

Retrieving or Revising? Using Mythology in Contemporary Italian Literature against Femicide

Nicoletta Mandolini

This paper investigates two contemporary Italian novels on the topic of femicide (*femminicidio*) – *Undicesimo comandamento* (2011) by Elena Mearini and *Padreterno* (2015) by Caterina Serra – drawing on feminist insights that consider practices of both revising and retrieving mythology as an opportunity to start a process of re-symbolisation that could challenge patriarchal discrimination and violence. In particular, Mearini’s decision to re-write the Christian myth of the cross in order to tell the story of a woman annihilated by her partner’s violence and Serra’s use of the Greek myth of Aristaeus to retrieve a story of femicide told by a male offender who undertakes a process of self-awareness will be considered as part of the same contemporary Italian tendency to tackle lethal gender violence against women by means of literary representations and storytelling.

In the Italian context, the conspicuous production of literary works on the topic of lethal gender violence against women is a relatively new phenomenon that started in 2012, when discussion about the social issue of femicide (*femminicidio*) expanded beyond the niche of feminist discourse and began to be mainstreamed (Mandolini, 2017, p. 360). Since then, a surprisingly high number of texts that explicitly address the plague of women’s deadly victimization has been published on the peninsula, both by female and male authors.¹ Among these, *Undicesimo comandamento* [Eleventh commandment] (2011), by Elena Mearini, and *Padreterno* [Heavenly Father] (2015), by Caterina Serra, draw on Western religious and

¹ Examples include Giampaolo Simi’s *La notte alle mie spalle* (Rome: e/o 2012) and *Cosa resta di noi* (Palermo: Sellerio 2016), Antonio Manzini’s *La costola di Adamo* (Palermo: Sellerio 2014), Edoardo Albinati’s *La scuola cattolica* (Milan: Rizzoli 2016), Marilù Oliva’s *Le spose sepolte* (Milan: Harper Collins 2018), Giuseppina Torregrossa’s *Il basilico di palazzo Galletti* (Milan: Mondadori 2019) and the anthologies *Nessuna più* (Rome: Elliot 2013), edited by Marilù Oliva and *Rosa sangue* (Matera: Altrimedia 2016), edited by Donato Altomare and Loredana Pietrafesa.

mythological traditions to provide a literary critique of patriarchal culture from which sexist violence arises. Among literary works on the topic of femicide produced in Italy since the beginning of the new millennium, Mearini and Serra's works are the only two dealing with mythology in a structural and explicit manner. This article reads the two texts with the aim of discussing the role played by the apparently opposite narrative practices of re-writing and retrieving mythology² in the context of feminist art-based activism³ against gendered violence in Italy and beyond.

References to classical mythology are not unusual in narratives on the topic of sexist abuse, both in Italy and at an international level. To give just two examples, popular Italian feminist writers such as Dacia Maraini and Elena Ferrante reclaimed the mythical stories of Philomela and Demeter/Persephone in their novels *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucría* [The Silent Duchess] (1990-2000) and *L'amore molesto* [Troubling Love] (1992-2016). Maraini's implicit references to the Greek myth of Philomela, the woman whose sister's husband rapes her and cuts off her tongue (Brooke, 1995, pp. 191-192), and Ferrante's rewriting of the story of Persephone's rescue by her mother Demeter, who liberates her from the kidnapper Ades

² In the context of this article, Biblical and Gospel stories are exclusively addressed as mythical narratives. Following Northrop Frye's considerations on the irrelevance of the receiver's belief when it comes to the structural formation of myths as tales, it is thus possible to talk about "Christian mythology" (1961, pp. 599-600). A discussion on the potentially differentiating element of faith, despite not being unimportant in the study of re-writings on gender-based violence, exceeds the purpose of this article, which does not deal with the reception of the analysed texts.

³ Since "art-activism" and "artivism" are elusive terms that refer both to "the work of artists mobilising to change society [...]" and to the creative and artistic tactics of activists operating outside of the cultural sector altogether (Serafini, 2018, Approaches to Art Activism), I use the more specific "art-based activism" to refer to a practice that originates in the realm of art (literature, in this case) but clearly engages with political issues (femicide and gender-based violence). The analysed texts' link to political practices is testified by their publication dates, which approximate the date (2012) of the mainstreaming of feminist discourse on femicide in Italy. This temporal conjunction allows to include Serra and Mearini's works among the vast multimedia cultural production on the theme of lethal gender violence that emerged in the peninsula during the second decade of the 2000s (Bettaglio 2018; Mandolini, 2019; 2020; Pickering-lazzi 2018), thus highlighting the dependency and contribution of the texts to the politics of feminist discursive pollination.

(De Rogatis, 2016, pp. 188-191), demonstrate how looking back into the sphere of *mythos* is fruitful for developing narrative representations that can both describe and resist gendered violence. This is not surprising if we think about the importance of the process of mythopoesis (myth-making, etymologically) in the construction of imaginaries that can contribute to either confirming the *status quo* or stimulating social change. As the Italian collective of writers Wu Ming have often stated, manipulation and multiple, as well as dynamic, re-narration of myths is a crucial enterprise to which activists and artists should dedicate themselves if they want to tackle contemporary political issues (Amici, 2006, pp. 16-17). Feminist art-activism has a strong tradition in this sense, in Italy and elsewhere. As an example of this kind of earlier commitment to the practice of mythopoesis, one can think of the interest in the mythical figure of women demonstrated by feminist philosophers such as Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, both members of the Veronese collective of thinkers named after the Greek figure of the female intellectual “Diotima”.⁴ The productivity of myth-manipulation can be identified in contemporary feminism as well, where references to new figures of literature or pop culture such as the handmaidens created by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) or characters such as DC Comics’ Wonder Woman are used repeatedly to support specific feminist political causes (Marghitu and Moor Johnson, 2018; Bruni and Selmi, 2010).

As Liedeke Plate argued, the tendency to re-write or re-tell that characterizes a good portion of women’s artistic production should be considered a pivotal concept in feminist practice and politics as it allows historically subaltern subjects to rediscover or re-appropriate stories with memorial and/or transformative purposes. Within the area of feminist re-vision,

⁴ Established in 1983 at the University of Verona, the “comunità filosofica femminile” [women’s philosophical community] Diotima aimed at challenging “the universality and neutrality of philosophical discourse”. The insights of the French philosopher Luce Irigaray and the cultural practices introduced by the feminist association Libreria delle Donne di Milano worked as references for the collective. On this, see <http://www.diotimafilosofe.it/presentazione/>.

rewritings of mythological episodes play a foundational and decisive role because of the paradigmatic dimension of mythology as a narrative device that supports repetitions and retellings. In Plate's terms, mythology "emphasizes how rewriting also serves to repeat, transmit, and literally re-present the past as it adapts it to present concerns. This conservative dimension of myth is inherent to rewriting – even to those rewritings aiming at remembering differently [...]. It is crucial to the production of cultural memory as memory shared yet contested" (2011, pp. 30-31).

Analysing the role played by feminist re-writings in the field of cultural memory, Plate identifies a significant temporal shift in women writers' approach to the reworking of mythological narratives, which leads her to distinguish between the practice of "feminist revision" produced in the Seventies, when the practice originated, as testified by the influential concept of revision coined in those years by Adrienne Rich (1972), and that of "mythical retelling", which characterises works published in the new millennium (2011, p. 31). According to this categorization, the rewritings of the Seventies aimed at demythologizing, which is to say, they looked at mythology through an interpretative practice that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, borrowing Paul Ricoeur's expression "hermeneutics of suspicion", identified as dominant in the context of post-structural and feminist textual criticism (2003, p. 125). Their objective was to dismantle the patriarchal myth, to which they opposed a feminist version of the same story. To use the terminology proposed by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard, they created an "alternative *logos*" (2006, p. 10). In contrast, more recent re-elaborations of mythological episodes respond, according to Plate, to a "reparative impulse" (an expression again borrowed from Sedgwick) that allows an affirmative rediscovery of the myth, a re-mythologization that manages to be critical of patriarchal logocentrism because of the inherently open and pluralistic structure of the narrative typology that pertains to the *mythos*

(2011, p. 31-32).

The analysis of *Undicesimo comandamento* and *Padreterno* that I propose in this article attempts to challenge the dichotomous divide between negative/suspicious and affirmative/reparative interpretations or readings that, in the last two decades, have dominated the field of literary criticism (e.g. Sedgwick 1997; Strowick 2005; Felski 2009; 2011). Despite borrowing this same opposition with the aim of sustaining the diachronic division between the practice of “feminist re-vision” and that of “mythical retelling”, Plate recognises that the deconstructive and the restorative tendencies are not mutually exclusive. This is demonstrated by the fact that they are both envisaged by the feminist theorists who introduced the practice of re-writing to American and European feminists: Adrienne Rich and Hélène Cixous. According to Plate, Rich and Cixous’ theories of re-vision possess, in fact, a “double-directed look” that looks back, “implementing a change designed to correct or improve, yet also contains the power of vision, that is, the ability to imagine the future” (Plate, 2011, p. 45). It is not surprising then, that even feminist theories on mythical revisions produced in the Italian context rely on the idea of a fruitful coexistence between the practices of critically re-narrating the past and creatively reshaping the future. In her influential work *Nonostante Platone* (1990), the philosopher Adriana Cavarero retrieves female figures from classical texts with the objective of associating her feminist philosophical operation with the story of situated and sexed subjectivities. By defining this retrieving practice an act of “robbery”, Cavarero discloses her twofold aim: to oppose the marginalisation of female characters and to affirmatively re-use the female figures produced by patriarchal narratives as “symbolic mothers” for future feminists (2014, p. 20).

In light of this, I contend that, in the realm of Italian mythological retellings on the topic of femicide, the two opposite inclinations of feminist re-writing are simultaneously

active and that it is precisely in this coexistence of negative and affirmative tendencies that one of the most productive traits of feminist art-based activism on gender violence should be identified.

Affirmativity within negativity: *Undicesimo comandamento*, by Elena Mearini

Undicesimo comandamento, by the Milanese writer Elena Mearini,⁵ is a brief novel that reworks the Gospel's narration of Christ's Passion to tell a woman's story of surviving domestic violence. Mearini's first-person narrative and her dense, almost poetic, prose convey the experience of the so-called "living death", to use Nedera Shaloub Kevorkian's terminology (2002, p. 591), experienced by the protagonist Serena, who is trapped in a life-threatening relationship with her abusive husband, Diego. After enduring years of abuse, Serena eventually manages to fight back against her husband's violence and ends up killing him to protect herself and the foetus she is carrying.

The Christian symbolism of the Cross is the matrix from which Mearini's narrative departs in order to propose a striking criticism of Christian morals that glorify suffering and expose women in violent relationships to dangerous consequences. Serena, for example, often portrays herself as the holder of an undefined guilt that obligates her to obey a God-like husband and to accept, precisely like Christ on the Cross, any type of pain: "If the responsibility was mine, I needed to pay. Obeying like Christ obeyed the Father. Accepting

⁵ Elena Mearini started her literary career with the novel *360 gradi di rabbia* (Milan: Excelsior 1881, 2010). Following the publication of the novels *Undicesimo comandamento*, *A testa in giù* (Milan: Morellini, 2015) and *Bianca da morire* (Milan: Cairo, 2015), Mearini reached critical recognition with *È stato breve il nostro lungo viaggio* (Milan: Cairo, 2017), which was selected for competing in the prestigious Premio Strega in 2018 as well as in the Premio Scerbanenco, the most important literary prize dedicated to Italian crime fiction. Mearini's prose combines an interest for crime-related narrative and socially relevant topics. As testified by *Undicesimo comandamento*'s style, Mearini is also committed to poetic writing. She published two poetry collections: *Strategie d'addio* (Bari: LiberAria, 2017) and *Separazioni* (Milan: Marco Saya, 2019).

more than Christ on the cross" (Mearini, 2011, p. 92).⁶ The trope of the obedient wife that silently accepts her miserable destiny is conveyed by metaphors that suggest an idea of camouflage and conformity to the surrounding environment. For example, Serena's body is described as an entity that loses its thickness after Diego pushes her against a wall, to the extent of resembling the thin plaster and merging with the cement. The excerpt quoted below clarifies how, in *Undicesimo comandamento*, the process of annihilation results in the loss of the protagonist's bodily and psychic specificity, which is represented by images of adherence to the solidity of architectural structures that symbolize the moral pillars on which Catholic culture is erected: "His presence squashes me to the wall. It reduces my body to the thickness of the white plaster. I am a one-millimeter-woman, spread on the surface and confused with the cement" (Mearini, 2011, p. 5).⁷

As the novel progresses towards Serena's final act of rebellion, the solidity of physical and cultural structures is gradually destabilized by the insistence on images of rupture. The woman's initial fantasy of accidental earthquakes, collapses, and cracks becomes, in the end, a real and deliberate act of disruption that she performs in order to escape the closet where her husband had locked her up:

I hit hard. I bang. I destroy my cross before it destroys me, before the nail gives in and my body collapses. For the umpteenth time. Broken bones and mud on me. Fuck the happy ending. I don't believe in the fairy tale of the Lord anymore. I don't believe in the father's white beard. I don't believe in Diego's regret and redemption. I rely on my strength only. The strength that breaks the timber

⁶ All translations from Italian, if not otherwise indicated, are mine. Original Italian follows in footnotes: "Se mia fu la colpa, a me toccava pagare. Ubbidire come Cristo al Padre. Accettare più di Cristo al chiodo."

⁷ "La sua presenza mi schiaccia contro la parete. Riduce il mio corpo allo spessore dell'intonaco bianco. Mi ritrovo donna da un millimetro spalmata alle mura e confusa al cemento."

and the handle, the strength that cracks the cross. (Mearini, 2011, p. 101)⁸

Here, the act of punching and breaking through the door that separates her from freedom clearly illustrates the demolition of the structure, which, at a symbolic level, corresponds to the deconstruction of the whole Christian narrative that sustains the ethos of suffering and endurance. This is explicitly stated by Serena, who elsewhere labels the story of the Cross as “faulty” and employs a series of other negative nouns and adjectives (e.g. “breakdown”, “error”, “rust”, “rot”) to refer to it and to its consequences (Mearini, 2011, p. 100).⁹

This emphasis on negative concepts and images exhibits Mearini’s antagonistic approach towards a narrative that, as a superficial reading of the text would suggest, needs to be dismantled and substituted with a feminist counter-narrative of disobedience, which could be interpreted as a *mise en abîme* of the deconstructive tendency that Plate recognized in the feminist re-writings of the Seventies. The continuation of Serena’s story confirms Plate’s idea of feminist re-writings as the replacement of a patriarchal *logos* with a feminist one. In fact, the liberating and inevitable act of lethal violence that the protagonist performs on her husband reverses sexist brutality, instead of radically challenging it.

Notwithstanding the strong negative dimension of its narrative, *Undicesimo comandamento* does not entirely conform to Plate’s dichotomy, as demonstrated by its relatively open ending. After killing her husband, the protagonist serves fifteen years in jail, leaving her son Andrea to her uncle and adoptive father Rinaldo. Being a retired boxer,

⁸ “Picchio duro. Pesto forte. Distruggo la mia croce prima che lei distrugga me, prima che il chiodo salti e il mio corpo crolli. Per l’ennesima volta. Ossa rotte e fango addosso. Che si fotta l’happy end. Non credo più alla favola del Signore. Alla barba bianca del padre. A un Diego pentito e redento. Conto solo sulla mia forza. Quella che spacca il legno, rompe il manico, spezza la croce.”

⁹ “Ma la storia della croce è difettosa, non funziona per tutti allo stesso modo. Ad alcuni riserva il guasto, assegna l’errore. Un chiodo piantato male. La ruggine sopra il ferro. Il marcio dentro il legno e ti ritrovi la conclusione capovolta.”

Rinaldo trains Andrea, who soon becomes a successful athlete. In the last chapter of the novel, Serena is portrayed while she observes Andrea training for the regional championship and proudly thinks of him as the holder of her existential inheritance:

I am proud of my gaze, staring straight ahead at the square ring. The perimeter where my son learns how to keep his guard up, how to be vigilant. His body is precise and it defends without offense. It protects without denying the right to life. [...] Andrea trains with the prophets' tenacity. He punches the same way they wink, sure of a vision before them. Between their eyelids and the future. (Mearini, 2011, pp. 122-124)¹⁰

The protagonist's son embodies a new model of masculinity. His name, Andrea, whose etymology evokes the idea of strength and virility, illustrates the potential for positive and non-abusive manhood. If everywhere else in the book onomastics functions as a tool for negative reversal (for example, the name Diego – which means “he who protects” – underlines the negative aspect of patriarchal protection), here the affirmative dimension of the naming process is striking. It is no coincidence that Andrea is compared to a prophet, a figure that prefigures a promising future where the expression of a person's subjectivity does not coincide with the annihilation of the other. In this sense, Andrea uses boxing as a means of reproducing his mother's legacy of self-protection and, at the same time, for transmuting her negative act – Diego's murder – into a constructive and beneficial attitude.

In light of this analysis, *Undicesimo comandamento* clearly appears as a feminist literary text that throws a “suspicious” look at the Christian story of the Cross and revises it

¹⁰ “Sono fiera del mio sguardo. Dritto in avanti. A osservare il quadrato di un ring. Il perimetro di uno spazio dove mio figlio impara a tenere la guardia alta. Il riparo vigile. Il corpo esatto che difende senza offesa. Che protegge senza infrangere il diritto alla vita. [...] Andrea si allena con la tenacia dei profeti. Sferra pugni come loro strizzano gli occhi, certi di una visione presente. Tra la palpebra e il domani.”

with the aim of challenging at a narrative level the principles of punishment, suffering, and obedience to which women have long been subjected within patriarchal Christian societies. The novel testifies to the longevity, in twentieth-first century Italy, of the demythologizing tendency that, according to Plate, characterizes feminist rewritings of the myth in the era of Second Wave Feminism (the Seventies). However, this does not prevent the author from complementing her deconstructionist attitude with a “reparative” approach that, especially towards the end of the text, introduces a positive symbolism through which a way out of the violent sexist model is contemplated.

Negativity within affirmativity: *Padreterno*, by Caterina Serra

Caterina Serra's *Padreterno*, published by the major Italian publishing house Einaudi in 2015, showcases a tendency to re-work the material offered by mythology in an overall constructive and affirmative way that nonetheless welcomes a critique and consequent revision of problematic aspects of the myth, thus proposing a pattern that mirrors and inverts that of *Undicesimo comandamento*.¹¹ The book reflects on the issue of gender violence and toxic masculinity by referring to the myth of Aristaeus, the Greek demi-god of bee-keeping whose story is intertwined with that of the more popular myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Aristaeus is, in particular, the one who tried to rape Eurydice and indirectly determined her death, as she perishes from the bite of a snake while trying to run away from him. After Eurydice's death, the Nymphs punish Aristaeus by killing his bees, which forces the demi-god to undertake a journey to meet his divine mother, Cyrene, who suggests sacrificing some of his

¹¹ Before *Padreterno*, Serra published the novel *Tilt* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), an adaptation from the reportage *Chiusa in una stanza sempre aperta*, which the author wrote in 2006. Serra also works as screenwriter and editor.

cattle to get the bees back. In the end, the bees rise from the carcasses of the sacrificed heads of cattle (Harissis, 2009).

The myth is the matrix on which Serra constructs the story of a violent man, named Aristeo (Italian for Aristaeus), who kills his female partner and, in the aftermaths, undergoes a process of reflection that enables him to overcome his possessive approach to relationships. It is not a coincidence that the book is structured as a monologue with which the protagonist addresses his dying father, a figure who symbolizes the patriarchal power that Aristeo, precisely like his mythical namesake, firstly reproduces and then rejects. The progressive deterioration of patriarchal authority is furtherly reinforced by a variation that Serra introduces to the original tale: the father is, in fact, the object of a non-violent sacrifice that Aristeo performs by letting him die in the house where his bees are perishing. As in the myth, the sacrifice coincides with the resurrection of the bees. This is stated by the protagonist in the last pages of the book, when he talks to his deceased father about the animals, saying: “In the end, they managed, my bees are back, they closed the cracks to the light with their saliva and they have started flying all around the house. They brought in pollen and bread. To see you die in that way saved them” (Serra, 2015, p. 193).¹²

The direct connection between the two events (the death of the patriarchal father and the renewed vitality of the bees) qualifies the insects as positive figures and testifies to their symbolic connection to the female gender. By means of this metaphorical association, an existing element of the mythic tale, the bees, is re-characterized by Serra as a symbol of feminist autonomy.¹³ It is Aristeo himself who suggests this correlation by recalling a story

¹² “Alla fine ce l’hanno fatta, le mie api sono tornate, hanno chiuso le fessure alla luce con la saliva, e si sono messe a volare intorno alla casa e a portare polline e pane. Vederti morire così le ha salvate.”

¹³ In the context of recent Italian cultural productions, the image of the bee as symbol of female autonomy appears in Alice Rohrwacher’s movie *Le meraviglie* (2014), which won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014.

that his father used to tell him about a male child being chased by a swarm of killer bees. When the mother comments on the risk of the tale making the young Aristeo scared of bees, she openly says that being afraid of bees is like being frightened of females, thus confirming the symbolic concordance:

You invented a story about the revenge of bees, killer bees you called them, with their queen who smelled the scent of the child who had disturbed them. Do you remember? The queen who chased me... [...] Mum used to tell you to stop, otherwise, I would be left scared of bees, and females. (Serra, 2015, p. 76)¹⁴

As the metaphor of the bees suggests, Aristeo's violent behavior towards women is deeply intertwined with his fear of them. The recognition of the female Other as dangerous is, in fact, what triggers the abusive reactions, as demonstrated by the protagonist's beating and killing of his partner, which is portrayed as a clear result of Aristeo's fear of being abandoned. In this context, the positive image of the bees is mainly conveyed by the character of Nina, the abused woman, who recognizes them as an emblem of desirable female independence and power, which is precisely the same quality that characterizes the bees as abject and scary creatures. In one of the poetic notes that she writes for Aristeo before dying, Nina labels the bees as a model for self-determination against male domestication. This is how the note reads in the context of the protagonist's monologue:

I would like to be
One of your

¹⁴ "Avevi inventato una storia sulla vendetta delle api, le api assassine, le avevi chiamate, con la regina che sentiva l'odore del bambino che le aveva turbate. Ti ricordi? La regina che mi inseguiva [...] La mamma diceva di smetterla, che mi sarebbe rimasta la paura delle api, e delle femmine."

Bees.
I should
Learn
From them
How to
Live without
A man. (Serra, 2015, p. 39)¹⁵

In another poetic note that precedes the reference to the story of the killer bees, Nina portrays herself as a bee who stings Aristeo (Serra, 2015, 73), thus activating an identification process that testifies to her desire for emancipation from their violent relationship. With the continuation of the novel, Nina's rhetorical operation contributes to changing Aristeo's perception of his own dysfunctional relationality, which ultimately results in the man's decision to sacrifice the symbol of patriarchal power, his father, to the bees.

As these examples demonstrate, Serra adapts and modifies the original mythical story in order to serve the needs of contemporary feminist art-activism against gender violence by deconstructing toxic masculinity, but she does not denounce it as a sexist tale. On the contrary, the author identifies the aspects of the myth that already challenge patriarchal discourse (such as Aristaeus's process of redemption and the element of the bees) with the aim of enhancing them, thus revealing the affirmative dimension of her practice.

Serra's productive approach to mythology is demonstrated also by the novel's open ending, which assigns relevance to the unburdened dimension of the *mythos*, as opposed to that of closure that pertains to the *logos*. After the sacrifice of his father, Aristeo decides to leave his house to the bees, thus symbolizing the abandonment of his controlling attitude,

¹⁵ "Vorrei essere/una delle tue/api./Dovrei/imparare/da loro/come si fa/a vivere senza/un uomo."

and talks about his future in terms of a fruitful uncertainty. In particular, he is interested in exploring alternative forms of identity that do not conform to the gender polarization offered by patriarchal structures and fantasizes about the possibility of abandoning the dangers of binarism by becoming a “third thing”:

I don't know. I will invent something. Maybe I will become that third thing that you can become. That third thing that is not the result of birth or choice. That third thing that does not relate to the guilt of one's father or the will of one's mother.” (Serra, 2015, p. 194)¹⁶

We can analyze Aristeo's idea of the “third thing” by making reference to what the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin labeled as “thirdness” in her analysis of abusive relationality. The thirdness is for Benjamin precisely the dimension of mutual recognition where the radical separation between subject and object, from which violence stems, is surmounted or, in other words, where the encounter is made possible and the subject frees himself “from any intent to control or coerce” (Benjamin, 2018, p. 24). The open ending proposed by Serra, in this sense, functions as a narrative device that supports the reconceptualization of the perpetrator's subjectivity beyond the principle of dominant masculinity and challenges the patriarchal gender binarism that keeps legitimizing the split between abusive males and victimized females.

Notwithstanding the overall positive rediscovery of the myth that characterizes *Padreterno*, the novel does not avoid implicit criticisms of Greek mythology and its uses by patriarchal Western culture. A striking example of the deconstructive approach that

¹⁶ “Io non lo so. Mi inventerò qualcosa. Forse divento quella terza cosa che si può diventare, che non è per nascita o per elezione. Per colpa di un padre o per volontà di una madre.”

complements Serra's affirmative practice is the re-writing of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, a story that feminist scholarship has labeled as problematic because of the portrayal of Eurydice as a silent object of Orpheus's desire and art (de Sousa Santos, 1998, 126). In particular, Orpheus' decision to turn and look at Eurydice while he's escorting her out of Hades, which he knew would condemn the woman to death, has been interpreted as a metaphor of male control and female marginalization to the traditional role of muse (Locke, 2000, 2). Even though in the case of Orpheus the practice of women's annihilation is not direct, it is precisely on Eurydice's silencing that the bard builds his reputation of tragic hero, thus carrying out a symbolic violation that is not recognized, condemned and punished as such, as is the case for Aristaeus.

In *Padreterno*, it is Nina who embodies the character of Eurydice, because of her role as the victim of Aristeo's violence. However, Nina's lethal victimization does not prevent Serra from creating a literary space for her voice, which is guaranteed by the presence, at the beginning of each chapter, of the aforementioned short poetic notes that the woman leaves for her partner. Towards the end of the novel, Aristeo himself recognizes the poems as Nina's legacy and he understands her writing as a performative act that stems from silence and marginalization, as the reference to the image of the "shade" that recalls Eurydice's underworld testifies: "Nina used writing as an action. One of those actions carried out in silence, in the shade, with gratitude. As the bees make honey" (Serra, 2015, p. 193).¹⁷ Here, the woman's writing includes and consequently denounces her subsidiary or marginal position, but it also serves as an action that affirms her subjectivity, which is suggested in the quote by the comparison with the bees' practice of honey-making.

¹⁷ "Nina ha usato la scrittura come azione. Una di quelle azioni che si fanno in silenzio, nell'ombra, con gratitudine. Come le api il miele."

Moreover, it is precisely Nina's writing and speech that, in the book, oppose Aristeo's father's patriarchal discourse and sexist use of mythology. For example, Nina unmasks the brutality of mythical episodes such as the rape of Danae by Zeus. She deconstructs the myth's use of the metaphor of the golden shower that mitigates the cruelty of the unwanted penetrative act, and criticizes the euphemistic language used by Aristeo's father, who described the sexual violence as "possession". This is demonstrated by this quote where the protagonist talks to his parent:

Do you remember when you used to tell me the story of Zeus who slips between Danae's legs as a golden shower? You used to say that in that way he possessed her, as if to possess was gentler than to screw. When I told that to Nina, she said that maybe you meant to say to rape. (Serra, 2015, 4)¹⁸

In *Padreterno*, myth functions as a polysemous tale, from the legacy of which the author departs to meet the communicative needs of a feminist discourse aimed at subverting existing power hierarchies. In this context, the protagonist/narrator redeems Aristaeus' story and, by means of small changes in its plot, re-creates it as an allegory of the liberation of the male abusive male subject from the imperative of domination that a gendered upbringing imposed on him. The general constructive attitude towards the myth, however, finds its counterpart in the author's decision to challenge Orpheus' story, another myth that, as opposed to that of Aristaeus, requires a feminist deconstruction and radical revision.

Conclusion

¹⁸ "Ti ricordi quando mi raccontavi la storia di Zeus che scivola tra le gambe di Danae come una pioggia d'oro? Tu dicevi che la possedeva, come se possedere fosse più gentile che scopare. Quando l'ho raccontato a Nina, ha detto che forse volevi dire stuprare."

What emerges from the analysis of *Undicesimo comandamento* and *Padreterno* is that the presence of a negative and deconstructive approach towards the myth is crucial to feminist narratives on the topic of femicide and gendered violence because it provides readers with a clear denunciation of women's objectification and its reproduction or normalization at a representative level; furthermore, it guarantees the possibility of contrasting the same subordination with the enhancement of a female subjectivity that breaks with the existing storyline proposed by the myth. Conversely, an affirmative approach towards the mythos has the function of opening up to a re-symbolization that, as we have seen with the analysis of the two novels, avoids the risks of a mere feminist inversion of the patriarchal *logos*, thus prefiguring non-polarized relationships between gendered identities and welcoming the possibility of overcoming the imperative of toxic masculinity.

In light of this, the categorization proposed by Plate should be problematized and possibly revised so as to describe contemporary feminist re-writings of the myth that incorporate both a suspicious reading of the original text and the propensity to re-work the same text with affirmative methods. This is particularly relevant in the case of Italian literary revisions on the topic of gender violence, in which the needs to denounce victimization, to (re)construct the offended subjectivity of the woman and to imagine new non-abusive relationalities coexist. However, the effort to recognize this double tension of positivity and negativity and its productivity in the area of feminist discourse should be an imperative in all fields of feminist scholarship because, as Teresa de Lauretis (1987, p. 26) suggested, it is only through the acceptance of this inherent contradiction that feminist struggles can sustain themselves without the risk of collapsing under the weight of their internal oppositions.

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