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Dissimulation, Female Embodiment and the Nation: Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire*

In her 1949 novel, *L'Agnese va a morire*, Renata Viganò presents a female protagonist who works as a partisan "staffetta" (a courier) against the Fascists and Nazis who have killed her husband. After killing a German soldier, Agnese is compelled to take refuge with the partisans in the Padana Valley. As a large-sized, middle-aged widow, Agnese might initially seem an unlikely candidate for the partisan Resistance. It is by exploiting this tendency to read the surface of the body as a manifestation of interiority, however, that Agnese maneuvers through the ideological space that eventually characterized German and Italian Fascism, namely the classification of certain bodies as object.¹

Abjection, for Julia Kristeva, is an aversion to the corporeality that has historically been associated with the female, maternal body and the struggle to separate from it. As feminist and postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment tradition have argued, rather than constituting itself, the body is constituted by delimiting relations to itself and to other bodies, including political bodies. As Sidonie Smith observes, the ". . . politics of the body as border/limit determines the complex relationship of individuals to their bodies, to the bodies of others, to fantasies of the founding subject, and to the body politic" (10). That complex relationship also engenders what is perceived as the body. Because the fantasy of Enlightenment's Cartesian male has been transcendence—that is, disembodiment, women become the embodied subjects, and, subsequently, subject to their embodiment.

For Agnese, it is her embodied identity as a large, older peasant which establishes her marginal position in the body politic, in this case, that resilient plebeian spirit of the nation.² In particular, the manner in which that embodiment is read by others allows Agnese to dissimulate her "real" relation to the body politic, camouflaging herself and her clandestine activities from the German occupiers. As Jean Baudrillard clarifies, "To dissimulate is to feign to not have what one has. . . . Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked" (5). What is masked by

Agnese's dissimulation is her real relation to the body politic: her identity as a partisan.

However, Agnese's relation to the body politic is more complex than the simple masking of one reality with another. On one level, her relation to the body politic is tautological. In as much as Agnese can be understood to be the body politic incarnate, any relation of hers to that body is redundant. On another level, Agnese's relation to the body politic is not redundant but precarious, for "the cause," i.e., the Resistance, demands the abrogation of the self. Through Agnese's requisite, patriotic self-sacrifice in service to the Resistance, the self is elided. For although Agnese is physically distinct from the other partisans, her allegiance to the cause will ideally render her indecipherable from the other partisans.

For Antonio Gramsci, this elision of the self is necessary in times of war and revolution.³ Indeed Viganò has Agnese espouse just such an "ethics of sacrifice."⁴ However, for Agnese this self-abnegation coincides with an abject reading of femininity. As such, any reciprocity which might exist between Agnese and the body politic is askew in favor of the latter. Moreover, Agnese's proclivity to dissimulate will be manipulated by the Resistance which will exploit that dissimulation to its own ends.

Agnese's identity is, in a sense, indecipherable even before she joins the Resistance. Working as a washerwoman, Agnese dissimulates her identity by already seeming to be what she was not: "Verso la sera l'Agnese raccoglieva il bucato già secco . . . [e poi] andava verso la casa; . . . Passavano i ragazzi che scendevano alla pesca in valle: le dicevano ridendo: - Buonanotte, carro armato!" (Viganò 23). That Agnese's physical embodiment evokes militant images harkens to more than the pervasiveness of war in the consciousness of even Italian children. The children's comment, which is clearly meant to tease Agnese, is nevertheless apt. Working as a courier for the Resistance and as a peasant washerwoman, Agnese indeed has a dual identity. Furthermore, the analogy of domestic service to warfare foreshadows the domestic, maternal assistance she will offer the partisans, to the extent that she denies herself food and sleep for their sake.

The comparison of Agnese to a tank also intimates that Agnese will become a "fighting machine" in a more traditional, masculine sense. Yet, Agnese's transformation from humble peasant to partisan is not so disjunctive as it may seem. As the description of the killing of the German soldier suggests, Agnese's skills as peasant washerwoman, and her identity as a woman, bereaved of her husband, translate into an ability to kill:

Kurt, il soldato grasso, si era addormentato con la testa appoggiata al braccio. . . . Allora [l'Agnese] prese fortemente il mitra per la canna, lo sollevò, lo calò di colpo sulla testa di Kurt, come quando sbatteva sull'asse del lavatoio i pesanti lenzuoli matrimoniali, carichi d'acqua. (Viganò 54)

Agnese's strength as a washerwoman and her ability to kill are then intricately connected. Because Agnese is representative of the body politic in general, her actions are illustrative of the fact that the passage from peaceful peasantry to guerrilla resistance is not so far. In still another way the children's teasing is suggestive. Similar to a tank, Agnese succeeds in moving through the German occupiers. As such, this reference to Agnese's embodiment augurs both her ability to combat and her ability to dissimulate her relation to the body politic.

Owing to her physical and gendered characteristics, Agnese is not immediately perceived, nor does she perceive herself, as more than marginally positioned with regard to the war and its politics. As she explains to the partisans who first approach her about the Resistance, "Mio marito ne parlava, ma erano cose di politica e di partito, cose da uomini. Io non ci badavo" (Viganò 21). And even when Agnese begins working with the Resistance after her invalid husband Palita is deported and dies in a German transport, her embodiment continues to seemingly position her on the borders of the body politic. By dissimulating her partisan activities, Agnese is able to be a part of the partisan Resistance while remaining under the noses of the Germans who have occupied la Minghina's house, the neighbor who, along with her husband and two daughters, collaborated with the Germans and caused Palita's deportation and death.

Through her dissimulation, which manipulates the Germans' own prejudice against certain types of embodiment, Agnese hoodwinks the Germans at their own game. Not wanting the Germans to occupy her house, Agnese uses the space of her body to dissuade them:

Un maresciallo venne dritto alla porta, guardò dentro. L'Agnese non si mosse, stava seduta con le gambe larghe e la gatta in grembo. Così grossa, sembrava prendere tutto il posto nella cucina, che non ci fosse più spazio per un passo. Il tedesco guardò un poco, poi disse: – Qui niente bono, – e voltò le spalle.
(Viganò 51)

And when the Germans move into la Minghina's house next door: "I tedeschi non le badavano: agitavano le mani all'altezza della fronte e dicevano: – Matta. Vecchia brutta e matta, – e le ragazze [di Minghina] ridevano" (Viganò 52). Whereas before Agnese "non badava alla politica," the Germans now fail to pay attention to the politics of Agnese. As a result, the Germans are handicapped by

their reductive and abject reading of Agnese which clearly converges on the surface of her body.

In allowing herself to be read as merely “vecchia brutta e matta,” and therefore innocuous, Agnese dissimulates her real intentions. Her ability to do so far exceeds the capabilities of the male partisans: “il suo aspetto duro e pacifico non attirava i tedeschi, non si interessavano di una vecchia grossa contadina, e lei passava tranquillamente in mezzo a loro, avevano sotto il naso quella sporta e non pensavano di guardarci dentro” (Viganò 231). Her ability to dissimulate is due in part to the stereotypical assumptions made on the basis of her embodiment and her demeanor. But, as we will see, Agnese’s ability to dissimulate also gestures to the desire by both the Germans and the partisans (and Viganò herself) to read Agnese’s embodiment and actions allegorically.

Agnese is herself well aware that she is considered, at the very least, a large-sized woman. The narrator returns repeatedly not only to describe how Agnese’s body is perceived by others but to how she experiences it herself. When Agnese first joins the partisans after having killed the German soldier Kurt, she recalls a time when she and her husband Palita went to the city to visit a famous doctor. Agnese recalls that “si vergonava di muoversi in mezzo alla gente” (Viganò 63). On that occasion, even the doctor misreads Agnese’s embodiment by mistaking her for Palita’s mother rather than his wife:

– Suo figlio ha avuto una grave malattia, signora. Se l’è cavata bene. Con un po’ di riguardo può vivere fino a novant’anni. Moriremo prima di lui, signora –. Come rideva, Palita, per lei che era diventata rossa! Tutti e tre avevano riso per l’equivoco, e il dottore s’era scusato. Un dottore così bravo certo non si sbagliava. Palita doveva vivere fino a novant’anni, se non ci fossero stati i tedeschi. (Viganò 63-64)

The doctor’s misunderstanding is telling; he not only misreads Agnese’s identity and her relationship to Palita, but he fails to foresee the advent of the war and therefore misdiagnoses not only Palita’s fates but Italy’s fate as well. While the doctor’s misreading of Agnese’s embodiment surely foreshadows a similar misreading by the Germans, the misreading of Agnese’s body is also linked to a misreading of the nation’s body, alluding to how the one body will come to signify the other.

Repeated reference to Agnese’s large size, her wide face, her massive hands, her muscular thighs, her heavy, strained heart together form a motif of embodiment. However, throughout the text, particular emphasis is given to Agnese’s hands. After becoming a courier for the partisans, she is asked by one of them,

– Chi credete che abbia dato ai fascisti il nome di vostro marito? – e intanto con il pollice segnò verso la parete in direzione della casa della Minghina. – Sì, – rispose l’Agnese. – L’ho pensato subito. Se ne fossi sicura . . . – Strinse con violenza le sue grandi mani sciupate contro l’orlo della tavola. Un bicchiere pieno si rovesciò. – Allegrìa! – dissero i compagni, guardando colare il vino. – State tranquilla, lo sapremo. Chi è stato, lo « facciamo fuori » –. E il più giovane accenno l’atto di tirare il collo a una gallina. L’Agnese capi, non le parole, ma il gesto: e questa volta sorrise, improvvisamente, con serenità.

(Viganò 22)

That Agnese understands not the words but the gesture indicates both her affinity with the partisans, and her difference from them. While it is unclear whether Agnese does not understand the expression “fare fuori” and is therefore linguistically alienated from the partisans, she clearly understands their gesture or action. Its semiotic significance easily translates from a peasant vernacular to a military one, stressing again the affinity between these two groups.

It is not insignificant that “azione” is the Italian word that indicates a partisan military operation. Agnese’s own action in this passage: “Strinse con violenza le sue grandi mani” and the partisans’ proclamation, “Chi è stato, lo ‘facciamo fuori,’” are together both profetic and transformative. Ultimately those “grandi mani” kill the German soldier Kurt. Agnese thus indirectly enacts the partisans threat to “fare fuori” the informants for, in reprisal to Kurt’s death, the Germans kill la Minghina and her family. As a result, Agnese’s “grandi mani” achieve their vendetta to avenge the death of Palita and in the process they transform her into a partisan.

Agnese’s hands are again the narrator’s focus when they capture the attention of the partisan company she has joined:

Il partigiano del paradello si piegò in avanti, remando. Disse: – Ma come hai fatto, compagna? Gli hai sparato? – L’Agnese afferrò per la canna il mitra che Clinto teneva fra le ginocchia, lo sollevò, rispose: – Io non so sparare. Gli ho dato un colpo così –. Fece l’atto, poi rimise piano piano il mitra sul sedile. La sua vecchia faccia era immobile, contro il chiaro dell’alba. Tutti, nella barca, guardavano quelle grandi mani distese. (Viganò 58-59)

This passage also illustrates both Agnese’s difference from and similarity to the partisans. Part of that difference is due to the physical strength and ferocity that reside behind the guise of a “vecchia grossa contadina.” While Agnese’s embodiment dissimulates her identity, it also, as in the case of her hands, offers a clue to her potential as a partisan soldier.

If we compare the description of Agnese's hands, repetitively described as "grosse" and "grandi," to the one mention of the partisan leader's hands—the hands of the Comandante, his appear much more fragile and delicate than Agnese's. When a group of partisans become trapped in their barrack by the frozen marsh waters, the Comandante and a few partisans add a metal prow to a boat in order to break the ice and bring supplies to the barrack:

Era un lavoro pesante: col freddo e i colpi le mani sanguinavano, quelle del Comandante più degli altri, non erano abituate al ferro, al martello. Aveva la pelle sottile, si screpolava, si tagliava: su quelle mani appena un po' scure per il sole, ma lisce, il sangue si vedeva più rosso. (Viganò 182)

As a lawyer from the city, it is not surprising that his hands are so delicate; his hands, like his body, are clearly unlike Agnese's, unaccustomed to heavy, manual labor. And though the Comandante and the partisans suffer physical pain and deprivation, though they persevere under dire conditions, it is significant that the text displaces the bulk of embodiment onto Agnese; she becomes the repository of embodiment for the Resistance movement as a whole.

As Judith Butler contends regarding the Enlightenment tradition, masculine disembodiment is possible only through the compulsory embodiment of women:

By defining women as "Other," men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies,—a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally. . . . From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine "I" is the noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other—the body repressed or denied and, then, projected—reemerges for this "I" as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other, they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence. (133)⁵

Viganò's text is nothing if not redundant regarding embodiment as Agnese's defining characteristic. Although Agnese manipulates her embodiment and exploits other's reading/misreading of it, she is inarguably textualized as more full-bodied than the others.

Viganò's portrayal of Agnese's involvement in the partisan Resistance parallels the development of the involvement of partisan women in the Italian Resistance beginning in the fall of 1943. According to Victoria de Grazia,

70,000 women were in the Women's Defense Groups and 35,000 were troops in the field. In addition, thousands of other women hid and cared for Resistance

fighters and disbanded foreign soldiers, assisted Jews on the run from Nazi-fascist police, and protested Italian men from being conscripted for forced labor service. Forty-six hundred women were arrested, tortured, and tried, 2,750 were deported to German concentration camps, and 623 were executed or killed in battle. (274)

Renato Giancola, the author of *La donna italiana dalla resistenza ad oggi*, also estimates that at least 35,000 participated in the Resistance and that the cooperation of these women began with aid to the disbanded, to ally prisoners and to partisan soldiers. However, it is symptomatic of the cultural prejudice that casts women militants in the role of maternal or uxorial care-givers that this publication by the President of the Council of Ministers falls prey to a similarly gendered rhetoric. Stating that women partisans began by offering “aid, recovery, and support” to the male militia, Giancola then adds “le madri italiane vedevano il proprio figlio in balia della tempesta scatenata dalla guerra” (12). The slippage from a discussion of women partisans to the figure of the Italian mother erroneously assumes that all women partisans were mothers. In contrast to this presupposition, it is implied that Agnese is not a mother (Viganò 166). Nevertheless she is repeatedly referred to as “mamma Agnese” by both the partisans and the Germans, and, of course, the famous doctor who misdiagnosed Palita.

As such, embodiment cuts both ways for Agnese. On the one hand, the predisposition to read a person’s embodiment in order to limit her identity or potential identity to her most ostensible physical characteristics is what enables Agnese to dissimulate and thus aid in the Resistance. On the other, the gender ideology which transmutes “woman” into “mother” is the same that early, twentieth-century German and Italian nationalism foisted onto women. Embodiment thus empowers Agnese and disempowers her by imposing on her a constricted identity.⁶ The slippage by which all women become mothers—that quintessential example of embodiment—conceals a masculine prejudice against the femininity which embodiment signifies. Therefore, my intention here is not to champion the dissimulation of the female body and thereby risk the uncritical celebration of the displacement of women. Rather, Agnese exemplifies how dissimulation and compulsory female embodiment in a society and in an intellectual tradition that cherish disembodiment connote an ambivalence toward femininity.

Viganò’s own text hints at a certain contempt of femininity, or certain characterizations of femininity such as that of la Minghina, and her two daughter, whose fates are sealed by their collaboration with the German occupiers. As the partisan Clinto details, “[I tedeschi] li hanno ammazzati a

baionettate: erano come delle bestie. A una delle ragazze piantarono la baionetta nella gola, e poi giù, fino in fondo alla pancia,” (Viganò 75).⁷ Here the collaboration of Italian nationals with the Germans is displaced onto these women, and onto a symbolic feminine whoring, willing to exchange one’s body, and one’s neighbors for safety.⁸

Other examples of Viganò’s own ambivalence toward femininity include the casting of the Germans in the role of perverse femininity. For example, in characterizing the Germans’ excited states as feminine and hysterical—a symptom which has historically been identified with femininity, and by having a virile female as her protagonist, Viganò displays, if not an intolerance, at least an ambivalence toward certain supposed manifestation of femininity. The femininity that Viganò embraces as being redemptive for the nation and its future is not unlike the femininity propagated by Fascism, a femininity in service of the state. Indeed Agnese only sanctifies herself and her womanhood through complete selflessness, thereby distancing herself from what is perceived as abject femininity.⁹

Yet, paradoxically, as she abrogates her femininity and its embodiment for the sake of the Resistance, Agnese and her embodiment also personify the partisan Resistance, that portion of the body politic which dissimulates its identity and presence in the face of the oppressor in order to subvert it. As such, the body politic is allegorized as an androgynous female, one who combines traditional and non-traditional feminine characteristics. For on the one hand, Agnese is childless, fearless, mentally and physically strong and hard—in short, virile; on the other, she is matronly, heavy-set, and she cries and mourns—although less than other women and less than some of the men. She is then ambiguously gendered for she denotes fecundity and virility, femininity without lack. In this sense, Agnese is the phallic woman, who by being both feminine and phallic, i.e., culturally empowered, allows for the synthesized of divergent components. By integrating woman’s proclivity to embodiment with a prejudicial cultural tendency to configure political resistance as masculine or phallic, Agnese, as the phallic woman, can figure as the ideal concrete embodiment of the abstract or disembodied body politic.

Agnese’s identity as both the body politic incarnate and abject female embodiment makes her presence a particularly disruptive one for that presence is duplicitous. Here, Judith Butler’s observation that the body presents “a region of **cultural** unruliness and disorder” (131) is extremely trenchant. For Agnese, only in death will her “unruly and disorderly” embodiment finally be contained. This occurs when Agnese is eventually recognized as the murderer of Kurt by a German official:

Il maresciallo gridò ancora: prese la pistola, le sparò da vicino negli occhi, sulla bocca, sulla fronte, uno, due, quattro colpi. . . . L'Agnese restò sola, stranamente piccola, un mucchio di stracci neri sulla neve. (Viganò 239)

Butler's aphorism regarding the body's unruliness proves doubly true for the capacious body of an Italian peasant woman who, in the midst of a war to control the resistant body of the Italy peninsula, comes to symbolize that body.

In a sense, Butler's assertion and Agnese's fate also provide an legend to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's following claim regarding women's difficult relation to nationalism:

Women can be ventriloquists, but they have an immense **historical** potential of **not** being (allowed to remain) nationalists; of knowing, in their gendering, that nation and identity are commodities in the strictest sense: something made for exchange. And that they are the medium of that exchange. (803)

Viganò illustrates the excision of the feminine from national arena both with the novel's very title and denouement: *Agnese va a morire*, and through Agnese's mutation into a generic symbol of the Resistance and the nation.

In addition to its literary merit, *Agnese va a morire* is also important as an example of neorealist Resistance literature written by a woman about Italian women in the Resistance.¹⁰ Not only did Viganò participate in the Resistance as the director of health services for the Communist guerrilla units in the area around Ravenna (Traldi 288), she chronicled the contribution of other women in *Donne della resistenza*. However, while Viganò's work can be said to document women's contribution to the Resistance, her texts also participate in the mythologizing of the Italian Resistance.

Italian neorealism itself contributed to this mythologization. Although it is usually associated with anti-Fascist literature and cinema, some of neorealism's earliest examples in Italy were not anti-Fascist but sympathetic to Fascism.¹¹ Similar to Fascism itself, neorealism then drew from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. As such, its putatively objective critique was useful to both political persuasions. On the one hand, neorealism was embraced by writers sympathetic to Fascism who saw neorealism as anti-rhetorical and activist, which seemed to parallel Fascism's critique of the political and social climate in the 1930's (Ben-Ghiat 157). On the other, neorealism's status as a critical literary style also appealed to those wishing to critique Fascism itself. Yet, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat points out, in the period immediately following World War II, there was a need to purged neorealism of its Fascist past and to claim its origins in "the anti-Fascist revolution" (Ben-Ghiat 158-59). One effect of this national

disavowal was that it permitted neorealism and post-war Italy to reiterate, wittingly or unwittingly, the rhetorical and political tropes of Fascism.¹²

Both Fascism and anti-Fascism share a stake in Italy's national identity. Viganò's text illustrates how that investment in national identity depends on certain abject and manipulative readings of the female body, which either suppress the feminine, masculinize it or often project it as an ideal national identity. For all its worthy qualities as a women's history, Viganò's text obfuscates, even as it demonstrates, the gender inequity that permeates the battleground.

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Notes

¹See Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945*, on Italian Fascism's attitudes, policies and rhetoric regarding gender. Also George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. As Mosse and Young point out, "The idea of the unified nation . . . depended precisely on opposing manly virtue to the heterogeneity and uncertainty of the body, associating despised groups with the body, setting them outside the homogeneity of the nation" (Young 111). While Germany's National Socialism carried to greater extremes the classification and abjection of certain body types, Italian Fascism's misogynist public policies together with its nationalist impulses implicate it as well.

²Lucia Re makes a similar observation in *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism* 116-117.

³See Lucia Re on Gramsci's "ethics of sacrifice" (349).

⁴This is the case throughout the text but in particular see Agnese's explicit pronouncement on personal sacrifice in the context of the larger cause of the Resistance (Viganò 228-29).

⁵Quoted in Smith 11.

⁶As Judith Butler points out: "Discourses of embodiment [which include the valorization of motherhood, and its glorification as a patriotic duty] also mark woman as an encumbered self, identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny. Affiliated physically, socially, psychologically in relationship to others, her individuality [is] sacrificed to the 'constitutive definitions' of her identity a member of a family, as someone's daughter, someone's wife and some's mother" (Introduction to *Feminism as Critique*, quoted in Smith 12-13).

⁷While Augusto, la Minghina's husband, is killed along with his wife and daughters, he is portrayed as an inept male, conditioned by his wife and daughter. Furthermore, the four of them are referred to as "delle sguadrine e delle spie" (Viganò 75), a characterization

that, by the use of feminine nouns, reinforces the association of Minghina, the two daughters and Augusto with femininity.

⁸Re notes that the portrayal of sexually promiscuous women as collaborators is a topos of neorealist Resistance literature (118).

⁹"Framed through embodiment, the 'proper' woman remains subject to man's authority and theorizing because, if unmanned and misaligned, she will subvert the body politic. To the extent that woman represses the body, erasing her sexual desire and individual identity while embracing encumbering identities in service to family, community, and country, she positions herself as proper lady who surmounts her negative identification with the body through selflessness" (Smith 16).

¹⁰Alberto Traldi, *Fascism and Fiction: A Survey of Italian Fascism on Fascism and its reception in Britain and the United States* 288-90. Also see Silvia Spellanzone, "Renata Viganò Poeta popolare" 794-99.

¹¹See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Neorealism in Italy, 1930-50: From Fascism to Resistance" 155-129. Lucia Re's discussion of the question of neorealism's roots in the German Neo-objectivism (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) is also helpful (16-18). Finally, Marcia Landy, *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943*, makes an analogous argument regarding Italian neorealist film (4).

¹²Lucia Re gives an example of this citation of Fascism in neorealist texts in her reading of Aldo Vergano's 1946 film, *Il sole sorge ancora* (118-19).

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