Still figures: Photography, modernity and gender in Neera’s Fotografie matrimoniali

Silvia Valisa, Florida State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/silvia_valisa/13/
Still figures: Photography, modernity and gender in Neera’s Fotografie matrimoniali

Silvia Valisa

In 1883, in the early years of her writing career, 37 year-old Neera published a short novel entitled Fotografie matrimoniali. It ran in nine instalments, between March 18 and July 22, in the Milanese Sunday periodical Il Pungolo della domenica. Seventeen years later, in 1900, the novel was republished by the Sicilian house Giannotta, in its series ‘Semprevivi. Biblioteca popolare contemporanea’. The book, entitled Fotografie matrimoniali, contained the eponymous novel, now prefaced by the author, and a collection of aphorisms (Farfalle bianche, farfalle nere).

It was initially its striking title, and the direct reference to the technological metaphor of photography that it contains, that sparked my curiosity in the novel. I was then further intrigued by the discovery that no visual material is included in Fotografie matrimoniali: as it turns out, the ‘photographs’ presented in the text are short, quite heterogeneous prose chapters containing dialogues, letters, narrations
of conjugal moments. These snapshots formally reference and exploit the photographic medium to offer the reader a ‘real’, fixed image of married life, an impression of objectivity and novelty at once, but their relationship to photography is—with but one, fascinating, exception—eminently metaphorical and structural, rather than literal and content-based.

By virtue of such an innovative formal choice, the novel raises several issues that I wish to address here. I discuss the presence of the photographic metaphor, both at the formal and at the thematic level, as well as the context of Italian modernization that such a metaphor suggests. I argue that modernity takes on different meanings and ideological connotations in the text, in particular in its discussion of gender, while participating in a nationalist rhetoric that simultaneously gives room to and ‘frames’ its female subjects. I thus investigate how the representation of gender roles is impacted by the changes brought forward by modernity, and discuss whether Neera’s formal choice succeeds in opening a different narrative and ideological space. Finally, I argue that Neera’s discussion of photography in the novel’s 1900 preface is an important corollary to the text itself, one that confirms and complicates the significance attributed to photography in 

_Fotografie matrimoniali_.

^
Neera and realism

In reviewing the novel for its volume publication, almost twenty years after its periodical appearance, Neera prepared a preface aimed at thematizing the chronological and ideological distance between the novel’s first life and its belated resurrection:

Sfogliando la raccolta del *Pungolo della domenica* dove queste *Fotografie matrimoniali* apparvero la prima volta e guardando il nome degli scrittori che vi collaborarono, con intendimenti e con mezzi ora quasi del tutto dimenticati, provai un senso di malinconia che i giovani i quali mi leggono oggi non possono forse comprendere se non rammentando l’impressione da essi stessi ricevuta quando, in mezzo ai fogli di un libro, trovano un fiore vizzo. (*FM*, p. V)

Neera produced a comparison between *Fotografie matrimoniali*, as well as other texts by different authors that had appeared in *Il Pungolo della domenica*, and a ‘fiore vizzo’. This wilted flower is a reference to an outdated aesthetic, to the different social and cultural contexts within which the novel finds itself to exist, then and ‘now’.
Indeed, the preface continues with an emphatic reference to the changes in literary conventions that occurred in the years in between:

‘Quanti ideali tramontarono in questi ultimi anni! Quanti canoni d’arte, allora fiorentissimi, giacciono per il momento tra i ferravecchi’ (FM, p. vi).

Among the faded artistic ideals that now lie in the junkyard of literature, the canon she most likely refers to is that of realism, more specifically of verismo. Seen from the dawn of the new century, verismo, together with positivism at large, is, in Neera’s eyes as much as in those of her contemporaries, by then so outdated as to resemble a wilted flower. As Giulio Bollati has written, ‘Alla svolta del secolo, il ‘fatto’ è guardato con sospetto, e sconta duramente la presunzione di essersi ritenuto, col positivismo, un elemento decisivo’.iii

The writers Neera refers to as her published companions in the pages of Il Pungolo della domenica: Giornale di amene letture are, among others, La Contessa Lara, La Marchesa Colombi, Giuseppe Giacosa, Salvatore di Giacomo, Matilde Serao, Eugenio Torelli-Viollier, Cordelia, Edmondo de Amicis, Achille Basile, and Olga Ossani. Il Pungolo della domenica was explicitly open to different styles and poetics; it showcased an eclectic selection of contributors, and is not to be considered only a verista periodical. Yet the publication of realist bozzetti such as ‘Una vendetta
allegra (aneddoto storico)’ (13 May 1883), A. Cortella’s ‘Bozzetti veneziani’ and ‘Dal vero’ by Olga Ossani (27 May 1883), and ‘Bozzetti calabresi’ by Pasquale Martire (15 July 1883), allows us to glimpse at the consistent presence of a verista poetics in such a publication, a poetics focusing on the realistic and ‘objective’ description of specific settings and individual situations, often with a regionalist touch.

* Many people helped me conduct archival research on the historico-photographic part of this essay; in particular, I wish to thank the personnel of the microfilm room in the Braidense Library, dott.ssa Nadia Piccirillo from the Civico Archivio Fotografico di Milano, Francesco Basile at the Civiche Raccolte Storiche in Milan, as well as Patrizia Mauri, Antonella Bandini and Massimo d’Introno at the Biblioteca Storica RCS. I am deeply grateful to Angela Matilde Capodivacca, Ipek A. Celik and Mark Pietralunga for reading earlier versions of this essay.

i Neera, Fotografie Matrimoniali (Catania, Niccolò Giannotta editore, 1900). All further references are abbreviated to FM and are to this edition. (The text is also available online through the ‘Italian Women Writers’ project, http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/IWW/).

ii Neera started her prolific and successful literary career around 1875; she published short stories in daily periodicals such as Il Pungolo. Corriere di Milano, founded in 1858 (not to be confounded with the Neapolitan periodical of the same name). Il Pungolo was the most widespread newspaper in Milan before the arrival of Sonzogno’s Il Secolo.
(Storia di Milano, ‘Nell’unità italiana (1859-1900)’, Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Treccani, 1962, vol. XV, p. 753). Its Sunday edition, Il Pungolo della domenica. Giornale di amena lettura, was published between 1883 and 1885. The other episodes of the novel were published on 25 March (‘Luna di miele’), 8 April (‘Mode del giorno’), 29 April (‘Dopo il pranzo’), 20 May (‘Consigli a Sofia’), 3 June (‘Confidenze’), 17 June (‘Intimità’), and 8 July (‘Burrasca’).

iii G. Bollati, L’italiano. Il carattere nazionale come storia e come invenzione (Turin: Einaudi, 1983). He also refers to the changes in aesthetics in relation to photography: ‘Tempi difficili per la fotografia quando l’idealismo, l’estetismo, il moralismo prendono il sopravvento’, p. 163.