhood that it seems to promote.

1. Granica and the 'Provincialina'

La città nuova (*The New City*) is a realist novel told in the third person and divided into three parts, the three 'Tempos' reminiscent of futuristic cult of speed and the (cinematic) dynamism of the modern industrial age, which mark the different stages of the protagonist's process of becoming. The author's dedication to *Italianità Fascista* (Fascist Italy) allows Capuana to insinuate within her apparently 'fervent' work a counternarrative which disregards the normative codes to which it claims to adhere. In such a de-centred location, the relationship centre-periphery takes on a specific significance, considering that one of Fascism's objectives was solving the long-standing *questione meridionale*, namely the economic and social backwardness of the southern part of the peninsula.[192]

The complex, at times contradictory tenets of the Regime concerning the development of the country are epitomized in the novel by Gaetana's

[192] The First World War had accentuated the already present gap between the North and the South of the peninsula. While most critics agree in considering Fascism a northern phenomenon, they recognize that Mussolini used the Southern question in its propaganda, claiming he wanted to make the *questione meridionale* a national question. For a deeper insight into Fascism and the Mezzogiorno see e.g.: Valerio Castronovo, 'La politica economica del Fascismo e il Mezzogiorno', *Studi storici*, 17 (Sept 1976), no. 3, 25-39, and Guido Dorso, *Mussolini alla Conquista del potere* (Torino: Aragno, 2022).

ambivalent attitude towards her provincial origin, and, like in the other novels considered so far, by the tension between the desire for freedom and social demands which *Bildung*, as we have seen, entails.

At the beginning of the novel Gaetana lives in her rural town, which has the telling name of Granica (from latin granaio= granary),[193] with her grandmother under the constrains of an old bourgeois order. The flat life of the town, over which the spectre of the Great War looms in the form of a never-completed Monument for the Dead, is shaken by the arrival of Marco, the new and young *podestà* (Fascist mayor), who has ambitious plans on ruling the town – and Gaetana too, as I show more thoroughly in the second part of the chapter.

In this first part I examine how, similarly to Keun's novel, this provincial background shapes Gaetana's sense of self and sets her up for her 'education', which finds in the city of Catania its main stage. It must be noticed that, throughout the narration, traditional *Bildung* in the sense of 'schooling' is opposed to what seems the new education of young women, which, as for Doris, unfolds in the city.

As the town is described as a handful of houses piled on top of each other and with two oil mills staining the air, so Gaetana is presented as a simple country girl, 'provincialina'[194] ('little provincial'), and as such she is repeatedly defined. Indeed, since her parents died, she has never left the town and has been raised with values of chastity and simplicity by her watchful grandmother. In a similar vein, the old inhabitants of the town are unwilling to submit to the Fascist precepts and only want to be left to their countryside work and their pastimes on Sunday. It is telling that, if immediately after his arrival, Marco detects the peasants' reluctance and asserts his readiness to 'ammansirli' ('domesticate them', 15), a times he also shows a progressive stance. When Gaetana claims not to be interested in politics and what one reads in newspapers, he reproaches her for being a 'femminuccia' ('little woman') just waiting to marry and settle in her narrow reign in the house. Marco's reproach and his tough words impress the naïve Gaetana to the point of making her doubt herself and look for the advice of her friend and cousin Marinella.

[193] The name also recalls *Graniti*, a small town near Messina, which finds explicit mention in the Dedication.

[194] Ada Capuana, *La città nuova* (Milano: Edizioni La Prora, 1934), p. 20. All further references are to this edition. Translations are my own.

Gaetana's relationship with Marinella deserves some attention as it affects Gaetana's changing sense of self throughout the narration. It is via the dialogues with her friend that the novel gives insight into Gaetana's childhood years. Marinella appears from the onset as more emancipated, as her curly short hair and lascivious pose on the couch against Gaetana's stiff posture and long braids typifies. Gazing at her cousin's slender legs, crossed to offer a glimpse on the garter flakes, and her high-heeled shoes, Gaetana feels a chill of warmth on the back of her neck, a first hint at her later awakening.

However, to Marinella's surprise, Gaetana has got some education, which she nevertheless found extremely boring: she studied *belle lettere* and read Leopardi and Manzoni with a pedantic old tutor, a retired professor from whom she secretly prayed God to be relinquished.

Marinella represents a sort of mirror for Gaetana, who admires her cousin's self-confidence and, perceiving her own modesty by comparison, wishes she could emulate her and enjoy her youth fully. Likewise significant is that while a rebel spirit possesses Gaetana at the thought that Marco 'rules' the town, she yearns for the city where Marinella lives and is intrigued by the jouissance pervading it (20).

Gaetana lives, at least initially, in a passive state, unaware of her needs and desires, frozen like the clothes hanging in her wardrobe, as dusty as the destiny which awaits her within the mouldy walls of her grandmother's Palace.

It is worth noting that the words Marco uses to describe his act of renewing the town reproduce the Fascist rhetoric of domination. He uses the verb 'abbattere', namely 'demolish', but also 'sventrare' ('disembowel', 27), referred to the houses, which tellingly recalls *ventre*, the female 'womb'.

However, if he can pride himself on being a demiurge, he does not manage to subject the woman to his will. It is Marco, at the beginning, who discerns beyond Gaetana's 'scoria paesana' ('peasant dregs', 32) something hidden, a secret about to be unravelled, yet he doubts of the woman's ability to free herself from her constrained position.

On closer look, not only Marinella but also Marco plays a role in Gaetana's awakening. In his seminal study on the *Bildungsroman*, *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti has stressed the role of conversation in the formation

of the individual.[195] Exemplary of this is when Gaetana finds herself in her room one late night, after a long conversation with Marco and Marinella in which, overcoming her usual shyness, she has managed to express out loud ideas and opinions never previously given and notions acquired through her studies. The emotion of having heard herself so much stains her cheeks and neck red, and all her body is taken by a light, dense fire which in turn fuels her with new ideas, words and reminiscences (35). Significantly, her ability to see is also sharpened: while she feels her spirit becoming freer and lighter, she can distinguish also with a clearer sight the surrounding place: her eye, ''dilatato e smarrito' ('expanded and lost', 35), roams her room, resting on the faded wallpaper and the pale light of the bulb which casts upon things an imperceptible sadness. She perceives her room as being 'senza personalità' ('without personality'), 'the room of a *provincialina*', as well as the flat countryside of Granica outside her window as being too narrow for her lust for vastity (35).

Gaetana's awakening is described as a sort of epiphany through a vivid chromatic language, which is influenced by futurism and the avant-garde aesthetic. She discerns, for example, in the dark sky a composition of colours – 'cobalti metallici, rossi di sangue aggrumato, violetti, verdi formicolanti' ('metallic cobalt, clots of bloody red, violet, tingling green', 36) – which synaesthetically speaks to her in soft sounds. It is in the 'ubbriachezza pensosa' ('pensive drunkness', 37) induced by this buzz of colours, that Gaetana realizes what her life has been: a childhood covered by sultry clouds, a flat adolescence, and no sun at the dawn of her youth. There is here a twofold anticipation of her later transformation in Catania: first she is taken by the desire of flying, a hint at the name she will be given as a New Woman, and second, she unties her braids, and holding her hair on the palms of her hands, looks at it, touched, as to bid it farewell (36), which is what will actually happen when she cuts her hair in Catania.

Significantly, Gaetana's conversations with Marco revolve around ideals and the aim of life. While Gaetana hopes Marco can teach her the art of living, at least in some ways, he underscores the importance of the 'aesthetic education', which is an essential part of the project of self-cultivation, and thus of *Bildung*, as we have seen. As the mayor explains to Gaetana, there

[195] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso 1987), p. 50. Moretti recognizes in conversation a '*sociable* social institution' which allows the double gesture of 'expressing oneself' and of 'understanding others', p. 49.

is only one truth: to live discerning in the tangle of the soul the good part which allows one to be at peace with the world both without and within oneself, thus reconciling one's ideals – which for Marco can be love, faith, but also art – with one's social duties (45). If Gaetana yearns for an ideal, Marco's answer that the only possible ideals are the ones handed down through the centuries in their purity and holiness seem not to appease her restless spirit. She can, however, get a different insight into the struggle between ideals and duties shortly later, when she and Marco, with their friends Eli and Marinella, take a trip to Monte Ziretto, a mountain not far from Granica overlooking the valley of Malu Spirdu (literally, 'bad spirit'), where Zì Fanu lives. Marco, who hopes to get some truth from the old man, considered as 'half fool, half prophet', asks him the reason for his withdrawal from society, to which the man replies raising his hands to the sky and blaming money for making men ambitious (50). He then goes on to tell his story: as he was good at school, his father sent him to attend the *ginnasio*, the high school in the city with the children of the rich, yet he soon became sick of both school and the city and begged his father to come back to town and work with him in the fields. His father's reaction was to call the exorcist, but his mother took pity of him and allowed him to retreat for a while on the mountains to recover, sending supplies without telling his father, who at that time was away. Unluckily, on his way back home his father decided to stop at Monte Ziretto, where he mistook that spirited figure for the evil spirit that was said to haunt the valley. Due to his son's own clumsiness, he soon discovered the hoax, but it was too late: his heart could not stand that sight, and Zì fanu was left with nothing to do but weep on his father's corpse. Since then, to honour his memory, he made a vow to Madonna della Catena (tellingly, the name means 'Our Lady of the Chain') and resolved to spend the rest of his life at Monte Ziretto without ever touching a book again. The young people discuss, later, Zi Fanu's resolution. While Eli and Marco condemn his 'inaction' in the name of their ideals and dreams, Gaetana claims to approve his choice, as she thinks that is the only way to preserve oneself: if one does not manage to reconcile their desires with social duties, the only (other) option is suicide, she concludes (55).

Later on, when Marco and Gaetana meet in Taormina and Gaetana has become a New Woman, the question of ideals and duties comes up again. Significantly, this happens after Gaetana's conversation with her grandmother, who, feeling death approaching, regrets that she has allowed

Gaetana to leave Granica and begs her niece to do her duty and take on the running of the Palace she will soon inherit and marry – which causes the young girl's strong rejection: 'basta su questo argomento. Io non ho intenzione di sposare' ('enough on this topic. I'm not going to marry', 107).

Connected to the struggle between social duties and freedom is the symbolic meaning of youth, both for the *Bildungsroman*, and for the specific significance it takes in Fascist politics and practice. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Franco Moretti identifies the *Bildungsroman* as the 'symbolic form of modernity',[197] namely a form through which 'a specific image of modernity' is connected to 'a specific material sign', namely youth, which he considers as 'modernity's essence' for its ability to 'accentuate' the dynamism and instability proper to this era.[198]

Youth was charged with political significance for the Regime, representing a key concept in Fascist ideology and propaganda.[199] The First World War and the years immediately after were a crucial moment for the affirmation of a certain concept of youth. The youth movements of the early twentieth century in Germany and the United Kingdom had stressed the equation between youth and national values, as well as between youth and freedom from bourgeoise society, and from family.[200] A constellation of concept and images already present in the history of European culture took on a specific, Fascist, meaning in the connection youth/war, and the heroic death for the homeland. This link was quite evident in the literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century: from futurists to D'Annunzio, the theme was widely addressed, and, deprived of any 'aesthetic' it became a practical myth of Mussolini's era. Implicit in this constellation was another attribute of the young person, namely virility. In the trenches the three determinants of 'giovane, maschio, guerriero' ('young, male, warrior'), which will be fundamental for the construction of the image of the Duce, were fused, and his figure was idealized so that he would be always young ('Il Duce è il più giovane di tutti noi. Meravigliosa giovinezza la Sua!', 'the Duce is the youngest of all of us. His youth is wonderful'), youth symbolizing the eternal

197 Moretti, p. 5.
198 Moretti, p. 5.
199 It is telling that the Fascism hymn read 'Giovinezza, giovinezza, Primavera di bellezza!', namely 'youth, youth, springtime of beauty'.
200 On the emergence of youth as a distinct socio-political group in the twentieth century, with the First World War as a key rupture for generational identity see e.g.: Félix Krawatzek, 'Youth as a Political Force in Twentieth Century Europe: An Overview', in *Youth in Regime Crisis: Comparative Perspectives from Russia to Weimar Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

youth of the charismatic leader and the faith in the endurance of Fascism.[201] It is therefore significant that Gaetana's transformation in the city implies the taking of male attributes, and thus a masculinization.[202]

These tenets find expression in Marco's will to carry out the completion of the War Memorial conceived by the *Commendatore* Renzi on the model of Greek temples, which should house a Museum and a space for conferences illustrating and propagating the Duce's precepts. Fueled by Marco, who embraces this endeavor and remembers the days when they used to sing 'Giovinezza', the Commendatore believes he will be young forever, in the firm conviction that there is no other age than youth for those who have faith in the Regime (40).

Over the Twenties, Fascism's ambition to educate the Italian youth grew consistently and by 1926 the Regime began to organize systematically, grouping old and new units under the *Opera nazionale Balilla.* This also reflected the twofold attempt to enact a 'socializzazione totalitaria' ('totalitarian socialization') as well as to shape a new political elite. The meaning of childhood, adolescence and maturity was thus dictated by political conventions, and played a role for women too – indeed one of the novelties claimed by the Regime was that of including girls in its organizations, like the *Fasci femminili* (Fascist women's groups). However, as many scholars have noted, these very groups testify that the proposals the Regime addressed to young females were contradictory. Indeed, while the ideals of motherhood and family were constantly reiterated, mass association and sports also allowed for some sort of emancipation for women.

As it has been noted, it is difficult to give a precise definition of the Fascist city, a confusion also owed to Mussolini's open rejection of the word 'city' in favour of the narrower term 'comune' ('municipality'). However, Marco's plan of expansion of the town, which he considers as the realization of the Duce's will, entails its modernization. He envisions broad streets and buildings

[201] For an account of youth and its significance for the Regime see for instance Laura Malvano, 'Il mito della giovinezza attraverso l'immagine: il fascismo italiano'. Luisa Passerini argues that youth served as a metaphor for social change in twentieth-century Europe: 'La giovinezza metafora del cambiamento sociale. Due dibattiti sui giovani nell'Italia fascista e negli Stati Uniti negli anni Cinquanta', in *Storia dei giovani*, ed. by Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claud Schmitt, 2 vols (Roma: Laterza, 1994), II, *L'età contemporanea*, pp. 311-345 and 383-453.

[202] Gaetana's is indeed what Patrice Petro calls a 'masculine masquerade'. In: *Joyless Streets*: *Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 118.

painted with white to remove the patina of moss and soil, with industrious men open to urban rhythms (27, 39). While Marco is convinced that he will be able to 'plasmare' ('mould') 'anime e pietre' ('souls and stones') – he wants to prompt in Granica's inhabitants a 'coscienza nuova' ('new consciousness', 41) – understanding and controlling Gaetana proves much harder. Significantly, the woman's subversive power and her resistance to male objectification is made explicit by Marco via the parallel he draws between Gaetana and the city, as he recognizes in her stiffness 'la piccolo città chimerica' ('the small chimeric city', 41) he dreams of. This occurs in another turning point in Gaetana's awakening, after the 'colourful night' described earlier, namely when they are together in the garden. Significantly, Gaetana is picking 'le ultime rose' ('the last roses', 41),[203] which are clearly the symbol of her innocence, and while Marco imagines her dressed in white as an ideal woman and bride, Gaetana conceals beneath an emotionless face her hatred towards her tedious life in the town. After the turmoil of that night, in which, in her perception, she has become 'un'altra' ('another', 42), Gaetana feels now estranged from him and is eager to escape.

Indeed Gaetana has become aware of being 'una creatura diversa' ('a different creature', 43) and does not consider her grandmother and the other girls in town up to her. Moreover, she realizes that if she is now able to enjoy her own company, as her brain has started to 'work', this is thanks to Marinella, who amazes her with her tales of love and her charm which Gaetana ascribes to her life in the city. Significantly, this expanding (self)knowledge goes hand in hand with Gaetana's loss of faith, once a quiet refuge from the world, and the repeated rejection of her grandmother's plea to pray (66).

While Gaetana believes that thanks to Marinella her eyes have 'cleared up' ('si snebbiassero', 44), Marco still considers the girl as too naïve, and, discerning in her an 'uncultivated' sensibility ('sensibilità incolta', 44), he thinks she will develop her intellect only if he manages to 'restrain' her ('frenare da sè'). Deceiving himself that she is in love with him, he thinks of the time when she will be his 'amica e sposa' ('wife and friend', 44) in the new city, once again fusing in his daydream woman and city.

[203] The flowery imagery in this passage takes a metaphorical meaning, in that the roses symbolizes female sexuality: first they hang in a reddish drunkness, as Gaetana did in her earlier feverish night; later, when Marco's friend Eli arrives, the two men play with them. When Eli 'unleafs' one of them and throws it in the air, some red leaves fall on his neck, and he comments that they look like the mouth of a beautiful woman. This is also (fore)telling as Eli is the man Gaetana may marry.

As said, Gaetana's initially narrow view is repeatedly stressed, mostly in comparison with more emancipated women like Marinella. However, on closer look the picture of womanhood in the novel is more nuanced.

While Marinella feels superior to her cousin and considers Gaetana intelligent but still 'arretrata' ('underdeveloped', 64) – and, as mentioned, she often calls her 'provincialina' ('little provincial', 20) – it is the latter who seems not to be interested in marriage, while Marinella is only able to talk of her recent engagement. Telling in this sense is also the passage when the girls see the tapestry made by a girl from town, Marta. Marinella is enticed by that piece of cloth with Maria and the divine baby embroidered on it and praises the artist, showing to appreciate ancient art. Gaetana, instead, is concerned that her grandmother may give the tapestry to her as a reminder to pray and sees in it just 'an encumbrance' ('un ingombro', 66), so she is relieved when Marinella eventually buys the artwork.

Moreover, while her cousin can only think about her fiancée, Gaetana avoids Marco's care and has no interest in his 'scorribande fantastiche' ('fancy reveries', 70) around the future New City, which causes the podestà's frustration and consequent remark that 'she is changing too much' (71). Significantly, hearing Marco's patronizing assertion that she, like the other people of the town, resists being guided onto 'the right path' ('la retta via', 72), Gaetana finally understands that the only way not to 'bow down' and to realize her true self consists in leaving the town. Likewise significant, and somehow foretelling of Gaetana's becoming in the city, is Marco's warning not to put on wings all at once, as 'butterflies are short lived and burn easily' ('le farfalle hanno breve esistenza […] Si bruciano facilmente', 71).

At the end of the first part Gaetana leaves Granica with her cousin Marinella, realizing her wish for freedom and self-determination: she is sure that far from the town she would be 'renewed' ('rinnovata', 72) and would start to enjoy her life. As the car leaves a gloomy Granica behind, against a milky morning sky, leaning her face on the window she can already see the 'lampeggiante, immensa' ('blinking, immense', 76) life which awaits her in Catania.

2. Walking and Learning: the City as Encyclopaedia

In the second part, which takes place mostly in Catania, two elements related to the Young Woman's claim for *Bildung* are of particular relevance. The first

is the confessional, which comes out via Gaetana's letters and *soliloqui*, the dialogues with herself that contribute to expand her (self-)knowledge. The second is the role played by other women, such as the aforementioned Marinella and in particular the artist Irene, whose role introduces in the narration the motif of the artist as a young woman, thus revealing the novel's affinities with elements of the subgenre of the *Künstlerroman*.

As it is known, since the sixteenth century, letter-writing, particularly love letters, was seen as a gender-specific genre, for the traditional association of private and woman, as well as for woman's alleged greater sensitivity. Writing letters, as conventions required, was also part of the duties of a noble woman: the correspondence, from familiar or love communication *in absentia*, became in the modern era a means of education and cultural exchange, associating subjectivity and social practice.[204] As we have seen, the confessional mode is closely connected to female *Bildung* in what is generally considered the prototype of the genre, namely Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, and specifically in book 6, 'Confessions of a Beautiful Soul'. The 'Confessions' not only emphasise the spiritual aspect of *Bildung*, they also highlight the gender dynamics of aesthetic education and classical *Bildung*. While critics such as Michael Minden have seen in this female plot a displacement of the male hero in favour of an 'authentic female voice',[205] Marianne Hirsch has highlighted the ambivalence of female self-development in Goethe's work: although the 'Confessions' represent a 'creative response' to social circumstances, the *Bildungs*plot devoted to the Beautiful Soul is subordinated to the male one, so that her voice 'is confined and contained'.[206]

As I show, Capuana's text adopts the epistolary and confessional modes to foreground the woman's ambivalent stance towards her condition and her evolving self. It is also worth noticing that in Capuana's novel letters depart from love epistolaries and also go beyond the traditional association with the feminine. Marco and the *commendatore* Renzi also exchange (Fascist)

[204] For an interesting reappraisal of the epistolary genre and its tradition see Elizabeth C. Goldsmith's classic collection *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989). For an account of the epistolary genre and its gender-specificity in the Italian tradition see for instance Gabriella Zarri's Introduction to *Per lettera: la scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia: secoli XV-XVII* (Roma: Viella, 1989), pp. X-XXIX.

[205] Michael Minden, *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 40.

[206] Marianne Hirsch, 'Spiritual *Bildung*: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm', in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 23, 48 (pp. 31-32).

letters in which they discuss their plans to change the town and Marco describes his progress in converting the Granicesi. Moreover, Gaetana's letters are addressed to her grandmother in the first instance, and not to Marco. When Marco prompts her to write to him, Gaetana's letters are far from being sentimental, and rather testify to her detachment from him and the town and her will to define herself in her own terms. While he is convinced that she is not enjoying her city experience and feels like a 'una piccola rondine, spostata dal nido' ('a little swallow removed from its nest', 86), Gaetana's dry reply shows that she does not appreciate his concerns: 'risparmati di risolvere il puzzle del mio spirito ('refrain from solving the puzzle of my spirit', 87).

In her introduction to the canonical collection *Writing the Female Voice*, Goldsmith examines how the image of the woman letter-writer reflects shifting gender stereotypes and changing cultural perceptions of gender-genre connections. In this respect, Gaetana's epistolary style proves her self-reflexivity and the fact that she does not want to be (male-)defined, thus challenging Goldsmith's assumption that 'female epistolary voices tend to describe confinement more than liberation, isolation more than interaction'.[207]

It is significant that in Capuana's novel genre and gender conventions are subverted in ways which allow the woman to give voice to her desires and will for self-determination. As seen in the chapter devoted to *Fabian*, scholar Juliana de Albuquerque, (re)considering gender roles in Goethe, identifies female *Bildung* as self-mastery, that is the mark of 'healthy individuality' against the Beautiful Soul's inability to act and sickness. Interestingly, this is reflected in Gaetana's perception of herself and finds expressions in her interior monologues: her life in the city is explicitly compared to a recovery from the paralysis which had affected her in Granica.

Significantly, when Gaetana starts to enjoy her city experience, her grandmother's letters, with their heartfelt, nostalgic worlds, symbolize in her perception the 'regno di atonia' ('reign of atony', 89) which waits for her unchanged. If, at times, she has doubts or feels out of place in the new society, the soliloquies, where confessions and conversation mingle, give her self-confidence again. Thanks to her soliloquies, which she considers her favourite vents (*sfoghi preferiti*), she regains the conviction of being herself, a 'creatura pensante' ('thinking creature') and not 'una effiegie con una

[207] Goldsmith, p. XII.

idententità equivoca ('an effigy with an ambiguous identity'), as she felt at times in the new society (127). These interior monologues also reveal Gaetana's dark side, appropriating the Fascist rhetoric of virility to empower the woman.[208] Once alone with her thoughts, after a conversation with her suitor Eli, she is taken by rage and craves to be a warrior who wields a whip and beats the young man, hurting him and drawing blood. Although disgusted by her thoughts, Gaetana lingers in her vision with 'malvagia volontà' ('an evil mind', 128)[209]: the woman, looking dreadful in her anger, and the young man who moans lying on his back, blood running through his forehead clouding his 'wicked eyes' and pouring down to the chin (127-128). Significantly, remembering that Marinella told her that in their family someone suffered from hallucinations, she considers herself a worthy heir for her ability to split herself (*sdoppiarsi*) and live 'a second life' of which she is at the same time protagonist and spectator (128). Likewise significant is that, considering for a moment a future with Eli, who would choose her out of love for fatherhood and to meet society's demands, imposing his will and making a mother of her, Gaetana feels the urge to drink and free her mind from those thoughts. Mesmerized by the blue of the liquor shining in the light of the chandelier, she pours it first on her hand and then on the carpet, losing herself in the midst of that cascade of sapphire.

In her aforementioned article Flora Ghezzo examines the configuration of a feminine urban imagery in the literary production under the Regime, uncovering the works of unknown female authors, among which *The New City*. Capuana's text is thus aptly read within the hegemonic discourse linking modern urban space and (deviant) femininity, focusing on the city as the main stage of the woman's growth. However, while Ghezzo recognizes that Gaetana's path veers from the normative trajectory to which the text seems

[208] Barbara Spackman has devoted an enlightening study to the rhetoric of virility in Fascist discourse through literary and political texts, and to the ideological ramifications of its adoption by two women, namely the Futurist Valentine de Saint Point and the fascist Teresa Labriola. See *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[209] In her representation of the female character, Capuana seems to rework both Fascist rhetoric of virility and the association of virile woman, sterility and lesbianism. In this scene, however, and in Gaetana's delusion of 'floating with her thoughts in a dead lake of chimeras' (128) one also recalls those monstrous images of women which have a long history in literature by men. In male imagery these 'maddened doubles' were the symbol of subversive femininity: opposed to the angel, the monster-woman embodied intransigent female autonomy. See on this theme Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Female Imagination* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1984), p. 28.

to subscribe, she considers it as contained within the space and time of her city experience, overlooking the multiple ramifications of Fascist politics on women (self-)definition. Seeing in Gaetana's encounter with the city the chance to 'fashion herself anew', Ghezzo relies on Guattari's notion of 'soft subversion', reducing the narrative's potential for resistance. Furthermore, drawing a parallel between the woman's experience and Fascism's transition from an initial revolutionary moment to a later 'return to order', she considers Gaetana's developmental trajectory as accomplished in that she is eventually ready to conform to prescribed roles and marry Marco. Hence her labelling of the novel as 'a Fascist love story'.[210]

However, a closer look at the woman's masquerade in the city and claim for agency in relation to *Bildung* allows me to show that the narrative opens up new possibilities for articulating female self-development in a patriarchal society. Although the Sicilian city is not a metropolis like Berlin or Milan, I highlight that, similarly to Keun, Catania is the space where the woman can play with roles and recast the terms of her own desire. Even more evident than in Keun's novel is the role played by other women, and by a growing feeling of sisterhood, in the emergence of Gaetana's new sense of self, which leads her to the modern world and to self-awareness.

Like Doris, at the beginning Gaetana's feelings towards the city are mixed: as the car approaches Catania she is frightened, yet the new place becomes already familiar as the car *penetrates* (89)[211] into its high buildings and passes by the people in the streets. As in Keun's novel, the streets are paramount in the provincial girl's perception of the town and the city: Gaetana searches in Catania the narrow streets devoid of air, which reminds her of the 'umili viuzze' ('humble alleys', 90) of Granica. The lazy and lustful city marks Gaetana's entrance into a world of pleasures and bodily sensations: while the traditional education with embroidery and classical studies had been disappointing, she now enjoys the city's distractions, such as the sound movies, and is enticed by the semi-naked singers of the theatre and the 'fantasmagorie' of the operetta which 'la impregnano di misteri sconosciuti' ('imbue her with unknown mysteries', 90).

It is in the words of Marinella that the importance of the city for the woman's self-awareness comes out clearly. Learning and walking the city becomes the same as the latter is compared with an encyclopaedia that the

[210] Ghezzo, p. 212.
[211] The choice of an erotic verb to describe Gaetana's entrance into the cityscape is telling as it hints at her later sexual awakening.

girl leafs through as she walks: ‘Tu impari. La città è una enciclopedia che ti si sfoglia a casaccio sol che tu la percorri’ (‘You learn. The city is an encyclopedia whose leaves turn just by walking through it’, 91). Gaetana’s education also includes learning to discern the bad and the good: the city is indeed equated to a heart, half ill and half sane, of which she needs to separate the purulent part from the sap-rich ones.

Marinella thus embodies a sort of mentor for Gaetana, as she has already ‘learned’ a lot about herself and knows how to use the city and the opportunities it offers to her advantage, which, as she explains, is what Gaetana should do. Indeed, under her influence, Gaetana starts to develop: while she still wonders if this ‘turbine lento di eleganza’ (‘slow whirl of elegance’, 92) is what her souls yearned for, she already colours her lips and finely shapes her broad eyebrows.

Fascist rule largely covered the period corresponding to the development, in Italy as in other Western countries, of modern notions of ‘girlhood’ as mass culture presented girls with more commercial and freer sexual and social customs. As Victoria De Grazia has noted, two generations of Italian women were formed under the Regime: the first came of age as the movement rose to power in the wake of the Great War and were mostly the companions of the Male Front generation. These girls without a husband, like their Western counterparts, had experienced the emancipatory atmosphere of the war years, their image associated with short-skirts, bobbed hair and disinhibited behaviors. Victoria De Grazia speaks of the *maschietta* as the local version of the American flapper and the Parisian *garçonne*, although, as she points out, the Italian version was a more unevenly modern figure than her foreign counterparts, depending on geographic and social determinants.[212] Indeed in large parts of the country, especially in villages and rural areas, girls had no contact with urban ways, so that their life was determined by their family and then their husband, foreclosing any possibility of independence. The second generation of women reached maturity when Fascism was in its heyday and enjoyed the allure of an emerging mass consumer culture. Although they were the female counterpart of the so-called Littorial *Fascio* and did not know other government than Fascism, these women were also touched by the cosmopolitan allure originating in Hollywood which reached them not only through cinema, magazines and mass commodities, but also,

[212] De Grazia, pp. 118-120.

to some extent, thanks to the youth and leisure organizations of the dictatorship, like the *Fasci* on which I focus in the third part of the chapter.

De Grazia recognizes the potential of the new Italian girl to challenge fascist models and codes, yet she considers her 'provincial', given the still rural character of the country, and with no real sense of her power. If the Italian new woman may be an 'hybrid new woman'[213], as De Grazia would have it, neither traditional nor coherently modern, Gaetana's experience in the urban space demonstrates, in fact, the potential for self-awareness and agency inherent in the New Woman and the sense of communion this figure gathered.

Gaetana's conversion to a New Woman appears as a real 'baptism', supervised by Marinella and another girl, Irene, and is significantly infused with erotic tones. The lascivious atmosphere of the scented bath and the girl's 'arrossamento' ('blush', 93) at the gaze of the two women also hints at the crossover between lesbian subculture and emancipated femininity which we have seen in Kästner's novel too. Hence, if Gaetana has taken the attitude of the emancipated urban female type – she wears fashion clothes, puts on make up, and smokes – with her short hair and lean body she seems to embody the androgynous type of the *garçonne*.[214]

In Gaetana's rebirth, which includes the changing of her name to 'Aletta', the cut of her hair plays an important role. As the new name, which hints at a freer self (from ala = wing), should remove from her the 'residuo della bonomia paesana' ('the last dregs of peasant simplicity', 95), so her head deprived of that heavy 'matassa' ('bundle') appears more shining in her naked candid body (93). It is Irene, the artist, who chooses her new name, as she sees in it the expression of the girl's 'ripiegamento interiore' ('inward folding', 96) and of a perpetual uplifting. If looking at herself in the mirror wearing an elegant dress Gaetana is enticed by the charm of her page-boy head and her sheathed lined body, her grandmother's letter causes her sadness. The old lady's pleading words – 'Rivedrò la mia colomba come quando l'ho benedetta?' ('Will I see my blessed dove again?') – lie broken on the carpet, while the woman's straight neck and forceful hands accentuate her self-determination: 'Non vi sei che tu, che tu Aletta' ('there is only you, Aletta', 96).

213 De Grazia, p. 163.

214 This term was derived from Victor Margueritte's eponymous novel of 1922, which was translated into Italian in 1923, and came to identify the fashionable emancipated woman of the day, also hinting at the crossing of gender boundaries.

The relationship with her new friend Irene deserves closer scrutiny as it highlights, further, the significance of friendship for the woman's *Bildung* in the city and introduces in this novel, too, the idea we found in Keun that art can lift one up. Irene is indeed an artist: she draws and knows legends and stories, and her love of beauty triggers in the protagonist a sort of spiritual uplifting. Not only: she also leads Gaetana through the streets of Catania, in long wanderings, to discover constantly new aspects of the 'città multiforme' ('multifaceted city', 146). Gaetana draws new energy from the light and the movement of the city, and starts her recovery ('maturava la sua guarigione'): through her contact with Irene, who 'la raffina', ('refines her'), and Marinella, who 'la sveltisce' ('sharpens her', 148) the provincial girl becomes aware of the 'imprigionamento morale', the moral imprisonment which had 'frozen' her ('l'aveva raggelata', 146) until that moment. Gaetana realizes that she is changing, so much that if she had walked in a crowd, she would have only seen 'un'altra sè', another Gaetana, 'astrale e vagolante', risen now up to the stars, wandering with her freer, fuller self (151).

Similarly to Doris, Gaetana's evolving self is reflected in the changing relation with her (familiar) background: her aversion for her hometown and its people gets stronger, to the point that, one year and a half later, she refuses to come back and visit her grandmother and meets her halfway, in Taormina.

There, to testify further to Gaetana's estrangement from her previous self, the familiar people do not appreciate the (New) Woman she has become, first Eli, Marco's friend and her previous suitor, and then also her grandmother. Only Marco, quite tellingly, thinks that she could have not become anything else than this and admires her also in the new attire, with her short hair and red lips.

However, behind the man's apparent appreciation, lurks his attempt at objectifying the woman, reducing her once again to a subordinate role. Indeed, connecting again woman and city, he parallels her transformation with the one he has enacted in Granica, with the paving of two broad streets and the building of a prospective hospital; he has also managed to turn the peasants into devoted servants to the (Fascist) cause, ready to 'abbattere ed erigere' ('demolish and build') at their own expense. Here again, Gaetana reasserts her own desires and right for self-definition: while she claims to be content with his endeavours, she states firmly that she will never see the new city, causing Marco disappointment and his claim that she has become

foreign to him and the town alike. While his concern for the demographic problem leads him to encourage Granica's peasants to get married and have children, as we have seen above Gaetana is not interested in marrying – let alone having children – and dreams of blowing away the too-close face of her suitor Eli, like the smoke of her cigarette (130). In the face of her grandmother's, and Marco's, expectation that she become a mother and wife in the family house she will inherit, Gaetana reclaims her freedom, opposing to that 'noble mouldy traditions' her new life in the city, where, as she states, she is happy (107).

An episode which needs to be mentioned in the context of Gaetana's (sexual) awakening in the city is her encounter with Irene's friend Max Pardo, a poet known internationally and who had arrived in Catania to hold a conference. While Aletta confesses to the man that she cannot resist the spell of music and poetry, the old intellectual invites her to his apartment alone to 'initiate' her to the thrill of a fulfilment which is 'the gem of youth', and which he defines as 'real poetry'. It is telling that, after answering to his invitation with a vague 'maybe', Aletta looks at herself in the mirror and seems to discern something left of Gaetana, 'sofferente e nervosa' ('the nervous and suffering girl', 149). One night, alone at home, she wears her nightgown and silk robe and calls the man on the phone. While the girl tries to find real closeness, confessing to him her sorrow, the man, who calls himself 'friend' and then 'brother', dismisses her thoughts as 'romanticherie' ('sentimentality', 151) and brings her back to earth, asking lustfully how many men and women have loved her, which causes Aletta's disgust and the desire to sink her nail into his face (152).

Aletta'a attempt at bringing the conversation round to the man's book, which she has read, also proves useless as he is more interested to win the promise of a date and the kiss he awaits. It is worth noting that, to face the woman's rejection, the cultured man tells her that she suffers from 'la malattia delle ragazze moderne che sanno tutto, vogliono tutto, e si rifiutano' ('the illness of modern girls, who know and want everything, and say no', 154)

Significantly, as the possibility of a rendez-vous becomes real, Aletta becomes again Gaetana, 'la provincialina dagli insegnamenti austeri' ('the provincial with a strict education', 153) as she feels Pardo would 'waste' her soul.

While the dreamy conversation with the poet fades in the memory of a summer by the sea, when, after feeling dizzy in the waves, she was rescued

on a ship and stared at the sparkling sun, Gaetana invokes her grandmother, to save her from what seems a risky situation – at least for the woman's virtue. Gaetana's prayer seems to be heard, as in the morning her pleading half-sleep ('dormiveglia orante e affannoso') is interrupted by Marco's telegram that calls her back home as her grandmother is dying (154).

After examining the emancipatory potential of the woman's masquerade in Catania, I now turn to the last 'Tempo' of the novel, where we find Gaetana back in her hometown. An examination of the novel's ending reveals that the protagonist's hybrid position, far from restraining the woman's agency and right for self-determination, sheds to light on the complex ways in which modern women negotiated their role and a space for themselves in Fascist society.

3. New City, New Woman?

It should have become now clear that the Fascist mayor's intention is that of shaping and controlling both woman and city, in apparent adherence to the Regime's ideology which confines woman to the private sphere of home and childbearing, reinforcing patriarchal authority. However, a closer look at the third part of the novel and in particular at the woman's ambivalent position at the end, shows that if Fascism would seem to rigidly enforce the boundary between private and public sphere, excluding women and fixing them in the role of wife and mother, it also called for its 'transgressive crossing' by them, as Marina Addis Saba has underlined.[215] As mentioned, this contradictory call entailed further divisions, like the one between the representation of woman as rural mother, as a consequence of fascist 'demographic delirium', and the construction of woman as urban consumer, as a product of (American) capitalism, a tension which, as we have seen, Capuana's novel problematizes.[216]

[215] Marina Addis Saba, 'La donna muliebre', in *La corporazione delle donne*: *Ricerche e studi sui modelli femminili nel ventennio fascista* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1988), p. 5. Emma Scaramuzza, pointing to this contradictory interpellation to women, speaks of 'donna muliebre' to define the active, intellectual and fascistically feminist woman. The term *muliebre* refashions, according to Scaramuzza, the very rhetoric of virility, transferring onto the feminine 'the high moral tone attributed to *virile*'. In: 'Professioni intellettuali e fascismo: L'Ambivalenza dell'Alleanza muliebre culturale italiana', *Italia contemporanea*, 151-52 (September 1983), 111-133 (114n).
[216] De Grazia, 'La nazionalizzazione delle donne: Modelli di regime e cultura commerciale nell'Italia fascista', *Memoria* 33, 3 (1991), 95-111.

As mentioned, with his act of 'fascistizzare' (fascistizing) the town, which he feels more and more his own creation, Marco *de facto* modernizes the rural place, providing it with faster machines and more efficient systems of cultivation. As De Grazia and other historians have showed, Fascist politics and practice proves to be likewise ambivalent towards woman and her role in the State. Although Italian women experienced Fascist rule in different ways according to class and other determinants such as age and geographical provenance, the lives of women coming of age in Italy during the long years of Mussolini's dictatorship were generally 'a disconcerting experience of new opportunities and new repressions', as they felt at the same time 'the enticement of things modern' and the 'drag of tradition', which is also reflected, as seen, in Gaetana's (split) consciousness.[217]

Significantly, to the model of 'donna madre' (woman-mother) Fascism opposed the 'crisis-woman' (donna-crisi), invoked as the masculinized woman, who embodied the deviant degeneration of the female type, associated with emancipated behaviours and desires.[218] Gaetana's crisis, to use the Fascist word, would seem resolved at the end of the novel, which unfolds over five years, from 1926 to 1931. As Pickering-Iazzi has underlined, this period covers the intense demographic campaign supporting the sexual politics the Regime effected to incorporate women into a separate, 'domesticated' sphere of culture.[219]

Trying to reconstruct Fascist theories of gender,[220] Lucia Re has aptly underlined that several competing, even contradictory discourses on woman and sexual difference coalesced in the Regime policies towards women.

While she recognizes that alternative constructions of gender took place at the margins of the Regime's hegemonic discourse, Capuana's novel is of significance for foregrounding female subjectivity and self-representation *within* the very core of Fascist propaganda.

At the beginning of the third 'Tempo', after her grandmother has died, Gaetana is back in Granica, which has now become effectively the 'new city'

[217] De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 1.

[218] Robin Pickering-Iazzi, ed., *Mothers of Invention*: *Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): *Introduction*, pp. X-XI.

[219] Pickering-Iazzi, p. IX.

[220] Referring to two theoretical texts, namely Giovanni Gentile's 1934 *La donna nella coscienza moderna* (Woman in modern consciousness) and Ferdinando Loffredo's 1938 *Politica della famiglia* (Politics of the family), Re challenges the common view that Fascism did not have a ready-made, clear stance on the 'woman's question'. Lucia Re, 'Fascist Theories of "Woman" and the Construction of Gender', in *Mothers of Invention*, pp. 76-99.

envisioned by Marco, and she seems to consider her experience in Catania no more than an escapade. However, if life beyond 'il muro del suo giardino' ('the wall of her garden', 158) is described as a 'parenthesis' (159), Marco's conviction that she has been away just to learn to appreciate more 'il nido casalingo e raccolto' ('the cosy familiar nest', 160) is belied by Gaetana's inner restlessness. The woman is not happy in her regained small reign: it is said that she only 'adapts it to her wish for *temporary* stillness' (my emphasis, 160), which hints at another possible departure.

While Gaetana's (Fascist) education would seem to be accomplished in her taking an active role in Marco's new city, her position in society remains quite ambiguous. Even though she has retaken her 'claustral' name ('dalla sonorità claustrale', 184) of Gaetana, Aletta stirs inside her and her subversive power is far from contained. This is also marked at the textual level by the alternation of the two names, Gaetana and Aletta, which testify to her ambivalent self.

Quite telling is also the fact that Gaetana does not like the new city with its large streets and white façades as Marco would want: she finds it lifeless, as if a heavy sleep has taken all its inhabitants or they have fled (166). Actually, back in town Gaetana would also seem to have regressed to her previous, passive state – 'non è dunque altro che l'assorta, la chiara Gaetana' ('she is nothing but the pensive, clear Gaetana', 158) – yet her will to prove herself and her abilities to the mayor shows that a self-development has happened. She claims to be aware of the activities through which the State 'incanala' (directs) the woman and takes on a formative role in 'educating' other women too. Indeed, as Marco rejects her request to become the head of the Fascio Femminile,[221] Gaetana founds in her Palace the 'Casa delle donne Italiane' (House of Italian Women), opening laboratories to help young women to train in a profession and offering various classes to the peasants so that they can free themselves from their uncultivated peasantry ('selvatichezza paesana', 172). As the old men of Granica admit, in Gaetana's palace, which now looks more modern, women 'diventano moderne' ('become modern', 190).

The fact that Gaetana's consciousness has deepened is testified, again, by her self-reflexivity: back in town she tries to make sense of her city experience, and as a result she feels distant from everyone else. Alone in

[221] Yet it is very likely Gaetana will take this role eventually, as the former Head announces her intention to withdraw.

her room which looks now more modern like the one she had in Catania, she trembles like 'una puledra legata' ('a tied filly', 184), wondering if the role she has taken really suits her (178). Indeed she confesses to herself that she has chosen it less out of a real conviction than due to a rebel spirit and the 'whimsical and rebel instinct' ('istinto capriccioso e ribelle', 178) to prove Marco her skills. Hence, if Marco has managed to convert the Granicesi, and can proudly look at the city he has fought for, as to win 'un'amante magnifica' ('a beautiful mistress', 168), knowing all its stones and flaws, he still cannot decipher Gaetana so easily.

De Grazia has made the relevant case that the dictatorship 'exploited [women's] desire to be modern as much as it curbed it […] As "reproducers of the race", women were to embody traditional values, being stoic, silent and fervid; as patriotic citizens, they were to be modern, that is combative, public and on call'.[222] Focusing on the experience of women's coming of age in Italy during the long years of Mussolini's Regime, De Grazia recognizes that their life was a disconcerting experience of new opportunities and new repressions. On the one hand, Fascism condemned all the social practices connected to the emancipation of women, returning them to home and hearth; on the other hand, in an effort to mobilize all of Italian society's resources, it inevitably promoted some of the very changes it sought to constrain. Hence her use of Gramsci's notion of 'contradictory consciousness' to explain women's ambivalent feelings towards fascist politics and their own role in modern society.[223] This notion proves to be apt to describe Gaetana's trajectory from an initial refusal of Fascist doctrine to an ambivalent embrace of it, which results in the depiction of female self as many selves, rather than static or overly coherent, a feature which connects the novel further to the modernist formative fiction.

Emblematic of Fascist ambivalent politics towards women are *I Fasci Femminili*, the fascist women's group founded in 1925 with the aim of putting into social practice the ideal of service to the state as an obligation of female citizenship. As Capuana text shows, middle-class women employed such programs to forge female bonds and modern networks.

It must also be noticed that, if the Monument to the Dead of the Great War is finally accomplished, as Marco has planned, the realization of the frescoes for such an important Fascist endeavour is commissioned to a woman, Irene

222 De Grazia, p. 147.
223 De Grazia, p. 14.

in this case. Unlike Gaetana, Irene appreciates the aesthetic dimension of the New City and as an artist sees in it a potential source of inspiration, a place suitable for the conception of an ideal (183). To Gaetana's remark on her masculine outlook – she wears a grey silk shirt with a flattering tie over it and a velvet cap on her head – Irene replies proudly that she will always dress like this if she does not have to wear the party uniform. Indeed that is the visual mark of her status of artist: as she explains, all those who create and 'crave' must distinguish themselves from the other, ordinary people starting from their attire which is a sign of their 'superiority' (184). Irene, far less pretty and charming than Gaetana and Marinella, achieves through her art fuller perception than those around her, gaining a sense of her own value. Moreover, her position hints at the ambiguous place of educated women in Fascist society: she is allowed more freedom and consideration than the other women, yet her art is actually contained within Fascist scopes.

At the very end of the novel, Gaetana would seem to have finally found her place in Marco's society; this is also thanks to her strong bond with the Granicesi, the women of the town she tries to educate in 'urban ways' – she has bought a machine to project movies for them – yet her destiny is unsure. Reluctant to admit, even to herself, her feelings for Marco which the perceptive Irene tries to disclose to her, she seems bored and considers leaving for Catania again to shake 'l'inerzia mentale frammista a quella del corpo' ('the inertia of the mind and the body', 192). Until the very last moment – and line – she doubts whether she will join the celebration for the Decennale and the now finished Monument. Although she finally takes part in the ceremony, by standing next to Marco and fiercely holding his gaze she shows her resistance to being simply a subordinate and claims a place for herself in his society.

Gaetana's uncertain position is revealed when Marco proudly shows her his 'new' city. At the sight of the lights and clear facades (165) and the wide street bearing the telling name of 'Via della Rinascita' ('Renaissance Road', 162), covering with basalt 'le idee retrograde', the backwardness, together with the dry land, Gaetana cannot help asking surprised: 'è questa la città nuova? È questa?' ('is this really the New City?', 166), seeing in it almost the parody of a city. Looking in vain for the carriages and trams, the hustle and bustle which are 'l'impronta della città vera e propria' ('the mark of the real city', 166), she also reveals how much her urban experience has shaped once and for all her sense of self and of the reality around her.

Finally, it must be noticed that, if the novel celebrates female artistic achievement and recognition in a patriarchal society via the figure of Irene, woman's creativity and imagination is acknowledged from the onset, namely in the aforementioned Dedication to Italian Fascism. Beyond the surface of Fascist adoration, the text uncovers a process of female re-invention and agency: 'the city', generated in man's thought, in this case a fervent Fascist from Graniti, has born out of the fantasy and the tenacity of the young woman. The soul that flourishes out of this endeavour is therefore that of the woman writer, who has managed to re-tell 'la favola bella' ('the beautiful tale') she heard as a child, and that of the protagonist of the story, who has grown acquiring consciousness of herself amidst the travail of men and stones.

In this chapter I have examined woman's claim for agency and her ambivalent stance between conformity and resistance linked to *Bildung* in Fascist Italy via the developmental path of a 'provincialina' from her rural town to Catania and back again. The choice of a novel set in a decentered location like Sicily has allowed me to re-examine the relationship between centre and periphery, and thus the limits of *Bildung*, uncovering a neglected work and its author. Situating the novel within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, I have showed that Capuana's text reworks in interesting ways elements proper to the genre, such as letters writing and the role of (female) friendship, to give voice to female quest for agency and self-determination. Gaetana's complex trajectory shows that the novel appropriates Fascist discourse to highlight how women negotiated dominant codes, adopting and altering prevailing ideologies to find a space for themselves in modern society. Moreover, examining the notion of 'girlhood' within a Fascist frame of reference allows Italy's supposedly marginal position in relation to phenomena such as urbanism, modernization and the rise of mass consumer culture to be reassessed.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this thesis, in which I have examined the multilayered meaning of *Bildung* and its critique in the four chosen novels, by summarizing briefly the main threads of my inquire.

As I made clear at several junctures throughout this thesis, at the core of the modernist project of reappraisal of *Bildung* there is a double gesture which implies both a critique and a recuperation of *Bildung*, which we have seen at play, through different narratorial devices, in all the chosen novels.

In the first two chapters, I have underscored how the panoramic structure composed of units, which can be connected to the picaresque matrix of the *Bildungsroman*, is reaccentuated in Bontempelli's and Kästner's novels by the rhythms of the modern city and the adventures it occasions. While the developmental path of the two ex-soldiers back in Milan and Berlin respectively, is undermined by the crisis of values and the chaos of post-war society, an idea of 'good-naturedness' or morality, although played with or referred to ironically, is reaffirmed at the end of the narration. Taking into consideration the tropes of the genre, such as the confessional and the Young Man/Woman trajectory in and out of the city, I have examined how these elements interplay with the discourse of *Bildung* and the dialectic of personal desire and social responsibility it entails. Furthermore, in their critical reappraisal and modern versions of some of these tropes, the novels have revealed unexpected affinities with the *Bildungsroman* subgenres, namely the *Künstlerroman*, the novel of the artist, or the *Erziehungsroman*, the novel of education, thus giving a further insight into the effect of the institutionalization of *Bildung* on the subject's development or imagination.

I have foregrounded gender as a category particularly apt, together with other determinants such as social background and class, to explore the complex processes of modernization of these two countries, and the responses to the conditions engendered by modernity and by changing gender and social roles. I have demonstrated that Keun's and Capuana's novels reappropriate and play with the male defined discourse of *Bildung* to debunk common assumptions about women and their role in patriarchal societies. Far from representing a regression to traditional gender roles, the movement out of the city depicted at the end of both novels proves to be an attempt by the women to achieve a life configuration on their own terms, eschewing the market logic of capitalist society and laying claim to agency.

Stressing the (ir)resolution of most of these novels, which give way to non-linear path to self-discovery, I have tried to challenge their prevailing view as reverse or anti-developmental narratives, which reflect the apocalyptic tone dominating the arts and literature of the years between the two Wars. As it should have emerged in the course of my argument, this thesis has the potential to fill a gap in modernist studies on the *Bildungsroman*, which have paid little attention to the period and the works under consideration.

This account does not aim at being exhaustive: there are obviously further aspects – not to mention the number of (less known) novels and authors – which would deserve to be taken into consideration. I hope, however, that my analysis can pave the way for further examination which could illuminate the new modes of experiencing reality and the sense of self emerging out of the experience of modern urban life.

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