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...like a bridge over troubled waters: Giose Rimanelli's Graffiti

SHERYL LYNN POSTMAN

ABSTRACT

Il libro di Giose Rimanelli, Graffiti, è un testo incredibilmente difficile che facilmente disorienta e fuorvia il lettore inesperto. Fluttua tra due universi distinti che mostrano le somiglianze di ciascuno: conflitti politici, economici e sociali verificatisi in Italia all'inizio del XX secolo e, successivamente, negli Stati Uniti tra la metà e la fine del XX. Ogni periodo porta il loro paese su un percorso di rivolta civile. L'autore offre inquadrature cinematografiche che presentano uno spaccato della negatività culturale che si verifica all'interno del paese. Queste singole immagini si combineranno e creeranno una versione contemporanea di una proiezione zoopraxiscopica di un periodo specifico: la metà degli anni '60.

PAROLE CHIAVE: guerra, viaggio, autobiografia, donne

Giose Rimanelli's book, Graffiti, is an incredibly difficult text that easily mystifies and misleads the inexperienced reader. It fluctuates between two distinct universes showing the similarities of each: political, economic, and societal strife in Italy in the early 20th Century, and, later in the United States during the mid to late 20th. Each period takes their country down the path of civil revolt. The author offers cinematographic frames that present a glimpse of the cultural negativity occurring within the country. These individual images will combine and create a contemporary version of a zoopraxiscope projection of a specific period: the mid-1960s.

KEYWORDS: war, voyage, autobiography, women

AUTORE

Sheryl Lynn Postman è professoressa emerita di Spagnolo ed Italiano all'Università di Massachusetts Lowell. Le sue aree di specializzazione sono il romanzo spagnolo contemporaneo, il romanzo italiano contemporaneo, la narrativa Italo Americana e la letteratura comparativa spagnola ed italiana. Ha curato vari libri, tra cui uno sul linciaggio degli italiani a New Orleans in 1891. Ha scritto molti saggi sullo scrittore spagnolo Miguel Delibes e scrittori italiani come Italo Calvino e Fernando Camon. Ha pubblicato due libri e più di venti saggi sulla opera di Giose Rimanelli. I suoi libri sono: Crossing the Acheron: A Study of Nine Novels by Giose Rimanelli; An Italian Writer's Journey through American Realities: Giose Rimanelli's English Novels; and El viaje infernal en los Diarios de Miguel Delibes.

Sheryl_Postman@uml.edu

Giose Rimanelli's book, *Graffiti*,¹ is an incredibly difficult and intricate text that easily confounds and misleads the inexperienced reader. It is not for the faint of heart, but for the serious lector willing to go beyond the superficial story of a heinous unsolved homicide and enter into a more diverse ambiance that fluctuates between two unconnected and distinct universes all the while depicting the similarities and realities of each: political, economic and societal strife that occurred in Italy in the early 20th Century, and, later, once again, in the United States in the mid to late 20th. By counterbalancing the past with the present in each country, the author suggests that the years just before and after Italy's Civil War, are like the public, governmental unrest occurring in the contemporary era of the United States. Each of these time periods takes their country down a path of civic revolution. The author represents each era as cinematographic frames that, independently present a glimpse of life and hint at the cultural negativity occurring within the country. These individual snapshots will combine and create a contemporary version of a zoopraxiscope projection, of a specific, historic period: 1960s-1970s in the United States as the racial, gender and anti-war politics of the era engulf the nation.

I.

Paralleling the social and political dilemmas that occurred in Italy and the United States is not unusual in Rimanelli's works. It first appears in his novel *Una posizione sociale* (Vallechi, 1959) in which analogous scenarios were made between the Fascist era of the 1930s with the bigoted public unrest of the white populace against the Italian Americans of New Orleans that sparked the organized lynching of eleven citizens in 1891. This artistic style will continue through most of his Italian and English narratives, but in reverse, the United States contemporary period with the past Fascist era of Italy.

At first glance, *Graffiti* is a murder mystery with all the traditional elements of the film noir genre: the anti-hero; the mysterious femme fatale; the presence of shadowy figures lurking in the background; flashbacks; victims and villains; and the necessary oneiric environment all done within the Acheronian framework of the limited, and yet, vast world of this book. At the same time, a parallel text within the story clearly shows the panic and fear due to the economic, social, and political upheavals of the contemporary period in another country and another time: America

¹ G. RIMANELLI, *Graffiti*, a cura di T. Sardelli, Marinelli, Isernia 1977.

in the 1960s, an era that Rimanelli described, in his book *Tragica America*, as «[...] il decennio più tormentato della sua storia dopo l'unificazione e il New Deal...»²

The protagonist of the tale, Piero Lapulce, is a young man, a *molisano* who lives in Torino, accused of the brutal assassination of his landlady, Isotta Petracca. He is interrogated by a recently arrived from Naples Police Commisario (Pesce) and a socially prominent, local psychologist (Amorumano). Both interrogators are convinced that Piero is guilty although there is no evidence. The only way to solve the horrific act of the landlady bludgeoned to death is by combining the multiple puzzle-like pieces of the entire history and, ultimately, seeing it as one coherent, single image that depicts the present-day reality within the contemporary world.

Structurally, the narrative is not typical. It is an experimental novel that incorporates elements from traditional prose as well as a unique, metamorphosing style that might remind the reader of a much more complex and varied version of *le nouveau roman* of France or *la nueva novela* of Latin America. The components of Rimanelli's experiment are typographical games; an intermingling of multiple languages; scenes from current American television programs and the apparently endless recital of a character talking into a tape recorder. The abstract composition is interspersed with fragments and/or reflections of different political essayists, social philosophers, poets, and critics, all within the framework of the narration. In *Graffiti*, as he will do more profoundly in *Benedetta in Guysterland*, the author employs literary texts from other authors and non-literary pieces and fuses them into a one logical composition. In this manner, he creates, by the streaming of texts one into the other, a *fluid* novel.

As varied as the structure and style are, so to, is the temporal frame that jumps between the current reality of the mid 1960s in the United States, shifts to the horrors the German occupation of Italy in the 1940s, which serves as the basis of Marco Laudato's horrific journey through the country's Civil War that leads him to self-awareness in *Tiro al piccione*.

For the author to create the essential binary pathway to escort the reader, he must set in relief two specific time periods: the Italian Civil War years and its after-effects on the protagonist; and the 1960s with its social, political, and economic consequences on the main character. To do this, there are two separate narrators, each illustrating the era to which they correspond: Piero Lapulce and Marco Laudato.

The duality of the time spans is clear from the start of *Graffiti*. Although somewhat muffled, the text has two distinct voices: Piero Lapulce and Marco Laudato, the

² G. RIMANELLI, *Tragica America*, Immordino, Genova 1968, p. 7.

protagonist of Rimanelli's first novel, *Tiro al piccione*. In Rimanelli's large unpublished manuscript *La macchina paranoica* from which this novel comes, there is a fragmented text with the title *Bella Italia amate sponde*. Alberto Granese specifies that this is the personal diary of the author's alter ego, Marco Laudato, and that Piero Lapulce is the alter ego of Marco Laudato.³ If, as Granese establishes, Piero Lapulce and Marco Laudato are the same person, the reader is confronted with a Pirandellian-like twist. This characteristic will further develop in the author's English narratives as it shows, clearly, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction; reality and fantasy; and between autobiography and the non-personal history of the writer. The relationship between Lapulce and Laudato comes into clearer focus in the final segment of the text as the two characters meet, for the first time, and have a conversation:

- bonjour.
- bonjour.
- vous-etes la personne que m'a envoyé LA message? Dites-moi.
- no, monsieur; io sono un ventriloquo ...
- Un homme parle avec une poupée du bois ... C'est tres bizarre.
- peut-etre... (p. 129)

The presence of Marco emerges in an uncluttered standing and forms a crystal-line distinction in a conversational interaction with Piero. He states, «*Ti seguo da molto sai?*» (p. 134) Piero Lapulce is the alter-ego of Marco and Marco is the alter-ego of Giose Rimanelli. The verbal intercourse occurs between two alter-egos, two characters of fiction separated by nearly a quarter of a century and a lifetime of separate realities played out in Rimanelli's narrative. Laudato may be the alter-ego of Rimanelli, but Lapulce is not. He is the alter-ego of an alter-ego.

Marco Laudato's appearance twenty-two years after *Tiro al piccione* is not completely surprising nor is it unique to the work of the author. Marco Laudato unfortunately witnessed the Civil War in his birth country. He saw all the atrocities and was able to testify to all its horrors. His arrival in *Graffiti* is not without a purpose nor precedent. Marco re-surfaces in two short stories of the author also written during the same period as *Graffiti: Fantasmi del passato* and *Dimostranti*.⁴ His presence

3 A. GRANESE, *Le anamorfofi di Rimanelli. Testo, pre-testo e contesto del romanzo Graffiti*, «Misure Critiche» (Su/per Rimanelli), 65-67, 1988, pp. 172-173.

4 Both stories appear in his book, *Il tempo nascosto tra le righe*, Marinelli, Isernia 1986. Marco is hinted at in the tale *Lo faccio a fette con terenezza*, also within the collection. Although this anthology

is, therefore, appropriate here. Marco, the protagonist and narrator of Rimanelli's first novel, now re-appears in the author's first novel written in the United States during an equally distressing socio-political moment in American history: the late 1960s. Historically, this is a period of unrelenting and gruesome racial unrest; deplorable gender inequality; and an unpopular grotesque war in Southeast Asia, all of which created a civil war like atmosphere within the country that paralleled Italy's past. Marco served as the witness to Italy's violent period of the first half of the 20th century and now, again, as an observer in the United States during the second half. *Graffiti* came out in print in 1977, but Rimanelli wrote it the summer of 1967 while visiting his parents in Detroit. Piero Lapulce, according to the time frame of *Graffiti*, would be, roughly, nineteen years old the same age as Marco Laudato when he returns to Casacalenda after the war. Now, both give testimony to the shameful realities of their respective eras.

II.

Upon presenting his manuscript *Tiro al piccione* to Cesare Pavese and being asked to tell him, in one sentence about it, Rimanelli, stated that it was the tale of «un giovane della mia età che vede la Resistenza dalla parte sbagliata.» This intrigued Pavese. In a letter to Carlo Muscetta, Pavese wrote that the book is not political. It is not the case of a Fascist who repents or changes, but a young boy who miraculously survives all the horrors and has learned a great deal from his horrible experience.⁵ Elio Vittorini, who ultimately published the book with Mondadori after Pavese's suicide and the forced delay of its publication, also saw the book as apolitical. He viewed it as the story of an adolescent forced to fight in a war for the Fascists, attempting, but failing, to escape from them and being compelled to prove himself.⁶

The novel, although written in the first person singular and, as Rimanelli explained to Pavese, tells the story of a young person like himself, is not an autobiography as many people have erroneously stated. There are autobiographical elements, but it is not an autobiography. Many of the parts within the narrative do not pertain to the life of Rimanelli. There was no emotional or physical relationship with

of short stories comes out nine years after *Graffiti*, the narratives, according to the dates attributed to each of them, are from 1967.

⁵ «Non è un libro politico-non vi esiste il caso del fascista che si disgiunge o converte, bensì il giovane travolto, preso nel gorgo del sangue, senza un'idea, che esce per miracolo, e allora comincia ad ascoltare altre voci.»

R. LIUCCI, *Ritratti critici di contemporanei: Giose Rimanelli, «Belfagor»*, 30 novembre 1998, vol. 53, No.6, p. 674.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Giulia nor was there an Anna; Rimanelli did not request a lift out of Casacalenda but was forced at gunpoint to enter the German retreating truck and there were no dead bodies within it. In a 2014 interview with Antonio Carlo Vitti, the author explained clearly that there are several items within the book that are fiction and that the text is «ispirato a fatti veri, non di un'autobiografia vera e propria».⁷

Georges Gustorf theorizes that all literature is autobiographical, and that concept parallels Rimanelli's own position when he states that all his literature is autobiographical.⁸ This literary technique is so entrenched in the works of the author that it quickly moves into fact, blurring the line between reality and fantasy. Yet, according to Giovanni Cecchetti, it is more a process by which Rimanelli characterizes himself anew which is the basis of his constant and continual experimentation.⁹ The basic story within *Graffiti* has nothing to do with the life of the author. Piero was born after the civil war whereas Rimanelli fought in it. Piero has one sister, and the author has two brothers. Piero's father died after the war as a result of his harsh imprisonment in a concentration camp and Rimanelli's father did not enter a camp at all, living to an advanced age.

Both Laudato and Lapulce, years after the end of the war, are victims and casualties of the Fascists and Nazis. Laudato, in the short story *Fantasmî del passato*, comes face to face with two former *repubblichini*, twenty-two years after the fall the Republic of Salò in the United States and a brawl breaks out between them as Marco refused to accept their rightist philosophy. Lapulce's victimization appears to begin after his arrest for the killing of his landlady. He is discharged from prison only when it becomes clear that a German tenant, a former Nazi also living in the *pensione* is the murderer of the dead woman. This former Nazi was the onetime lover of Piero's mother suggesting that the harassment of the family began before his birth. It commenced when the Nazi imprisoned his father. Again, if Piero Lapulce is the alter-ego of Marco Laudato, the reader is confronted with a prism-like transformation of the author resulting in nothing of Rimanelli's actual life remains within the text and as such, the writer is drawing a clear distinction between himself, his alter ego, and his new fictional character.

In Rimanelli's works, Molise and Detroit have always played a singular purpose: the sacred, sanctified world of his protagonist. Both areas have been identified as consequential in his life. The ancestral home for Marco is his family home. It is his

⁷ A. C. VITTI, *Interview*, «Italice», vol.91, n.2, 2014.

⁸ G. RIMANELLI, *Notes on Fascist/Antifascist Politics and Culture From the Point of View of a Misfi(s)t*, University of Toronto, «Rivista di Studi Italiani», Anno II, no. 2, Dec. 1984, p. 73.

⁹ G. CECCHETTI, *Autobiografia mitografica in Giose Rimanelli, Rimanelliana*, edited by S. Martelli, «Forum Italicum», 2000, p. 121.

safe harbor, the location to which he returns as it provides him with stability and security. In his later narratives, as his parents moved to Canada and the United States, their homes in Montreal and Detroit become his sacrosanct space.

In an ironic turn, the action of *Graffiti* takes place in Torino, the Detroit of Italy. Both cities have a shared immigrant reality. The masses from the rural and agricultural communities seeking a more prosperous start in life in an urban and industrial universe totally unfamiliar to their being, migrate to these cities with the unending hope of a brighter economic situation that would lead to a more hopeful social reality. And yet in the family dwelling of this Italian *motor city*, the family home makes Piero feel «*la sensazione de essere nudo, un ospite*» (p. 95). He does not sense any protection or safety in it. Piero, unlike Marco, never felt comfortable or safe with his mother. He was forced to live with her when his father passed away. As he aged, he traveled extensively so not to remain with her. Once back in Torino, he chose not to reside with his mother, but to find another residence. He opted for the *pensione* of *la signora* Isotta Petracca.

At the same time, the Molise present in *Graffiti* is no longer a sacrosanct area as it appears in all of Rimanelli's other narratives. It has become a profane universe, a world totally antithetical to a sacred environment he always cherished. It is a venue in which, during World War II, the Nazis established five concentration camps, including one in the author's hometown. It is into this blasphemous and unforgiving cosmos that the father, although not yet married to Piero's mother, spent several years as a prisoner of the Nazis. He is imprisoned by the German soldier who had a relationship with Piero's mother. She sustained that a romance would protect her future husband, but to the contrary, it prolonged his confinement. Piero's mother shows herself to be a Nazi sympathizer. To protect herself, she selfishly accepted the evil that surrounded all and said nothing against it.

Within the sacred world of Marco Laudato, his parents' physical home in Casacalenda and, later, Detroit, always functioned as his *axis mundi*. Although there is no sacred world for Piero in either of his parent's homes, there is a place in which he feels totally secure and safe and, ironically, it is the jail. As Piero's interrogation takes place within this restricted and enclosed environment, it flings open the closed doors to his family's horrifying past and permits the reader to see the parallels between the two eras. The reader learns the personal history of the entire family. In so doing, the unfortunate domestic background from which he came is revealed: the father's internment in a Concentration Camp; the marital discord of his parents; the mother's relationship with several other men, specifically the Nazi; the father's extreme negativism towards the mother; the mother's resentment towards the father; and Piero's sister, Xenia, who appears to be taking on all the negative traits of his mother.

In archaic communities, a young man needed to endure a rite of passage to enter, formally, their society and be a viable participant within it. The rite of initiation is an act that goes back *in illo tempore*. It is the transition from childhood to adulthood. The rupture is with the world of childhood, a cosmos that Eliade defines as profane. Once detached, he now enters the sacred world of maturity, creating a sacred act.¹⁰ Marco's rite of passage commences when he leaves his home and becomes a forced volunteer in Italy's Civil War. He is gone from his home for nearly two years and when he, finally, returns, he no longer accepts, silently, the rightist political doctrine of the small-minded people in his hometown who continue to ferment such hateful ideas and have not learned anything from the recent internal conflict. The people of his village still clung to age-old, patriarchal, and self-gratifying rites of life. As Marco confronts these people of their political and social immorality, he completes his ritual initiation passage and becomes an adult.

Piero perceives this death-like separation from his mother as a requirement for existence.

His first step into his initiation rite is when he decides to abandon his mother's home and reside in another. However, the new home is like the one he just abandoned. La signora Petracca, like his mother, had a relationship with a Nazi. She is a widow and like his mother, also, has a daughter. The daughter is now married to the one-time lover of the mother, a former Nazi.

Piero's rite of passage is accomplished at the end of the narrative after a conversation with Marco. Laudato explains to Piero that a person has two paths in life and that Piero alone must choose his own. Marco cannot indicate Piero's route as he is still on his own journey. His present course is to leave the inferno-like ambience created by the Detroit riots, and the civil unrest that spread throughout the country. Man must move forward, according to Laudato, and to do that, a choice of pathways must be made. If a preference is not chosen, man remains stuck in a swamp-like existence. Man must not remain silent and non-committal; that apathy will, ultimately, penetrate the core of his soul and consume him, evoking, at the same time, the infernal images of Dante.

Piero must now achieve his own social knowledge. He must, as Marco explains, have a concept of the past to move into the present, and eventually, the future. This idea echoes Dante's and it functions as the incentive for Piero's journey. The social awakening pierces the text in a conversation that he has with Marco. In it, he describes the horrific world in which he lives. Piero must understand those images

¹⁰ M. ELIADE, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, translated by W. R. Trask, Harper & Row, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London 1975, pp. 3-9.

before he makes his journey. It is the recollection of his past that will allow Piero to undertake his voyage, and the journey commences with his choice of roads.

III.

Although *Graffiti* pretends to ascertain the barbarous murder of Piero's landlady as if it were a simple *romanzo giallo*, the presence la signorina Laura Petracca suggests a possible deeper understanding of the narrative and it is a nod to Italy's rich literary tradition. Italian Medieval and Renaissance culture have held a huge position in Rimanelli's works and, in this novel, the influence of the country's three principal writers, Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio, is unmistakable. The aura of these authors can be found in all of Rimanelli's texts starting with *Tiro al piccione* moving through all to his last narrative, *Il viaggio*. In *Graffiti*, the author takes the classic Italian tradition of the *stilnovisti* and their view of *la donna angelicata* and reverses the image to depict her as the antithesis of the paradigm to exhibit a satirical look at contemporary society and the blossoming role women should play in it.

The demise projected within *Graffiti* is the destruction of a long-held myth: the false, medieval paradigm of women as being either an angel or a shrew. Throughout the course of Rimanelli's narratives women have not played an outstanding or distinguished role. They tend to be passive/aggressive females attempting to direct the lives of their family, some for apparent good, and others as amoral and condemnable.

The mother-figure wants to control everything and everyone around her. She loves her husband a great deal but has the tendency to be domineering and self-serving. The girlfriend or the wife in Rimanelli's opus, until *Il viaggio*, is never shown in a totally positive light. In *Tiro al piccione*, both Giulia and Anna are, according to Rimanelli, a means by which the story moves forward. Neither female is presented in a wholly pure manner as Giulia is the reason for which Marco runs away and Anna is very experienced with the opposite sex. The eldest daughter in *Peccato originale*, Michela, is considered by her mother to be less than pure, even condemning her daughter for being molested rather than the men who attacked her. Stella Gomena, in *Una posizione sociale*, is depicted as having an extra marital affair and, in the long run, to silence the only witness (Massimo Niro) to her extra curricula activities, pays, at the suggestion of Massimo's mother, for his education outside the confines of the town. In future works of the author, the wife of the protagonist is never present, but always referenced. She has a problematic relationship with her spouse preferring to abandon him and spend extended time with her mother. This negative characteristic permeates his narratives.

Although the maternal presence in several of Rimanelli's books appears to be a saint-like person, a more thorough analysis of the matriarchal character indicates the contrary. In *Tiro al piccione*, as in *Una posizione sociale*, the mother is obsessed with her reputation. At the start of *Tiro al piccione*, Marco, no longer a seminarian, has returned home. The mother is disturbed that Marco has not lived up to her dreams. Additionally, at the end of the novel she is equally upset that Marco went to war because it could possibly suggest to the townspeople that he learned about such violence in her home. In *Una posizione sociale*, the mother is concerned that the tenant in her home is having relations with a married woman. She believes that the entire town is gossiping about it and is, portraying her family in a negative light. Again, the mother states that she does not want to be the source of rumormongers. In *Peccato originale* the mother is upset by her daughters: one, mentally challenged and the other, physically assaulted. The mother seems to believe that her daughters are the cross she must bear in life and is constantly telling them that they are a burden in her life. In *Biglietto di terza* the author's own mother cajoles and guilted her son to visit her in Canada. Once he arrives, she only talks about the wealth of her brothers and her lack of funds. She is, at the same time, very concerned with the money he makes and also with the company he keeps.

The negative attitude perceived toward the female characters, is based on the women's desires to be something they are not: socially and economically superior to others, while at the same time they are totally dependent on the male figure. She is always portrayed as a passive/aggressive being. This position is continued throughout the works of Rimanelli until his last narrative, *Il viaggio*, in which he shows that his wife is a partner in his life, independent and willing to share everything with her spouse as he is with her. She is presented in a positive manner with no hidden traits or agenda.

In his mini-memoir, *Molise Molise*, Rimanelli asserts that his paternal grandfather, upon the appearance of his biological father, a man who gave him away at birth, rejected him as he denied him not only a name but an education. He wanted nothing to do with the person who negated him any possibility for a better life. He proclaimed, «Sto in piedi da solo.»¹¹ This independent streak of the grandfather is one that reverberates in the personal life of the author and indicates the reason for which females are not presented in a totally benevolent manner as they have never been totally able to stand on their own without their male counterpart until his last narrative. All the female characters, prior to the appearance of Sarah Post in *Il viaggio*, are always shown to be dependent upon their husband, although feigning independence from them. Sarah, on the other hand, shows that she can stand on her own

¹¹ G. RIMANELLI, *Molise Molise*, Marinelli, Isernia 1979, p. 39.

as she is, as her husband was, an academic of notable standing, but chooses to share her life with G. G. Ri.

In *Graffiti*, the mother-figure is, from the start of the narrative, found to be selfish, controlling, self-indulgent: antipathetic. During the war years she housed Nazis within her family home and had an affair with one. She is a Nazi sympathizer concerned only with her own situation rather than caring for the horrors and suffering of others in her community. That same Nazi officer imprisoned Piero's father in a concentration camp and twenty-two years after the war, returned to Italy and married the daughter of his former lover.

The personal history of the two older women during the war years, is parallel, and so, too, is the tale of the daughters. A Nazi SS Major had an affair with Isotta Petracca during the war and returned to Italy, twenty-two years later and married her daughter. The name of this character, Isotta, is, moreover, evocative of the medieval tale of Tristan and Isolde (Isotta), albeit in a crude and vulgar variation. In Rimanelli's saga, love does not enter the story as it does in the original medieval narrative. *Graffiti* is a tale of sex, not of love. Whereas Tristan and Isolde make peace with Tristan's uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, the victim of their illicit love relationship, the husband of Piero's mother never accepted her relationship with the Nazi and peace between all parties was never achieved. The father and mother separate and have an acrimonious relationship until the father's death.

In a strange twist from the medieval tale in which Tristan and Isotta amicably see each other years later, the German lover of Piero's mother returns to Italy more than twenty years later, not to pursue any type of relationship with his former lover, but to marry and have sex with her daughter. There is no love or affection between any of these people, just physical attraction.

The similarities between the two stories of the mother, daughter, and the Nazi suggests that Xenia and Laura as well as the two older women (Piero's mother and Isotta Petracca), may be the same persons. The prism-like effect within this narrative that transforms Rimanelli's alter ego from Marco Laudato into Piero Lapulce is a similar projection of the female characters. It suggests that the kaleidoscope representation that created Piero from Marco is the same one that is transforming Xenia into Laura and his mother into Isotta Petracca.

Through the narrative, the reader sees that Piero's mother, a Medea like figure, does not have any of the refined or angelic qualities of the conventional mother. She betrayed his father with the Nazi who incarcerated him. Moreover, the mother introduced and educated her daughter to the same treacherous lifestyle, twenty-two years later with SS Major Hugues Von Sade. The perfidy continues.

There is an immediate and visible link in *Graffiti* to the poet Francesco Petrarca. The woman who is killed in this tale has the surname of Petracca, an obvious play

on the name of the famous poet. Within the specificity of this text, the poet's impact comes to light with a direct reference to his composition *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* (p. 46). The murdered victim is Isotta Petracca, and she has a daughter by the name of Laura, the same as Petrarca's beloved. The poet's Laura, or Laurette de Noves, was married to Hugues de Sade, the identical name attributed to the assailant of the landlady in *Graffiti*. That assassin is the ex-SS Major Hugues Von Sade, the husband of the daughter of Isotta, Laura. This Von Sade was, also, the former lover of Piero's mother and, possibly, the actual spouse to his sister as Laura is the alter-ego of Xenia.

Rimanelli's reference to Petrarca's *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* is not haphazard. As the work of the poet is both philosophical and humorous, the present-day role of women comes into play in *Graffiti*, in a sardonic and thought-provoking way. It assists the reader in the arduous and misunderstood journey of the two male narrators traversing the current gender war in both the United States and Italy.

Piero explains that *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* attacks the image of women and marriage. Maurice Valency points out that, although Petrarca ascribed all his fame and cleverness to Laura, he, also, declared himself to be an intense woman hater.¹² Pure love, according to Petrarca, is something spiritual, and only happens to the mature man. He adds that women are not worthy of love because they deceive, and that arguments and unhappiness enter a household as soon as a woman enters. Piero, also, reminds the reader of Petrarca's statement that a man who has been married once would be a fool if he were to do it a second time. Ironically, neither of the two narrators follow the advice. The first narrator, Piero, has never married, but, Marco, the alter-ego of Rimanelli, had been married twice at the time he wrote and published this book.

The concept of love in *Graffiti* is not innocent nor is it spiritual, it is physical. Piero's mother had a sexual affair with a Nazi while her soon-to-be husband was in a Concentration Camp; his sister, Xenia, moreover, marries her mother's former lover twenty-two years later. The hint of lechery in *Graffiti* transports the reader from the pure concept of love, as envisioned by Petrarca to the carnal image of his contemporary, Giovanni Boccaccio.

The perception of the famed storyteller is not as specific or as apparent as Petrarca, yet it is perceived within the infrastructure of the narrative and the stylistic experimentation of the tale. Rimanelli expands on the Renaissance idea of the frame narrative and brings it into the 20th century. Whereas Boccaccio used a simple frame narrative, the author of *Graffiti*, takes the refracted images that are depicted within

¹² M. VALENCY, *In Praise of Love*, The MacMillan Company, New York 1958, p. 3.

the narrative and melds them together to form a two-fold text made up of pop-culture that take the reader back in time to Italy's Civil War period and, simultaneously, shows the civil unrest occurring within the contemporary era.

In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *locus amenus* is the lush gardens of Florence, but in *Graffiti* there are no opulent grounds but the sparse cement enclosure of Piero's jail cell. Boccaccio's work covers ten days, but Piero's story is a period of twenty-four hours. As Dioneo had license to speak about any topic and not be restricted to the theme of a specific day, in a similar manner, the narrators of this saga are, also, not limited to temporal restrictions. Piero discusses historical facts that precede his birth, and Marco's emotional travels transcend the contemporary rebellious period in the United States transporting him to his horrific experiences in Italy during the civil war, a span of over twenty years.

After Piero's release from jail, he roams the city talking into a tape recorder with his observations. These utterances are present day *graffiti* and according to Capek-Habekovic, they pertain to other literary texts by other authors (although there may be some texts of the author), and in other mediums, and «they are immersed in general literary discourse—ultimately in culture itself.»¹³ Piero returns, finally, to his home and watches television. Everything he sees on the monitor create a frame-like narrative to his current reality. The experiences taking place outside Piero's window mirrors the TV program. Police officers use physical force to control student riots. Piero sees the corruption as they, like their television counterparts, are stealing from the very people they are sworn to protect. Reality and fiction have intersected and blended for Piero: they all become unified into one presence.

The *hortus conclusus* in which Piero's sister, Xenia, originally forfeits her innocence, is reminiscent of the Boccaccio's *Decameron*. To balance out the horrors of the Black Plague, Boccaccio positions his narrative in the lush gardens outside Florence. Giuseppe Mazzotta asserts that play is the main metaphor through which Boccaccio organizes his text and that it is the plague that triggers this activity creating a type of chiasmus effect.¹⁴ As Mazzotta shows the significance of play in Boccaccio's work, similarly, Capek-Habekovic points out that *Graffiti*, too, has a linguistic game plan pattern. The idea of a word game will, further develop in Rimanelli's first English novel, *Benedetta in Guysterland*, written two years after *Graffiti*. Luigi Fontanella believes that the language experimentation that started in *Graffiti* and followed into *Benedetta in Guysterland* will evolve even more so in his novel *Detroit Blues*. He

¹³ R. CAPEK-HABEKOVIC, *Texts Within Texts: Hermeneutics of the "Fluid" Novel Benedetta in Guysterland For the Jabberwocky Reader*, in *Rimanelliana* cit., p. 206.

¹⁴ G. MAZZOTTA, *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1986, p. 7.

shows Rimanelli's purpose, in these works, are as a word game.¹⁵ At the same time, Piero, also, attributes the metaphor as a game of words:

...la metafora è un gioco di parole, ed è alla base della poesia. Se lo scopo dell'arte è quello di liberarci dalle repressioni, e se la civiltà è essenzialmente repressiva, allora l'arte è sovversione della civiltà. (p. 40)

The maneuvering within the linguistic process allows the reader to construct his own mental representation of the tale and not be forced to view it within its traditional structure. In that manner, he helps create his own parameters and as such, each person then may consider the image without any pre-determined narrative limitations.

The plague ignites the action of play in the *Decameron* and the spark in *Graffiti* is the sexual, social disparity of the 1960s. If as Boccaccio states, his tales are to give pleasure and *useful counsel*¹⁶ to the women who read his work, then Rimanelli's aim is a mirror image of the same: to give pleasure and guidance to men on their outdated attitude towards the nascence of the new woman in contemporary society.

The labyrinthine view of *Graffiti* is, nevertheless, more suggestive of Boccaccio's *Il Corbaccio*. Due to difficulties Boccaccio had with women, he requested the service of Dante to aid him through the tangled web of love. In a similar way, Rimanelli seeks out the great Florentine and the reader hears his call within the specificity of the text. Boccaccio's work is an intentional misreading of Dante's *Commedia*. It is a high form of praise, albeit a parody of incredible depth of the master's great work. F. Regina Pskai points out that the *Corbaccio* is intended to be funny. It is not a joke on women but rather the misogyny, the pseudo-intellectual and male privilege that directed sexist treatment for centuries.¹⁷ It is a male chauvinist's lampoon.

In a similar satirical and pungent manner, Rimanelli's text suggests that women of the contemporary period should not still be treated or looked upon as if they were creatures still living in the Middle Ages. They are not the roadblocks to a man's existence. The author establishes a biting satire on the ever-changing role of women in the present-day era and the perpetual infernal in which men are destined to live if they refuse to accept this new view and leave behind their medieval concepts of women.

To drive the point home of the medieval concept of male domination in a romantic relationship, there are only two men who play a role, directly and indirectly,

¹⁵ L. FONTANELLA, *La narrativa in inglese di Giose Rimanelli*, «Rivista di Studi Italiani», Vol 1., 19, June 2001, p. 166.

¹⁶ G. BOCCACCIO, *The Decameron*, translated by M. Musa and P. Bondanella, with an introduction by T. Bergin, Penguin Book, New York 1982, p.3.

¹⁷ F. REGINA PSKAI, *Boccaccio's Corbaccio as a Secret Admirer*, «Heliotropia» 7.1-2 (2010), p. 105.

in the life of Piero: his father, who died when he was young; and a former Nazi. One was a gentle soul who was imprisoned during the war for protesting the harshness of the Nazis in Italy; and the other, the barbarian who imprisoned him, suggesting that only the brutal man survives and controls the relationship with women. Piero's father, already separated from his mother, dies after the war because of the monstrous actions committed to him in the camps. The ex-Nazi continues with his vicious conduct and in the end, the police find out that it was he who murdered the landlady. He was content to allow Piero to take the blame for the heinous act. In so doing, he was continuing the Nazi savagery, perpetuating it, from one generation to another.

In a dialogue with Piero, the former Nazi proclaims that it is only sex that is important. Sex is shown not as a part of love, but rather a semi-graphic depiction of lust, and perhaps, more importantly, a power struggle for dominance of one person over the other. Piero, at the same time, claims that women «*sono sesso che inganna*» (p. 46) because once they enter the house, only unhappiness and fighting comes with them. Piero does not foresee any romantic involvement with females for himself. Unfortunately, from an early age, he only witnessed trouble between the sexes. But whereas F. Regina Pskai states that Boccaccio's text is a sexist caricature, Rimanelli brings to light the male chauvinist's perspective in a terrifying and haunting manner: the appearance of a Nazi, a cruel savage who destroyed the lives of innocent victims and killed without reason. His choice not only creates the necessary flashback to the horrific war years, but strongly suggests the repulsion and bigotry of the ancient masculine viewpoint in a contemporary society towards females.

Although the *Corbaccio* could be seen as an autobiographical text because of Boccaccio's failure with a specific woman and the use of the first-person singular within his text, the author does not speak *in propria persona*. There may be strong similarities between the author and the voice within his text, but they are never the same.¹⁸ In a similar manner, although the female character within the work of Rimanelli may appear to directly speak to his own life, the voices of the characters and the author are not the same, reconfirming, as Rimanelli has always stated, that his literary creations do have autobiographical elements within them and that these components inspired his narratives, but they are not his autobiography.

The journey as an analogy, a means by which a character acquires self-awareness, is not new to Italian literature and the *Divina commedia* of Dante immediately

¹⁸ R. HOLLANDER, *Boccaccio's Last Fiction: Il Corbaccio*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1988, p. 25.

comes to mind. His odyssey through *Inferno* on his path to self-knowledge is a ubiquitous element found within all of Rimanelli's works.¹⁹ Sante Matteo determines that Rimanelli's passages, especially in his early narratives, are unlike Homer's Odysseus. They are, according to Matteo, more related to Dante's Ulysses.²⁰ He is a passenger on the journey rather than a Ulysses, and Virgil is present to support him.²¹ The inspiration of Dante in Rimanelli's work is not without precedence, and initiates with his first literary output, *Tiro al piccione*, and concludes with the final work, *Il viaggio*. It is viewed, delicately, within the sub-text of all his narratives and indicates the necessary route to come through the horrors of a repressive regime. In *Graffiti*, Dante's presence within Rimanelli's text is exceptionally clear with the use of the word *burella*:

ieri notte ho sognato che Lucifero in persona veniva risucchiato nella burella sporca del cesso, in un mare di whiskey. (p. 67)

This reference allows the reader to make an immediate connection with *Canto XXXIV* of *Inferno*. It is during this period that Piero is being interrogated for the brutal death of his landlady. Neither one of his inquisitors believes him to be innocent; they are trying to prove his guilt.

Piero's travels through the obscure *burella* of his inferno-like existence due to the sexual politics of the period begins to shed some light during his interrogation by the police inspector and the psychologist. Piero claims that he could spend his entire life in a hypnogogic, *dormiveglia*, condition.

The use of the dream-like state, the hypnogogic realm, is repeated in several of Rimanelli's narratives starting with *Una posizione sociale* and continuing until his last narrative, *Il viaggio*. The use of this literary style enables the juggling of temporal periods that engenders comparisons between one historical period and another. It allows the reader to journey along with the writer as a virtual witness to history.

¹⁹ S. L. POSTMAN, *Crossing the Acheron: A Study on Nine Novels by Giose Rimanelli*, Legas, New York 2000.

²⁰ S. MATTEO, *Molise Lost and Regained in Rimanelli's American Odyssey*, «Rivista di Studi Italiani», Anno XIX, n. 1, giugno 2001 p. 237.

²¹ J. FRECCERO, *Introduction to Inferno*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, edited by R. Jacoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 173-174.

The *dormiveglia* condition of Piero resonates the idea of Dante at the start of his orphic trek. The death of Beatrice prods the Florentine on his voyage of self-realization. The provocation for Piero, ironically comes about because of the slaughter of his landlady. Whereas Virgil was the guide for Dante; Marco is it for Piero.

The meeting between Marco and Piero occurs, structurally, at the end of the narrative and sets up the chronological time frame within the text, while simultaneously allowing the reader to understand the disconnected timeline and the passage of Piero through his present-day inferno. A Dantean-like odyssey begins to pierce the darkness and emerges during the conversation between the two, as Marco uses words that reverberate those of Dante as he crosses the river Styx.

The Styx, home to those quick to anger and argue, describes the childhood home of the protagonist. Even when his parents were no longer together, they incessantly disagreed. Their heated discussions started during their marriage when the father did not accept the mother's collaboration with the Nazis. She accepted the Nazi war machine and benefitted financially from them. She refused to understand that he did not. The father could not remain quiet to their evil and protested loudly and, as such, was imprisoned for several years.

The polemic between the parents is reminiscent of the socio-political stance that Marco encountered upon his return to Casacalenda after the war. There were still people in his town willing to fight and support the rightist ideas that had flung the country into a brutal and bloodthirsty Civil War. Many were still waiting for a new Duce to appear and lead them along a road that would allow the elite in Molise to keep the poor even more destitute and needy than before the war. They wanted to perpetuate the authoritarian and oppressive history of the Fascist ideology to command the masses. Marco, who entered the civil hostilities as a boy without any political consciousness or ideals, as an adult rejected any form of social repression that could hurt the masses, and he objected forcefully to it.

In *Tiro al piccione*, Sargent Elia guides Marco through the horrors of the Italian Civil War. In *Graffiti*, Marco is Piero's guide, and he indicates to the young man the existence of a path out of his inferno. However, Piero must decide if he wants and needs to make the journey. Marco, like Virgilio, does not lead Piero down a particular route, he confirms its presence. The decision to make the trek and follow a specific pathway must be made by Piero.

For Piero to successfully make his own journey toward self-awareness, he must become cognizant of the social realities that are engulfing his world. More than just becoming knowledgeable, he must act, as Marco explains to him:

«-vedi,» dice il signore, «il vero grande lavoro comune da fare non è la rivoluzione, ma come andare al di là della rivoluzione.» (p. 137)

As Dante and Virgilio are crossing the Acheronte, the poet hears the chilling moans of the people who did not criticize the wickedness of the times. At the conclusion of his orphic journey, Marco, now an adult, takes a stand against the evil that many in his town want to perpetuate. He does not remain silent. Piero, according to Marco, must, equally, take a position against the return to such horrors. He cannot and should not remain quiet to injustice.

As the Italian medieval literary tradition has played a remarkable role in Rimanelli's works, in this narrative, he takes the image of *la donna angelicata* and spins the concept on its axle to depict *la donna diabolica*. In so doing, the author presents a dual purpose of the female character in *Graffiti*: to show the deceitfulness of some women; and, at the same time, to present a satirical look at contemporary society and the blossoming persona women should play in it by counterbalancing it with the Medieval world.

Piero looks at his sister as anything but pure as he saw her having premarital sex. From his perspective, she is *una puttarella*. (p. 78) For Piero, women appear to be of the lowest character. The only women he has ever known are his mother and sister and they have shown themselves to use sex for a purpose. Additionally, this episode is strongly suggestive of Rimanelli's short story *Due vocazioni*,²² a narrative he wrote in 1960, the year in which he abandoned Italy to live in the United States. The sister of that protagonist loses her virginity in a similar manner as Piero's sibling. Lorenzo, in that tale, refers to his sister using a similar term as Piero: *una puttana*. The noticeable reuse of written matter is, nevertheless as Capek Habekovic explains, a basic component of Rimanelli's writings and one that is evident to the experienced reader of his works from the 1950s in Italy to the 21st century in the United States. It is his perpetual need to revise his work and create a stronger text with deeper dimensions that drives the author.²³

Piero's mother and sister, each, have an influence in his life. They both aligned themselves with a Nazi for economic reasons. Neither considered the negative effects it would have on the family: the father and Piero each suffered. Piero's younger sister is now with the same Nazi as her mother from years earlier. She obeys her mother's mandate. In this way, the two women show themselves to be Nazi sympathizers. They sold themselves for financial gain. These women are *le lupe* that obstruct man's climb out of *Inferno*. Piero is unable to abandon his Inferno until he can liberate himself from the impact these women have on him. Although Piero moved

²² G. RIMANELLI, *Il tempo nascosto tra le righe*, Marinelli, Isernia 1986.

²³ R. CAPEK-HABEKOVIC, *Listening to the Beat of Different Drums: Giose Rimanelli's Latest Poetry*, «Rivista di Studi Italiani», anno XIX, giugno 2001, p. 109.

out of his mother's residence and is apparently free of her, the image of his sister reflects in the young wife of the Nazi.

The author calls on these classic Italian literary icons to counteract the unfavorable image of females represented in contemporary society. It appears that Rimanelli creates this juxtaposition of women to suggest the equivocal stance that men have towards the modern-day female. Women in the 1960s were still considered second-class citizens and had no legal, economic, or social rights within society. They were not allowed to have a credit card, serve on juries, go to ivy league colleges, use birth control pills, or have equality in the workplace. Their function according to the socio-cultural views of the day was to be a homemaker, mother, and wife. They had to obey their husbands. In addition to the humanistic gulf that existed between the sexes, there also existed a dichotomy among women. Many females preferred to be treated as something less than their spouses believing it was their duty and obligation to do so, while others, contrarily, demanded more equality. The women in *Graffiti* believed that the only way to survive was to rely on their sexual comportment as they had no other abilities. They were incapable to stand alone on their own.

The political discord of the 1960s continues in this novel with the momentary, but potent, appearance of Victor, a spiritual leader to the various social uprisings taking place at the time. Victor reminds the reader of the social and political concerns that the populace faced in this turbulent period. Within *Graffiti*, all the social-political obstacles of the decade came to light and the last was the Vietnam War.

Although present in the works of Rimanelli of the mid 1960s, the war in Vietnam does not play an overpowering role in this narrative as the political unrest due to this conflict only started, minimally, on university campuses in 1965. Additionally, Rimanelli had a personal philosophy that as a non-citizen of the United States he did not have the legitimacy to condemn the government's role in Southeast Asia. Once he became a naturalized citizen in the late 1960s, he could, and did, protest the conflict. The anti-war movement reached a climaxing moment in 1968, one year after the author wrote *Graffiti*. It did play a huge role in his first English novel, *Benedetta in Guysterland*.²⁴

In early 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered, a retributory bombing on military centers in North Vietnam for their bombings in Tonkin Bay. As the death index of United States soldiers increased and the draft of more into the army, the American public, especially the young, were becoming more and more disenfranchised with the government's wartime policies. The presence of Lucy Bird Johnson,

²⁴ S. L. POSTMAN, *An Italian Writer's Journey through American Realities: Giose Rimanelli's English Novels*, Bordighera Press, New York, 2012, pp. 7-50.

the daughter of the President of the United States, in *Graffiti* brings the reader to see the specific reference:

la ragazza Lucy al Presidente suo padre: «Tu, padre, entrerai nella storia per aver iniziato la Terza Guerra Mondiale.» (p. 54)

Luci Bird Johnson, in 1967, was a nineteen-year-old female, coincidentally, the same age as Marco Laudato when he returned home after his horrendous experience in Italy's Civil War. Marco was an active witness to the civil war atrocities in Italy, and now, although not an involved participant in combat, he, indirectly, is a witness to the horrors in the United States. The brutality of the war is once again a reality in the life of the now mature academic.

The current witness to the political unrest although not actively involved, now pertains to a new generation and, ironically, appears in the figure of a nineteen-year-old girl: the daughter of the President of the United States. Johnson, during her teen years, like so many baby-boomers, rebelled against her parents doing the contrary of what they wanted. In earlier times, the female role would be to remain silent and to obey, but now in the contemporary period, women were taking a more active role. Rimanelli is inverting the gender of the observer to highlight the growing role of the female in the current society. She is no longer a silent bystander but may be an active participant.

Victor reminds the reader of the social and political issues faced in this turbulent period: the War in Vietnam, economic and racial disparity; and sexual inequality. His presence further allows for the shifting between the political infernal of Dante's age and that of the present era by eliciting the name of the great poet and correlating it to the present time.

According to Dante and the medieval tradition, the number three is of great consequence. Christopher Ryan, in his essay *The Theology of Dante*, discusses the solemnity of the number.²⁵

Structurally, *Graffiti* is a text in which there are three basic chapters. The fourth unit functions more as an epilogue to the entire narrative. Each of the main chapters deal with a specific moment of time within the text and tie the story together: the brutal murder of the landlady, Isotta Petracca; the interrogation of Piero by both the Police Commissar and the local psychologist; and the final unit, release of Piero from jail. Additionally, each unit ends with a reference to *Che* and his name is repeated three times through the narrative. Part I asks the question, «chi ha ucciso Che?, in Bolivia»; Part II starts and ends with reference to *Che* asking the question, «perché

²⁵ C. RYAN, *The Theology of Dante*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* cit., p. 151.

hanno ucciso Che, in Bolivia?»); and the final unit ends with «Che non è poi morto in Bolivia?») Che Guevara, symbol of the counterculture movement during the 1960s, was the image for the social and political revolutions taking place in the Americas and the use of the name highlights the various protest movements occurring during the 1960s. More specifically, the three references refer to the three major social revolutions happening at the present time: racial; gender; and political.

IV.

The 1960s was a period of great political and social unrest. It was a time of revolutionary human and humanistic progress, an era of racial uprisings, anti-war protests, and rallies for women's rights. Giose Rimanelli's narrative, *Graffiti*, presents these elements in a web-like representation, a kaleidoscope of visual images based on the written word, within a brief one hundred and thirty-nine pages of text. *Graffiti*, thrusts the reader, like the protagonist of the saga, into a dense, dark universe of gender politics. It is a universe in which those who enter are seemingly lost and disoriented and Rimanelli is the usher through the various historical periods, shining a light on the societal upheavals taking place within the contemporary world. As it was the political upheaval that provoked Dante's journey through *Inferno*, it was, similarly, the hellish-like socio-political environment that Rimanelli encountered in the United States that thrust him on his transcendental trek.

America, unlike Italy, offered Rimanelli a multiplicity of new possibilities and, as Raffaele Liucci points out, it is a land of total freedom and acceptance for the author that permitted him to experiment so boldly with the narrative style, language, and content of this text. In this new environment, the writer looks at the world from a different perspective, one as an outsider in a curious new land confronting the present-day realities as seen through the lens of the medieval world he left behind, and with this tale he chose the complicated universe of gender politics. Women in the United States were demanding equality. They no longer accepted their subservient role in modern society. Both Marco Laudato and Piero Lapulce were casualties of a brutal and bloody internal civil conflict and as Marco guides Piero through the sociopolitical labyrinth of the present-day era within *Graffiti*, Rimanelli attempts to escort the reader through the cultural-political struggle that became known as the war between the sexes. Ironically, in the United States, Italy is known for its chauvinistic behavior towards women, and an Italian writer now residing in the States, as well as a veteran of this type of civil struggle, is the Virgil for the present-day Italian male in the never-ending engagement between the genders. Rimanelli's text has a two-fold purpose, just as there is a temporal duality to the entire text: destroy the myth

of the noble and selfless mother and, at the same time, to obliterate the false primitive image that man holds of womanhood. Rimanelli's narrative, *Graffiti*, suggests that until man stops believing in the false images, visions that he and primordial societies generated of the female, he will be forever relegated to an existence in an inferno of his own making.