Gendered Quests: Analysis, Revelation and the Epistemology of Gender in Neera's "Teresa", "Lydia" and "L'indomani"

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A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (J. Butler, Gender Trouble 44)

Between 1886 and 1889, the Milanese writer Neera published three novels so structurally and thematically coherent that they came to be considered a ‘trittico della fanciulla’, as Antonia Arslan has defined it. Teresa (1886), Lydia (1887) and L’indomani (1889) examine the destinies of three young women striving to discover and affirm their role in society. Their similar quests soon configure themselves as paradoxical, split as they are between an intellectual attempt to ‘understand’ one’s place in the world and the social subjection that binds these heroines to their biological destiny as women. The novels enact three different solutions (or non-solutions) to solve this division: in the first instance, Teresa autonomously sets off on her quest for a happier life; in the second novel, Lydia is humiliated in her romantic hopes and kills herself; in the third one, Marta reinserts herself within the ranks of a traditional female genealogy, enforcing the very law that has defeated her cognitive ambitions.

In this essay I propose to understand these texts as grounds of gendered quests that have as their objective, in fact, the very possibility of a free-willed quest. The heroines attempt
to achieve the status of ‘seeker’ such as it is granted to a male protagonist from the very start of a novel. In the case of the protagonists of Neera’s novels, the achievement of such status is not the beginning but, in the best-case scenario, only the outcome of the text. I discuss such a narrative unfolding from the standpoint of the epistemological organization of the texts: an analytical paradigm of knowledge – active, rational, traditionally associated with men – is juxtaposed to a revelatory one – passive, irrational, traditionally gendered in the feminine. I illustrate the ideological tensions that such an epistemological and gendered ‘coupling’ produces, but also its potential for subversion. Finally, I discuss the pivotal role that the three revelatory sequences acquire within the economy of each novel: they are fundamental to the development of the subjectivity of the three protagonists, as well as key moments in the production of a gender ideology that, as phantasmatic as it can be shown to be, has direct and grave consequences on the individuals it regulates.

In his landmark study on *The Theory of the Novel*, György Lukács outlined that ‘the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivized as the psychology of the novel’s heroes: they are seekers’.

Heroes – conjugated in the masculine in his text – embody and confirm the structural restlessness of the novel and its quest for meaning: the novel is, in Lukács’ words, ‘the artform of virile maturity’ (p. 194). There is no place, in this as in later theorizations of the novel, for the specific status of characters, such as those found in Neera’s novels, structurally torn between a position as subjects of their own story and one as objects of someone else’s desire and knowledge. My exploration of these texts thus aims to underline the structural and ideological challenges a writer like Neera faced as she set out to build these stories around a split – i.e., gendered as female – protagonist, whose status as seeker could be envisaged only as the final achievement of the narrative journey, that is as the recognition and
overcoming of the passive epistemological stance that socially and culturally constrained the heroine.

Several literary scholars have suggested that Neera constitutes an interesting example of conflicting representations of women contained within the work of a single author. Her essayistic production elaborates very conservative and anti-feminist stances, whereas in some of her novels she provides important material for a critical approach to the female condition, and definitely combines ideologically conflicting discourses on women’s role in society. Luigi Baldacci, in the introduction to his and Francesca Sanvitale’s 1977 edition of Neera’s ‘anti-feminist’ Le idee di una donna, points out that, ‘[f]emminista convinta ed efficace quando narra, e soprattutto in Teresa […], Neera s’impone di rivedere le proprie idee, come saggista, dall’interno del sistema dominante, quando affronta espressamente il problema della donna’. This convergence of two different discourses, a subversive and a complicit one, is undoubtedly the most visible feature of Neera’s works.

Baldacci writes that Neera sometimes accepts ‘dall’interno del sistema dominante’ the guidelines relegating women to the domestic sphere, whereas, on the other hand, she conveys a different reality, or at least portrays women’s condition exactly as it is, from what he implicitly connotes as an ‘outside’ space. This distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ can be overcome if we think of the discursive system within which Neera inserts herself as the very space providing her and her writings with an existence, as an all-encompassing system of social power. The notion of a discursive system of power is one I derive from Foucault’s Histoire de la sexualité, a text in which he also famously outlined how even the ‘resistance’ to a dominant discourse can only exist and be enacted from within such discourse, and use those very terms, images and structures employed by power. ‘Power’ is not a unified, centralized
structure emanating from a governing will. It is, rather, multiple and relational in that it does not exist by itself, as something external to economic, political and sexual relations, but is a constitutive part of such relations. Foucault’s perspective is essential to an understanding of social and cultural interactions in which every act on the part of a subject is already inscribed in relations of power that define and limit it. If we think of subversion and complicity in Foucauldian terms, they are to be considered the poles of a tension continuously shifting: every text results from a specific combination and arrangement of these two forces, understood as the constituents of a power relationship that defines individuals’ roles in society, just as they shape the ideological organization of a novel.

Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of society and of power relations, while focusing more specifically on gender, Judith Butler has underlined in her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* the importance of ‘rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself’ (Butler 1999, 40). One of the most important insights provided by Butler’s critique of conservative notions of power is that ‘to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement’ (p. 40). She labels this repetitive yet variable structure of action ‘performativity’: it is ‘that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration’ (Butler 1993, 20). The very act of telling – or re-telling – one’s story opens up the possibility of producing a different message, or of unchaining a different reaction from one’s audience.

The narrative ‘matrix of power’, in Butler’s words – i.e., the ideological framework – displayed in Neera’s three novels is the univocal parable, prescribed to and expected of women, from virgin daughter and sister to married woman, and then on to mother. Neera
never explicitly undermines the validity of this parable, but her texts demonstrate that a narrative enterprise setting out to exemplify it is bound to encounter, more often than not, obstacles preventing the smooth enforcement of this basic narrative (and social) paradigm. Her works are, in this sense, highly performative: while telling (or re-telling) quite linear and traditional female trajectories, they succeed in negotiating new spaces for both characters and readers, spaces within which it becomes possible to measure the distance between the ideological framework of the text and the subjective aspirations of the characters inhabiting it.

**Teresa, or the Successful Revelation**

The first novel of the triptych, *Teresa*, offers the most fitting example of the ‘displacement’ Butler writes about, and an optimistic, if ambiguous, solution to the problem of the female seeker’s status. Published in 1886, it is Neera’s most famous work and has been quite regularly reprinted throughout the twentieth century. Teresa, the protagonist, is introduced to the readers at the pivotal

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i A. Arslan. *Dame, galline e regine. La scrittura femminile italiana fra ‘800 e ‘900*. (Milan, Guerini Studio, 1998), p. 128. C. Ramsey-Portolano reports that, according to Arslan, Neera herself referred to these novels ‘in several unpublished letters as “ciclo della


vi Antonia Arslan and Anna Folli are among the recent scholars more engaged in reassessing the importance of Neera’s works. Together with Gian Luca Baio, Arslan has edited the most recent edition of Teresa (1995); with Anna Folli she has published an edition of Neera’s short stories and, among others, of her private correspondence with B. Croce. Neera, Monastero e altri racconti, A. Arslan and A. Folli eds. (Milan: Scheiwiller
