

# NOTES AND GLEANINGS / NOTE E CURIOSITÀ

## QUADERNO PROIBITO: A SILENCED WOMAN'S VOICE IN POST-WAR ITALY

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### **Abstract**

*Nel romanzo-diario, Quaderno proibito, Alba de Céspedes si fa portavoce della vita interiore e esteriore della donna italiana medio-borghese degli anni Cinquanta, campo fino a allora largamente inesplorato. Scrivendo nel diario, la protagonista acquista coscienza dell'inadeguata posizione che la donna riveste all'interno della famiglia e nella società, però, non avendo il coraggio di esternare il proprio messaggio, la protagonista brucia il diario e rinuncia a crearsi una vita diversa. Da un lato de Céspedes rappresenta le barriere sociali, psicologiche e economiche che doveva affrontare la donna italiana che scriveva negli anni Cinquanta, dall'altro forse rivela anche una certa sfiducia nelle donne da parte dell'autore. Nonostante la rinuncia finale della protagonista rafforzi il ruolo tradizionale della donna, le profonde riflessioni sulla propria esperienza quotidiana contengono il principio di nuovi modelli comportamentali.*

The first person, self-analysis of the dominant female protagonist, Valeria Cossati, is the focal point of *Quaderno proibito*<sup>1</sup>, published for the first time in 1952. In the novel, Alba de Céspedes gave voice to the private lives and tragedies of women controlled by the law, by the

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<sup>1</sup> A. de Céspedes, *Quaderno proibito*, Milano, Mondadori, 1952.

Church and, most significantly, by the weight of social morals. This theme was most forcefully expressed in *Quaderno proibito*, as well as in *Dalla parte di lei*<sup>2</sup>, published in 1949, and in *Prima e dopo*<sup>3</sup>, published in 1955. In these works Alba de Céspedes publicly attacked what she saw as the patriarchal institution of the family.

De Céspedes' scepticism of conventional marriage is expressed at the end of *Quaderno proibito*. Valeria, having said good-bye to Guido, her platonic lover – thus sacrificing “la sua ultima possibilità di essere giovane” (254)<sup>4</sup> – returns home to her husband, Michele:

Mi sono stretta a lui, che seguitava a leggere, e ho finto di dormire come se fosse una sera qualunque. Pensavo che, forse, anche Michele, qualche volta, avrà finto di dormire. E che di questo continuo fingere di dormire e rimanere svegli nella propria angoscia è fatta la storia di un matrimonio esemplare. (255)

The author was publicly condemned by the Vatican because of the liberal views on marriage and divorce she expressed in *Epoca*<sup>5</sup>. As one of her characters, Sandro Cantoni, says in *Quaderno proibito*: “qui si deve rimanere incatenati, condannati” (186). At the time she was writing *Quaderno proibito*, the novelist was also writing for the Communist Women's magazine *Noi donne*. The magazine pursued a muted political line in the early Fifties and was domestically oriented. In the literature section, however, more radical ideas were explored:

[...] alla letteratura veniva demandato il compito non soltanto di intrattenere, bensì anche di educare. [...] firme prestigiose [...] al pari di Franca Pieroni Bortolotti accettavano di costruire personaggi e situazioni atti a far

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<sup>2</sup> A. de Céspedes, *Dalla parte di lei*, Milano, Mondadori, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> A. de Céspedes, *Prima e dopo*, Milano, Mondadori, 1955.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations are taken from the following edition of *Quaderno proibito*: Milano, Mondadori, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Alba de Céspedes had a mail column in the magazine *Epoca* from 1953 to 1961 (see Marina Ceratto, *Il chi è delle donne italiane 1945-1982*, Milano, Mondadori, 1982: 66).

riflettere sulla situazione sociale dell'Italia del tempo [...]. Su *Noi donne* [...] pubblicavano in quel periodo Fausta Cialente, Anna Maria Ortese, Anna Banti, Alba De [sic] Céspedes tra le scrittrici, e Dina Bertoni Jovine o Ada Gobetti, tra le 'dilettanti'. (LX)<sup>6</sup>

In a 1948 issue of *Mercurio*, the first political, literary and scientific review to be published just after the Second World War – funded and edited by de Céspedes – the novelist defended the right of women to be legally represented and judged by other women, claiming that men could not judge women as they did not know them. De Céspedes invited Maria Bassino, an outstanding Italian criminal lawyer, to write an article in *Mercurio* defending the right of women to be judges.

When *Quaderno proibito* was published, in 1952, women's suffrage was only seven years old. Women, but not men, could still go to jail if they committed adultery. The law sanctioning inequality in adultery was only declared unconstitutional in 1968. Divorce was finally introduced in Italy in 1970, eighteen years after the publication of *Quaderno proibito*<sup>7</sup>. These restrictions testify to women's lack of legal, let alone economic or social power in post-war Italian society<sup>8</sup>. The extent to which Valeria Cossati's renunciation of life beyond the family arises from the novelist's need to represent historical reality, or from a lack of faith in women stemming from identification with a predominantly masculine intellectual milieu will be considered in this article.

As she stressed during our discussions in Paris in March 1990<sup>9</sup>, Alba de Céspedes insisted on being called a 'poeta' and not a 'poetessa', even

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<sup>6</sup> As reported by Annarita Buttafuoco in her introduction to Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Sul movimento politico delle donne: scritti inediti*, Roma, Utopia: LX.

<sup>7</sup> Source of data on the legal situation of women in Post-war Italy - "Per una cronologia del movimento delle donne e dell'emancipazione femminile", in Annarita Buttafuoco, editor, Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Sul movimento politico delle donne: scritti inediti*, cit.: 227-288.

<sup>8</sup> A journalist's criticism of the daughter of the then Italian President De Gasperi in 1947 provides an indication of what was held to be inappropriate behaviour for women: "Una donna in pantaloni è un fatto scandaloso per i costumi un poco provinciali delle famiglie di stretta osservanza cattolica". (D. Bartoli, *L'Europeo*, 2 gennaio 1947, n.p., citato in Miriam Mafai, *L'apprendistato della politica: le donne italiane nel dopoguerra*, Roma, Riuniti, 1979: 198.

<sup>9</sup> See "Colloqui con Alba de Céspedes" in Piera Carroli, *Esperienza e narrazione nella scrittura di Alba de Céspedes*, Longo, 1993: 131-194.

as a child. Already aware of the disparity in the esteem given to female and male writers, she wanted to be identified with the masculine form 'poeta' because, as she said, she wanted to be taken seriously, especially by her father. Her strong attachment to her father, her pride in her aristocratic paternal Cuban lineage, her profound admiration for Fidel Castro and male authors such as Alejo Carpentier and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, narrowed, perhaps, the possibility of her identifying fully with women emotionally and intellectually. Despite her condemnation of marriage as an institution that could force people who no longer loved each other to live together, de Céspedes believed that many women lack the courage to leave the "family home".

Unlike Augusta, one of the characters in Alba de Céspedes' first novel, *Nessuno torna indietro*<sup>10</sup>, Valeria has no aspiration to become a recognised professional writer; on the contrary, she hides her writings. The diary is a secret outlet for her frustration and dissatisfaction. As such, it may have a conservative effect as a safety valve preventing her from attempting more vigorous acts of liberation. Conversely, the diary, as inner writing revisiting the recent and distant past, constantly renews the narrator's point of view of her experiences and her perspective of her previous writing. It therefore contains the potential to evolve the narrating and narrated self. It is through the written expression of her creative impulses that Valeria Cossati becomes aware of the inadequate role traditionally offered women within the family. During our discussions Alba de Céspedes expressed her awareness that the diary is often considered a minor literary form when written by women<sup>11</sup>. She said that in her view this was nonsense. When asked why she had chosen the diary form for *Quaderno proibito*, she said that it had come naturally, following an incident which occurred one Sunday when she was buying a packet of cigarettes. She saw a woman in the shop begging furtively the tobacconist, to sell her a 'quaderno', a notebook. At that time, notebooks could not be sold on Sundays. It was precisely the woman's watchful insistence that raised the author's curiosity,

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<sup>10</sup> A. de Céspedes, *Nessuno torna indietro*, Milano, Mondadori, 1938, Oscar Mondadori, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, as observed by the scholars Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter, it is only when the diary form is used by women that it is considered a 'minor' form. (*Revelations: Diaries of Women*, New York, Vintage Books, 1975; quoted in Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe, "Towards a Feminist Aesthetic", *Chrysalis*, 6, 1978: 62).

igniting her imagination. It is also possible that subconsciously the author linked that scene to her memories of 1943, when she escaped with her husband, Franco Bonous and some friends to Abruzzi, hoping to cross into territory occupied by the Allies. From her diary of that time emerges an obsession with notebooks and a fear that smokers might use her diary as cigarette paper. She also wrote about the possibility that a farmer might give her a new one and her difficulty in finding time to write in it.

The diary structure suits the protagonist of *Quaderno proibito* who, unable to exteriorize her growing uneasiness within family boundaries, finds an escape in narrating about herself, to herself. The choice of the diary as the novel's narrative structure is also suited to the protagonist's tripartite world – she is at the same time a worker, a wife, and a mother. Valeria's fragmented time lacks the continuity needed to construct her daily experience in a more compact literary form.

Valeria perceives the time she dedicates to writing in her notebook as robbed from her family. Consequently, her writing is accompanied by guilt, by the anxiety of the possibility of being caught while writing and the necessity of keeping the diary secret. However, within the confined physical and personal space of the household, she finds it almost impossible to hide her notebook:

«Lo metterò nell'armadio» pensavo, «no, Mirella lo apre spesso per prendere qualcosa di mio da indossare, un paio di guanti o una camicetta. Il comò, Michele lo apre sempre. La scrivania è occupata ormai da Riccardo.» Consideravo che non avevo più in tutta la casa un cassetto, un ripostiglio che fosse rimasto mio. (8)

The diary compensates for Valeria's lack of physical space in the house by expanding her intimate space. In the diary, the narrator can affirm her unique identity. In a dialectic relationship between life and the detached narrative point of view which is characteristic of diary writings, Valeria's 'other' self, free of its *maschera*, its social façade, emerges and evolves through observation and reflection.

Soon after buying the diary, Valeria, who is 43, reported that she felt humiliated when her husband, Michele seemed to interpret her nervousness as a sign of menopause. The narrating voice analyses the

process through which she, as a protagonist, has come to fit perfectly into the patriarchal construct of motherhood:

11 dicembre

Nel rileggere quel che ho scritto ieri mi vien fatto di domandarmi se io non abbia incominciato a cambiare carattere dal giorno in cui mio marito, scherzosamente, ha preso a chiamarmi 'mammà'. Mi piacque tanto, sul principio, perché così mi pareva d'essere io la sola persona adulta, in casa, la sola che già sapesse tutto della vita [...]. Però adesso capisco che è stato un errore: lui era la sola persona per la quale io fossi Valeria [...]. ( 11)

Michele started calling her 'mammà' after his mother – whom he hailed as a saint – died (119), although, as Valeria re-discovers at a later stage, Michele had begged her to remain Valeria, the woman he had married, hoping she would be his companion, and not just 'a mother'. After rereading the passionate letters that her husband had sent her while he was fighting in Africa, she found that in her answers, she rebuked him for what she saw as lack of recognition of all the hard work she was forced to do in order to take care of his children (169). It is implied that Valeria, from her husband's point of view, embraced motherhood so blindly that she discarded the rest of her personality and her sexuality. As a result, Michele appears to be at first an unwilling, but then a resigned, victim of tradition.

What Valeria finds most shattering is that her husband maintains that when she was young she was as rebellious as their daughter Mirella; this leads Valeria to the conclusion that Michele has never really understood her and that perhaps she does not really know him or the children:

Ma non è questa la scoperta più importante, è un'altra: ho capito che Michele non mi conosce affatto se giudica libero, ribelle, il mio atteggiamento di allora. Io sono molto più libera, oggi, molto più ribelle. Egli continua a rivolgersi a me attraverso una immagine che non mi specchia più. Tutto ciò che è accaduto in questi anni non ha scalfito quell'immagine [...] quel modello di me che è ormai

pietrificato nella sua mente. Forse a me accade lo stesso  
nei riguardi di lui e dei miei figli. (81)

Michele rejects with embarrassment Valeria's attempts to get closer to him sexually because he does not see Valeria as a lover anymore but as a 'mamma'. He had had to suppress his desire years earlier, when she rejected him. Later, he directs his frustrated desire for passion into a very sensuous film script. Valeria learns from Clara, a friend of theirs who works as a script writer, that Michele's script is too scandalously sexual for the morals of the time to be made into a film. There are many hints in Valeria's reporting of Michele and Clara's behaviour and comments that she believes that Michele may have fallen in love with Clara.

Clara faces a difficult task: to live outside the conventional model of appropriate female behaviour. Separated from her husband, she has the reputation of having had many lovers. From Valeria's reports of their conversation, we learn that she started working because she was tired of depending on men for her happiness (197). However, she goes on explaining the shortcomings of independence, and the difficulties facing women who have chosen to move away from tradition:

«Una donna che lavora» Clara continuava «soprattutto una donna della nostra età, porta sempre in sé la lotta tra la donna tradizionale che le hanno appreso a essere e quella indipendente che ha scelto di divenire. C'è un continuo conflitto in lei. Risolverlo, superarlo, costa: soprattutto nei riguardi degli uomini [...]» (196)

The psychological implications derived from choosing either an independent life as in Clara's case, or a traditional path as in Valeria's, are clear: in both cases many women of their generation suffered from a sort of split personality, unable to integrate fully two opposing forces, tradition and emancipation.

Valeria's son, Riccardo, in his mid-twenties, is a strong supporter of patriarchal family values. Like his father, he worships his mother and wants his fiancée, Marina, to fit into his constructed image of her (118-119). Valeria realizes the hypocrisy inherent in denying mothers a sexual role: "Una madre di fronte ai propri figli, deve sempre mostrare di

non aver mai conosciute queste cose, non averne goduto mai. È questa falsità che ci fa avvizzire. Sono loro i colpevoli, loro” (204). In refusing to accept alternative behaviour, Valeria realises that children perpetuate the maternal construct:

[...] più mi allontano dall’idea che essi hanno dei genitori, della madre di un loro coetaneo, più li sconcerto e li intimidisco. Quando invece annunzio severamente che Mirella non può uscire perché è già ora di cena, o che Riccardo non può avere danaro per andare al cinematografo, li sento a loro agio. (110)

As Valeria’s discontent grows, she places more value on her professional work. In the office, unlike at home, she has a room of her own. It is at the firm, where she is paid for her time, that she realises her identity as a sexual being in union with Guido, the owner and director of the company where she works as an executive secretary. First she becomes aware of his gaze, then that she too is drawn to Guido, because of the way he sees her. Unlike her husband and her children, he considers her a capable and attractive woman. Valeria, though, is aware of the social implications of being ‘l’amante’ of one’s rich boss; she begins questioning whether, once she became his lover or even his wife, she would not, in fact, come to fit that stereotype, taking advantage of his money instead of being his working partner. It is at this stage of the novel that the distance between the narrating voice and the protagonist is greatest. Valeria comes to reject her traditional role and is determined to go on holiday with Guido to Venice, where she spent her honeymoon, in an attempt to recapture the magic of youthful romance but with a mature sexual awareness. From then onwards, the gap begins to close as Valeria gradually renounces her creative self.

Valeria strongly disapproves of Mirella’s relationship with Sandro Cantoni, a 34-year-old successful barrister, separated from his American wife. Valeria, in her attempts to convince Mirella to give up Cantoni and her career, tries to force her daughter, a law student aspiring to become a successful barrister, into the traditional maternal construct she secretly criticises:



Agli uomini non piacciono affatto le donne indipendenti, quelle che hanno una carriera propria, o almeno non le vogliono per mogli; e del resto lei stessa quando avrebbe avuto tra le braccia il suo primo bambino, quando lo avrebbe sentito piangere e aver bisogno di lei per nutrirsi, per vivere, non avrebbe osato trascurarlo per la vanità di un lusinghiero successo in Tribunale. (115)

Mirella plainly and decisively refuses the future her mother envisages for her: “Mirella ha detto che le sue idee sono diverse: se anche si sposerà e avrà figli, desidererà lo stesso diventare un avvocato celebre” (115). Valeria, for fear of destroying her construct of self-sacrificing mother, decides not to confide in anyone: “più forte del desiderio di confidarmi [...] [è] il timore di distruggere qualcosa che sono andata costruendo giorno per giorno, in vent’anni, e che è il solo bene che io possieda” (196). In order to protect her secret self from Marina, her future daughter-in-law, who is pregnant and will move in with them once she is married to Riccardo, she decides to give up her trip to Venice and consequently her relationship with Guido. However, Valeria, attempting to reconcile the two opposing forces within her, encourages Mirella to leave home, revealing her secret self to her daughter. Following her rejection in the diary of her passive and pregnant future daughter-in-law, there is a moment of open solidarity between mother and daughter:

Mirella mi accarezzava la fronte, i capelli; non sapevo che potesse essere tanto tenera [...] «Io non ho tempo di aiutarti, in casa, non posso, ma proprio in questi giorni volevo dirti di prendere una donna, come volevi tu, a mezzo servizio. La pagheremo col mio stipendio.» Avevo la testa appoggiata contro il suo seno, sentivo il suo cuore battere, forte, un po’ veloce. Mia madre dice sempre che Mirella somiglia a me: forse, se i tempi fossero stati diversi, anch’io sarei stata una ragazza come lei, così sicura[...] Mi pareva di dover tagliare, per la seconda volta, il vincolo col quale, prima che nascesse, la tenevo legata a me [...] «Temo che qui ci siano molte brutte cose, molte bugie. Forse non te lo dirò più, ma ricordati che te l’ho detto

stasera: salvati tu che puoi farlo. Vattene, fa presto [...]».  
(225-6)

The protagonist had called her writing in the diary “un fiume ricco che scorre in me e che mi duole come quando avevo troppo latte” (250). The act of writing becomes a metaphor for the abundance of milk produced after a mother gives birth. Her association with the condition of the procreating and nurturing woman reaffirms the traditional role of mother through which she interprets her writing. This attitude prevails in the end. Motherhood is deeply rooted in Valeria, inculcated in her during the Fascist era, as her natural destiny, the only destiny of woman<sup>12</sup>. Valeria hopes that her future grandchild will become a surrogate diary, or perhaps the diary was a surrogate baby. In the last pages of the diary she expresses her eagerness to take possession of the baby, saying that it was hers, hers and Riccardo’s alone, not Marina’s. Despite her growing realization of self and society, Valeria perpetuates her role by destroying all her means of emancipation: her diary, her job and her links with the world outside her family. Fearful that her secret message may become public if found by her future daughter-in-law, Valeria burns her notebook.

In *Quaderno proibito* the woman writer is portrayed as somebody who wishes to keep her text private, lacking the courage to make her message public. Valeria also lacks the courage to detach herself from her unhappy situation. The narrator of *Quaderno proibito* comes to represent the failed writer who, having externalised her ‘otherness’ through her authorial self, is scared of the consequences it might have on her constructed image of the fulfilled housewife. In an act of self-violence, Valeria commits symbolic suicide by destroying her creative self (the notebook).

De Céspedes examined all the taboos still surrounding women and writing in the 1950s and explained how difficult it was to be taken seriously as a woman writer. The author, from her ‘extraordinary’ financially and culturally privileged position has explained that the

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<sup>12</sup> Alessandra Bocchetti in her “Discorso sulla guerra e sulle donne” states that “Il materno umano (invece) dura tutta una vita [...] poiché il materno, appartenendo alla storia delle donne, fa le donne così come sono oggi, ed è ancora nel materno che milioni di donne investono la loro intelligenza ed energia, essendo impossibile per loro o quanto meno difficile, avere un’altra immagine di sé.” (Roma, Centro Culturale Virginia Woolf, 1984: 7).

reason why *Quaderno proibito* still sells is because Valeria burns her notebook, and the readers, seeing that they are not alone in lacking the courage to leave, find comfort in it. If what de Céspedes says is true, if that is the reason for this text's popularity, it might be possible that the author has helped prevent some readers from acquiring an 'orizzonte d'attesa', different expectations. Seen in this way, the text reduces the stimulus to leave, and reinforces the safety of a maternal construct they have come to question and yet still accept. By emphasising the fact that the majority of women did not have the courage to leave and create an independent life for themselves, and by then stating that many do not have it even today, de Céspedes reveals her prejudices towards her own sex.

Because of *Quaderno proibito*'s ending, in a recent publication<sup>13</sup> de Céspedes was included among those in the tradition of the late 1800s, early 1900s, with writers such as Deledda, Serao and Neera, who denounced in their novels women's condition but nevertheless at the end made their heroines comply with that tradition<sup>14</sup>. Without denying the negative impact the tragic ending might have had on readers at that time, it must be considered that the novel contains characters, who do choose to lead a life outside the then established parameters of patriarchal construction – characters such as Clara, Mirella and her partner, Cantoni.

It should be noted also that Valeria's sacrifice may have been seen as futile and stunting by women searching for new, more fulfilling models of behaviour. These women may well have resolved not to make the choices made by Valeria. If that is the case, and the author's interpretation represents inaccurate revisionism, then the book may have had a radicalizing effect on the women who read it. The importance of the author's text lies in the detailed exploration of the internal lacerations produced by Valeria's coexistence within two worlds. She believed in women's emancipation and equality at work, however she maintained that women such as Valeria felt, and still feel, safe in the role of 'mammà', trapped within the marital walls – a role into which Valeria shrinks.

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<sup>13</sup> Paola Blelloch, *Quel mondo dei guanti e delle stoffe: profili di scrittrici italiane del '900*, Verona, Essedue, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> With the exception of the novel *Teresa* by Neera, published in Milan in 1876 (republished by Tipografia Cordani in 1943 with an introduction by Benedetto Croce).

It is true, as de Céspedes maintains, that it was extremely difficult for a woman to fend for herself while facing significant social stigma as a 'separata'. However, in asserting that many women lack the courage to create an independent life, she exteriorised a patronising view of women. Almost certainly the novel would have stimulated many readers to think more deeply about their position in the family and in society; even if they did not take the extreme decision to leave their families, their perspectives may have shifted, and their behaviour become more assertive.

In the burning of the diary, Valeria's voice was silenced, but not the voices of other women facing similar dilemmas.