

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 156



Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 156

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Natalia Ginzburg 1916-1991	1
<i>Italian novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, biographer, autobiographer, journalist, and playwright</i>	
Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1908-1961	119
<i>French philosopher</i>	
Bienvenido N. Santos 1911-1996	295
<i>Philippine-born American novelist, poet, short story writer, autobiographer, memoirist, and essayist</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 343

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 443

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 455

TCLC-156 Title Index 461

Natalia Ginzburg

1916-1991

(Has also written under the pseudonym of Alessandra Tournimparte) Italian novelist, short story writer, critic, essayist, biographer, autobiographer, journalist, and playwright.

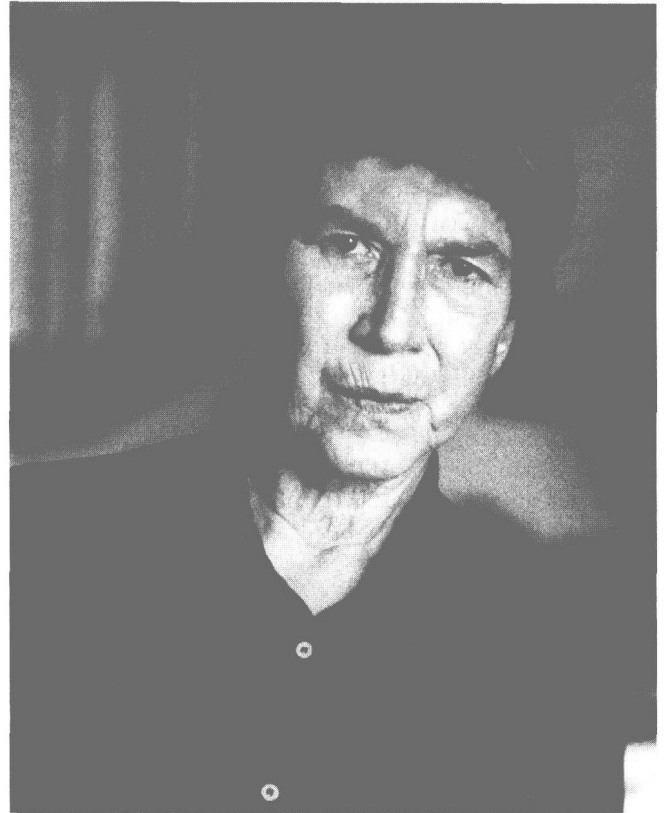
The following entry provides criticism on Ginzburg's works from 1990 through 2000. For criticism prior to 1990, see *CLC*, Volumes 5, 11, 54, and 70.

INTRODUCTION

A major Italian novelist of the post-World War II era, Ginzburg examines the difficulties of maintaining interpersonal relationships in contemporary society. Writing in reserved, understated prose, she often utilizes small but significant details to develop the crises of her characters. Her early works depict individuals whose ambitions are stifled by marriage and familial restrictions, while her later writings explore problems caused by the disintegration of the family unit.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ginzburg was born July 14, 1916, in Palermo, Italy. At the age of three, her family moved to Turin when her father, an anatomy professor, was appointed chair of the anatomy department at the University of Turin. In 1935 she enrolled in the university, but she never completed her studies. She married anti-Fascist activist Leone Ginzburg in 1938; two years into their marriage, he was arrested for subversive activities and imprisoned in the town of Pizzoli. In 1940 she moved to Pizzoli with their two children. Her first novel, *La strada che va in città* (1942; *The Road to the City*), was written during this time. After Leone's release from prison in July 1943, he moved his family to Rome. In November 1943 he was arrested again, this time for editing the anti-Fascist newspaper *L'Italia libera*. On February 5, 1944, he died under torture while in prison. For the next two years, Natalia and her children hid in Rome. After the end of the war, she moved back to Turin to work as a translator and editor for the publishing firm Einaudi. During this time she became acquainted with several major Italian authors, such as Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese, and Elio Vittorini. In 1952 she moved back to Rome and became a professor of literature at Magistero, a prominent teachers' college. She wrote articles



and reviews for periodicals and published novellas and plays. She was very active in politics during her life, and in 1983 she was elected deputy to the Italian parliament. Ginzburg died of cancer October 7, 1991.

MAJOR WORKS

Ginzburg's first major works of fiction are narrated by young women who are disappointed in love. The heroine of *The Road to the City*, which Ginzburg published under the pseudonym of Alessandra Tournimparte, successfully manipulates a wealthy young man into marrying her but realizes afterward that she has sacrificed her relationship with the man she really loves. Several of Ginzburg's early novellas present a bleak yet often humorous view of domestic life. For example, *Valentino* (1957) concerns a promising young man who disappoints his family by marrying an unattractive but wealthy woman. While Ginzburg's early works portray the family as a source of personal suppression, they

also emphasize its importance as a stabilizing social force. Her later writings decry the effects of divorce and the growing alienation between generations. In the novel *Caro Michele* (1973; *No Way*, also published as *Dear Michael*), Ginzburg centers on the last days in the life of an exiled activist through a series of letters written by his estranged parents and friends.

Ginzburg's autobiographical and biographical writings have earned critical recognition. *Lessico familiare* (1963; *Family Sayings*), a memoir of Ginzburg's life from the 1920s through the 1950s, features a laconic, conversational style reminiscent of her fictional narratives. *La famiglia Manzoni* (1983; *The Manzoni Family*) chronicles two hundred years in the family history of eighteenth-century Italian poet Alessandro Manzoni. The book's eight sections focus on the experiences of a particular family member through the transcription of actual letters and a novelistic recreation of events. In addition to her fiction and biographical writings, Ginzburg has published numerous articles and critical essays. These pieces are collected in *Le piccole virtù* (1962; *The Little Virtues*), *Mai devi domandarmi* (1970; *Never Must You Ask Me*), and *Vita immaginaria* (1974). She has also written several plays, including *Fragola e panna* (1966), *La segretaria* (1967), and *L'inserzione* (1968; *The Advertisement*).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ginzburg's simple, spare style of writing has impressed critics, while her intimate explorations of domestic life have been praised for their authenticity and concern for traditional values. Moreover, commentators have commended the use of humor, irony, and detail in her work and further describe her style as laconic, subdued, and direct. The characterization of women and children has been another area of critical study, and there have been several feminist perspectives on her plays, fiction, and essays. In general, commentators view Ginzburg's prose work as a perceptive reflection of social and historical events in Italy during the tumultuous years during and after WWII. Her minimalist style and compassionate evocation of the frustrated lives of her protagonists have elicited comparisons to the works of Anton Chekhov.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

La strada che va in città [*The Road to the City*] (novella) 1942
È stato così [*The Dry Heart*] (novella) 1947
Tutti i nostri ieri [*Dead Yesterdays*] (novel) 1952; revised as *All Our Yesterdays*, 1985

Valentino [*Two Novellas: Valentino and Sagittarius*] (novellas) 1957
Le voci della sera [*Voices in the Evening*] (novella) 1961
Le piccole virtù [*The Little Virtues*] (essays) 1962
Lessico familiare [*Family Sayings*] (memoir) 1963
Cinque romanzi brevi (novels) 1964
Fragola e panna (play) 1966
Ti ho sposato per allegria e alter commedie (play) 1966
La segretaria (play) 1967
L'inserzione [*The Advertisement*] (play) 1968
Mai devi domandarmi [*Never Must You Ask Me*] (essays) 1970
Caro Michele [*No Way*] (novel) 1973; also published as *Dear Michael*, 1975
Vita immaginaria (essays) 1974
Famiglia [*Family: Two Novellas*] (novellas) 1977
La famiglia Manzoni [*The Manzoni Family*] (biography) 1983
La città e la casa [*The City and the House*] (novel) 1984
Opere, raccolte e ordinate dall'autore. 2 vols. (novellas, memoir, essays, plays) 1986-87
Serena Cruz, o la vera giustizia (essays) 1990
Teatro (plays) 1990
A Place to Live, and Other Selected Essays of Natalia Ginzburg (essays) 2002
It's Hard to Talk about Yourself (interviews) 2003

CRITICISM

Serena Anderlini (essay date April 1990)

SOURCE: Anderlini, Serena. "The Advertisement: Homoeroticism and Gender in Natalia Ginzburg's Drama." *Esperienze Letterarie* 15, no. 2 (April 1990): 67-82.

[In the following essay, Anderlini asserts that the relationship between the two female characters in *The Advertisement* provides insight into the Italian feminist movement of the 1960s.]

The Advertisement is a pre-new feminist Italian drama by Natalia Ginzburg, a part-Jewish female writer prominent in the national, post world war two literary scene; the play premiered in London in 1968 and is symbolic of the writer's concern with the new feminism and the intersubjective rapports among women that it brought about. The play occupies a central position in Ginzburg's dramaturgy: the homoerotic complicity of the two female characters reflects Ginzburg's effort to refocus her attention from the women of her own generation to those of the following one, who, born during the

'baby-boom', in the seventies became the rank and file of Italian *Femminismo*. Formally anchored to the dynamics of the 'theatre of the absurd', *The Advertisement* foreshadows the thematics of new feminist drama.

Natalia Ginzburg had been through a lot when the women's movement became a prominent force in the Italian scene in the mid-seventies. She was born in 1916, before the dawn of Fascism, the youngest child of a middle-class part-Jewish Italian family, and in her childhood had absorbed her father's view that "there [was] nothing, absolutely nothing that one could do against Fascism" except undo it by the strength of one's resilience, and still be there to tell the story after its fall. Married to Leone Ginzburg—a left-wing Russian-Jewish political activist, who was found murdered in a prison cell in 1944—she had made the best of her wifely exile in an Abruzzi peasant town, when the regime had sent him to political confinement. In *Le piccole virtù*, a memoir, her "Eboli" is evoked as a lost paradise, but the narrative breaks the image of the happy family with an account of Natalia's first and atrocious encounter with death:

Mio marito morì a Roma nelle carceri di Regina Coeli, pochi mesi dopo che avevamo lasciato il paese. Davanti all'orrore della sua morte solitaria, davanti alle angosciose alternative che precedettero la sua morte, io mi chiedo se questo è accaduto a noi, a noi che compravamo le arance da Girò e andavamo a passeggiare nella neve. Allora io avevo fiducia in un avvenire facile e lieto, ricco di desideri appagati, di esperienze e di comuni imprese. Ma era quello il tempo migliore della mia vita e solo adesso che mi è sfuggito per sempre, solo adesso lo so.

(My husband died in Rome in the Regina-Coeli prisons, a few months after we had left the village. Before the horror of his solitary death, before the harrowing alternatives that preceded it, I ask myself if this really happened to us, the very people who used to buy oranges from Girò, and went out into the snow to take a walk. I used to have faith then in easy and happy times to be, clad with fulfilled desires, with experiences and with adventures in common. But that was the best time in my life and only now that I have lost it forever, only now I know it)¹.

Bereaved at such an early age (twenty-nine) and being left a young widow with three small children at the end of a second war, she became interested in a particular kind of character: her women have lower-class, rural, humble origins, but a tremendous drive to project themselves out into the environment, and a talent for living intensely and being intensely loved. If they are narcissistic, self-conscious, extremely difficult women, in her dramaturgy one finds that their desires are the cement of society. Just like Lillian Hellman—a similarly prominent female American dramatist—Natalia Ginzburg is

not concerned with typically feminist characters, but with ordinary, non-professional and often non-educated women, who obstinately resist the conforming pressures of society².

Ginzburg's activity as one of the most prominent Italian novelists since the forties can be briefly summarized: a series of *romanzi brevi* written in the pre- and post-war period, started her out as the representative of the *gentil sesso* in a group of left-wing Jewish-Italian *letterati*, among the country's prime liberal intellectuals³. A cross between the *novella* and a regular novel, the *romanzo breve* is a swift, condensed, unadorned narrative, conveying the viewpoint of a *voce femminile* in a fable based on a collective protagonist and characterized by Ginzburg's distinctive staccato rhythm and naïve accents. *Lessico familiare* (1963), a full-length novel of family life and anti-Fascism, brought national recognition: a withdrawn, timid, naïve narrator casts in a choral structure the story of the author's childhood under Fascism. The memory of Natalia's relatives echoes through the book in the lines of the family jargon that form the refrains distinctive of individual characters; a confused notion of a prior age, that—before the backlash associated with the Fascist period—had been more promising and attractive for women, is reflected in the child's puzzled admiration for her garrulous, lighthearted, and amusingly eccentric mother. With the raise of Italian *Femminismo* Ginzburg put the novel aside, and for a number of years devoted herself to drama. She later returned to her original genre, but drama put her in touch with the generation formed in the intense experience of the new feminism, and this understanding became the backbone of her later narratives. Her plays reflect the political and cultural vivacity that *Femminismo* brought about.

To define Ginzburg's perspective on women one needs to glance at the specifics of the women's movement in Italy. In the early twentieth century, a rural economy and the Catholic establishment prevented the suffrage movement from gaining popular support in the country. Feminist ideas survived the *ventennio* (1921-45) through the efforts of a xenophile intelligentsia, colored of anti-Fascism; but with the peace treaty women's vote was granted as an antidote to Marxism. The rapid industrial development of the sixties broke the traditional family structure, but was not adequately matched by a transformation in the judicial system of the country: for instance, there was a state prohibition for the sale of contraceptive devices, and divorce was not allowed. Birth-control pills were sold illegally under the heading of headache remedies, but statistics announced an incidence of illegal abortions and irregular sexual partnerships higher than most western countries. Back-room abortions and illegitimacy had become a way of life automatically⁴.

When the liberal left passed a timid set of regulations it faced an immediate resistance from the conservative side of the country. The right wing in alliance with the Church establishment set out on a campaign to abrogate the new laws granting divorce and abortion rights, by a popular referendum. The situation gave a tremendous momentum to the feminist rank and file: on the issues of both divorce and abortion the country became politically polarized, and for two times in a row a large majority of the people voted side to side with the women's movement. *Femminismo* acquired a clear conscience of its powers: in moving the public opinion from a preindustrial to a post-modern view of the family, Italian women felt for a while that they had in their hands the destiny of the country.

A combination of social, historical, religious and economic factors thus made the impact of *Femminismo* particularly dramatic. Natalia Ginzburg was affected by this impact, but maintained a sober standpoint and a controlled distance. In 1973 she was a regular contributor to the *terza pagina* of two major liberal newspapers. Questioned about *la condizione femminile*, she answered:

Non amo il femminismo. Condivido però tutto quello che chiedono i movimenti femminili. Condivido tutte o quasi le loro richieste pratiche.

[I do not love (new) feminism. I am in agreement, however, with all that which feminists movements demand. I share all, or almost all their practical demands]⁵.

Feminism in the seventies obscurely appeared to her as a new form of reverse, self-defeating "racism". She saw its origins in an age old "inferiority complex" of women, that gave a "secret complicity" as its questionable results. She thought that for the national feminist movements to become positive forces in the complex of society the implications of that secret complicity had to be sorted out⁶.

As in the plays by women her contemporaries, in Ginzburg's plays female characters of the new feminist generation are placed stage center. However, her American and Continental contemporaries do not match her political acumen and her lucid insight into the dynamics of women's solidarity. White American playwrights like Megan Terry and Rosalyn Drexler were much younger than Ginzburg. Their work in experimental theatre collectives produced protest plays about themes like birth-control, rape and abortion that conveyed their messages through utopia and abstraction: their female characters are pale and depersonalized. Racial consciousness granted a perspective distance from the new feminism to Black American women writers: Lorraine Hansberry drew memorable, intense female characters, but still concentrated primarily on the racial tensions of the

time. The new feminist dramatic urge also stimulated established French novelists and filmmakers like Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras; their plays have complex, multidimensional female characters; however, the eroticism of language overrides gender tensions, and the complicity of female characters is buried under a heavily formal absurdist style.

Ginzburg's anarchical equidistance from both feminism and capitalism is similar to that of her well-known predecessor Lillian Hellman—a quite controversial writer whose last original play *Toys in the Attic* premiered in 1961. Ginzburg is also a woman of the same generation as this American writer; both are keen observers of the new feminism who focus on the examination of the dynamics of gender in intimate family microcosms, rather than calling political attention to macroscopic aspects like political demonstrations and rallies. However, Ginzburg develops homoerotic complicity because she uses multiple female protagonists: for instance, one senses the imminence of a new feminist age in *Toys in the Attic*, but Lily, the central character, is isolated from her generation, and therefore incapable to voice its demands. In Ginzburg's *The Advertisement* Teresa and Elena form a dual female protagonist and reciprocally awake their feminist consciousness as they form an erotic bondage with one another: where Hellman left Ginzburg picked up, remaining all through the seventies an active and successful playwright.

Lighthearted farce is the initial tone of Ginzburg's dramatic period, which sees traditional gender-roles respected and upper-class, conventional mores satirized. In *Ti ho sposato per allegria* (*I Married you for Fun*), for instance, the effrontery of Giuliana, a young female character from the working-class, is a vivifying force in the play's milieu. Her adventurous and unpredictable temperament stands in contrast to her upper-class sister and mother-in-law. Giuliana's maid has adopted conventional manners to be on the safe side, and she strangely mimics the rigidity of Giuliana's in-laws. Giuliana's influence begins to be felt in the environment, but her alliance with the maid keeps the scope of the satire on the social level. A darker tone in the later plays is conducive of the suffocating atmosphere imposed, despite *Femminismo*, by the impinging economic crisis. In *La porta sbagliata* (the wrong door) a confused, unacknowledged anxiety hovers behind a disappointed baby-boom generation that has reversed gender and class conventions, but feels itself to be of no use to an unevenly developed society. With its oblique humor and its diffused, but not quite overwhelming anxiety, the above mentioned *Advertisement* finds its dramatic balance in between these two⁷.

The complexity of Natalia Ginzburg's dramaturgy gives evidence of the hypothesis that gender difference in writing cannot be established on the basis of a purely

formal or of a purely thematic analysis. Scholars who propose a formal answer to the questions "what is the difference?" and "why study it?" are naturally bound to find that men from a country other than their own, or from an ethnicity other than their own, use forms believed to be specific of women's playwriting. Likewise, 'alien' women dramatists may use forms that appear "masculine" to the American feminist mind. Ginzburg, for instance, uses Ionescoan, threadbare absurdist canvases, which can be easily construed as a surrender to "masculine" structures: in the seventies the absurdist model was well-established, especially if compared to the "transformational" new feminist experiments of this country. But Ginzburg, already established, stayed away from the avant-garde experimentation that was also becoming popular among her younger women compatriots: the first significant Italian woman dramatist, she put her plays in the mainstream circuits, and used well-known directors and actors. Like Hellman, her above mentioned illustrious American predecessor, she used traditional dramatic forms to deconstruct them.

In Ginzburg's intriguing love triangles one can likewise read an echo of the comedy of manners, whose apoliticism can be constructed as the feminist reflection of a generic Italian backwardness. However, it is precisely by focusing on the private microcosm of a collapsing post-industrial heterosexual couple that Ginzburg can explore the thematic complexity of women's desires, their world of erotic projection and the crucial moments of their collective state of mind. A brief analysis of Ginzburg's reception illustrates how audiences responded to her works according to changing gender constructs.

Commentators on Ginzburg's literary beginnings as a novelist took her for granted as the virtuoso "token" woman of the Italian post-Fascist literary environment: local critics acknowledged a promising talent, but none spent time on the influence of gender in her writing; Italian criticism being still a male province at the time, Ginzburg's thematics automatically came across as "less relevant" than those of contemporary male writers*.

In the seventies, Ginzburg's novels have attracted a number of female commentators outside and inside of her country. Theses critics have focused on the rhythm of her prose and on her style: as has been pointed out, the rhythm of Ginzburg's prose is based on a staccato pace and on an abundance of vowels that mask a sage consciousness under a naïve style. But her thematic organization functions on stinging humorous bits that interrupt the pace, and on metaphors about temporality and death that cut across the rhythms creating emotional vertigo. This common denominator of thirty years of writing reflects her contemplative poetic personality and her drive to hide in the observer's corner and unfold the stories of apparent "others" as a means to establish the writer's power to survive them*.

Her recent enchanting, intriguing and sad novels show how drama changed the perspectives of her narrative. From *Caro Michele* (*Dear Michael*, 1973) to *La città e la casa* (*The City and the House*, 1983) the epistolary form progressively takes over the traditional narrative. In *La città e la casa* this allows the novel to follow a plot that develops with some characters living in central Italy and some on the East coast of the United States. The author examines the links that her characters establish between the two continents, and uses the deeds of two generations to embrace the theme of the ongoing flux over the Atlantic. As in drama, the composition relies on purely dialogical patterns, and the author uses different registers to pitch on various levels the voices of her characters.

The translation of her last novel has confirmed Natalia Ginzburg's status among the American reading public. Her anthologized essays, plays, short stories and novels have long since been favorites of Italian students and teachers. *The Little Virtues*, a newly translated essay-collection and memoir, has been favorably reviewed in the mainstream papers of this country¹⁰. This diffused interest in Ginzburg in America suggests that her international reputation could be due to an analogous response of the female portion of the reading public, similarly interested in both countries.

The Advertisement (original title *L'inserzione*, literally "the classified ad"), examines a microcosm that reflects the general tensions that gave origin to the new feminism. Teresa is the typically "backward" woman of pre- or de-industrialized societies, who depends on marriage for social status. Deserted by her husband, she starts living with Elena, a female student ten years her junior, who becomes immersed in the tales of her tumultuous life. The two women become mutual supports and sources of self-assurance for each other, until the student falls in love with Teresa's ex-husband.

A confused, still unconscious and inarticulated homosexuality appears as a major motivation of the two women's alliance, although it goes unacknowledged by the characters. Mostly due to the diffused influence of popularized Freudian psychoanalysis, the level of intimacy reached by the two women in the play had previously come across as neurosis or insanity caused by a frustrated heterosexuality. By this middle-aged Italian writer, who glances at the new feminism from one generation back, the psycho-erotic bond between the two female characters is now newly regarded as the microscopic seed that gave origin to the collective new feminist action. As in her memoirs, and as most writers formed at the backlash aesthetics, Ginzburg suggests that there is no solid alliance until the real motivations are collectively acknowledged and surpassed.

From a generational distance the established writer looks at the formation of feminism in the new alliances

that discard the conventional hierarchies that govern gender-roles in society. Under the new feminist influence, the traditional triangle becomes a microcosm that reveals the gender-dynamics that are at stake in society. The defeat of the new alliance (when Elena leaves Teresa to live with Teresa's ex-husband), reflects Ginzburg's reticence to accept this influence. But the homoerotic basis of the alliance suggests that the writer developed a sharper and a more articulated consciousness of gender as she wrote for the theatre. In *L'inserzione* the absurdity is used to present the betrayed complicity that re-establishes the gender hierarchies threatened by the women's alliance in the beginning of the play.

L'inserzione brought Ginzburg to the international attention of feminist scholars of the theatre. Partly as a result of this attention, the play has since been periodically revived, translated, taught and anthologized. A controversial view of Italian women is the basis of its popularity. Its premiere in London—rather than in Rome or Milan—suggests that the script had a provocative potential with respect to the Italian public. The success of its productions in Europe rested on the assumption that the play's protagonist realistically corresponded to the Italian type. But when *L'inserzione* finally opened in Italy, the protagonist role was purposely played as a neurotic, so as not to disturb the local public¹¹.

Formal descriptions of the play by non-feminist writers range from absurdist, to tragic farce, to comedy of sentiment and of manners. The compulsive talkativeness of Teresa is invariably seen as its subject. This emphasis on the protagonist narrows down the perspective of Ginzburg's dramaturgy: the play uses the conventional triangle to examine gender dynamics in the power struggle of a heterosexual couple. Teresa and Lorenzo have managed for a year to live apart. After five years of a contrasted, tempestuous, but tremendously passionate marriage, they have regained their mental balance and now periodically visit each other.

A beginner in writing for the stage, Ginzburg is still very dependent on the narrative. Her borrowing from the absurdist model gives a neurotic slant to the characters, but the play deconstructs the absurdist model because it shows verbal flows as erotic channels between characters. The first act develops as Teresa, who now lives alone and cloistered in her apartment, responds to the calls for the three classified ads that she placed in the local paper to regain some touch with reality: she wants to sell her villa and her antique sideboard, and find an au pair to share the apartment. She would prefer a student, to bring a fresher breeze into the stagnant air of her retirement; she definitely wants a woman, to stand on an equal footing and enjoy a discreet presence in the apartment.

Teresa's talkativeness is a form of desire by which she projects herself onto others: as she steps through the door, an inordinate verbal flow invests Elena, the university student who is interested in moving into the apartment. As she keeps asking questions, Elena is slowly caught in Teresa's spell: predictably, Teresa concentrates on Lorenzo, and gives the details of the terrible fights that brought about the separation, sought and warmly fostered by the upper middle-class family of the husband. From her story one gathers that these two people did not know how to deal with each other: on the one hand their marriage was based on a liberated and frankly physical passion, on the other they could not find ways in which this relationship could become socially positive for them. They usually wound up in crazed situations just because they kept having trite expectations of one another. For instance, the prospect of a rural wealthy tranquillity made Lorenzo invest all his money in the pretentious villa which Teresa wishes to sell now. When Teresa discovered that she did not care for that wifely quiet, they came back to Rome and lived on fast-food in a empty apartment.

An anonymous caller for a classified ad, Elena is transformed into an addicted spectator of Teresa's storytelling in less than one act. Listen to the crescendo of intimacy between the two characters as Elena asks questions about Teresa's life:

Ed è venuta a Roma?
E poi è diventata davvero un'attrice del cinema?
Oh, no. Mi piace sentirla. Racconti ancora. . . .
Suo marito è questo qui della fotografia?
Era un uomo molto disordinato. . . .
Non poteva telefonare?
Litigavate su cosa?
Ma lui non lavorava?
E non ci sta nessuno adesso in quella villa?
Studiava da sua madre?
L'ha tradito con chi?
E lui l'ha saputo?
E Lorenzo non l'ha più visto?

(And then you moved to Rome?
And then did you really become a movie-star?
Oh, no. I really like to listen. Please tell more.
Is your husband this one here in the picture?
He sure was a very disorderly man. . . .
Couldn't he call?
What would you argue about?
Didn't he work?
And is there anyone now in that villa?
Did he study, at his mother's?
And with whom did you betray him?
And did he find out?
And did you ever see Lorenzo again?)¹²

In the crescendo of questions that Elena asks Teresa about her married life one reads her growing power over the other character; but in speaking of their childhood the two women also reinforce the bond that is

growing between them: their experience in their respective families are strikingly similar, as little girls growing up in the mid-century anti-feminist climate: both women came from rural backgrounds and had a similarly powerless, exploited, hard-working mother; they felt second-class citizens in their family because they were placed second to their brothers; they spent their teen-age years thinking of ways to escape the drab perspective of a woman's life in the country. While Elena moved to Rome in the sixties and had access to education thanks to the liberal climate, Teresa,—not much older than Elena—had moved ten years earlier, with the improbable project of becoming an actress. But in the fifties she found a still conservative, prudish, extremely misogynist climate: a number of stints as an extra in the growing local film industry suggested to her that even the more liberal movie world was remaining insensitive to her charms. If she had failed as an actress, she had at least taken enough care of herself to avoid the streets by finding a husband.

Act one thus concludes on a positive note for the two women: Teresa's story wins Elena's respect, and Elena moves in with the understanding that they will give each other mutual support. Both women are too primitive in their assessment of their sexuality to realize that the strength of this bond is based on a mutual physical attraction. But the timidity and fundamental anxiety of the two characters suggest that the author deliberately leaves the possibility open that the two could fall in love with each other. The feminist influence at this point can be regarded as the propelling force of the play: Natalia Ginzburg's curiosity about the two women's alliance manifests the writer's desire to be included in the "secret complicity" that she questions in her memoir.

The second part of the play goes into reverse gear and shows more of the author's generational reticence vis-à-vis the new feminism. When Lorenzo arrives in the second act, a casual visit rapidly turns into a scene of seduction, as he feels his former role threatened by the new partnership. A sense of ownership of the women's place exudes from his gestures in the apartment: his presence breaks the calm, intimate balance that the women have established. In talking to Elena, he gathers a sense of power from presenting himself as the unquestioned center of Teresa's desires; in speaking of their marriage, he demeans Teresa's image in the eyes of the new partner. Act two concludes on Teresa's silence as Lorenzo wins Elena over. The impression is that a frustrated sense of self-worth is too shaky as a basis for the women's alliance.

In a short exchange with Lorenzo, while Teresa is still out, Elena naïvely acknowledges the mutual support—much beyond the *au pair* relationship—that the two women are giving each other:

ELENA:

Oh, no. Io sto benissimo qui.

LORENZO:

In questa casa? Ci sta benissimo? Poverina. Chissà come la opprime Teresa, con la storia delle nostre disgrazie. Vede, tanto io che Teresa abbiamo bisogno di rovesciare i nostri guai su qualcuno. Ma né io né lei guardiamo, se chi ci ascolta è in grado di sopportare il peso dei nostri guai.

ELENA:

Non so se io sono di aiuto a Teresa. Quando parla, sto a sentire. Non le do grandi consigli.

(p. 109)

(ELENA:

Oh, no, I really like to be here.

LORENZO:

In this house? You really like it? Poor thing. Teresa must be terribly oppressive when she talks of our misfortunes. You see, both Teresa and I need to throw our troubles on someone. But neither I nor she make sure that the listener is capable of bearing the weight of our troubles.

ELENA:

I don't know that I give support to Teresa. When she talks, I listen. I don't give much advice).

But a timid sense of self-worth that the two women have given each other comes across from Teresa's tone as she arrives:

TERESA:

Oh, ciao. Beato chi ti vede. È un mese che non so più niente di te.

(p. 109)

(TERESA:

Oh, hi! Nice to see you. It's been a month since I last heard from you).

As Teresa and Lorenzo discuss the villa business and eventual buyers, he is taken aback by her counterarguing:

LORENZO:

Io non ho tempo.

TERESA:

Anch'io non ho tempo.

LORENZO:

Perché cos'hai da fare, tu?

TERESA:

E tu? Tu cos'hai da fare?

LORENZO:

Più di te.

TERESA:

Io ho da fare.

LORENZO:

Cosa?

TERESA:

Non ti riguarda.

(p. 109-110)

(LORENZO:

I don't have time.

TERESA:

Neither do I have time.

LORENZO:

Why? What have you got to do?

TERESA:

And you? What have *you* got to do?

LORENZO:

More than you.

TERESA:

I'm very busy right now.

LORENZO:

Busy doing what?

TERESA:

That's no business of yours).

But when the three speak together, Lorenzo counterattacks by flirting with Elena. Lorenzo obviously capitalizes on Elena's naïveté, but Teresa stays out of his trite game of seduction, and actually outsmarts him with his own remarks.

LORENZO:

Se ti ho detto che non sto più con mia madre. Ho un piccolo appartamento per conto mio.

ELENA:

Senti, Teresa, ho messo su il pollo. Facciamo la minestra in brodo, no?

TERESA:

Sì, tesoro.

LORENZO:

Mi invitate a colazione?

ELENA:

Con piacere, vero Teresa?

TERESA:

La minestra in brodo a lui non gli piace.

LORENZO:

Non è vero. Mi piace moltissimo.

TERESA:

Hai cambiato gusti, in un anno?

LORENZO:

Mia madre me la fa sempre.

(p. 111)

(LORENZO:

I told you I no longer live with my mother. I have a small apartment of my own.

ELENA:

Teresa, listen, I've started the chicken. We'll also have soup, 'that right?

TERESA:

Yes, darling.

LORENZO:

Am I invited?

ELENA:

Of course you are, (to Teresa) right?

TERESA:

He doesn't like soup.

LORENZO:

That's not true, I like it a lot.

TERESA:

Did you already change tastes, in a year?

LORENZO:

My mother always makes it for me).

Being closely in touch with Elena has obviously made Teresa quite impassive to the power games of her husband: she is aware that his affected interest for her charming *au pair* is but a form of unacknowledged jealousy toward her new partnership. Listen to her witty remarks as she dismantles his boasted chastity: