

# Natalia Ginzburg's Narrative *Voci della sera*

In questo racconto i luoghi, e i personaggi, sono immaginari. Gli uni non si trovano sulla carta geografica, gli altri non vivono, né sono mai vissuti, in nessuna parte del mondo. E mi dispiace dirlo, avendoli amati come fossero veri. (Author's Note to *Le voci della sera*)

Soon after *Le voci della sera* was published in 1961 Eugenio Montale commented on the title of Natalia Ginzburg's novel in a somewhat perplexed tone:<sup>1</sup>

Voci della sera? Di quale sera? Forse del crepuscolo della borghesia? Non crediamo che Natalia Ginzburg si sia molto interessata al titolo del suo libro. Quel che le interessava, senza dubbio, era di darci un racconto sostenuto dal basso continuo del *gossip*, della chiacchiera; un racconto così grigio da risultare poi vivamente luminoso, una volta che gli occhi si siano abituati a quella uniformità di colore. Tra gli scrittori italiani d'oggi non ce n'è un altro che come lei sia riuscito ad abbassare il tono senza scadere mai nella fonografia realistica. Ed è curioso notare come in lei tutto sia così incredibilmente vero pure restando lontano, protetto da un vetro, inaccessibile; come in lei la poesia sorga dalla più nuda desolazione prosastica.

Montale was not convinced by the title, mainly because he questioned the word "sera." This temporal reference probably designates the moments in which the novel begins and ends: "Era ottobre, cominciava a far freddo; nel paese alle nostre spalle s'erano accesi i primi lampioni . . ." (9) and "È di nuovo ottobre . . . È quasi sera . . ." (126). This circular time frame is reinforced by the dialogues which introduce these two short descriptive passages at both ends of the narrative. The main voice is heard at this hour, that of the mother. Montale interpreted the noun "voci" as the "basso continuo del *gossip*, della chiacchiera," probably that of the narrator's mother and friends, the "vox populi." Although she may not fully realize it, the mother barely leaves any room for her daughter to respond. This continual "external monologue" which Elsa, the narrator-protagonist, incessantly undergoes and whose constant mechanical flow she does not feel it necessary to interrupt, emphasizes her silence. This silence surrounds the triviality of social/family conversation.

Not only shall we note this pervasive use of *pseudo-dialogues* — of multiple *voci* from which the protagonist's voice seems to be more or less absent, but we

shall also see how the narrative structure is diverted from its linear course, from the common family story.<sup>2</sup> The plural of *voci* actually implies an unusual technique: Ginzburg's handling of *narrative voice*<sup>3</sup> is most striking in this novel: how shall we account for Elsa's disappearance from the narrative scene, that is, her disappearance as narrator-protagonist? I intend to show how the originality of Ginzburg's novel lies in a specific and comprehensive narrative strategy not only in terms of voice, but also of *tense* (the use of grammatical tenses interplaying with the *order of discourse*), and of *mood*, since Ginzburg's characteristic minimal "style" can certainly be linked to problems of focalization. In this perspective, I shall stress how the themes of the novel, although recurring in other works, cannot really be dissociated from the overall narrative technique.

The small town in which the story takes place as well as the city nearby are never named, even though all the surrounding towns are: Castello, Castel Piccolo, Cignano. The narrator-protagonist, Elsa, shares very little information with us about herself. We know that she is twenty-seven years old and lives with her father, aunt and mother and that her father is the notary for a factory. The narrative begins as Elsa and her mother return from the doctor's. The factory, which produces fabric, was founded before the war by De Francisci, a Socialist, nicknamed "il Balotta" now deceased. The novel proceeds backwards in time as we are given information on the De Francisci family and about a distant relative, nicknamed "Il Purillo" (because of his beret), who lived with them and whom "il Balotta" chose to succeed him as manager of the factory. Then, the narration zigzags back and forth from the prewar years of the childrens' youth and early adulthood, through the war, the post-war years.

The first major break in this seemingly conventional narrative occurs with a series of successive *analepses*<sup>4</sup> telling one after the other the ultimately sad and pathetic stories of each of the De Francisci children. These stories form a cycle of desolate repetition which seems more and more absurd and squalid as each of them ends up prematurely dead, unhappy, or indifferent. Beginning with the eldest, Gemmina's unrequited love for "il Nebbia" (later murdered by the Fascists) results in a frustrated sentimental life. The second child, Mario, marries an introverted Russian woman and leads a rather vacuous existence which ends prematurely after he returns from prison in Germany. The third son Vincenzino, is the most gifted for business, but his bizarre indifference destroys his marriage to Cate. "Il Purillo," becomes Fascist, yet saves Balotta and his wife from Fascist reprisals. Ironically he ends up marrying the youngest De Francisci daughter, Raffaella, ex-resistance fighter. The youngest is Tommasino, who resembles Vincenzino because he is incapable of sustaining meaningful intimate relationships, yet, unlike his brother, he seems more aware of his own emotional failings and aloofness.

The narrative course is thus clearly undermined not simply because the initial story line is interrupted by a retrospective account into these characters' past but by the fact that these *analepses* are multiple, successive, thereby digressive, and

that they take up the first half of the text just after a very short prologue. Furthermore, this series of *analepses* appears disconnected from the beginning of the main story in time (they are *external analepses*),<sup>5</sup> almost unmotivated at this point of the narrative<sup>6</sup> (they seem *heterodiegetic analepses*).<sup>7</sup> The narrator becomes totally absent from the events and time in which these various stories take place.

Several critics have remarked this unusual "first person" in the narrative. Luciana Marchionne Picchione writes that Ginzburg's "first person" assumes "the role of a sort of impersonal and non circumscribed intelligence":

Interessante, nel romanzo, è l'uso della prima persona, che in questa particolare sintassi d'incastri e di avvolgimenti assume il ruolo di un'intelligenza impersonale e non circoscritta, capace di denunciare le varie tappe della vicenda senza porsi il problema dei limiti della sua indagine individuale o dell'impossibilità di ricostruire fedelmente gli stati d'animo della protagonista o le azioni di quest'ultima cui non ha assistito personalmente. (56)

On one hand, there is the "impossibilità di ricostruire fedelmente gli stati d'animo della protagonista" very similar to what Genette characterizes as *external focalization*.<sup>8</sup> The originality here of Ginzburg's novel is that this perspective is adopted by the *narrator herself about herself*. On the other hand, what is most unusual is that *Le voci della sera* is far from being written entirely in the "first person." The main frame narrative (beginning and ending with the narrator's pseudo-dialogue with her mother) is, according to Genette's terminology,<sup>9</sup> *homodiegetic*, and even *autodiegetic*, since it is clear in the last part of the book that she becomes the main protagonist (the story of her failed marriage with Tommasino). But, although Elsa is obviously the initial narrator, her narrative presence soon disappears throughout the successive *analepses* and is replaced by an anonymous voice for half of the novel before she returns in the last part of the story. This constitutes then a third change from the initial narrative situation: Elsa, the homodiegetic narrator of the first chapter, becomes the main protagonist of the story when she tells us about her affair with Tommasino in the third part of the novel: this *autodiegetic* shift is the more noticeable since it follows the embedding of successive *analepses* that constitute at first reading the center of the novel.

In between these two narrative regimes, the reader is thus struck by the sudden and lengthy shift from the protagonist — Elsa's narration (*homodiegetic*) to an impersonal narrative voice (*heterodiegetic*) that recounts events which took place before her birth and during her early childhood, and are hardly related to the initial story line. This rupture between narrative regimes occurs on pages 14 and 15 where the text swings back and forth between past and present. The dominant perspective and voice, up to this point, have been that of Elsa (homodiegetic narrator), though not yet main protagonist. While describing "il Balotta," the

first-person narrative is suddenly interrupted by a conversation which took place between Balotta and his wife, la Signora Cecilia. The narrator does not tell us that she was part of this conversation. This is followed by a series of conversations in which she could not have participated and we therefore realize that the perspective has shifted. The following passage exemplifies this alternation of narrative situations (the first section is *homodiegetic* [B] while the second [A] will then appear to be *heterodiegetic*):

(B) *Mio padre* dice: Quando c'era il vecchio Balotta, non succedevano certe cose.

(A) Il vecchio Balotta era socialista. Rimase socialista sempre, pur avendo perduto l'abitudine, venuto il fascismo, di dire il suo pensiero ad alta voce: ma era diventato, negli ultimi tempi, di umore assai malinconico e torvo; e al mattino quando si alzava, fiutava l'aria e diceva a sua moglie, la signora Cecilia:

— Che puzzo, però.

E diceva:

— Io non lo sopporto.

La signora Cecilia diceva:

— Non sopporti più l'odore della tua fabbrica?

E lui diceva:

— No, non lo sopporto più.

E diceva:

— Non sopporto più di campare . . . [Emphasis mine]

We note that this shift is introduced by the family name which works as a transitional device. The narrator starts telling the De Francisci stories; the only connection that could explain the long digression, that is merely metonymical (based on the unity of space: "the paese"), is that her father works in the factory.

Abitiamo nel paese da molti anni. *Mio padre* è il notaio della fabbrica. L'avvocato Bottiglia è l'amministratore della fabbrica. Tutto il paese vive in funzione della fabbrica. . . .

I padroni della fabbrica sono i De Francisci.

Il vecchio *De Francisci* lo chiamavano il vecchio Balotta. (14) [Emphasis mine]

The chart below is intended to distinguish clearly the narrative voices in relation to the time/tense shifts in the novel.<sup>10</sup>

pages	VOICE	TENSE	ORDER
1.9-14	homodiegetic	past	main narrative/dialogue [Elsa/Mother]
	B: protagonist is 27	present	main narrative
2.14-24	<i>Heterodiegetic</i>	past	analepsis [Il Balotta]
	A: (= before B)		

ex:	during the narrator's childhood/early youth		
3.24-29	Autodiegetic (A) (B)	past present	analepsis dialogue [Elsa/Giuliana]
4.29-32	Homodiegetic (B)	present	main narrative [Gemmina]
5.32-37	<i>Heterodiegetic</i> (A)	past	- analepsis [Gemmina/Il Nebbia]
5.37-44			- analepsis [Vincenzino]
5.44-50			- analepsis [Mario/Xenia]
5.50-70			- analepsis [Vincenzino/Cate]
5.70-77			- analepsis [Raffaella/Purillo/ Vincenzino]
6.77-82	<i>Heterodiegetic</i> (B) (homodiegetic in retrospect)  DIEGETIC CONNECTION	present	narrative [Tommasino]
7.82-87	Autodiegetic (B)	present	Tommasino/Elsa main narrative/dialogue
8. 87-124	Autodiegetic (B)	past	main narrative/dialogue [Tommasino/Elsa]
9. 124-29	Autodiegetic	present	main narrative/dialogue [Elsa/Mother]
C:	present (after B)		

After the various *analepses* successively centered on the De Francisci children (entry five), we finally return to the initial time frame of narration, back to the "present" moment in which the story is being recounted (time of narration = C). This shift in narrative discourse may be observed in the following heterodiegetic passage where it is marked by a blank space between paragraphs. The first brief paragraph is the end of the analepsis (in the past tense, entry 5), while the second (after the space, entry 6), signals the return to the frame story in the present tense:

*Morì all'ospedale. Il Purillo, avvisato per telefono, fece a tempo a dargli un saluto. Il Tommasino no, non fece a tempo.*

Il Tommasino *mangia* da solo, col libro appoggiato nel sul bicchiere. Viene a fargli da mangiare la Betta, la contadina. (77) [Emphasis mine]

At this point of the narrative, we are not told why the individual stories of each of the children are important or how they relate to the narrator-protagonist

Elsa, nor do we immediately understand why such emphasis is devoted, about 15 pages (three times more than to all the other children except Tommasino), to the story of Vincenzino and Cate. However, we are given a clue in a dialogue (recounted by the autodiegetic narrator) at the beginning when Elsa's friend, Giuliana Bottiglia, remarks that Elsa and Tommasino have been seen together (entry 3). Elsa still does not comment.

(B) S'infilò i guanti, si allacciò la cintura dell'impermeabile.

— Ora me ne devo andare.

Sulla porta, senza voltarsi, mi disse:

— Ti hanno vista.

— Cosa?

— Ti hanno vista, col Tommasino.

— Chi?

— La Maria mia sorella, e la Maria Mosso. Vi hanno visti in un bar.

— E allora?

— Allora, niente. (28-29)

This is the only clue given to us for fifty pages until we are told (by the autodiegetic narrator, between entries 6 and 7) that she and Tommasino meet regularly, though clandestinely, in the city.

(B) Ci incontriamo, *il Tommasino e io*, tutti i mercoledì in città. (82) [Emphasis mine]

In the last part of the book, the story focuses on Elsa and Tommasino, first on their love affair, then on their public engagement, its breakup, and the aftermath (the longest section 8 is in the past tense preceded and followed by the sequences in the present).<sup>11</sup> Since the fiction concludes at the same time of the year as it began, in October, it returns to the point of departure as if everything had been recounted, coldly recaptured and tentatively recapitulated in vain leaving the reader with the nihilistic sensation of a useless, irremediable narrative account. This diegetic parallel between end and beginning is reinforced since both passages are dialogues, except that now Elsa remains entirely silent as her mother talks. The ending is both a *variation* (change of tense/Elsa's silence) of the beginning, and an *echo* which neutralizes the passage of time while emphasizing the importance of the narrator/protagonist's final effacement. Now the change in tense from the opening passage to the concluding one becomes more significant:

Era ottobre, *cominciava a far freddo; nel paese alle nostre spalle s'erano accesi i primi lampioni*, e il globo azzurro dell'Albergo Concordia rischiarava d'una luce vitrea la piazza deserta. (9)

È quasi sera, e *comincia a far freddo. In paese si sono accesi i lampioni*. La terra, sul sentiero, s'è fatta dura, l'erba velata e umida, e il vento soffia mordendo e punzendo, forse presto verrà la neve. (126) [Emphasis mine]

The originality of this novel may be largely explained by the unusual shift in the *narrative situation*.<sup>12</sup> Since Elsa, the initial homodiegetic narrator, recounts conversations she never could have heard and events which go beyond her direct field of knowledge, we might conclude that she gives way to an “omniscient narrator” (see Genette 208). One could all too quickly assume that this is an example of classic *paralepsis*, what Genette defines as a simple “alteration” of a chosen narrative perspective (focalization).<sup>13</sup> For example, towards the middle of the novel, Vincenzino often heard the voice of his ex-wife in his memory repeating: “Ma perché, perché abbiamo sciupato tutto?” (77). On other occasions, we enter the thoughts of Cate, after her first extramarital affair not through the pretext of a spoken monologue, but through her silent thoughts: “È stato niente, niente, — lei pensava. — Succede a tante donne, a tante succede. E non è niente, non l’ha saputo nessuno, e devo fare come se non fosse successo” (63). This “external” voice recounts events which took place before Elsa’s birth as well as conversations and dialogues which she could not have heard. Yet this goes far beyond mere infraction of a narrative constraint since it is repeated mostly within the series of *analepses*.

Responding to these various paralepses (so many that they contribute to the impossibility of reading the entire narrative within the homodiegetic regime), the auto/homodiegetic sections multiply *paralipses*<sup>14</sup> from the narrator-protagonist, the most obvious being her relationship with Tommasino that is finally unveiled at the end of the analeptic series. It is not before section 7 that we understand its *narrative function*. We could even say that, structurally, the role of these heterodiegetic analepses is to fill the gap — created by the initial narrator’s paralipse — “in advance”. This omission makes the whole structure enigmatic until the analepses retroactively find their diegetic necessity: the fiction of an aborted marriage explained through the stories of the entire family of her would-have-been husband.

Even as an autodiegetic narrator we never enter Elsa’s thoughts. As noted before, the type of *focalization* here is the one Genette calls *external*. The paradox is that, within the homodiegetic regime, the *external* type of focalization concerns the narrator’s *inner* life while the *internal* type of focalization concerns *exterior* events (acts and dialogues), whereas, within the other regime, the *external* narrator gives us access to what, as an homodiegetic narrator, she could never know, their *internal* monologues or intimate dialogues. This type of exterior focalization can certainly be related to the widespread definitions of the author’s style.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, Natalia Ginzburg consistently avoids dramatic tones and creates a type of *understated lyricism*, which tends to mask itself through common, unassuming, modest words, unemotional descriptions and elliptical transitions, as may be observed when Tommasino and Elsa have just realized that their affair is over:

— Una cosa sola è vera, — dissi, — che io sono innamorata, e tu no.

— Sono innamorata, — dissi, — ora, prima, sempre, e tu no. Tu mai. Andammo a prendere l'autobus. Non l'ultima corsa. Erano solo le cinque del pomeriggio, non tramontava ancora il sole. Era quasi vuoto, l'autobus, a quell'ora. Sedemmo l'uno accanto all'altra. Non parlammo più. (119)

The only moment in the entire novel in which Elsa expresses her feelings is in this brief dialogue, never in her narration. Here, the transition from dialogue to narration also emphasizes her withdrawal. Thus, in first-person sections, the *narrative situation* of *Le voci della sera* is one that combines homodiegetic narration with a neutral (or external) perspective on the narrator herself. In *Nouveau discours du récit*, Genette illustrates this narrative situation with Dashiell Hammett "hard-boiled" novels in the first person like *The Red Harvest* (1929), Benjy's monologue in *The Sound and the Fury*, and with Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. More precisely, he defines the latter novel in terms that could well apply to Ginzburg's fiction: after distinguishing the perceptive level (which is rendered through *internal focalization*) and the psychic level ("le mode narratif de *L'Etranger* est 'objectif' sur le plan 'psychique', en ce sens que le héros-narrateur ne fait pas état de ses (éventuelles) pensées" [*Nouveau discours* 84]), he concludes:

En ce sens, bien sûr, le mode de *Moisson Rouge*, du *Bruit et la fureur* ou de *l'Etranger* est plutôt une focalisation interne, et la formule globale plus juste serait peut-être quelque chose comme "focalisation interne avec paralipse presque totale des pensées." (*Nouveau discours* 85) [Emphasis mine]

The alternation between the two main narrative situations (autodiegetic/heterodiegetic), which in our view structures the novel, could be put differently since a narrative is *either* homodiegetic/autodiegetic *or* heterodiegetic. If after the first analepsis (entry 2) we were to return to the main narrative and if this digression were more consistently related to it, we could assume that, within the homodiegetic regime, we had dealt with a temporary "infraction of an implicit norm."<sup>16</sup> When Proust constructs one uninterrupted analeptic/paraleptic section (*Un amour de Swann*) within the autodiegetic narration of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, the narrator tries to justify his "omniscience" — without minimizing the difficulty — through the process of remembering the narratives he heard from others.<sup>17</sup> Ginzburg's narrator instead does not try to sustain such a contradictory course: the solution she adopts here is elliptical vanishing pure and simple. Furthermore, the structure of *Le voci della sera* contrasts these different regimes within a continuous text. This disruptive pattern between the two opposing narrative regimes (autodiegetic/heterodiegetic) is reinforced by the fact that the text presents itself in continuity, without clear sections or chapters, which would diminish and "naturalize" the impact of such an unfamiliar break in narrative situation.<sup>18</sup> Besides this important difference in the literal presentation of both texts, there are many others between *Un Amour de Swann* and *Le voci della sera*

with its series of analepses. Whereas the former may be read as a separate autonomous text (it forms a clear division in *A La recherche du temps perdu*), the latter narrative break consists of a multiplication of heterodiegetic analepses whose narrative function is deferred. If we were to interpret them within a broader frame involving the temporary disappearance of the narrator, then the homodiegetic narrator thesis would hold on the condition that everything recounted outside the protagonist's field of knowledge were *paralepses*. However, they are so numerous that we can hardly speak of accidental "transgressions." If we then revert to the omniscient narrator scenario, then it is no longer consistent with the initial homodiegetic narrative frame. The solution lies in a new form of elliptic and implicit *regime alternation*: an interspersed juxtaposition of two distinct narrative situations.

However, the problem related to the "vocal" status of some of the sections arises if we compare the similar entries 4 and 6. There is no doubt that both are cast in the present tense, share the same fictional time frame, and that the narrator, although absent from both sections, belongs to the same diegetic universe as Gemmina and, of course, Tommasino. But, if for section 4 the status is clearly homodiegetic (it follows an autodiegetic section), the passage that introduces Tommasino (entry 6) is preceded by the longest heterodiegetic section of the novel (the long series of analepses) and we still have not been informed as to Tommasino's connection with Elsa. This transitional section, which (still marked by a blank space) precedes what I call the *diegetic connection* (resolution) between the two main story lines/regimes, is of a particular interest (entry 6). First, the transition between the previous analepsis cast in the past (70-77) and this section in the present hinges upon Tommasino's "absence":

Il Purillo, avvisato per telefono, fece a tempo a dargli un saluto. *Il Tommasino no*, non fece a tempo.

*Il Tommasino mangia* da solo, col libro appoggiato al bicchere. Viene a fargli da mangiare la Betta, la contadina. (77) [Emphasis mine]

This passage, focalized through Tommasino, echoes, but from the *other's* perspective (that of the couple Elsa/Tommasino that is going to be revealed in the next section), the one in the beginning cast in the present tense (entry 1, p. 12):

*Salii* nella mia stanza. La mia stanza è all'ultimo piano e guarda sulla campagna. Si distinguono in lontananza, *la sera*, i lumi di Castello, e i pochi lumi di Castel Piccolo, in alto, su una gobba della collina; e di là dalla collina, c'è la città. (12) [Emphasis mine]

The parallel is reinforced not only because of the contrasting present tense but also because that is the same topic (marriage) that is broached more or less directly in both dialogues (first after Elsa's dialogue with her mother, then, Tommasino/Betta):

Ma il cruccio più pungente, per mia madre, è che io non mi sposi. (13)

Così solo, povero cuore, dice la Betta. Dovresti prenderti una bella moglie. (78)

There is no doubt that this parallel scene works as a sort of narrative transitional “lock” that prepares the revelation of the two main protagonists’ relationship which covers the second part of the novel. From the standpoint of the vocalic narrative regime involved, the parallel here described would allow us to conclude that section 6 is *homodiegetic* (since the narrator shares without question the same diegetic universe as involved in section 1). However, and such a factor should be stressed (according to the parameter of the *order of discourse*), this is only the case within the scope of a *retrospective reading* (after the diegetic connection Elsa/Tomasino has been clarified), and if we exclude about the long break achieved by the heterodiegetic analepsis immediately followed by the Tommasino scene. If we look at the novel spatially as a whole, this scene is *homodiegetic*. On the contrary, if we read it according to the order of the sequences and take into account the complexity of the structure into which it fits (its consecutiveness), in the *interplay between the order of discourse and the process of reading*, it is first perceived as *heterodiegetic*.

The term “voci” refers therefore to a narrative strategy composed of alternating perspectives as well as a very marked use of dialogue throughout the novel. After two short descriptive paragraphs, the text begins with dialogue and ends with dialogue. Often the dialogue is punctuated by a repetitive use of the verb “dire” in the passato remoto (“disse”) to introduce direct discourse. One of the unusual characteristics of Ginzburg’s style is manifested in her transformation of dialogues into monologues. Often a dialogue form will be set up, but no dialogue takes place. Instead, one character talks aloud to another who does not answer. The character seems to be listening to her- or himself and frequently the banality of her or his words is underscored by the repetition of the introductory verb “dire,” the repetition of key phrases, and the lack of any response from an interlocutor. A character’s discourse is isolated in such a way (also because the author does not present it in a judgemental fashion) so as to make its vacuous and banal qualities more distinct and incisive. Often in a Flaubertian vein, the dialogue-monologue contains “lists” of commonplace notions. This technique is very evident at the beginning of the novel (the section below is homodiegetic) where the protagonist’s mother speaks (entry 1):

(B) Il generale Sartorio era passato accanto a noi col cappello alzato sulla testa argentea e riccioluta, la caramella all’occhio e il cane al guinzaglio.

Mia madre disse: — Che bella capigliatura ancora, a quell’età!

....

Disse: — Ma a te, non t’invitano mai?

— Non t’invitano, — disse — perché trovano che ti dai delle arie. Non sei andata più nemmeno al Circolo del Tennis. Se uno non si fa vedere in giro, dicono che si

dà delle arie e non lo cercano più. Le bimbe Bottiglia, invece, le invitano tutti. L'altra sera hanno ballato dai Terenzi fino alle tre. C'era gente da fuori e perfino un cinese.

....

Disse: — Ci sarà da fidarsi di questo nuovo dottore? Il vecchio era vecchio, si capisce, non si interessava più. Se gli si diceva un disturbo, diceva subito che l'aveva anche lui. Questo scrive tutto, hai visto come scrive tutto? Hai visto com'è brutta la moglie? (9)

Giorgio Caproni wrote that “il contrappunto di quei ‘disse-disse’ di stampo un po’ vittoriano” functions “musicalmente, quasi come sostegno di una colonna sonora.” Although it is certainly true that the insistent use of the verb “dire” creates a musical effect, it also emphasizes the silence of the narrator/protagonist, who here does not reply until the mother, annoyed, remarks: “Disse: — Ma possibile che non si possa avere da te, qualche volta, il miracolo d’una parola?” (10). In other words, *Io* begins to tell the story, but is constantly interrupted and even stifled by other voices. Thus the voices mentioned in the title are heard immediately from the beginning. It is evening (“nel paese alle nostre spalle s’erano accesi i primi lampioni”) and the first voice is heard, which is the dominant one in the story, that of the mother, not the narrator.

Yet not all the dialogues in the novel are punctuated by the famous “disse,” nor even “diceva” or “dice,” and are dialogue-monologues. On pages 26 through 29 a dialogue takes place between Elsa and her friend Giuliana, which is introduced by two preliminary “disse” but then proceeds to omit all introductory verbs of this sort until page 28. We thus have almost two pages of *unmediated dialogue*. The effect created is highly theatrical and the rhythm of the conversation is quick and incisive. This dialogue stands out since it is one of the few which is so evenly and consistently humorous. In this instance the narrator is not listening to “voices,” but to her friend, and even though the conversation is not particularly substantial (they discuss a rather mediocre film), the reader understands that the narrator-protagonist’s attitude is different towards Giuliana than her mother, for example. Her mother’s act of *speaking* is accentuated, especially since frequently Elsa does not answer her and their “dialogues” become monologues. Instead, Giuliana’s *speech* — what she says — is here (in this autodiegetic segment) emphasized since Elsa participates in the conversation (entry 3):

- Oggi, — disse, — sono stata al cinematografo, a Cignano.
- Cosa davano?
- *Tenebre di fuoco.*
- E perché erano di fuoco le tenebre?
- Perché lui era un ingegnere, diventato cieco, — disse. — E lei era una donna di strada, ma lui non lo sapeva e la credeva pura, e si sposano. Prendono un bellissimo appartamento. Ma lui comincia ad avere dei sospetti.
- Perché dei sospetti?

— Perché lei gli aveva detto che prima era povera, e invece lui scopre che non era mica tanto povera, perché aveva una *parure* di gioielli. Lo scopre perché glielo dice la cameriera, che l'aveva vista con quella *parure*.

Besides direct dialogues marked by “disse,” and those with very few, or none, like the one above — more *autonomous, dramatic dialogues* — , there are also dialogues recounted indirectly — *narrated dialogues*, we might say — as the following passage which recounts a conversation between Vincenzino and Tommasino:

Diceva di quel giorno, che aveva visto, quand'era ancora un bambino, il Purillo che prendeva a sassi un cane. (76).

We find *narrated dialogues* throughout the earlier novel *Tutti i nostri ieri* (1951). This novel presents an interesting contrast with *Le voci della sera* since there are virtually no dialogues in it at all and it is much longer. These instances are rarer; in general direct discourse prevails over indirect.

Pietro Citati aptly observed: “il più lieve e lieto dei suoi libri [della Ginzburg] è anche quello dove lo strazio è più profondo, dove l’energia si piega più accoratamente sulle cose che si perdono, sui sentimenti così fragili che muoiono, appena qualcuno li porta alla luce” (Citati, *ibid.*). One of the major themes of *Le voci della sera* is that of things lost, frequently through a family whose powerful unity, ironically, has a destructive impact on its members. For example, Elsa’s mother is responsible for suffocating the newly born relationship between her daughter and Tommasino, but Elsa, because of her loyalty or lack of strength is incapable of preventing this; Vincenzino chooses Cate for his wife, a woman of whom his father will approve, even though he (Vincenzino) has nothing in common with her. Other dominant themes are the oppressiveness of social codes and how they destroy and stifle feelings, the numerous problems and failings of marriage and the sordid emptiness of everyday life in a small town. It is especially in Tommasino’s admission to Elsa that the various thematic threads of the book are tied together. Once the two have become formally engaged and once they come into the realm of the family, their relationship changes and they discover that they barely have anything to say to each other. Before they saw each other freely, now they do so because this is what is expected of them, what Tommasino says Elsa expects of him. They are both aware of this change, but only Tommasino, the “indifferent” Moravian-like character, verbalizes it in the following autodiegetic passage (entry 8):

(B) — Lo sai bene, te l’ho sempre detto, non era un grande amore appassionato, romantico. Era però qualcosa, qualcosa di intimo e delicato, e aveva una sua pieinezza, una sua libertà. Tu e io, là in via Gorizia, soli, senza piani per l’avvenire, senza niente, siamo stati felici, in qualche nostra maniera. Abbiamo avuto là qualcosa, era poco, ma era pure qualcosa. Era qualcosa di molto leggero, di molto fragile, pronto a disfarsi al primo soffio di vento. Era qualcosa che non si poteva

acchiappare, portare alla luce, senza che morisse. L'abbiamo portato alla luce, ed è morto, non lo riavremo mai. (117)<sup>19</sup>

Even though the prose is unadorned and almost blunt, it succeeds in conveying a complex and subtle psychological moment, one which expresses the tragic awareness of the absolute transience of human experience: just as a feeling is born, it dies. It dies as soon as it becomes visible, as soon as it is brought to light. Whatever may follow is never the same. The sensation of loss is powerfully expressed in all of Ginzburg's works.<sup>20</sup>

When Elsa recovers her narrative role (after we understand the diegetic connection between the analepses and the Tommasino/Elsa relationship, entry 7), her voice is gradually eclipsed and ultimately silenced by her mother's monologue (entry 9). The narrator's voice would seem to be repressed by all the other voices. This narrative effacement of the narrator's voice through the analeptic passages reflects the protagonist's fate whose chance of happiness is literally ruined by the voices of Tommasino's family and her own. Ginzburg's characteristic stratagem is to achieve this effect through the narrative structure.

*Le voci della sera* combines a variety of techniques, from traditional — the *in medias res* beginning, dispersed use of indirect discourse, direct discourse — to less familiar dialogue in the present tense without comment from the narrator, as well as the first person who narrates in the present tense. We have also seen how Ginzburg transforms the dialogue structure into monologue. At the same time, she constructs the unusual alternating narrative situation: the first person narrator-protagonist begins the novel (homodiegetic narrator), then becomes a heterodiegetic narrator in the various external analepses, and finally ends up being the main protagonist in her own sentimental story (autodiegetic narrator). Through the alternation of narrative perspectives and voices, and the changes of grammatical tenses within the same narrative regimes or sequences, the narrator has been slowly deprived of first-person qualities until she vanishes. We could certainly point out here the organic link between all the narrative features underlined: the overall structure, the movement of dialogue towards monologue, the anti-expressive way of *writing* she achieves as well as the major nihilistic themes evoked. At the end (the last four pages), the only time "io" speaks is in the "noi" form when she writes: "Torniamo, io e mia madre, dalla Vigna, dove siamo state a vedere come va la vendemmia" (126) and then falls silent since Elsa never answers her mother's repeated questions. We could say that Ginzburg's bleak vision is translated by Elsa's non participation in dialogue. The mother's questions are answered only by the remaining blankness of the page. And the end is hardly an "end," for we are left dangling in Elsa's silence. This silence in the fictional *diegesis* could also be a metaphor for the disappearance of the actual narrator's voice in the central section of the narrative. This type of "ending" could also be considered what Calvino called "garbata ferocia"<sup>21</sup> and is perhaps what Montale meant when he wrote "come in lei la poesia sorga dalla più nuda desolazione pro-

sastica." Insofar as we can relate the narrator's central vanishing from the course of her narrative and her subjection to the *voci* of others in most dialogues, we may wonder if this novel does not actually stage a Mallarméan "disparition élo-cutoire"; its aborted attempt to return, to come back, to exist in the final dialogue becomes the sign of the "heroine's" struggle to survive as a narrative voice.<sup>22</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Mario Ricciardi summarizes the reactions of several other critics including Piero De Tommaso to Ginzburg's novel: "E il momento di passaggio è indicato tempestivamente dal critico nelle *Voci della sera*, pubblicato nel 1961, in cui l'abilità tecnica della G. e la forza dello sfumato che cala ormai la vicenda e gli oggetti in un flusso indistinto e inarrestabile, raggiungono i risultati più persuasivi" (367). Ricciardi also gives a bibliography of articles and studies of Ginzburg's works. For a more recent bibliography of Ginzburg criticism see also Bullock 248-53.
- 2 Certain biographical critical tendencies often reduce the novel to an anecdotal series of supposedly autobiographical family stories: "The curious combination of nostalgia for her past life and a positive euphoria at the thought of once more creating dialogue burst forth in *Voices in the Evening*, one of her best-known works, in which places and people from her childhood are presented with only the thinnest of fictional disguises and characters have no inhibitions about using direct speech in a succession of short paragraphs in complete contrast to the long explanatory narration of *Sagittarius*" (Bullock 24-25).
- 3 In the sense of Gérard Genette's narratological categories, or "basic classes of determinations" of narrative discourse: "those dealing with temporal relations between narrative and story, which I will arrange under the heading of *tense*; those dealing with modalities (forms and degrees) of narrative 'representation,' and thus with the *mood* of the narrative; and finally, those dealing with the way in which the narrating itself is implicated in the narrative, narrating . . . that is, the narrative situation or its instance . . .", Genette sets "this third determination under the heading" of *voice*, i.e., the narrating voice, that is, the subject of the enunciation (*Narrative Discourse* 30-32).
- 4 Genette calls *analepsis* ["retrospection" opposed to *prolepsis*, or "anticipation"] "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment, and reserving the general term *anachrony* to designate all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative . . ." (40).
- 5 *External analepses* are those "whose entire extent remains external to the extent of the first narrative" and which deal with events that take place "earlier than the temporal point of departure of the 'first narrative'" (*Narrative Discourse* 49, 61).
- 6 The most common *function* of external analepses "is to fill out the first narrative by enlightening the reader on one or another 'antecedent'" (*Narrative Discourse* 50). As we shall see, the actual reason for these analepses is actually made clear 70 pages later.
- 7 These are "analepses dealing with a story line (and thus a diegetic content) different from the content (or contents) of the first narrative" (*Narrative Discourse* 50).
- 8 In this type of focalization, "the hero performs in front of us without our ever being allowed to know his thoughts or feelings" (*Narrative Discourse* 190).
- 9 Genette defines two fundamental types of narrative: "The real question is whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate *one of his characters*. We will therefore

distinguish here two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from the story he tells (example: Homer in the *Iliad*, or Flaubert in *L'Education sentimentale*), the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells (example: *Gil Blas*, or *Wuthering Heights*). I call the first type, for obvious reasons, *heterodiegetic*, and the second type *homodiegetic*. . . . So we will have to differentiate within the homodiegetic type at least two varieties: one where the narrator is the hero of his narrative (*Gil Blas*) and one where he plays only a secondary role, which almost always turns out to be a role as observer and witness . . . . For the first variety (which represents the strong degree of homodiegetic) we will reserve the unavoidable term *autodiegetic*" (*Narrative Discourse* 244-45).

10 The page numbers refer to the 1989 Einaudi edition. The letters A, B, C refer to the time of fiction.

11 D. M. Low's English translation of *Le voci della sera* considerably distorts the verb tenses. For example, on page 110 of his rendition, he substitutes Ginzburg's present tense (82) with the preterit.

12 The concept of *narrative situation* reformulated by Genette (*Nouveau discours* 77-89) combines three categories (two of them are voice/mood) and was first introduced by Franz K. Stanzel (1955) and more recently in *A Theory of Narrative* (chapter 3: "A New approach to the definition of the Narrative situations" 46-78).

13 Genette calls this *paralepsis* (*lepsis* from *lambano*), that is, when we are given "more [information] than is authorized in principle in the code of focalization governing the whole" (195). Genette adds that paralepsis may also consist, in "internal focalization, of incidental information about the thoughts of a character other than the focal character, or about a scene that the latter is not able to see" (195-197). In Ginzburg's case, the information we are given is not as Genette specifies, incidental (a "change in focalization," "isolated in a coherent context", "as a momentary infraction" 195). The homodiegetic narration entails, as Genette makes clear in *Nouveau discours du récit*, a "modal restriction": "Le narrateur homodiégétique, . . . est tenu de justifier ('Comment le sais-tu?') les informations qu'il donne sur les scènes d'où 'il' était absent comme personnage, sur les pensées d'autrui, etc., et toute infraction à cette charge fait paralèse . . ." (52).

14 It consists in "giving less information than is necessary in principle" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 195; *Nouveau discours* 44), the most famous case being *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, first analyzed by Barthes in "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" (263) : the narrative is focalized through the murderer/narrator who omits "from his 'thoughts' [simply] the memory of the murder" (Genette 196).

15 Many critics tend to oversimplify Ginzburg's narrative strategy because of her understated "style," see, for example, Clementelli.

16 "Even when *Gil Blas* and Watson momentarily disappear as characters, we know that they belong to the diegetic universe of their narrative and that they will reappear sooner or later. So the reader unfailingly takes the transition from one status to the other — when he perceives it — as an infraction of an implicit norm" (*Narrative Discourse* 245).

17 See Brian Rogers/Jean-Yves Tadié, *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* 1 ("Notice" 1185). The passages in Proust's text are pp. 183, 191. See Genette 251. In Proust, the solution is *metadiegetic*: ". . . this episode [*Un amour de Swann*] is doubly metadiegetic, first since the details were reported to Marcel by an undetermined narrator at an undetermined time, and then because Marcel is remembering these details in the course of certain sleepless nights. These are memories of earlier narratives, therefore, from which the extradiegetic narrator once again gathers up the whole kitty and in his own name tells this whole story that took place before he was born . . ." (*Narrative Discourse* 241-2).

18 In fact the translation of *Voci della sera* into English by D.M. Low divides the novel into chapters with titles. This, of course, distorts the structure of the novel as presented in the original. In the original, the shift in the narrative "voice" is less legible (*lisible* as Barthes would say), less noticeable but more transgressive since the narrative discontinuity contradicts the seemingly literal/graphic continuity.

19 All references to page numbers in *Le voci della sera* come from the Einaudi 1989 edition.

20 It might be tempting to focus on the women in this book and on the fact that so many female protagonists stand out in Natalia Ginzburg's novels from the very beginning: Delia in *La strada che va in città* (1941), the young teacher in *È stato così* (1947), *La madre* (1948), Anna in *Tutti i nostri ieri* (1952) and the gullible mother in *Sagittario* (1957), etc. who are always victims of social codes and structures, but frequently of their own families and mothers. There are, however, just as many male victims equally trapped by family ties and their own shortcomings.

21 Calvino writes that Ginzburg represents "la cronaca di questa sua umanità con garbata ferocia, ma è una ferocia esercitata su di un mondo col quale riusciamo ad entrare in un rapporto chiaro, asciutto, di condanna non invischianto, di familiarità non colpevole" (*ibid.*).

22 I would like to thank Michel Sirvent for his criticism and input concerning certain narratological questions.

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