

UCLA

Carte Italiane

Title

Between Italy and America: Exile and Suspension in Ebe Cagli
Seidenberg's *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8z158439>

Journal

Carte Italiane, 2(5)

ISSN

0737-9412

Author

Ferraro, Eveljn

Publication Date

2009

DOI

10.5070/C925011379

Peer reviewed

Between Italy and America: Exile and Suspension in Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*

Eveljn Ferraro
Brown University

In 1938 Mussolini's government approved the so-called racial laws against the Jewish community that had been present in Italy for centuries and totaled over forty thousand out of a population of forty-three million. In July, a manifesto signed by ten Italian scientists declared that Jews did not belong to the Italian race, and in the following months a series of discriminatory measures were put into effect. The Jews were deprived of the civil rights granted to Italian citizens: they could not attend public schools, own property over a certain value, work in public offices and banks, practice their profession, or mix with the "pure Italian race" through marriage. They were also suspended from their academic appointments, which forced many scientists and intellectuals to leave Italy and seek refuge in countries like the United States, Switzerland, France, England, and Belgium. Among the six thousand Italian Jews that emigrated were Emilio Segrè, Arnaldo Momigliano, Enrico Fermi, Giuseppe Levi, and his assistant Rita Levi Montalcini. The latter, as a woman, also had to struggle with a patriarchal society that assigned to women the subaltern role of wives and mothers and thus considered it unsuitable for them to pursue the medical profession that she had chosen. Today, Rita Levi Montalcini is respected as a world-class scientist and her political role as senator for life in the Italian Senate testifies to her strong ties with her native country. Anti-Semitism has nevertheless weighed upon these ties, making her feel connected with the Jewish victims of Fascism, and distant from those emigrants that she met after the war in St. Louis, Missouri, and who identified their patriotic feeling with the Fascist ideology.¹ Rita Levi Montalcini's life course, the experience of exile due to the racial laws, the long American parenthesis punctuated by frequent journeys to Italy, and the permanent return to the native

land, call to mind the biographical path of another Italian Jewish woman much less famous but just as fascinating, Ebe Cagli Seidenberg.

With this article, I intend to give visibility to her exile and analyze some aspects of her literary production that is directly linked to that experience. In the first part I will explore the relations between exile, identity, and the construction of a poetics of suspension in one of Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's novels, *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* ("The Time of the Dioscuri"), where suspension defines the position of the uprooted individual, but also configures a space of cultural negotiation. The second part will be devoted to suspension as it is reflected in the textual movement between literature and painting. I will use the image of *Lo Sgombero*, which the author chose for the cover of *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*, to investigate the migratory aesthetics of the novel and the political and cultural issues that it raises with regard to today's mobility. I will argue that starting from her own position of suspension the author developed an approach to art and human experience that challenges monolithic views of national identity.

COMMON DEPARTURES, SEPARATE RETURNS

Ebe Cagli Seidenberg was born in Ancona, on the Adriatic Sea, in 1915 and raised in Rome in an upper middle class Jewish family which, like the majority of Italian Jews, considered itself assimilated. Both her parents were well-educated: her father was a professor of applied mathematics at a technical institute, while her mother worked as an editor of the International Red Cross publications. Ebe received her education in Rome (including a University degree) and left Italy right after Mussolini's government passed the racial laws. Thanks to the help of a relative, she was able to attend the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where she obtained her doctoral degree in Romance Languages, and met Abraham Seidenberg, a mathematician who later became her husband and with whom she moved to Berkeley, California, in 1945. In the new setting, she started her literary activity under the supervision of Wallace Stegner, and in 1957 her first novel, *Before the Cock Crows*, was published, in English, under the pseudonym of Bettina Postani. The several positive critical reviews that the book received in the US inspired the author to continue writing, but interestingly she chose to write her subsequent works only in Italian. This decision may be partly due to her frequent stays in Italy since the 1960s or earlier, and eventually to her permanent move to Rome after her husband's death

in the late '80s. Her works amount to eight volumes of novels and short stories, five of which make up a "cycle" devoted to the theme of exile (*Ciclo dell'esilio obbligato*), and are centered on experiences of deracination, marginalization, memory, and identity.

As I have tried to suggest in this brief introduction, suspension played a crucial part in Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's life; as such, it came to constitute a key concept in her texts with different meanings and through multiple manifestations. *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* focuses on the relationship between Ebe and her brother Corrado Cagli, a noted Italian painter and dedicatee of the novel. The two siblings shared the experience of exile in America, but while Corrado returned to Rome after serving in the United States army during WWII, Ebe remained in California. Her work thus tells how these intersecting and eventually diverging trajectories redefined the siblings' original ties. In the text, which deals with the protagonists' vicissitudes between 1938 and the immediate post-war years, this relationship is introduced as one of mutual affection, but also of profound admiration: the life-long little sister considers her older brother as her "primo mito" and a myth maker at once. He is described as a volatile, sociable, vital, and talented young man who has a cosmic rather than religious faith, and attaches magical meanings to many things, not least the fact that his little sister shares with him the same day and month of birth. When he leaves the household to open his own art studio in Rome, near the Capitolium Square and the equestrian statues of the Dioscuri (hence the title of the entire book), he surrounds himself with people that in his words immediately become "Dramatis Personae, favolosi, con destini eccezionali."² As an adolescent, Ebe is fascinated by these characters and their stories, and is exposed to the blend of storytelling and painting that animates the life of the studio. The magic quality, or sense of "splendore" that she derives from these encounters is heightened by the monumental surroundings she walks through to reach the studio. It is important that the title references the Dioscuri, rather than for instance "via Monte Tarpeo," where the studio was located. Those sculptures matter to the author for the power of their symbolism more than for their material appearance: they well suit the purpose of impressing a mythical aura onto the tie between Ebe and Corrado. Siblings born on the same day (not year), they are introduced as inseparable as Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri of Greek mythology, also known as the "Heavenly Twins." Different by nature (one was mortal, the other immortal, respectively), they partook

in a common fate as combatants and travelers, and are often associated with the constellation Gemini.

The initial description of a comfortable and protective sense of home works as a premise and a counterpoint to the instability of the dark years that would soon follow. The perception of peril is expressed in one of Corrado's drawings that strongly impresses Ebe when she sees it upon her brother's return to Rome from a trip abroad: a powerful David, threatened from behind by a gloomy figure, displays a defiant attitude while lifting his arm and showing the beheaded giant Goliath. Such a warning turns into a sad reality a few months later when, while on vacation in the Versilia area, in the town square the sister finds herself facing a pink poster announcing the exclusion of all the professors and students of Jewish race from the schools of the Kingdom. The message is in itself an example of suspension, as it clearly draws a line of separation and creates a distance, discriminates and imposes a removal, pointing to one of the several measures against the Jews mentioned above.

The experience of exile, at least in the beginning, marks a separation of the siblings, which proves to be crucial to the narrator's process of defining self-identity. At the age of twenty she boards a ship headed to the United States by herself, unprepared for a land whose language is unfamiliar to her, and to a city, Baltimore, whose streets and skies appear somber and quite hard to associate with the roads to liberty that she had imagined before her arrival. The initial difficulty to communicate in English or even to read a map, something that she had never had to use in her hometown, and the realization of being suddenly judged as "helpless" and worthy of compassion, are humbling experiences that cannot be comfortably reconciled with the sense of triumph deriving from the drawing of David and Goliath that she has brought with her to the new country. In particular, she receives a harsh critique of her protected Italian lifestyle and Fascist education by her adviser, Professor Kucher, a European philologist who shares with his young student the status of refugee. What he proposes to her is, instead, a model of mental discipline in the approach to the work of art, based on the principle of "tabula rasa" or blank slate, that is the abandonment of cultural pre-conceptions, and the valorization of the human experience embedded in a work. Although didactic in nature, Kucher's teachings about the modesty of the interpreter influence the narrator's reflection on her own experience of humbleness in everyday life in the new reality. The result is a re-conceptualization of her past as deception: deception of its

splendor, of the myths, of her sense of the marvelous during her visits to the art studio in Rome before the war. When she fully realizes that she has nothing in common with the valiant warrior David, “tremando di ribellione” she takes the drawing off the wall and locks it in a drawer, a revealing and powerful (although painful) act through which she rejects a vision of the world that does not belong to her.³ More importantly, she repositions herself in rapport with her brother, whom she evidently identifies with the noble David.

Suspension, I maintain, is the new horizon that the narrator embraces in her life after dismissing the drawing of David. The concept of suspension contains its previous meaning of removal and separation from the native land along with the familiar faces, objects and rituals, but also expands it to define the liminal position of the uprooted individual and, ultimately, to configure liminality as a space of negotiation. In Victor Turner’s anthropological model, based on van Gennep’s theorization of the *rites de passage*, liminality indicates a transitional phase in which the “threshold people” are “neither here nor there” in the social structure, so they possess ambiguous characteristics.⁴

In the context of *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*, an image of suspension as liminality is provided by the drawing *Lo Sgombero*, literally “the move,” completed by the narrator’s brother after he joins her in Baltimore for some time before the breakout of World War II. In Italian, “sgombero” indicates the act of emptying and moving out of a place, but it also has the negative connotation of evacuation of dangerous areas, a concept sadly resonating in the history of Jews. In the novel, the title of this pastel drawing actually refers to the strange character that embodies the action of clearing out, a clumsy

uomo-manichino con la testa seminascosta da un viluppo di stracci, un torso fatto d’un piccolo cassettone, d’un orologio a pendolo, d’una gabbia, d’uno specchio, tutti tenuti in bilico tra le braccia che, contratte dallo sforzo, finivano in due rossi artigli.⁵

The physical effort due to the weight of the subject’s load is amplified by *Sgombero*’s unwillingness to leave the place he has inhabited so far. Meaningfully, his legs do not appear to follow the movement of his head and the rest of his body, but instead they go backward, thus producing an effect of distortion and ambiguity in this character and the drawing

at large. "Poveraccio, deve andare avanti, ma ha tanta voglia di tornare indietro," says the painter while examining his own piece of artwork, too Cubist and too pathos-ridden in his own judgment.⁶ On the contrary, it is precisely this latter quality that evokes pity, sadness, and suffering, which allows his sister to sympathize with Sgombero and to rescue the drawing from being trashed, a gesture that, as she recognizes at the end of the narrative, was instinctive as well as symbolic. Compassion and deformity are traits of that humble mannequin-man that she can relate to her own liminal position. Thus, by saving that image, in a way, she recuperates a reflection of her own identity, wounded, fractured, "con la [sua] inutile fedeltà al paese che [l']aveva respinta" and yet longing for a sense of being and stability in the new country, suspended between worlds that she painfully and precariously holds together as Sgombero does with his load of objects.⁷ On this drawing and its key role in the migratory aesthetics of the novel I will expand in the second section of this article.

As part of the author's bridging operation, the account of the following years (1940-45) is not articulated solely by the first-person narrative voice, but is made more vivid through the insertion of excerpts or entire letters signed by Corrado and addressed to his sister Ebe. Along with a number of poems, drawings and pictures, these letters bear witness to the destitution, solitude and humbleness experienced by the painter during his five military campaigns with the United States army which brought him from the valleys and deserts of the West coast of the United States to England, Germany, and eventually back to Italy. Writing from Fort Lewis, Washington, on May 27, 1942, Corrado observed that what he tiredly continued to call his life was but a "sequence of interruptions," and that "if you want to be a good soldier...you ough to forget yourself 'by the numbers'" (sic).⁸ Thus, the painter-poet, dispossessed of his past and unable to forecast any prediction in a time of war, is reduced to a condition of nakedness and moral distress.

Besides provoking an internal crisis, a disconnection "between you and yourself," life in the army "digs a channel...between yourself and your circle," so that the act of writing to one's dearest persons suffers from an impasse "because it looks like you don't have much to say" when, in fact, there is "too much to tell."⁹ The idea that emerges here, and even more explicitly in other letters by the brother, is that the resumption of the dialogue, started long before the war years between Corrado and Ebe, can only take place by means of a physical encounter

and an oral exchange, rather than an epistolary one. However, after a series of deferments, when this encounter finally occurs in Rome, during Ebe's second visit to Italy since the end of the war, it proves a complete disappointment for her. In fact, Corrado avoids a personal dialogue with her, denies her a private space of discussion that she desperately needs in order to reconnect with him through their common experience of exile, but also to recover her own roots and sense of belonging.

The reason behind the breakdown of the communication between the siblings fundamentally hinges on the different meaning that the notion of return takes for them. With the end of the war, the brother's exile comes to a final conclusion, and his re-incorporation into the Italian society is totally in line with his conviction that his roots are there: "Non si può fare violenza alla propria individualità. Un essere umano è come un albero: soffre a essere trapiantato. Ognuno di noi ha il suo paesaggio."¹⁰ Within the perspective of suspension as liminality adopted in my analysis, Corrado's return is consistent with the concept of liminality as a transitional phase, chronologically limited, between separation and re-aggregation, as theorized by Van Gennep and expanded by Turner. However, this return to the roots does not come without costs: to fully regain his identity as a painter and the mythopoetic qualities of his art, Corrado must free himself of the soldier that he used to be, and by extension, of his American experience. America, to him, becomes part of a past that has certainly left a "trace" behind, although one that only reemerges into his life "nei modi più inaspettati," as a product of involuntary memory.¹¹ By forgetting, he consciously distances himself from *that* experience which does not exclude the possibility of a return to America "in occasione di qualche mostra, da turista."¹²

Interestingly, "come una turista" is the expression used by the siblings' mother, with an accusatory tone this time, to remark the "easy" choice of Ebe: "Vai, sposi un americano, diventi cittadina americana. Addio al passato, addio a tutto. Torni così, come una turista."¹³ Although prompted by maternal affection and sense of loss, such a judgment points to a condition of exclusion and foreignness that the narrator truly experiences when she first returns from California after the war. Even the simple practices of everyday life show her that she has lost some of the Italian habits she used to have, and that in the eyes of the people around her, she now appears as a person without a recognizable background. The multiple places of her exile sound like empty names to them, whose

common hardships during the Nazi occupation reinforce their sense of community, rooted in a specific and familiar geography. The perspective of returning to Italy to find the old familiar faces and to feel whole again is dismantled by Ebe's realization of being "un prodotto ibrido," a subject whose identity has been shaped by two cultures often at odds with each other but neither of which can be erased.¹⁴ In contrast to Corrado's, her return is not definitive, but only one of many journeys between Italy and America, here and there, which questions the notion of liminality as a temporary phase and reconfigures it as a potentially permanent geographical and socio-cultural space or "state," to use Turner's term. The risk implied in this in-between position is that the female protagonist, as a migrant, may never achieve the social recognition from her former community that she longs for, thus remaining invisible and ambiguous in her role of "il Maestro's sister." Indeed, in the novel, her attempts to communicate with her mother, her relatives and friends are unsuccessful, because dialogues slide into monologues where she only functions as a listener, overwhelmed by their voices and unable to articulate the complexity of her own situation. Even when she meets Corrado in Rome and realizes that her own view of reality, influenced by her experience of migration and alienation, clashes with his, she is unable or unwilling to express her dissent aloud. Instead, writing becomes a privileged space where she can break her silence and make her voice heard. Through writing, Ebe Cagli Seidenberg reinvented a dialogue with her brother in which she integrated and reinterpreted his artwork to voice two different stories of migration. In particular, without adopting a subversive perspective, she used her own condition of suspension to contest a male viewpoint knowingly oblivious of its migratory past and committed to re-construct a sense of *one* self, a process reminiscent, on a much larger scale, of the treatment reserved by the Italian official culture to Italy's *many* migrations.

I am not suggesting that Ebe's conceptualization of suspension is a radical or systematic attempt to neutralize self-fulfilling and reassuring perceptions of national and cultural belonging. She never denies that "[o]gnuno di noi ha il suo paesaggio" or that transplantation causes suffering to the human being, as Corrado states. In fact, her own condition of suspension is undesired. What I argue is that Ebe's migratory imagination raises the problem of the encounter of the subject suspended between worlds with the individual solidly rooted in its own environment, like a tree. In other words, how does the logic of the

threshold interact with the logic of the landscape? Or, what happens when Sgombero approaches a well grounded tree? In order to answer to this question and understand its cultural and political implications, I will return to the image of Sgombero.

LO SGOMBERO AND THE MIGRATORY AESTHETICS OF *IL TEMPO DEI DIOSCURI*

In my analysis of Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's book, I have described Sgombero as an ambiguous character whose clumsiness and precarious balance resonates with the female narrator's view of her own liminal position. This section focuses on that drawing as a defining element of the migratory aesthetics of the novel.

Mieke Bal suggests that "a topic does not make an aesthetic. What does make an aesthetic is the sentient encounter with subjects involved."¹⁵ This happens when the viewer, the spectator, or the user is engaged, even physically, by the artwork. In Bal's "migratory aesthetics," the modifier "migratory" refers to the mobility of today's globalized world, in which migrants and migration are part of any society. Consequently, the "aesthetic encounter is migratory if it takes place in the space of, on the basis of, and on the interface with, the mobility of people as a given."¹⁶ The term "migratory aesthetics" is a ground for experimentation rather than a concept, and its purpose is to investigate the political effectiveness of art. My goal is to pinpoint the presence of a migratory aesthetics in *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* and to explore the possibility for this text to do political work by producing critical thinking about mobility.

A first consideration regards the human spatiality of the Sgombero and the immediate identification of the narrator with this mannequin-man. The drawing portrays Sgombero in the act of moving out: in the foreground, his large upper body overflowing with cumbersome, composite objects and his legs following an equivocal trajectory; in the background, a disproportionately small room, with irregular blue walls and checkered floors, empty and ready to be vacated. To the viewer, Sgombero's movement appears uncomfortable and undesired because, as Corrado puts it: "[d]eve andare avanti, ma ha tanta voglia di tornare indietro." The overall effect is that Sgombero remains on the threshold between inside and outside, past and future, the memory of provenance and the ongoing construction of a home somewhere.

For his particular position, Sgombero can be regarded as a metaphor of the migrant's condition. However, not all migrants would have the

same kind of sentient encounter that Ebe experiences in the novel: her identification with Sgombero is instinctive, unexpected, immediate – it happens. She is involved with the subject of that drawing visually and emotionally, to the extent that she saves it from the wastepaper basket and keeps it with her. This aesthetic event is migratory precisely in the sense specified by Mieke Bal:

detached from the self-evident certainty of who and where we are, and tumbling inside the experience of someone else caught in a state of mobility which curiously imprisons him. Mobility as, paradoxically, a prison.¹⁷

It is evident, however, that the imprisoning mobility represented in this artwork does not have a historical referent in the globalized world as we know it today. Rather, it might evoke the forcible movement of the political refugees and the Jews during the late Thirties or early Forties.

In the first part of the paper, I presented Ebe's identification with Sgombero as a defining moment of independence and change in the relationship between Ebe and Corrado. However, her affinity with Sgombero also has several ties with the aesthetics of *Il Tempo*. For one, it is intriguing that in a book where the centrality of time is emphasized by the title and the unfolding of the narrative, the image of Sgombero, loaded with a sense of spatiality, appears on the book cover. This may suggest that the effects of the sentient encounter that took place in 1940 were powerful and long-lasting on Ebe Cagli Seidenberg: she kept that drawing with her during her wanderings in the United States, and forty years later she wrote a novel around and about it, and chose it for its cover. When the book was reprinted in 1996 to honor the twentieth anniversary of Corrado Cagli's death, another drawing, David and Goliath, took its place on the front cover, and it was transferred to the back cover. The internal motif of the dialogue between Ebe and Corrado was thus reinforced through this visual move.

Nevertheless, the prominence given to Sgombero by the author never feels diminished. In fact, in my view, it provides the reader with an interpretative key to access the text: Sgombero symbolizes mobility and imprisonment at the same time, and in this direction evolves the migratory aesthetics of *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*. The conspicuous insertion of drawings, photographs, letters and magazine pages throughout and at the end of the book is perhaps the most tangible sign of its interdisciplinary

movement. Sometimes these visual materials are fully integrated in the narrative and support the written reconstruction of the exile and the war years: David and Goliath, the Sgombero, several letters and poems by Corrado are some examples. Other times the images are interjected and briefly followed by a caption that ties them to the context of the narration without being commented on in the main text. Furthermore, the last part of the book, about one fifth of the total pages, is entirely devoted to six letters by Corrado, his war drawings and excerpts from *The Caisson*, a magazine circulating among the United States soldiers during the war and to which he contributed to with his illustrations.

The translations from English to Italian that accompany the original documents add to the complexity of *Il Tempo*: two languages intertwine to make public a private exchange and present it as a personal account of the effects of racial persecution, deracination and war on the individual. Reproducing Corrado's letters, originally composed in English, or the pages of *The Caisson*, which only his sister Ebe owned, reveals the intention to deliver a first-hand source about the artist's military life, while the translations complement that depiction making it available to the Italian reader. The interplay of two or more languages that characterizes this novel as well as other volumes of *Ciclo dell'esilio obbligato* is not surprising considering the writer's decision to convey in Italian the intricacies, also linguistic, implied in the experience of exile.

The impact of displacement on language played a crucial role in Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's writing style. In her works she pursued what Massimo Bontempelli called "povertà conquistata," that is, a clear, simple, and essential style that can only be attained by getting rid of "the superfluous, the embellishing, the worthless." Such simplicity, also defined as "poverty" or "nakedness," is not given by birth but it proceeds from the trials of life and according to the subject's capacity for self-discipline.¹⁸ Bontempelli, who was married to Amelia Della Pergola, a sister of Ebe and Corrado's mother, certainly had some influence on both the siblings' artistic undertakings. He had theorized the principles of "magic realism" during the second decade of the twentieth century, and Corrado and Ebe were familiar with many of the ideas condensed in that formula, such as: the invention of new myths after WWI; imagination and its power to penetrate ordinary life and pervade it with a magic atmosphere; the quest for the "elemental" and for a superior simplicity in art and literature; and so forth.¹⁹ Echoes of these notions are scattered throughout the pages of *Il Tempo* and can be found, for instance, in

Corrado's cult of myths or in the discipline that Kucher imparts to Ebe with regard to the work of art and the art of writing. In that particular episode, Kucher condemns the falsity of art made out of pompous and void words disconnected from human experience of life because, as he maintains, it is the "realtà della vita che agevola l'accesso all'altra [la realtà estetica], e forse ne è identica."²⁰ Human and artistic experience are strictly connected in Kucher's approach, which lays out Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's own aesthetic belief. Of her first novel, Wallace Stegner wrote: "She works directly in marble" to underscore the effectiveness of her essential style.²¹ In *Il Tempo* she adopted a language that combines precision in the characterization of people and ambiances, and a taste for symbolism, in order to denounce the trauma of forced exile, which in her view has not been explored in contemporary Italian literature, in spite of the many lives it affected.²²

Besides the "povertà conquistata" of her writing style, there is another, less visible, aspect of language that the author employed to achieve her goal of denunciation. This has to do with the voice of the exile. In fact, behind the movement between two or more languages, the novel raises the fundamental question of the possibility of performing the act of speech. From her first winter in Baltimore, Ebe grows more attentive to body language, because she comes from a different culture and immediately realizes that people see her as a poor vulnerable refugee. As English is a new tool to handle, she focuses on imperceptible reactions to understand her own preoccupations and discern people's inner lives and anxieties: "una piega agli angoli delle labbra... un battere delle palpebre... un volgere del capo per nascondersi."²³ In other words, she uses vision rather than speech to exercise what she calls compassion, the ability to see and feel the suffering of another person coupled with the wish to relieve it. Compassion is, after all, the quality that she so much admires in Sgombero, humble enough to inspire that feeling and yet compassionate to the point of saving as many modest things as he can.

Body language becomes instrumental in Ebe's exploration of human relationships, but speech remains a problem. Ten years later, when she returns to Rome, to her "landscape" and to those acoustic surroundings that had largely contributed to shaping her identity, she fails to speak, as I mentioned earlier. Or she is not asked to. "Nessuno m'aveva chiesto: 'e l'esilio? T'è stato duro l'esilio?' Nemmeno mia madre."²⁴ Ironically, she performs well when she meets Corrado's many acquaintances because finding topics for conversation is "un'abitudine

che s'acquista in America, dove la gente s'incontra ai cocktail-parties e si parla di tutto e di nulla."²⁵

If a friendly language can "recast the reassuring quality of the home soundscape in the new environment," as Bal maintains,²⁶ Ebe's example demonstrates that sharing a common mother tongue does not guarantee engagement with the original community. Memory is the missing link between Ebe and the old familiar faces. In her absence, they have built an archive of common memories around the tragedies of war, persecution, starvation, and so on, from which she is excluded. Through their oral stories, the old friends are willing to make that archive available to Ebe because she knows the people and the places involved. For the same reason, they have no interest in entering her own memories, linked to names and locations they cannot recognize. Nor can they understand her sense of guilt for leaving behind her dearest persons or the complexity of her ties with Italy.²⁷ As a result, their choral narration overcomes her solitary voice. The strength of the community, that landscape that is protective as long as the tree is still rooted there, increases the vulnerability of the returning subject, so that Ebe lies in a position of double marginality: she is a refugee turned into a migrant in the United States and a tourist in Italy.²⁸ To make her mother and brother happy, the narrator is led to put on a mask and pretend enjoyment, as she admits, and in so doing her act of speech is trivialized, bound to play by the rules of society. That mask is clearly reminiscent of the screen-like rag that covers most of Sgombero's face, and brings us again to the paradox of mobility as imprisonment.

Then, how can Ebe's fragile voice reach out to the readers of the 21st Century? And how can *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* help us explore the current social world? I do not envision Ebe's story as an uncritical, nostalgic return to a community and its landscape, to borrow Corrado's analogy. Rather, I believe that by drawing our attention on that difficult encounter, the author warns us against the weaknesses of being suspended on the threshold and of identifying with a landscape. On the one hand, the migrant risks being silenced by its own community of origin if this is unable to listen to and welcome in its archives the memories of those who leave. This holds true for any migrant, but is especially important for those groups of people who have been the object of racial discrimination first and oblivion later, like the Italian Jews. Ebe Cagli faced a different kind of migration from that of many fellow Italians of the Little Italies, but this can only make

us appreciate more the legacy of her writings. On the other hand, the connection between individual and territory is not necessarily as solid as Corrado pictures it. Ebe and her family live in Rome, in the capital of the Fascist regime, and yet they can not see that the racial laws are coming and sweeping their lives away. As a plea, she claims that her parents were not interested in politics. In the novel, a slight shame shows through for that lack of vision, but the plot is all centered on the human outcome of that inaction. In other words, we are only indirectly alerted about the dangers of political disengagement in a society that behind the rhetoric of tolerance cultivates racial hatred.

More direct is instead the appeal to consider the lived experience of the migrant in *Il Tempo*. This is clearly shown through Ebe's autobiographical narrative, as I have tried to stress, but there is also an episode that I find effective in the perspective of the migratory as we know it today. On their last night together in Rome, Corrado and Ebe are joined for dinner by Nino, a successful Sicilian tailor and raconteur. A lapse on Nino's part elicits a conversation on his origins. He tells that, although he would like to marry, there are eleven siblings to set up before him. Being "lu granne," the oldest brother of a large family, he has had to take on the responsibilities of an adult early on in his life.

uno dei primi ricordi che ho è che me ne stavo, in vesticciola, legato con una corda a una sedia spagliata, con l'ultimo nato in braccio....Cosa crede, in una famiglia di pescatori mi facevano il completino? Mamma mi ricavava 'na vesticciola da un suo vecchio abito [...]. Quando era l'ora di mangiare mia madre distribuiva pane e cacio. Se il cacio era scarso, a me dava solo due fette di pan nero; io dovevo capire che non c'era di più. E se lagnavo [...] lei tagliava 'na terza fetta di pane più fina: 'la metti in mezzo,' mi diceva, "e fai finta di mangiare pane e cacio."²⁹

Later on, Nino tells another story while enjoying his scampi dish. This time, the protagonist is "la forestiera di Villa Fonte Aretusa," a foreigner and strange lady who owns a magnificent villa in a Sicilian town and has a passion for fabrics. One day, she invites Nino over to her villa to announce the wedding of Assuntina and Nunzio, two local people, and to commission him to an elegant suit for the groom. The lady first takes Nino into a room where on a table lies a doll in a white wedding gown.

And then, since *porta male* (“it brings bad luck”) if the groom sees the bride in her wedding gown, she takes him into a second room.

Mi faccio sulla soglia e cosa vedo? Tante bambole vestite coi costumi nostri: una replica in miniatura dei paesani che si radunano in piazzetta, prima di cena. Ecco perché comprava tante stoffe dalla Rosalia. Le bambole chissà da dove se le è fatte venire: sono una via di mezzo tra bambole e manichini.³⁰

In the novel, the author devotes six full pages to Nino’s stories with the purpose of highlighting the opposite reactions of the siblings. Nino’s mother’s gesture is “poetic, symbolic,” beautiful for Corrado, and he thinks that Nino’s *vesticiola* could be the source of his talent as a tailor. On the contrary, Ebe sees poverty in that patched small gown and in that chair, and “un gioco malinconico che non poteva ingannare nessuno” in the gesture of the mother. Likewise, after listening to the second story, Corrado exclaims: “Che storia straordinaria! [...] questa vecchia che si trasforma in demiurga, crea tutto un suo piccolo popolo, stabilisce nozze e nascite [...]”³¹ On the other hand, Ebe’s compassion brings her to look at the human tragedy of that mad lonely woman, “sradicata chissà perchè in mezzo a gente tanto diversa da lei, tagliata fuori dalla vita a fare i suoi monologhi con le bambole.”³² Although Ebe absolutely disagrees with Corrado’s remarks, she remains silent, which confirms once again how her voice heavily relies on the written word.

The two stories that Nino recounts are very different but share one element: the migrant subject. Nino is the protagonist of a fortunate migration within Italy, while the lady is an immigrant, probably an aristocrat fallen on bad times. Finally, Nino’s audience is made up of a return migrant, Corrado, and an emigrant, Ebe. In this picture of the migratory and of its interconnections is reflected the composite world of migrations that characterizes the past and present history of Italy. Although the scene has no direct correlation to today’s mobility, the author of *Il Tempo*, also through the examples of Nino and the old lady, points to one approach to life and art that foregrounds the human experience of the uprooted subject.

This human exploration, the responsibility to uncover and keep alive the memory of past migrations, the effort to understand the lived

existence of the migrant, be it an immigrant or emigrant, can be read as the ethical counterpart of the migratory aesthetics of the novel.

To conclude, mobility and imprisonment define the paradoxical position of the subject on the threshold as depicted in the *Sgombero*, a representation of human spatiality that the author ultimately uses to construct her own space of representation, that is the novel itself. The notion of suspension unfolds across a plurality of disciplines in the book, from history and geography to visual art and literature, to converge on the human experience of displacement. The cultural, social, and political reverberations of Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's exile and artistic production are multiple and the encounter with this author is just beginning.

Notes

1. Remembering the violence of certain anti-Semitic articles that had appeared in the Italian newspapers before the racial laws, Rita Levi Montalcini writes: "For the first time I felt pride in being Jewish and not Israelite, as we had customarily been called ... I felt a bond with those who were, like me, the victims of the lurid campaign unleashed by the Fascist press." *In Praise of Imperfection: My Life and Work*. Trans. Luigi Attardi. New York: Basic Books, 1988. 80. Of her arrival in St. Louis, in 1947, she says: "Along with fascism there survived a streak of anti-Semitism which had found fertile ground in the descendants of immigrants from Italy [...]. In my rare visits to the famous shops on the hill, I avoided any reference to politics and especially to fascism." *Ibid* 136.

2. Cagli Seidenberg, Ebe. *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*. Bologna: Bora, 1996. 19.

3. *Ibid* 56.

4. So called because they cross a *limen* or threshold in order to pass from one stable condition or "state" in the social structure to another. Turner's concept of liminality can be found in Victor Witter Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967. 93-111.

5. Cagli Seidenberg 81.

6. *Ibid*. According to Corrado, another artist would have liked *Lo Sgombero*. Di Genova suggests that the indirect reference is to De Chirico, whose composite figures and Metaphysical painting also appear in *Un altro sgombero* of 1944 (Cagli Seidenberg 161). Di Genova, Giorgio. *Cagli: La collezione Ebe Cagli Seidenberg*. Bologna: Bora, 1987. 32.

7. Ibid 115.

8. Sic. Ibid 212. In English in the original. The letters exchanged by Ebe and Corrado during the War were originally written in English and translated into Italian by the author to integrate them in the novel. A bilingual version of six of them is provided at the end of the book.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid 166. We find the same concept in a letter sent by Corrado from a German camp for displaced persons in 1945: "It is definitely wrong to force a figure by Caravaggio into a Liebermann's landscape." Ibid 224.

11. Ibid 185.

12. Ibid 186.

13. Ibid 166.

14. Ibid 167.

15. Bal, Mieke. "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library." *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art-Making*. Eds. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord. Thamyris intersecting, no. 17. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 23-35. 26.

16. Ibid 23-24.

17. Ibid 28.

18. Bontempelli's notion of "povertà conquistata" is contained in his commemorative speech delivered in 1937 in memoriam of Luigi Pirandello: "Ha voluto morire nudo. *Maschere nude* ha intitolato il *corpus* del suo teatro. *La vita nuda* una delle raccolte di novelle. Questo che lui chiama nudità è la raggiunta semplicità. È di tutti gli spiriti grandi questa smania di levarsi d'attorno il superfluo, il decorativo, l'inutile S'intende che parlo di povertà conquistata. Nudità e povertà come punto non di partenza, ma di arrivo. E arrivo dico, non ritorno. La povertà-nudità cui si giunge per una diritta sorveglianza di sé, non è quella da cui possiamo essere partiti nascendo: essa, quando è ben raggiunta, è fatta densa di tutte le prove accumulate lungo la vita attenta." Bontempelli, Massimo. *Introduzioni e discorsi*. Milano: Bompiani, 1964. 31.

19. For an overview of the principles of "magic realism" see: Bontempelli, Massimo. *Realismo magico e altri scritti sull'arte*. Ed. Elena Pontiggia. Carte d'artisti, 78. Milano: Abscondita, 2006.

20. Cagli Seidenberg 49.

21. The comment is reported on the back cover of *Before the Cock Crows*. The first chapter of that book had previously been published in *Stanford Short Stories 1956*, edited by Wallace Stegner and Richard Showcroft.

22. See dust jacket of *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*, 1996.

23. Ibid 195.

24. Ibid 167.

25. Ibid 177.

26. Bal 33.

27. For instance, a mixed feeling of pain, shame, and guilt seizes Ebe when she learns from her mother that they lost many relatives under the Nazi occupation. Cagli Seidenberg 163.

28. Ibid 193. In spite of the others' perception of her, Ebe feels like a "sister" to the "Mediterranean people" that walk in streets of Rome, and a "daughter" to Italy: "Avrei continuato a venire finchè avessi potuto. Perchè ero sempre venuta a ritrovare non una, ma due madri. E se una era mortale l'altra sarebbe stata sempre viva: l'altra che m'aveva respinta e ora sembrava pronta a riaccogliermi, volubile e pigra, orgogliosa e prodiga."

29. Ibid 179-180.

30. Ibid 182.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid 183-84.