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Female Theology Meets Poietic Writing: Michela Murgia's L'incontro (2012)

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Article abstract

One of the most acclaimed (female) voices of contemporary Sardinian and Italian literature, Michela Murgia offers in her short novel L'incontro a powerful expression of poietic writing. Writing as poiēsis, as creative force capable of shaping reality through theoretical reflection, expresses itself in the in-between space of literal and metaphorical orders. In particular, L'incontro represents an expression of poietic writing in its combination of female theology and community activism. This contribution reads L'incontro, a novel of formation unfolding along the preparations for the traditional Sardinian Easter ritual of S'incontru, through the lens of feminist theology and within the theoretical framework provided by the theorization of sexual difference. Marina Warner's (1976) and Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott's (1983) feminist biblical exegesis, in conversation with the "teologia al femminile" elaborated by Marinella Perroni and Cristina Simonelli, connect Murgia's L'incontro to her theological essay, Ave Mary: E la Chiesa inventò la donna (2011). In this context Murgia's writing articulates a concept of poiēsis that intertwines thinking and doing, transcendence and immanence while shaping a more open and inclusive community.

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Abstract: One of the most acclaimed (female) voices of contemporary Sardinian and Italian literature, Michela Murgia offers in her short novel *L'incontro* a powerful expression of *poietic* writing. Writing as *poiēsis*, as creative force capable of shaping reality through theoretical reflection, expresses itself in the in-between space of literal and metaphorical orders. In particular, *L'incontro* represents an expression of *poietic* writing in its combination of female theology and community activism. This contribution reads *L'incontro*, a novel of formation unfolding along the preparations for the traditional Sardinian Easter ritual of *S'incontru*, through the lens of feminist theology and within the theoretical framework provided by the theorization of sexual difference. Marina Warner's (1976) and Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott's (1983) feminist biblical exegesis, in conversation with the "teologia al femminile" elaborated by Marinella Perroni and Cristina Simonelli, connect Murgia's *L'incontro* to her theological essay, *Ave Mary: E la Chiesa inventò la donna* (2011). In this context Murgia's writing articulates a concept of *poiēsis* that intertwines thinking and doing, transcendence and immanence while shaping a more open and inclusive community.

One of the most acclaimed (female) voices of contemporary Sardinian and Italian literature, Michela Murgia offers in her novel *L'incontro* a powerful expression of writing as *poiēsis*, as creative force capable of shaping reality through theoretical reflection, which expresses itself in the fluid space between literal and metaphorical orders.[1] A religious educator in public schools, a militant politician in the

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[1] Murgia's first book, *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria* (2006), denounces the devastating impact of the gig economy on the young, overqualified labor force of the third millennium, which she experienced first-hand as a part-timer in the call center of a multinational corporation. A homonymous theater adaptation directed by David Emmer and

pro-independence movement "Sardegna Possibile," an environmental activist in the industrially and touristically exploited island of Sardinia, a Grazia Deledda alter-ego on stage,[2] Murgia offers an incarnation of *poietic* writing in her *corpus* as a whole.

In her theoretical journey from *vita activa* to *vita contemplativa*, philosopher Hannah Arendt asked an intriguing question: "What are we 'doing' when we do nothing but think?" (8). Arendt's investigation triggered my own query: "What are we 'doing' when we do nothing but think through writing?" When analyzing Murgia's *L'incontro*, more specific questions arise: To what extent does *L'incontro* offer a representative example of *poietic* writing? Furthermore, how does this short novel or long story suggest an encounter between literary word and theological reflection that can have an impact on reality by shaping a new sense of community open to difference(s)? *L'incontro*, I contend, represents an expression of *poietic* writing in its entwining of female theology and community activism.

The theoretical framework of my considerations emerges from the theorization of sexual difference and its articulation of a female line in the symbolic order of western philosophy. More specifically, my contribution reads *L'incontro*, a novel of formation unfolding along the preparations for the traditional Sardinian Easter ritual of *S'incontru*, through the lens of feminist theology. The foundational texts *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976) by Marina Warner and *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Images of God as Female* (1983) by Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott, in conversation with the "teologia al femminile" elaborated in Italy at the same time of Diotima's Group by Marinella Perroni and Cristina Simonelli, connect Murgia's novel to her theological essay, *Ave Mary: E*

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interpreted by Teresa Saponangelo was performed in 2008. In the same year Paolo Virzì directed a filmic rendition of Murgia's "romanzo tragicomico" entitled *Tutta la vita davanti* (with Isabella Ragonese, Sabrina Ferilli, Elio Germano e Valerio Mastrandrea). Murgia attained wide national and international success with her first fictional novel, *Accabadora* (2009). The recipient of the prestigious Campiello Prize in 2010, this controversial narrative links the contemporary debate about euthanasia and adoption with ancient Sardinian traditions.

[2] Through her 2017 theatrical performance in the lead role of *Quasi Grazia*, a "romanzo in forma di teatro" about Grazia Deledda's life—written by Marcello Fois and directed by Veronica Cruciani—Murgia was able to give vocal and physical strength to the matriarch of Sardinian writing. While Cruciani represents Deledda "libera, controversa, emancipata" (www.teatrodiroma.net), her *mise en scène* underlines the dual marginalization to which Deledda was subjected because of her gender and her insular identity in post-unification Italy. The director creates on stage a *Doppelgänger* effect through which Murgia the actress and Deledda the character interact and abolish any chronological distance between them.

la Chiesa inventò la donna (2011). In this context Murgia's writing articulates a concept of *poiēsis* that links thinking and doing, transcendence and immanence while shaping a more open and inclusive community.

A key term in literary theory since pre-Socratic philosophy, in modernist thought *poiēsis* acquires a hybrid nature at the intersection of the theoretical and the pragmatic. The inherently fluid, open-ended nature of *poiēsis* is ingrained in the etymological root of this feminine noun, which derives from the verb *poiein* and not the masculine noun *poiētēs*, which refers to the subject of the action. In its original meaning, the verb *poiein* indicates "an act of formation and transformation of matter in the cosmic sphere in relation to time" (Gourgouris 1070). In classical western philosophy, and particularly in Plato's *Republic* and *Timeo*, and in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the noun *poiēsis* acquires a more specific meaning, that is "l'attività del produrre (dell'artigiano come dell'artista) in quanto distinta dall'azione e in quanto competenza di un peculiare genere di conoscenza" ("the productive activity [of the artisan and the artist alike] as distinct from action and as it belongs to a specific kind of knowledge"; "Poiesi").[3] From there, the evolution of the term *poiēsis* oscillates along the lines of its concrete building force and its abstract creative power. On the one hand, the notion of the *poiētēs*, the agent of *poiēsis*, as *homo faber* has permeated western (literary) culture. For example, Dante's commendation of the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel as "miglior fabbro del parlar materno," ("a better artisan/of the mother tongue"; Purgatorio XXVI, Mandelbaum 117) re-surfaces in T.S. Eliot dedication of the 1922 revised edition of his *Waste Land* to Ezra Pound as "miglior fabbro."[4] On the other hand, particularly during Romanticism, the prophetic concept of the *poiētēs* as a visionary interpreter of a transcendent inspiration determines the development of the term *poiēsis*. European Modernism, in particular through the hermeneutic writings of existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger, highlights the crucial role of *poiēsis* in crafting a literary and at the same time philosophical language as a meaningful alternative to the languages of science and metaphysics. According to

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[3] Aristotle distinguishes theoretical sciences (philosophy, physics, and mathematics) from practical sciences (ethics, politics, and *poietic* or productive disciplines) depending on the necessary or possible nature of their subject matter. While theoretical sciences' object of investigation is defined by necessity, practical disciplines deal with possibility.
If not otherwise indicated, all translations into English and all italics are mine.

[4] With the dedication "For Ezra Pound *il miglior fabbro*" (3, italics in the original) Eliot paid homage to the craftmanship that characterized his friend Ezra Pound's editing of the *Waste Land* revised manuscript.

Heidegger, *poietic* expression offers a far-reaching alternative to data-driven scientific knowledge and to highly abstract metaphysical conceptualization. It does not represent a mere vehicle of information or empty *Geschwätz* ("chatter") but places human beings in dialogue with the being that reveals itself while, at the same time, concealing itself in a constant interplay of hiddenness and unhiddenness (Dahlstrom 11).[5] Heidegger articulates his hermeneutical reflections in *Holzwege* (*Off the Beaten Track* [1950]) and *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (*On the Way to Language* [1959]). In these and other late works, Heidegger expands the original meaning of *poiēsis* and makes it the only form of human expression capable of projecting existential authenticity.[6] In other words, *poiēsis* may prevent the human being from falling prey to inauthentic existence, as it hints at their *Seinkönnen* ("capability of being") in the always partial revelation of the truth of being, or *a-lētheia* ("Un-hiddennes").[7] From this perspective, Heidegger's interpretations of Friedrich Hölderlin's romantic poetry and Georg Trakl's modernist poems revive the original meaning of the ancient Greek verb *poiein* "as a radical act of formation or transformation of matter" (Gourgouris 1070). According to Heidegger (*Holzwege* 136; *Unterwegs* 34), the convergence of *Dichten und Denken* [*Poetry and Thinking*], traces a philosophical two-faced Janus, for any poetic—or, more precisely, *poietic* expression—is philosophical, and vice versa.[8]

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[5] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Heidegger's terminology refer to Dahlstrom.

[6] Heidegger insists on the two-fold meaning of the verb *dichten*, which includes both "compose poetry" and "invent": "L'essenza di ogni arte, allora, in quanto l'opera rappresenta un'apertura o un progetto che deve essere *gedichtet*, inventato, è *Dichtung*, poesia" ("The essence of each art, then, is *Dichtung*, poetry, as the work of art represents an opening or a project that ought to be *gedichtet*, invented"; Vattimo 96–97). Hence, *Dichtung* is poetry in its general meaning, as the essence of each art form, while *Poesie* refers to *poiēsis* as the art form centered on language. According to Heidegger (*Holzwege* 61, 59), language itself is *Poesie* in its quintessential meaning. For the ambiguity of *dichten*, see also Hofstadter xi.

[7] "[…] *poiēsis* is a mode of disclosure (*a-lētheia*) of Being which is conceptually broader than, and so can assume the modality of, either philosophical or poetical discourse […]. The concept of *poiēsis* furnishes the analogical unity of the poet and the philosopher. *Poiēsis* becomes the original site of Being's disclosure […]" (Ferrari Di Pippo 3).

[8] "Das Gespräch des Denkens mit dem Dichten geht darauf, das *Wesen* der Sprache hervorzurufen, damit die Sterblichen wieder lernen, in der Sprache zu wohnen" (Heidegger, *Unterwegs* 34; italics in the original) ("The dialogue of thinking with poetry aims to call forth the *nature* of language, so that mortals may learn again to live within language"; *On the Way to Language* 161). See also Kuhlmann 2010.

In Murgia's *L'incontro*, the *poietic* power of writing emerges at the modernist intersection of theory and praxis. Its narrative development unravels a synergy between literary fiction and theological reflection that aims at affecting societal reality by shaping a more inclusive community beyond conventional identity borders.

Poietic writing, as a creative force able to mold reality through thinking, expresses itself in the dimension of the border. The Latin term for border, *cum-finis*, evokes at the same time inclusion (Lat. *cum*, with, together) and exclusion (Lat. *finis*, limit, end, boundary). As Murgia reminds us in her philosophical essay *Futuro interiore* (2016), the Italian word *confine*, far from erecting walls or barriers that prevent any kind of exchange, rather evokes

> il luogo simbolico in cui si è destinati a 'finire insieme,' un punto dove i limiti di ciascuno si danno appuntamento per riconoscersi a vicenda. [...] Per giungere a questo orizzonte ideale [...] occorre essere consapevoli che i confini dell'identità non ci circondano: ci attraversano. (32–33)

> the symbolic place where we are destined to 'be bound together,' a place where the limits of each one meet to recognize each other. [...] In order to reach this ideal horizon [...] one must be aware that the boundaries of identity do not surround us: they traverse us.

Poietic writing, in which a theoretical and a pragmatic thread intertwine in the dimension of the border, weaves an identity capable of implementing "l'incontro" with otherness to the extent that it accepts the destabilizing suspension of certainties that this crossing implies.

Murgia's *L'incontro* stands out as a text that promotes a form of writing capable of crossing and blurring identity borders between sameness and otherness. The protagonist of this agile novel of formation is Maurizio, an eleven-year-old boy who spends every summer with his grandparents in a fictional-yet-not-so-fictional Crabas.[9] Years of vacations dotted with playful adventures with local kids have nurtured his sense of identity as belonging.[10]

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[9] The Crabas of the novel is the anagram of Cabras, Murgia's hometown in Central-Western Sardinia.

[10] Murgia discusses her vision of identity as belonging in *Futuro interiore* (7–33) and in an interview with Cinzia Sciuto (3–5).

Used to the sense of security provided by a closed-knit community, Maurizio experiences the fragility of that seemingly granitlike cohesiveness as soon as the otherness bursts into it.[11] More specifically, the intrusion of the other is represented through the founding of a new parish church, determined by the bishop in order to better serve a growing community. Murgia, a Roman catholic with a theological education, develops the religious theme as an opportunity to reflect on *poietic* writing, in which theory and praxis intertwine on the blurred line between "me" and "us."

The birth of the Sacred Heart parish in the outskirts of Crabas determines a conflict between its area of competence and the one traditionally assigned to the Saint Mary parish. Similar to a nuclear fission, the doubling of the church structures in town determines also the explosion of a linguistic structure that is the pronoun for the first-person plural: "noi."

For Maurizio, prior to the divide determined by the foundation of the new parish, that "noi" characterized the inclusive, collective discourse of daily life in Crabas. By using that "noi," he voiced his vision of community and sense of belonging. Over the years, the pronoun "noi" had morphed into a sort of existential category of "noità":

> Perché a Crabas i suoi nonni, i vicini di casa dei nonni, i loro figli e i bambini dei loro figli parlavano tutti di sé al plurale con la ronzante fluidità di uno sciame d'api intorno all'alveare.
>
> "Come siamo diventati grandi!" diceva per esempio l'amica di sua nonna […]. Ma era soprattutto dagli altri ragazzi che Maurizio sentiva usare il noi con quell'accezione densa, piena di respiri comuni.

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[11] Murgia underlines the ineludible fragmentation of identity in "A pezzi": "Avevo pezzi di cose che non confinavano con niente che avessi intorno. Pezzi di storie, pezzi di pensieri, pezzi di sogni, tutto a frantumi. E soprattutto ad ogni passo, come dentro un osso mio, sentivo la frattura della terra, una maledetta terra interrotta su quattro lati […]. È così la mia nazione, non confina con niente tranne l'acqua e manco la geografia ti serve più, perché non bastano i confini a dire chi sei, se per farlo ti serve un altrove che stia fermo […]" ("I had [in myself] pieces of things that did not border on anything around me. Pieces of stories, pieces of thoughts, pieces of dreams, all shattered. And above all, at every step, as if inside a bone of mine, I felt the fracture of the earth, a cursed earth, interrupted on four sides […]. That's how my nation is; it does not border on anything except water, and even geography does no longer help because borders are not enough to say who you are, if in order to define yourself you need an elsewhere that keeps still […]"; 170).

"Non ci diamo proprio per vinti, eh?" gli aveva detto una volta Giulio, mentre lo guardava con la fionda stretta tra le mani prendere per l'ennesima volta la mira sulla lattina vuota poggiata in piedi sull'argine dello stagno, proprio dietro alla chiesa di Santa Maria […].

Quel "noi," a Crabas, non era un pronome come negli altri posti, ma *la cittadinanza di una patria tacita dove tutto il tempo condiviso si declinava così, al presente plurale.* (15–16)

Because in Crabas his grandparents, his grandparents' neighbors, their children and their children's children, all used to talk about themselves in the plural, with the fluid buzzing of bees around the hive.

"How we have grown up!" would say for example his grandmother's friend [...]. But it was from the other boys that Maurizio noticed how that "we" carried a dense meaning, full of shared breaths.

"We are not giving up, eh?" Giulio had once told him as he watched him with the slingshot tight in his hands, take aim for the umpteenth time at the empty can standing on the bank of the pond, just behind the church of Santa Maria […]. That "we" in Crabas was not a pronoun as it was elsewhere, but was *the citizenship of a silent homeland, where all the shared time was expressed in the present plural.*

Within a spatial and temporal context that is at the same time real and sur-real, *L'incontro* deals with "il tema della comunità e dei suoi confini" ("the theme of community and its borders"; Murgia, "Intervista"). The book's title refers to an extremely popular celebration in Sardinia, which marks the culmination of the Resurrection narrative on Easter Sunday. *S'incontru*, in Sardinian language, enacts the encounter between the son *par excellence*, the victorious Jesus Christ who has redeemed humanity from sin, with the mother *par excellence*, Mary, the incarnation of maternal self-sacrifice and suffering (*L'incontro* 70–71). Two separate processions, one with the statue of the resurrected son, the other with the statue of the mourning mother, meet in a town square. The triumphant son lifts the black veil off his mother's face. Reawakening to joy thanks to this symbolic gesture, a radiant Mary proceeds by her son's side, leading the two festive groups of the faithful in a sort of "catartica riunione familiare" ("cathartic family reunion"; *Ave Mary* 37).

As the plot's unfolding indicates, Murgia's *L'incontro* represents *poietic* writing to the extent that it offers a concrete solution to a cultural and sociological *impasse*. The interweaving of the theoretical thread of theological reflection with the pragmatic thread of the narrative 'making' of the procession, enables the resolution of a paralyzing conflict within a community that had never had to deal with pluralism and difference. As we shall see, when the parallel processions meet at the apex of a divisive tension between the two opposed groups—"noi" and "loro"—, the young protagonists' ingenuity overcomes the boundaries of identity and power. Thanks to the boys' silent initiative, Mary's statue of the old parish unites with Jesus' statue of the new parish, while Mary's statue of the new parish unites with Jesus' statue of the old parish, thus suggesting a future in which the Crabas community will be able to integrate the other.

The first part of the novel focuses on Maurizio and his befriending of Giulio and Franco, while learning with them how to "*fare* il gioco insieme" ("*play* the game together"; *L'incontro* 8).[12] In the second part, though, their friendship struggles when they "do" together the celebratory ritual of *S'incontru*. Following a tense journey, the encounter between the statues of the resurrected Christ and the statues of the mourning mother opens up the possibility of a more inclusive community as the mixed mother-son pairs leave together the central town square to return to the two parishes among the cheering crowd of the faithful.

L'incontro, as is the case of Murgia's literary activity and political engagement, is anchored in her Sardinian roots. Insular culture represents a synecdoche of the modern crisis, the part for the whole that Grazia Deledda placed at the center of her Sardinian narrative. When asked about her Sardinian roots, Murgia replied:

> Sono affezionata a certe dinamiche collettive da cui provengo: il 'noi' iniziale della Comunità mi ha segnato. Ma ho imparato a riconoscerne le criticità: non esiste concetto di privacy; ci sono regole

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[12] In her "Prologo" to *L'incontro*, Murgia insists on the powerful impact that playing together has on the developing identity and sense of belonging of children, such as Maurizio and his friend. The "Prologo" concludes with an unusual syntagma in italics instead of the usual verb, "giocare." The author's lexical choice underlines the *poietic* force of her writing: "Così li senti davvero certi adulti nei bar, uomini fatti e disfatti mille volte dalla vita, vantarsi ancora tra di loro dei legami della strada dell'infanzia—*abbiamo fatto il gioco insieme*—come di un parto condiviso." ("And so you really hear some adults in cafés, grown men that life has shattered a thousand times, how they still brag with each other about their childhood street ties—*we did the game together*—as if they had shared giving birth"; 8).

precise di normalità; la diversità trova posto con fatica e non sarà mai
legittimata se non riesci ad agglomerare attorno a te un microcosmo.
E le radici no, quelle ce le hanno gli alberi, l'uomo ha i piedi e deve
camminare. ("Intervista")

I cherish certain group dynamics from my place of origin: the initial
'us' of the community has left a mark on me. But I have learned
to recognize its problematic aspects: the concept of privacy does not
exist; there are precise rules about normalcy; diversity struggles to
find a place and will never be legitimized if you can't agglomerate a
microcosm around you. Let's not talk about roots; trees have them,
man has feet and must *walk*.

Murgia's provocative statement about her roots provides an opportunity to
explore the fascinating link between *L'incontro* and *Ave Mary*, between creative
writing and theoretical reflection, or, to use Heidegger's terms, between *Dichten*
und *Denken*. For Murgia's theoretical and narrative developments in both works
underline precisely her ability to "mostrare radici capaci ancora di frutti" ("to
display roots still able to bear fruit"; Simonelli 180). The same quality defines the
strength of feminist theology, pursued in Italy by Marinella Perroni and Cristina
Simonelli, and the feminist biblical exegesis, elaborated in North America by
Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott and Marina Warner. Both Perroni and Simonelli
participated with Murgia in a conference entitled "Donne e Chiesa: un risarci-
mento possibile?"[13] Perroni's and Simonelli's contributions provided a historical
and theoretical framework advocating "la necessità di un ripensamento dei rap-
porti tra la Chiesa e le donne" ("the necessity of rethinking the relationship be-
tween the [catholic] Church and women"; *Ave Mary* 4) in their respective research
areas, biblical studies and patristic. In her introduction to *Ave Mary*, entitled "Più
che un'introduzione, un'intromissione," ("More than an introduction, an intru-
sion"; 4), Murgia specifies that her conference presentation originated from her
personal experience as a Christian woman, a religious activist for the movement
"Azione Cattolica" in the local parish, a student of the Divinity School, and a
Religious Studies teacher in public schools. The animated conversation with the

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[13] "Women and the [Catholic] Church: Is a Compensation Possible?" The female mayor of
Austis, in the secluded Sardinian region of Barbagia, had organized the conference to celebrate
International Women's Day on March 8, 2009.

conference audience triggered the genesis of *Ave Mary*, which the author defines "un libro di esperienza, non di sentenza" ("a book of experience, not of categorical knowledge"; 7). Perroni, on the other hand, underlines the similar experiential foundation of feminist theology. American suffragist and abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other twenty-six committee members initiated the feminist revision of the Holy Scriptures in 1885.[14] Their fundamental motivation, Perroni explains, was a "scelta di fede" (164), a choice guided by faith anchored in their militance in the movement for universal suffrage, not in a theoretical stance.

The creative productivity of both Murgia's *poietic* writing and feminist theology lies in this ability to take root in the lived-faith experience, which in Murgia's case is not separable from her Sardinian roots, despite her vocal denial. While in *Ave Mary* Murgia's essayistic writing gives voice to the political significance of "womanist theology," her fictional writing in *L'incontro* becomes *poietic* to the extent that it projects a concrete change in the life of the Crabas community through the merging of reflection and action. According to feminist theologian Mary Daly (in Dickey Young 85), "the overcoming of dichotomous sex stereotyping" through a biblical exegesis highlighting female protagonists in the Holy Scriptures intends "to break past models and create ourselves as women." More importantly, the fundamental goal of feminist exegesis is the implementation of a profound social transformation centered, at its origins, on the egalitarian principles of Christianity, which Jesus Christ incarnated as "embodiment of all humanity" (Mollenkott in Dickey Young 88–9).

What are then these past gender models that the biblical exegesis has ingrained in the Jewish-Christian tradition? Murgia's *Ave Mary* attempts to answer this question through a deft historical-theoretical investigation triggered by the author's life experience and aimed at "cercare rimedio alla sofferenza causata dalle narrazioni distorte" ("finding relief from the pain caused by twisted narratives"; *Ave Mary* 123). Tradition, translation and betrayal are inextricably interwoven, thus creating an "immaginario patriarcale normalizzato" ("a normalized patriarchal imaginary"; 133). Despite significant textual ambiguities, this male oriented imaginary reads the attributes of the divine solely through a masculine gender lens. Suffice it to mention here the example of *almà* (Isahia 7, r14). While the

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[14] The first complete edition of Part 1 and Part 2 of the *Woman's Bible* appeared in 1898. While it immediately became a best seller, the *Woman's Bible* also triggered a heated controversy among Cady Stanton's fellow suffragists and members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (Gilbert and Gubar 69).

original Hebrew word indicates a young woman old enough for marriage, the ancient Greek, Latin and Italian translations transform *almà* into "vergine" (*Ave Mary* 122–23). This consistent practice has conjured up a "mutilazione simbolica" ("a symbolic mutilation"; 133) that continues to provide "rappresentazioni limitate e fuorvianti" ("limited and misleading representations"; 7) of and to female subjects in liturgical rituals and in religious folk traditions, as well as in the visual arts and in the church structure. As Maria Luisa Bartolomei remarks, symbols are "active," that is, they not only reflect but also reinforce the existing social contract:

> Ma anche quando una società e cultura cambiano, gli antichi universi simbolici tendono a restare attivi. Non c'è un corrispondente cambiamento rapido e automatico. Di qui la rilevanza culturale della revisione critica operata dalla teologia femminista circa il linguaggio, la simbolica e la concettualità relativi alla divinità, maturati all'interno delle tradizioni religiose, in particolare per la riflessione filosofica della differenza sessuale. (12–13)

> But even when a society and culture change, ancient symbolic universes tend to remain active. There is no corresponding rapid and automatic change. Hence, feminist theology's critical revision of language, symbolism and concepts related to the divine and developed within religious traditions, acquires particular cultural relevance for the philosophical reflection on sexual difference.

Which narrative and visual symbols does Murgia revisit in *Ave Mary*? While focusing on Mary of Nazareth, the author discusses the four fundamental mariological dogmas that Marina Warner dissected through a diachronic analysis in her foundational 1976 text, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*: "[H]er divine motherhood and her vicinity [...]; the immaculate conception, sparing her all stain and original sin, which was proclaimed in 1854; and her assumption, body and soul, into heaven, which Pope Pius XII defined in 1950" (xxii).

In particular, Murgia's analysis of the evolution of Church sanctification policies through the centuries in the third and fourth chapters of *Ave Mary* brings to light "una progressiva verginizzazione del modello femminile di santità" ("a progressive virginization of the feminine model of sainthood"; *Ave Mary* 79). It

is not by coincidence, Murgia argues, that precisely in the time span between the 1854 promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the 1950 proclamation of the Virgin Mary's Assumption to Heaven, the Catholic Church enacts a series of swift canonizations of female saints who had sacrificed their lives to resist sexual violence.[15] "Un vero e proprio restyling dell'iconografia mariana" ("a veritable restyling of Marian iconography"; 79) enshrines the image of virginity as indicator of purity. Thus, the sexual and the moral planes overlap. For example, in the representations of Lourdes' and Fatima's miracles, Mary's images shed the realistic traits of the young Baby Jesus's mother portrayed in Renaissance art.[16] They become the stylized epitome of ethereal, sublime purity. Because of their dogmatic nature, these progressively prevailing traits of Marian iconography established through papal infallibility determine what Murgia defines "una deriva idolatrica" (81). This drift towards idolatry turns Mary into "una sorta di semi divinità femminile" ("a sort of female semi-divinity"; 81): "L'instaurazione del modello estetico angelicato di Maria aveva strappato definitivamente la ragazza d'Israele al mondo aspirazionale delle donne normali" ("The introduction of Mary's angelical aesthetic model had definitely torn the girl from Israel away from the aspirational world of average women"; 81). Maria's "lifting teologico" ("theologic lifting") becomes at the same time cause and effect of the "terrorismo estetico" ("aesthetic terrorism"; 90) in contemporary society, which subordinates ethic to aesthetic and equates physical aging to intellectual decay. A closer look at Mary's iconography in art history reveals that this "theologic lifting" of sorts has old roots in the representation of Mary's motherhood. Murgia reminds us of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, in which a thirty-year old son, who sacrificed his life to redeem humanity, lies in the arms of his "madre cinquantenne che ne dimostra surrealmente sedici" ("fifty-year-old mother who surreally appears as a sixteen-year-old"; 96).

Throughout the centuries, argues Murgia, religious iconography has determined this "idolatric drift" (81) through images of the divine that conform to the social order in force. The fight against the gender-biased idolatry is also at

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[15] Maria Goretti and Antonia Mesina represent two exemplary cases. A peasants' daughter from the Marche region, Goretti died at age 11 in 1902, when she opposed the attempted rape by a family friend, whom she forgave shortly before passing away. In 1935, fifteen-year old Mesina from Sardinia was stoned to death by her assailant, who had attempted to rape her when she was gathering firewood.

[16] Suffice it to mention Raphael's *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist* (1504).

the center of feminist theology, as Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott's 1983 pivotal work, *The Divine Feminine. The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* indicates. A biblical hermeneutic beyond patriarchal stereotypes, capable of considering the Christian literature of the origins not only as "patristics" but also as "matristics,"[17] clearly demonstrates that "all three persons of the divine triad are depicted in feminine as well as masculine images" (Mollenkott 4). The study of the divine iconography in both the Old and the New Testaments in *The Divine Feminine* includes, for example, chapters about "The Godhead as a Woman in the Process of Giving Birth," "God as Midwife," "God as Mother Bear," "God as Female Homemaker," and "God as Female Beloved." As was the case with the rewriting of the western symbolic order pursued by Adriana Cavarero and the Diotima Group, the multifaceted image of the divine that emerges from this rereading of the Holy Scriptures urgently demands a more inclusive liturgic language. Otherwise, Mollenkott warned us already in the Seventies, "It is all too easy to divert ourselves away from worshipping God to worshipping one particular image of God: and that is idolatry" (116).

In order to stem the tide of idolatry and its nefarious consequences in contemporary society, Murgia highlights Mary's revolutionary significance. Mary's response to the Archangel Gabriel's annunciation is the "Bing Bang del Cristianesimo" ("The Big Bang of Christianity"; *Ave Mary* 113). The courageous young woman from Nazareth accepts the mystery of the incarnation and, therefore, the redemption of humanity from Adam and Eve's original sin. On the other hand, Mary's "yes," her acceptance of the mission bestowed upon her, triggers the manipulation of female consent that resulted in the widespread submission to institutionalized gender paradigms.[18] In other words, writes Murgia, Mary's "yes" is turned into

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[17] In her analysis of Kari Elisabeth Börresen's volume, entitled *From Patristics to Matristics,* Simonelli remarks that the introduction of neologisms such as "matristics" "sta a indicare che le nuove domande necessitavano nuove prospettive e le nuove prospettive richiedevano nuovi linguaggi" ("indicates that new questions needed new perspectives, and new perspectives required new languages"; 175).

[18] While underlining the cultural interdependence between "la presunzione del consenso della donna" ("the assumption of woman's consent"; 110) and rape, Murgia recalls the infamous case of Franca Viola. In 1965, the 18-year-old Sicilian girl refused a "matrimonio riparatore" imposed by her raper and kidnapper according to the conventions of the time. Viola's firm behavior decidedly contributed to the revision of family laws implemented by democratic forces in 1975, and to the abolition of article 544 of the penal code, which stated that the

il sì al matrimonio per essere collocate socialmente, il sì ai rapporti sessuali con il legittimo sposo, il sì alle gravidanze, tutte, sempre e comunque. Il sì al servizio e alla sottomissione nella gerarchia familiare. L'obbedienza naturale al padre, al fratello, al marito. L'obbedienza spirituale al prete. (113)

yes to marriage as a way to social ascent, yes to sexual intercourse with the lawful spouse, yes to pregnancies, all of them, always and in any case. Yes to service and submission within the family hierarchy. Natural obedience to the father, brother, husband. Spiritual obedience to the priest.

Murgia underlines that

Maria di Nazareth è la persona che ha subito il torto più grande nel dipanarsi di questa colossale struttura di dominio. È stata strumentalmente trasformata in […] esempio luminoso di donna funzionale ai piani altrui, lei che i piani altrui li aveva sovvertiti tutti senza pensarci su neanche un istante. (115)

Mary of Nazareth is the person who suffered the greatest wrong in the unravelling of this colossal structure of domination. She has been exploited and transformed into […] a shining example of a woman who is functional to the plans of others. She who had subverted all of them without a moment's thought.

Mary's affirmative response to the annunciation does not conform to tradition exactly as the messenger's behavior did not conform. The angel of the annunciation did not seek permission from Mary's father or her groom or a high priest as it was customary in patriarchal Jewish society. Mary shows an astonishing agency for a young woman at that time in embracing the role of "protagonista nella scelta che la riguarda" ("protagonist in the choice that concerns her"; 116). Like the angel of the annunciation, Mary does not resort to her father or her

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rehabilitating marriage extinguished a sexual violence crime. Murgia reminds us that, according to Italian law, until 1996 sexual violence was considered a crime against morality and not a crime against person.

future husband asking for permission. Rather, she hints at a timid request for explanation, and eventually, in her thoughtful awareness about her mission, she accepts to carry in her womb an extraordinary pregnancy "senza conoscere uomo" ("without knowing man"; 116).[19] Furthermore, oblivious of the risk she is taking, Mary travels to her cousin Elizabeth, who will be the first one to notice her pregnancy. Back home, Mary starts cohabitation with Joseph. A carpenter from Nazareth, Joseph, following a revealing dream, no longer considers rejecting her and becomes the most careful supporter of the young pregnant woman and her baby on his way to the world. According to Murgia, "la natura destabilizzante del Cristianesimo" ("the destabilizing nature of Christianity") is rooted in the "libertà di dire sì," ("freedom of saying yes"; 118), which Mary powerfully incarnates as a female subject that is responsible for her body and mind. For

il Dio che ha rovesciato i potenti dai troni e ha innalzato gli umili ha anche sconvolto una volta per sempre la gerarchia patriarcale tra l'uomo e la donna, facendo di una ragazza la massima complice della salvezza dell'uomo. (118)

the same God who overthrew the powerful from their thrones and raised up the humble also undermined once and for all the patriarchal hierarchy between man and woman, and made a girl the greatest accomplice to man's salvation.

While shaping the "soggettualità femminile" ("female subjectivity"; Perroni 161), Mary's consent and her behavior, imbued with revolutionary agency, define the most crucial encounter for mankind's hope, that is the conjunction of immanence and transcendence. The liberating political potential within female theology relates to its "ripartire dalla differenza" ("starting anew from the idea of difference"; Toschi 204). In the wake of the concept of sexual difference elaborated in various ways by Luce Irigaray, Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro, feminist biblical exegesis reinterprets the notion of difference even in biological terms. As a privileged realm of definition and possible realization of cultural values with strong political and collective significance, the concept of difference translates into

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[19] This radical meaning of the verb "to know" goes back to the Hebrew usage of "to know" (*yd*), indicating a love encounter in which the sexual aspect entails affection, attention, and care (Ceserale 252).

the respectful recognition of otherness through reciprocity and interdependence, and the elaboration of alternative linguistic and symbolic structures. The latter concerns subjects who are no longer disembodied, that is tragically deprived of their corporeal identity. This is the case of Mary, whose body has been gradually eternalized throughout centuries of iconographic practices, thus becoming "un santuario immutabile" ("an immutable sanctuary"; *Ave Mary* 34). Far from representing the biological foundation for women's exploitation, sexual difference becomes in female theology "un luogo etico nel quale i modelli di comportamento oggi imperanti possono trovare il loro limite e il loro superamento" ("an ethical realm in which today's prevailing models of behavior can meet their limits and their obsolescence"; Toschi 205).

Through the historical, free-spirited, courageous young woman of Mary of Nazareth, female subjectivity engenders the most radical encounter with otherness: the encounter between the human and the divine. Mary's role as a mediator between immanence and transcendence comes to light in the ritual of *S'incontru*, "l'acme della mattina della Resurrezione" ("the culmination of the morning of the resurrection"; *Ave Mary* 36), which Murgia describes with a theatrical vein in *Ave Mary*. While no mention of this paraliturgical ritual appears in the Gospels, *S'incontru* is celebrated with firecrackers and festive music in the central square of every Sardinian town.

On Easter morning two processions, one with the resurrected, victorious Christ and one with the Mater Dolorosa still unaware of his resurrection, merge into a central town square. There

> il Risorto toglie il velo nero dal volto di Maria che, finalmente radiosa e felice, procede al suo fianco come una regina madre il giorno dell'incoronazione del figlio, seguita da un'unica grande processione di fedeli soddisfatti della catartica riunione familiare. (*Ave Mary* 37)

> the Risen One lifts the black veil from the face of Mary who, at last radiant with joy, moves forward next to him like a Queen Mother on the day of her son's coronation, followed by one big procession of the faithful pleased with the cathartic family reunion.

As previously indicated, in her theological essay *Ave Mary*, published one year prior to *L'incontro*, Murgia interprets this celebration as yet another

representation of woman's subordinate role in the catholic tradition. The Catholic Church, argues Murgia, has instrumentalized the biblical verdicts to Adam, Eve, and their descendants. As a punishment for original sin, men—just like Adam—will earn their sustenance "through painful toil" (Genesis 3:17 NIV). Even more radically, "[t]o the woman he said: 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children…'" (Genesis 3: 16 NIV). Thus, the Catholic Church has consistently reiterated the alleged naturality of female suffering. Through the inherent relationship between motherhood and pain, women's suffering becomes the unavoidable path to "oblazione" ("oblation"; *Ave Mary* 38) that is the sacrificial annihilation of the self.[20] In this context, Murgia reads *S'incontru* as a ritual that confirms the "rapporto sussidiario" ("subsidiary relation"; 38) between women and death (and, therefore, between women and life as well). In the culminating moment of *S'incontru*, Mary's unveiling at the hands of her death-conquering son upholds women's inescapable need to "giustificare la propria presenza sociale dentro l'assenza di un altro" ("Justify their social presence within someone else's absence"; 38).

Yet, the significance of *S'incontru* changes when Murgia goes beyond the theoretical interpretation in *Ave Mary* and *writes* the ritual in *L'incontro*. When the author thematizes *S'incontru* through fiction, the paraliturgical celebration and Mary's societal role assume a different meaning, which—I argue—defines Murgia's writing as *poietic*. Through the narrative rendition of the ritual that she had previously analyzed in theological terms in her essay, Murgia offers an example of *poietic* writing in her novel. For *L'incontro* shapes a societal transformation through the encounter between theological reflection and community activism.

In the narrative of *S'incontru*, set in a real-surreal Crabas, the sudden intrusion of an otherness until then deemed unconceivable triggers an unexpected reaction. The formation of a new parish and its community within the previously close-knit community, determines the duplication of the mother-son pair of processions on Easter morning. Now, with two mother-son pairs, four processions advance towards the same central square of Crabas. This shared destination goes

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[20] Murgia draws our attention to the Catholic Church's official resistance to introducing in the delivery room the scientific advancements that pain medicine had achieved in the second half of the nineteenth century. The implementation of the epidural anesthesia in the 1930s exacerbated the controversy between science and theology to the point that in 1956 Pope Pius XII advanced a metaphorical rather than literal interpretation of the divine punishment in order quiet down the diatribe.

against the bishop's recommended compromise. Hoping to avoid an open conflict between the two parishes, the officially approved itinerary has assigned the two processions originating from the new church a peripheral square for the joyful encounter between mother and son. And yet, contrary to all expectations, a destabilizing encounter of sorts takes place. The statues of Mary and the Resurrected coming from the new parish of the Sacred Heart reach the central town square at the same time as the other two statues approaching from the old parish of Saint Mary. The latter, to whom Maurizio belongs, claims an exclusive right in the name of a nativist ideology. Animated discussions arise in order to trace the boundaries of influence ascribed to "noi," the Saint Mary's parishioners, and "loro," the Sacred Heart's parishioners. As a consequence,

> Maurizio si rese conto per la prima volta che nella comunità di Crabas potevano esistere plurali diversi dall'unico di cui fino a quel punto si era sentito parte. Dipendeva tutto dal fatto che adesso c'erano anche loro, quelli del Sacro Cuore. Dacché ricordasse lui, non c'era mai stato un "loro" a Crabas. (*L'incontro* 50)

> Maurizio realized for the first time that in the community of Crabas there could exist plurals different from the only one he had felt part of up to that point. All of this because now they were there too, those of the Sacred Heart. As long as he could remember, there had never been a "they" in Crabas.

To Maurizio's pensive question about the identity of this other community within the community, his Nonno offers a haunting reply: "Loro sono quello che noi non siamo" ("They are what we are not"; 51). An escalating tension between the "noi" and "loro" pervades the unfolding of *S'incontru* and the related issues of identity and belonging. The omniscient narrator skillfully renders the anxiety that paralyzes the young processions' leaders: on one side of the square, Giulio, followed by Maurizio, for the Saint Mary's parish, and, on the other side, their former friend Franco for the peripheral Sacred Heart parish. A narrative freeze-frame immobilizes the altar boys and their respective followers, caught in their clinging to the limits of their identity. Only the hammering Loreto litanies that Giulio on one side and Franco on the other intonate enliven the petrified encounter of the two fronts:

[Giulio] pallido e magro accanto alla sua Madonna imbeccava la
gente con calma simulata.

--Santa Maria… -- cominciò

--Prega per noi! -- rispose il popolo della sua parrocchia.

Franco Spanu non si lasciò intimidire, […] Sovrappose la propria
voce alla sua cercando di sovrastarla:

--Santa Madre di Dio!

--Prega per noi! --tuonarono i parrocchiani del Sacro Cuore rivolti
verso quelli di Santa Maria.

Giulio strinse le labbra, ma riprese deciso:

--Santa Vergine delle Vergini!

--Prega per NOI! --rispose il coro alle sue spalle.

--Madre di Cristo, --sibilò Franco fissandolo negli occhi.

--Prega per NOI! --gli fece eco la sua gente […]

A ogni invocazione la gente rispondeva pronta con uno sguaiato
"Prega per noi" che risuonava in tutta la piazza, ma non c'erano dubbi
che quella fosse una rivendicazione senza condivisioni: se Maria
pregava per gli uni, era escluso che potesse contemporaneamente
pregare anche per gli altri. (80)

[Giulio], pale and thin next to his Madonna, prompted his people
with feigned calm.

--Saint Mary… --he started

--Pray for us! --his fellow parishioners answered.

Franco Spanu did not feel intimidated […]. He superimposed his
voice over Giulio's in the attempt to dominate it:

--Holy Mother of God!

--Pray for us! --thundered the Sacred Heart parishioners facing
those of Saint Mary's.

Giulio pursed his lips, but resumed without hesitation:

--Holy Virgin of Virgins!

--Pray for US! --the chorus replied behind him.

--Mother of Christ, --seethed Franco staring straight into his eyes.

--Pray for US! --his people echoed him […]

At each invocation the crowd replied promptly with a loud "Pray for
us" that resounded throughout the whole square, but there was no
doubt that their reclamation did not allow any sharing: were Mary to

pray for one group, it was out of the question that she could at the same time pray also for the other. (80)

When the two processions with the statues of the two "Cristi bellicosi" ("Belligerent Christs"; 82) arrive, the authorial voice adopts a military tone to represent an encounter that is about to become an explosive battle. The irony of this linguistic register underlines "in tutta la sua enormità la portata di quanto stava per accadere" ("the immense gravity of what was about to happen"; 82). This moment of utter suspension seems to seal the boundaries of identity. And yet, in this eerie instant, body language crosses the borderline between the two parishes and the two communities. An impalpable gesture rebuilds the "noi […] al presente plurale" ("us […] in the present plural"; 15–16). That "noi" had defined Maurizio's sense of belonging to the Crabas community prior to the separation of the two parishes:

> Giulio e Franco si fissarono ancora per diversi secondi, poi [Franco] il ragazzo con i capelli rossi ebbe un'impercettibile flessione del capo e rivolse all'amico un gesto che nessun altro comprese […]. Giulio camminava con decisione alla testa della processione dell'Afflitta, ma la sua Madonna non puntava verso il centro della piazza dove Monsignor Marras già faceva condurre il suo Cristo: la direttrice del passo del ragazzo di Santa Maria andava infatti inequivocabilmente verso il Risorto del parroco del Sacro Cuore. (84–5)

> Giulio and Franco stared at each other for several seconds, then [Franco] the red-haired boy bent his head imperceptibly and gestured to his friend in a way that no one else understood […]. Giulio walked decisively at the head of the procession of the Mater Dolorosa, but his Madonna was not pointing at the center of the square, where Monsignor Marras already had his Christ led: the trajectory of the steps of the Saint Mary's boy pointed unequivocally towards the Risen One of the parish priest of the Sacred Heart.

This undetectable, improbable gesture blurs the line between "us" and "them." The gesture, born from the boys' past familiarity through the "*fare* il gioco insieme" (8), creates a spatial and conceptual chiasmus that projects a new, broader and more inclusive community on a journey:

Il Cristo del Sacro Cuore si accostò a sua madre, cioè, a quella sbagliata, e da quel momento tutto si svolse in discesa: il Gesù simulò di farsi riconoscere e uno dei chierichetti di Santa Maria tirò il nastro che liberava la Madonna dai veli neri del lutto, mentre il sacrista del Sacro Cuore […] fece partire il mortaretto finale che forò il cielo con una scia di zolfo, avvisando tutti che l'incontro era avvenuto […]. Ogni coppia di statue doveva tornare ora unita alla chiesa d'origine, ma fu la Madonna guidata da Franco ad accompagnare il Cristo nella chiesa dell'Assunta, mentre Giulio con la sua Maria non più afflitta procedeva a ritroso lungo corso Umberto fino al capannone dove la parrocchia del Sacro Cuore *faceva le prove* per diventare comunità. (87)

The Sacred Heart's Christ approached his mother, that is to say, the wrong one, and from that moment on everything unfolded smoothly: Jesus made himself recognized, and one of the altar boys of Saint Mary pulled the ribbon that freed Mary from the black mourning veil, while the Sacred Heart's sacristan […] ignited the final firecracker that pierced the sky with a trail of sulfur, warning everyone that the encounter had taken place […]. Each pair of statues was to return now together to its original church, but it was the Madonna led by Franco that accompanied Christ to Saint Mary's church, while Giulio with his no longer afflicted Mary went back along Corso Umberto all the way to the building where the parish of the Sacred Heart was *rehearsing* to become a community.

The swap of statues between the two parishes makes it possible for their members to try to become a community by crossing the identity boundaries set by tradition. This exchange, the sign of a pluralistic encounter, takes place thanks to Mary's mediation. The inspirational force of this hopeful development is the brave girl who uttered the crucial "yes" that shaped Christianity as a destabilizing and radically innovative, political, and moral vision of the world. She drives the young captains of the opposed processions to cross boundaries, thus transforming contrast into convergence, clash into encounter. It is Mary's statue, with the procession led by Giulio along with Maurizio that goes through Crabas' central square, in front of dismayed parishioners and civil and religious authorities, in

order to reunite with the resurrected son coming from the *other* parish, thus initiating a possible community.

As Marinella Perroni underlines, in the New Testament female characters often situate themselves "beyond the boundaries […] on the borders of religious taboos" (McElwee). Their behavior epitomizes the constructive meaning of resilience, as is the case for Mary in *L'incontro*. Contrary to resistance, Perroni argues, resilience means "psychological coping with trauma and stress" (McElwee)—that is, in *L'incontro*, the schism in the Crabas community symbolically represented through the duplication of the two original processions of the afflicted mother and the resurrected son. Therefore, resilience enables "the reordering of one's life after difficulties towards a positive life" (McElwee). In *L'incontro*, Mary's resilience inspires the young leaders of the processions to pursue an affirmative reorientation of their community. At the peak of an unspoken, divisive conflict, Mary's figure triggers the captains' symbolic act of crossing the border between "us" and "them." Mary's recognition of the *other* son expresses the embracing of a pluralistic, diverse, shared identity that shapes a future community beyond the center-margin paradigm.

Arising from Murgia's theological contextualization in *Ave Mary*, Mary's figure in *L'incontro* embodies the possibility of a communal belonging beyond boundaries. In this sense, Murgia's narrative provides a forceful example of *poietic* writing, in which the theoretical and the pragmatic interact to build a new form of community. After the unexpected conclusion of the *S'incontru* ritual, which promotes a real encounter among different identities, all the participants begin "rehearsing to become a community" (*L'incontro* 87) in the spirit of what feminist theology defines "absolute relatedness" (Mollenkott 113). According to feminist biblical exegesis, this shared community of relationships and identities is the essence of the divine: "This *Thou*, this Absolute Relatedness, may be referred to as *He*, *She* or *It* because this *Thou* relates to everyone and everything" (Mollenkott 113), as the sixteen biblical metaphors analyzed in Mollenkott's *The Divine Feminine* indicate.[21] Recognizing the divine as the overarching relationship with the other in all of its multifarious expressions, nurtures an enduring resilience. It is this resilience that enables the subjects to overcome the historical trauma generated by the hierarchical dichotomy between masculine and feminine in institutional Christianity, thus empowering them to build a community grounded on reciprocal respect. Political militancy aiming at social equality characterizes the

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[21] On the divine relatedness, see also De Monticelli 23 and Muraro 148–49.

feminist movement by and large. Feminist theology, Mollenkott argues, adds to this socially progressive engagement the belief that "mutuality—mutual submission or deference, mutual concern, mutual servanthood—is the relational order exemplified by Jesus and specified by the New Testament epistles" (2).

The meaningful "mutuality" or "relatedness," which the unexpected development of the "psicodramma collettivo" ("collective psychodrama"; *Ave Mary* 138) promises, engenders in *L'incontro* a different experience of community. The gradual building of a community that is at the same time more open and more inclusive inserts Maurizio's coming-of-age story in the broader coming-of-age story of his community. This dual *Bildungsroman* rewrites the "noità," the existential category of a shared community "in the first-person plural of the present tense" (*L'incontro* 16) that had indissolubly tied Maurizio to Crabas. The creation of this new community is made possible by the revolutionary power of mediation that Mary of Nazareth incarnates, as the feminist theology that pervades Murgia's *Ave Mary* indicates.

An epistemological and at the same time pragmatic urgency animates Murgia's work, because "non è possibile conoscere quel che nessuna storia ci narra" ("it is not possible to know what no story tells us"; *Ave Mary* 138). Anchored in the original, transformational significance of *poiēsis*, Murgia's writing is *poietic* as it shapes a new form of community in which the theoretical and the pragmatic interact. In this respect, Murgia's narrative incarnates the modernist meaning of *poiēsis* from which we departed. In light of the theological reflection developed in *Ave Mary*, the *poietic* force of *L'incontro* operates "a radical act of formation or transformation of matter" (Gourgouris 1070). At the intersection of the theoretical and the pragmatic, the convergence of literary fiction and feminist theology profoundly transforms the exclusive definition of group identity and belonging that used to characterize the real-surreal Crabas of the novel. Murgia's *poietic* writing in *L'incontro* creates a community based on inclusive encounter(s) and rooted in the constructive resilience towards individual and collective suffering caused by the distorted Christian narratives around female subjectivity.

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