Una donna: Autobiography as Exemplary Text*

Since its debut in 1906, Sibilla Aleramo’s Una donna has been interpreted as a book which is simultaneously autobiography and novel, confession and paradigm, personal and universal. Starting with the earliest reviews, some critics have focused on its factual matrix and interiority, while others have highlighted its feminist message. Arturo Graf proposed that “più che di un romanzo, ha carattere di giornale intimo” while, seventy-five years later, Olga Lombardi would declare that “si tratta di una lunga, appassionata confessione in cui l’autrice rifà la storia della propria vita” (737). At the same time, Graf’s contemporary, Alfredo Gargiulo, understood its seminal nature, placing it “nella bibbia del femminismo, al posto della genesi” alongside Ibsen’s plays, an opinion echoed in 1975 by Lanfranco Caretti: “è certo il primo libro femminista in Italia.” For Aleramo herself, Una donna was memoir, avowal, exposé, and, most profoundly, self-examination: “Ho dovuto, sempre, fare un grande sforzo per rievocare il passato che volevo, che dovevo narrare, e dal quale ormai ero del tutto estranea.” In keeping with much women’s writing, autobiography and novel merge creating a work which is both private and public: indeed, Una donna originated in a handful of diary annotations written in June 1901, a year before the neo-novelist began the composition of her first book. This “nucleo generatore” was carefully integrated into the text, emphasizing its confessional tone and sincerity. Aleramo was extremely concerned with the veracity of her fiction, as though any distortion of the facts would negate the validity of her message for, although her heroine’s tale was exemplary, it was also her story whose telling was an act of self-revelation. In the diaries kept late in life, the writer would comment that Una donna was “se non proprio una menzogna, per lo meno una mutilazione della verità,” because she had not told her entire personal history, a misrepresentation remedied in Il passaggio (1919). The emphasis on truthfulness contained in this revisionist re-telling underlines the fusion of the real and fictional selves in Aleramo’s writing:

Dissi in quel tempo che soltanto ad un interiore comando avevo ubbidito lasciando la casa dov’ero nata le moglie e madre. Come si va ad un martirio. Ed era vero. Dissi che nessuno m’incitava all’atto terribile, e che non per amore di un altro uomo m’esponevo così a perdere per sempre la mia creatura: anche ciò era vero.

Ma una cosa fu taciuta, allora, e più tardi nel mio libro.

Non era per amore di un altro uomo che’io mi liberavo: ma’io amavo un’alt’uomo. (Passaggio 27-28)
Throughout her long literary career, Sibilla would come to consistently and faithfully write herself, obliterating the demarcation between reality and imagination in a series of poetry collections, novels, and public diaries which link her production to that of other modern women “writers like Dorothy Richardson and Anaïs Nin, whose lives, journals, letters, and fiction become nearly coterminous” (Gardiner 185), to such an extent that Aleramo would come to create works like *Amo dunque sono* (1927), an autobiographical epistolary novel that reads like a diary for the beloved. Aleramo’s female protagonists are projections of herself and this narcissistic identification of author and character is further heightened by the employment of a first person narration. However, the tone, style, and purpose of *Una donna* differ from the lyric and fragmentary nature of later Sibillian prose, from which this first novel was also separated by more than a decade of artistic silence.

Notwithstanding its autobiographical fidelity, *Una donna* was intended as a manifesto, or a “thesis” novel, in which the obvious feminist ideology both includes and transcends the personal chronicle. In a letter dated September 17, 1904, two years prior to publication, Aleramo had already noted the paradigmatic value of her past, as well as her own detachment from it: “Io non ho messo in quelle pagine la creatura che sono oggi e che va rintracciando con umile tenacia la sua perfetta espressione: ma quella che fui: perciò esse non possono avere il valore che di un documento.” Indeed, the author is writing the history of her former self, Rina Pierangeli Faccio, a name and an identity she had shed upon becoming a new woman born of the experiences recounted in the pages of her text. Like history, *Una donna* records the past. Even the confessional element is attenuated by its relegation to a former time, emotionally distancing the narrator/writer from the protagonist. While the book’s first person narrative demands a participational reading reminiscent of the journals and autobiographies women often chose to compose “not only because they were more ‘acceptable,’ but because they often suited what was an underlying motive of women writings—the need to validate one’s own experiences” (Goulianos 81), its structure is essentially realist. Critics have frequently indicated *Una donna’s* ties to the naturalist literary environment, comparing its sensitive character delineation to Bourget’s penetrating psychological studies, or viewing its plot as a standard example of the “slice of life” school of documentary fiction. Rita Guerricchio has justly pointed out its similarity to the 19th century genre of the confession rétrospective. Like any journal, *Una donna* is a flow of memory attempting to recreate significant events and, like any diary, it is centered on the emotional states of the writer/protagonist reacting to the events described. But, because of its implied dual time frame (then and now) and the subsequent division of the “I” into narrator/witness and protagonist/actor, the book invites a binary interpretation: an understanding of the protagonist’s actual story presented in the chronologically sequential plot, to be followed by an ontological re-evaluation in light of the changes undergone by the narrator.
The heroine’s experiences offer a maturation process in progress whereas the narrating “I” attests to the achievement of the desired maturity and self-affirmation. In feminist terms, the witness has achieved the psychological liberation for which the protagonist is striving. In many ways, _Una donna_ is a “libro della mia memoria” which, like the Dantesque prototype, declares _incipit vita nova_, a new life whose meaning is understood in both personal and universal terms after the narrator has reappraised the past.

In recreating the significant moments in her own life, Aleramo seeks to associate a woman with Everywoman; the autobiographical tale becomes the story of woman-kind. In doing so, the author explores a variety of standard female literary motifs, which have been identified and described in recent scholarship on women writers, and utilizes several significant archetypal patterns, which will be detailed in the course of this analysis. Among the recurrent themes, common to women’s fiction, we find: the focus on family life, including the issues of bonding with the parents, particularly the mother; the portrayal of adolescence as an androgynous period in which the growing girl falls prey to romantic illusions fostered by fanciful readings or social indoctrination; male seduction leading to the eventual betrayal of the young women’s dreams and fantasies; the presentation of marriage as the imprisonment of the individual, who seeks escape through either sublimation (in maternity or art), madness, or death. In addition, many of Aleramo’s structural and stylistic choices serve to depersonalize and, thereby, universalize her narration. The division of the text and its ordering indicate Sibilla’s adherence to a somewhat traditional format. The story line is presented sequentially from earliest childhood memories to the narrating present with no use of flashbacks and a relatively consistent use of the past tenses. Because _Una donna_ is meant to represent the opportunities for growth and transformation even in the midst of oppression, the adoption of the _passato remoto_ and the _imperfetto_ also signifies the narrator’s break with the past. The heroine has gone beyond the reality described and survived; the past is now memory, albeit painful. By implication, other women in similar circumstances can do the same. It is important to note that Aleramo’s first draft was written in the present tense, which naturally intensified the emotional level and the immediacy of communication, making the book more diaristic, but this verbal choice narrowed the focus on change and rebirth. By opting for the finality of the past tenses rather than the ongoing quality of the present, the author requires her public to assume the perspective of the narrating “I.”

The framework of _Una donna_ is composed of three interrelated sections, each with a clear thematic core. In turn, the internal structures of each part are complementary, although they do not correspond in chronological time. Parti Prima and Seconda are of similar length (nine and ten chapters, respectively) but of unequal duration: the first follows the heroine from childhood to a suicide attempt through a series of obligatory female rites of passage including puberty, marriage, and motherhood; the second section
stresses inner growth and its time is psychologically defined; the chapters indicate interior change rather than the passage of years and the protagonist’s education is predominantly spiritual. Not incidentally, the nine chapters of Parte Prima contrast thematically with the ten of Seconda: the former document the heroine’s integration into the roles society creates for her and their destructive aftermath whereas the latter stress personal, rather than social, development. Parte Terza covers a short temporal span and a mere three chapters in narrative space; its truncated length is a sign of its content, for the protagonist opts for authenticity and abandons her family and, by doing so, the past. This focus on growth and process leading to closure suggest an inherent affinity between the design of Una donna and the patterns of the Bildungsroman.

Generically, a Bildung story details the psychological development of the main character; as it is traditionally defined, such a novel is an optimistic rendering of male development and integration into the social fabric. The genre’s acknowledged prototype, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1796), follows the adventures and misadventures of the protagonist, a merchant’s son, as he sets forth to learn about life and decipher its meaning in a series of sexual encounters, work experiences, reversals, and achievements. The sequel, Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, oder die Entsagenden (1821–1829), depicts the mature Meister relating to his society as a contributing member. Briefly put, the classic German Bildungsroman and its imitators are about leaving childhood, exploring the world, and learning lessons with the specific intent of creating rational, responsible paradigms of human behavior; the hero gradually matures by leaving the security of family and home and venturing into the unknown and often hostile world. In the end, the Bildung hero has achieved a private identity which allows him to integrate into a social group (generally, the bourgeoisie) by adopting its values. Clearly, many of the topoi utilized in a male Bildung process cannot apply to female protagonists because of the diverse natures of their socio-sexual development. Recent studies on novels of female maturation, notably Annis Pratt’s Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction and the anthological The Voyage in Fictions of Female Development, have dealt with variations on the Bildungsroman as it is adjusted to portray women’s reality. The nineteenth century proposed two models of female development novels. Early, socially conservative stories written for young girls emphasized patriarchal values to their readers, such as chastity, domesticity, submissiveness, and altruism. Texts like Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868) or Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) and their Italian counterparts, for example Neera’s and Marchesa Colombi’s numerous novels, taught girls the need to subordinate their individuality and will to others in order to become good wives and mothers through acquiescence, chastity, and self-sacrifice. These novels offered models for “growing down” rather than “growing up,” to distinguish the different existential sphere inhabited by women. Since the traditional woman’s domain is private rather than pub-
lic, her life-style is defined by confinement and passivity offering no valid openings to the outside world in which the male conducts his quest for identity, autonomy, and position. Female life is directed to closure not adventure, obeisance not action, chastity not sexuality. Therefore, while the female novels of development follow the linear pattern of the male Bildungsroman in tracing their heroines from childhood into adulthood, the maturation process is necessarily spiritual, since girls are not afforded mobility, and their human encounters and work experiences are purely domestic. Lacking freedom and unable to leave the home, such a heroine grows through her relationships with a limited, familiar number of individuals and through her own inwardness. Her apprenticeship is pre-ordained. A sub-genre of this conventional and conservative female Bildung novel traces the spiritual nature of the heroine’s quest beyond its seemingly inevitable conclusion in marriage and maternity. Often called the “novel of awakening,” this version deals with “the struggle—and, all too often, failure—of women to achieve ethical autonomy”¹⁴ within traditional society. In this variation on the novel of development, the protagonist comes to understand the disparity between social expectations and personal aspirations; because of a fundamental discontent with her lot and through personal meditation, the “awakened” heroine strives for self-fulfillment and authenticity only to be blocked by the obstacles created by the patriarchal order. “The protagonist’s growth results typically not with ‘an art of living,’ as for her male counterpart, but instead with a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations.”¹⁵ In keeping with this negative epiphany, many late nineteenth and early twentieth century novels of awakening end tragically with adultery, loss, madness, and even death due to the impossibility of integrating individual needs and the demands of social conformity. Seeking real growth, the heroine meets with rejection and dead-ends forcing her to retreat, abdicate, or choose non-conformity and exile.

Una donna’s narrative patterns borrow from both the classic female novel of development and its evolutionary offspring, the novel of awakening. The initial pattern described in the book’s first chapters appears to herald a standard male Bildungsroman, for the protagonist as child rejects passivity and domesticity in favor of action and energy. She reads voraciously, possesses a questioning mind, finds pleasure in her athletic prowess, emulates her father’s work ethic, refuses feminine tasks, and rejects the home in favor of office work at the factory. Drawn to power, independence, authority, intellect, and an undefined sensuality, the girl favors the assertive world and personality of her father while denying the value of her mother’s femininity. It is only with advancing puberty and the forced recognition of her sexual identification that the protagonist conforms to standard behavioral norms applied to women and, even then, only after having been manipulated, spiritually seduced, and physically violated by an attractive and inferior co-worker. At this point, the text implies that cross-sexual attitudes call for the downfall of the “mas-
culine” heroine as a negative model which is to be avoided: “for women, identification with the father can only interfere with development. Women who rebel against the female role are perceived as unnatural and pay the price of unhappiness, if not madness or death.” The rape of her innocence is the end of the protagonist’s spiritual virginity and spatial freedom. It is also the introduction of a more conventional female development pattern directed at producing good mothers and wives rather than rebellious androgynes. As often occurs in early female Bildungsromane, the non-conformist girl must be made to comply through suffering and punishment. Because of her violent sexual initiation, the heroine’s biology has become her destiny and she must follow society’s fixed gender roles. Having lost ownership of her body according to established morality, this child-woman of fifteen abdicates her personhood as well and becomes the property of her rapist:

Appartenevo ad un uomo, dunque? Lo credetti dopo non so quanti giorni d’uno smarrimento senza nome.

............

Avevo cominciato a pensare che forse amavo il giovane da tanti mesi senza saperlo.... Poi avevo soggiunto che forse, in quell’avvenire di amore e di dedizione non mai prima intraveduto, era la salvezza, era la pace, era la gioia. Sua moglie ... Non l’ero di già? Egli m’aveva voluta, egli m’era destinato, tutto s’era disposto mentre io credevo seguire una ben diversa via ... Quello sposo delle leggende, che m’era sempre parso un pucile personaggio, esisteva, era lui! (Una donna 48–49)

Her acceptance of his will equals the endorsement of sexual pre-determination according to the values of passivity, vigilance, and subordination required of a woman because of the very nature of her female-ness and fostered—consciously and unconsciously—in gender-directed cultural messages. The metamorphosis from ravager into prince, violence into love, and independent human being into possession re-establishes the traditional prototype of the female Bildungsroman: her role is that of the fairy-tale heroine. Like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, she prepares for a life similar to those fictions which “portrayed acquiescent females who cultivated domestic virtues in dreamy anticipation of a prince’s rescue by which the heroine might enter magically into marriage—her highest calling.” Having entered the female sphere, the heroine is quite literally domesticated, abandoning the outer world for the interior spaces reserved her sex. It is her first taste of closure, as she is confined to her father’s house, awaiting marriage:

V’era stato davvero un tempo in cui io potevo recarmi alla spiaggia a mio piacere, a tuffarmi per ore nell’acqua, e vagar nella campagna, e abbandonarmi a sogni di lavoro e di bellezza senza fine?

Adesso le giornate scorrevano quasi per intero nel silenzio della mia stanzetta.

(53)

With marriage, not only physical surroundings, but the entire future is limited: “io ero proprio una donna maritata, un personaggio serio, cui l’esistenza era
definitivamente fissata” (55). With the achievement of the married state, Una donna’s heroine has completed the voyage of discovery charted for women, crowned with the joy of motherhood. Yet, just as marriage is a closure to the dreams, hopes, aspirations and freedom of adolescence, other such terminations and impediments appear as the novel progresses, continuing the protagonist’s maturation process. Attempting to be the perfect wife, the heroine becomes a perfectly unhappy one, reacting with inertia and frigidity to her new husband. Her legendary prince has not rescued her but metamorphosed, instead, into a tyrannical, sexually demanding toad. Maternity augurs a new fulfillment and an escape from personal unhappiness which is socially acceptable but it does not complete her. As she attempts to regain a measure of meaningfulness and power over the environment through her child, he becomes her stand-in as she sets out to mold him, making the boy the image of her perfect self, an impossible task. The more she gives her son, the less the heroine has left for herself:

In verità, al di fuori della somma di energie ch’io spendevo attorno al bambino, era in me un’incapacità sempre maggiore di vedere, di volere, di vivere: come una stanchezza morale si sovrapponeva a quella fisica, lo scontento di me stessa, il rimprovero della parte migliore di me che avevo trascurata, di quel mio io profondo e sincero, così a lungo represso, mascherato. Non era un’infermità, era la deficienza fondamentale della mia vita che si faceva sentire. In me la madre non s’integrava nella donna. (74-75)

At this juncture in the text, a conservative Bildungsroman would create a crisis situation, the death or grave illness of the child perhaps, and bring the protagonist back to her senses and her appropriate place as a faithful wife and devoted mother. Instead, Aleramo shifts the action so that the book clearly presents itself as a novel of awakening rather than a classic novel of female development whose intended goal is the exaltation of passive womanly virtues and the praise of married life. Now conscious of her inner needs and existential angst, the heroine seeks for wholeness; another opening to personal satisfaction materializes in the person of a “forestiero,” an outsider come to invade her limited physical and psychological spaces. She idealizes her platonie lover and romanticizes the beauty of their adulterous attachment, only to reject him too when he proves as animalistic and egotistical as her rapist husband. By the conclusion of the first section of Una donna, the heroine has attempted all avenues of self-realization open to women in a traditional society: marriage, motherhood, and romantic love. All have failed her and the consequences of having violated her vows (albeit only in thought) and having stained her husband’s name (her own being valueless) are abuse, public dishonor, and further confinement into the unreachable recesses of her house turned prison. Beaten and unheeded, “come un oggetto immondo” (90), the bruised woman chooses the negative self-affirmation of suicide only to be forced back to life.
Seen as an independent whole, *Una donna*’s Parte Prima operates as a prototype of the novel of awakening, very like Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, books to which it is often compared. Like Emma Bovary and Edna Pontellier, Sibilla’s protagonist is the victim of an inherent duality. Caught between society’s dictums and her private self, she turns to adulterous love, despair, and death. All three characters seek resolutions to their emptiness first in marriage, then through their children, and finally in an alternative passion, only to find that all are wanting; thus, suicide becomes the last possibility for women suffocating in their optionless lives. The awareness of social constraints, the subordination to a spouse’s whims and demands in keeping with the Pauline injunction that wives submit to their husbands, motherly affection, and the abdication to male supremacy are all signs of a cyclical fate which is passed from mother to daughter through the generations, offering only resignation, madness, or death as female openings: “Amare e sacrificarsi e soccombere! Questo il destino [di mia madre] e forse di tutte le donne?” (64). The opening and closing sentences of this section of Aleramo’s novel point to the negative knowledge achieved by the protagonist. Going from an attitude of vital autonomy—“La mia fanciullezza fu libera e gagliarda” (19)—to one of lifeless abandon to the power of the other, the male—“Ma la mano ferma ed inflessibile mi resse il capo, mi costrinse” (93)—the heroine has awakened to the reality of her woman’s identity in a patriarchal universe. In her depiction of this female *iter* which closely parallels her own experiences, Sibilla Aleramo manages to integrate a number of recognizable archetypal images that mirror the universal female condition and emphasize the paradigmatic nature of her *Bildung* narrative.

Since archetypes are woven into the fabric of the collective unconscious, these categories are not necessarily calculated by the artist but flow naturally into a work, being common, if variable, images, narrative patterns, and types. A number of recurrent archetypal patterns found in literature by women, as identified by Annis Pratt, emerge from *Una donna*. These include patterns the critic terms green world, rape trauma, growing-up-grotesque, marriage as enclosure, insanity, and punishment for transgression. As employed by Aleramo, these archetypes are not mutually exclusive but blend harmoniously in the structure of her plot and the characterization of her protagonists. In her adolescent, pre-sexual development, Sibilla’s heroine displays a predilection for physical sovereignty and a one-ness with the infinite natural world (the green world archetype) that sets her apart from the invasive and threatening social order and offers her a place for authenticity. At the same time, she finds herself innately unsuited because of her intellect, aspirations, and self-determination to the community she rejects but is destined to enter (the growing-up-grotesque archetype).

The vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescent hero’s attitude toward her future here meet and conflict with the expectations and dictates of the surrounding society. Every element of her desired world—freedom to come and go, alle-
giance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities—inevitably clashes with patriarchal norms. (Pratt 29)

The adolescent’s ingress into male-dominated society is often forced and involves the loss of autonomy and self-hood (the rape trauma), contrasting the freedom of the green world with the enclosure of marriage. Part of the Sibillian protagonist’s grotesqueness is based on her personal identification with masculine rather than feminine qualities. Aleramo clearly divides the two spheres through the representation of the parental figures. The Father and Mother are both individuals and stereotypes, embodying, respectively, reason and emotion. He is a scientist, risk-taker, manager, leader, freethinker, and atheist: the symbol of authority and action. By comparison, she is a shadow figure whose traits include submissiveness, fragility, resignation, sentimentality, and anxiety. The dynamic Father overpowers the passive Mother, controls her, and eventually breaks her will. The daughter’s affinities, before marriage, are totally paternal as she is drawn to him in a complex, exclusive, and exclusionary bond:

Era lui il luminoso esemplare per la mia piccola individualità, lui che mi rappresentava la bellezza della vita: un istinto mi faceva ritenere provvidenziale il suo fascino. Nessuno gli somigliava: egli sapeva tutto e aveva sempre ragione. (19)

Even into puberty, the protagonist continues to cater to her paternal demigod, more son than daughter. She emulates his work ethic and beliefs, keeps her hair short, runs, swims, works at the factory, and rejects the passive life of her mother. Drawn to male power, she is androgynous and abhors her blossoming womanhood, outrightly rejecting marriage as her destiny. It is the Mother she is repudiating and the traditional female role. Whereas father and daughter are ostracized and excluded by the community, a small provincial Southern town, the mother is honored as the ideal: “Trovavano alla mamma un viso da madonna, e voci femminili le mormoravan dietro benedizioni per i suoi bambini” (30). The Marian model is a perfect patriarchal projection of suitable womanliness in its devotion, piety, humility, chastity, and obedience to male authority. Such virtues are shunned in men, however, “and the type of virtues decreed feminine degenerate easily: obedience becomes docility; gentleness, irresolution; humility, cringing; forbearance, long suffering” (Warner 190). Trapped in her virtues and rendered powerless, the Mother gains public commendation but loses herself. The frail woman, unloved and unnecessary, impulsively attempts suicide, survives, and slowly declines into childishness and then, insanity. The melancholia, hysteria, and masochism of the Mother are brought about by her enclosure in the spaces and limitations of marriage, which afford her no room of her own in which to define herself. Having lost her husband’s love, fidelity, and erotic interest, she develops into the mad wife so common in literature by women: insanity is the consummation of the bounded female condition. Aleramo’s Mother is confined from
the beginning to the end of the novel. She inhabits her house, the only universe she knows. Even her joyful memories are contained in four domestic walls: "La mamma si illuminava nel volto bianco e puro le rarissime volte che accennava alle due stanzine coi mobili a nolo dei primi mesi di vita coniugale" (22). Significantly, the Father introduces his daughter to working spaces and nature whereas the Mother instructs her in prayer in the limits of her childhood room. While the Father's spaces enlarge, the Mother's narrow. She can only escape by fleeing the house, flinging herself from a window during her suicide attempt. In the end, she is truly "confined" to the cell of an asylum where she disintegrates slowly until she disappears altogether in death. The Mother's final space, a legacy to her daughter, is a box which contains forgotten letters, words from a past which is being relived in the daughter's present.

After her rape and subsequent engagement, Una donna's heroine finds herself excluded from male space and confined to domestic areas. Exiled from the factory and work, she sees her boundaries progressively narrowing. The parental house is left for a small apartment from which she can gaze upon the area of her lost freedom through glass openings:

Le finestre della saletta da pranzo del nostro appartamento davano su uno stradone, di là dal quale si stendevano alcuni orti, al fondo si scorgeva un profilo di colline e una striscia di mare. (55)

After the discovery of her supposed adultery, the marito-padrone limits her access to the public rooms to the morning hours, then "per tema ch'io ricevessi qualcuno, venivo chiusa a chiave fino al suo ritorno . . . sola col piccino nell'ambiente caldo e ingombro della camera da letto prospicente sul giardino abbandonato" (98). It is symbolic that the heroine's prince of love become her jailer in marriage, locking his two properties in the room which most defines the wife's sexual submission and social role. It is also the room of her supposed adultery, for which she is expected to pay with her life according to a violent code of honor (the punishment for transgression archetype):

. . . dopo una notte inenarrabile in cui il mio viso ricevette a volta a volta sputi e baci, e il mio corpo divenne null'altro che un povero involucro inanimato, mi sentii proporre una simulazione di suicidio . . . "Bisogna che io ti faccia morire di mia mano; ma non voglio andar in galera: devo far credere che ti sei data la morte da te stessa . . ." (90)

The decision to commit suicide by poison, with its obvious literary echoes, becomes the protagonist's chosen path to deliverance, preferable to the route of insanity taken by her mother. It is a standard escape from the patriarchy chosen by women from Emma Bovary to Sylvia Plath, but, it does not conclude Sibilla Aleramo's book.

Una donna's Parte Seconda offers an alternative Bildung pattern which structurally mirrors the movement in the novel's first section, but offers another mode of development unrelated to traditional female roles and, thus,
fundamentally non-sexual. The protagonist defines her attempted suicide as a means of cancelling out the past and beginning anew: "La mia esistenza doveva finire in quel punto: la donna ch’io ero stata fino a quella notte doveva morire" (95). The voyage into the realm of the dead becomes the instrument of rebirth: "Da un’altra sponda... Come nel punto di darmi la morte, io considerai il mondo e me stessa con occhi affatto nuovi, rinascendo" (95). The period of recovery is a gradual exorcism, a necessary confrontation with the past and a tentative search for regeneration. Enclosed in her domestic prison, the protagonist explores the only space open to her: the mind. Docile, conscious of her impotence in the social sphere, "condannata a camminare curva" (101), she transforms her jail into a cloister devoted to spiritual growth. The signs for this change are books, particularly one which offers her "una causa di salvezza" (102). Like Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, she too finds books a means to growth. Meaningfully, the readings that influence the protagonist of Parte Prima are romances, love stories, fairy tales: "Io leggevo nei libri vicende d’amore e d’odio" (33). The redemptive book of her new spiritual life is a sociological tract, an intellectual reflection on the human condition, in which she could participate "all’ideale costruzione d’un mondo" (103). From her diaries and later writings, it is possible to catalogue Aleramo’s known readings,20 which correspond to the life experiences portrayed in the first and second parts of Una donna. In childhood and youth these included the major Romantics: Dumas, Hugo, Manzoni, Aleardi, and De Amicis. The texts of her intellectual growth counted Whitman, Emerson, Nietzsche, Amiel, Ibsen, and the first, generative volume—Guglielmo Ferrero’s L’Europa giovane (1897), whose fervent humanitarian and socialist tone appealed to the budding intellectual’s need for a mission in life to replace the insufficiency of her wifely state. First by serious reading, then through writing, the heroine discovers an opening to the vast community beyond her provincial town and repressive family. Words become the means of consolation and communication, the negation of her isolation, and an affirmation of her spiritual freedom. Through the act of writing, Aleramo’s protagonist conclusively rejects solipsism in favor of human association, even within the limits of her marital boundaries. Still confined to her rooms, she can elude inertia through the activity of her mind and enter the outside world by sending forth her words. It is at this point in the narrative that the heroine discovers her similarity to other women; her fate corresponds to that of innumerable generations of wives and mothers. Joining the struggle for change and emancipation, the heroine finds a measure of self-worth in her intellectual contributions which recalls the sense of self-hood and hopeful achievement experienced in early adolescence before she became defined by her female-ness. Within the text’s imagery, this spiritual opening is followed by spatial expansion, as the action moves from the provincial town of Parte Prima to the urban perimeters of Rome.

Having been "allowed" to work for a woman’s magazine under her hus-
band’s vigilant and resentful gaze, Aleramo’s woman discovers the existence of welcome enclosures, such as the work place, studios, salons, and theaters, which are growth-producing and non-confining. This expansion of her universe from the private to the public, as she moves from the oppressive town to the metropolis, is only one aspect of the specularity linking the first and second parts of Una donna. Just as the protagonist redefines the physical boundaries of the woman’s sphere, so too she reinterprets her former perceptions of marriage, family, and love. Whereas in Parte Prima, the characters are denoted by their functions in relationship to the heroine as a member of the patriarchy—mother, father, in-laws, husband, son, doctor, stranger, and so forth—in the Seconda the women in particular are defined by their public capacities outside of their traditional roles: editor, writer, actress, artist. The heroine quickly adopts a new role model, a “buona mamma mia” of the spirit rather than of blood, who offers “un tacito convegno . . . alla mia anima” (130) and inspires by her altruism, social activism, integrity, and steadfastness: “era bene l’immagine del genio femminile manifestatosi attraverso i secoli in qualche rara individualità più forte d’ogni costrizione di legge o di costume” (136). Drawn to unconventional, dedicated, independent individualists, Sibilla’s woman reassesses her beliefs, discovers the existence of love based on shared values and freely given, and becomes infatuated with the mysterious “profeta,” an ascetic metaphysician who is the antithesis of her brutal domineering mate. These elective affinities, the stimulation of her mind, her personal achievements and professional accomplishments enlarge her horizons but do not lead to freedom. Even at work, she is controlled and subject to her husband’s desires, his insurance policy being their son. Given the option of a legal separation but the loss of her son, the woman returns with her husband to their provincial home, remaining in the emotional desert of her marriage, held there by convention, law, and proprietary instinct. Denied the life and liberty desired, she relinquishes her better self and returns to bondage. The movement from affirmation to defeat underlying the structure of Una donna’s Parte Prima is reiterated as the protagonist repeats her suicide attempt, killing not the body but the soul. While packing, she realizes that her boxes are “tante bare nelle quali seppellivo, cogli oggetti e coi libri, i miei sogni e i miei palpiti” (173). It is one of a series of metaphors depicting the ineluctability and proximity of death which close Parte Seconda, ranging from the vision of her dying friend who is weakened and consumed by disease, the “cara dormiente” carried away on “il carro carico di fiori,” to the tomb-like decay of the prophet’s dwelling which she enters through “l’oscura scala della vecchia umida casa,” and concluding with the heaviness of the final image: “avevo . . . ribadito la catena” (171–173).

The second section of Una donna is a modification of the novel of awakening in which the protagonist realizes the paradigmatic qualities of her individual experience and interprets herself as an example of the general female condition. Logically, having undergone such “consciousness-raising,” the
narrator adds a tone of “analisi-accusa” to the linear telling of her story which invites the reader to make further comparisons between this woman and other women. Such a comparison is being undertaken within the text by the heroine herself as part of her existential reassessment. Whereas the first part of the novel was dominated by the description of characters and events, the second augments the importance of meditation, in keeping with the protagonist’s new life of spiritual awareness. The entire patriarchal order is under scrutiny and found wanting; Aleramo attacks class divisions, the subservience of women, the structure of the family, sexual education, social hypocrisy, the legal system, standardized gender roles, superstition, religious bigotry, and much more. The assault is sufficiently pervasive to lead feminist critic Maria Antonietta Macciocchi to muse on Una donna’s substantial political momentousness for the present:

Così il libro dell’Aleramo, proprio nel più rigoroso contesto ideologico marxista, mi pare costituisca oggi una potente arma di lotta nel campo delle idee perché, malgrado la sua “ingenuità” esteriore, esso è costruito come battaglia a morte dentro e contro il centro della sovrastruttura morale egemone della borghesia, che, come detto, è malauguratamente quella di quasi tutta la “società civile.” (6)

Although not a Marxist until late in her long life, Sibilla Aleramo was well aware of the subversive nature of her book. But before she could enunciate a mature revolutionary message, she had to confront the core of her social and biological being—motherhood—within her life and, later, text.

In Una donna, it is through sexual initiation, marriage, and, most profoundly, maternity, that the woman first identifies herself as female, shifting her allegiance and empathy from Father to Mother. It is a move the heroine initially rejects, for “often there is a conflict between a ‘personal identification’ with the admirable aspects of the mother and a rejection of ‘positional identification’ with the mother as victim” (Gardiner 186). Actually, the protagonist is repudiating her mother’s self-sacrificing masochism which has become synonymous with the older woman’s self-destruction: “Dinanzi a quella miseria umana che mi ricercava nel mezzo della notte, ebbi una rivolta selvaggia di tutto l’essere . . .” (62). Yet, upon becoming a mother herself, the daughter reverts to a similar pattern of self-sacrifice, experiencing the joys of an indissoluble union with another being who totally loves and accepts her. The heroine initially agrees with the premise that maternity is gratification. Finding that thesis wanting, she remains unable to resolve the dichotomy between motherly selflessness and individual self-realization until the final section of the novel.

Having already determined the separation between personhood and motherhood in Parte Prima during her abortive search for romantic love, the protagonist determines the importance of personhood for motherhood during her long meditations in the book’s central section: “Ma la buona madre non deve essere, come la mia, una semplice creatura di sacrificio: deve essere
una donna, una persona umana” (114–115). To become that complete person, within the circumstances created by the social order, requires total severance, an action she is unwilling to take because of her maternal attachment. Like its predecessors, the Parte Terza begins on a note of affirmation:

Per la prima volta sentivo intera la mia indipendenza morale, mentre a Roma avevo sempre conservato, in fondo, qualche scrupolo nell’affermarmi libera, sciolta d’ogni obbligo verso colui al quale la legge mi legava. (175)

The return to the abhorred town proves so compressing to the protagonist that she is destined to implode into madness or explode into rebellion, finding herself enclosed in her mad mother’s house and detested husband’s family, unless she acts upon her recognition of moral autonomy. Concluding that “la rassegnazione non è una virtù” (172) but the abdication of the self, the woman realizes that the love of her son costs his mother’s humiliation and denial, which proves too great a sacrifice for both. The heroine acknowledges that mothering is actually selfishness rather than selflessness for the traditional matriarch demands fulfillment from her offspring since she cannot achieve it in her own life. The author reaches the nucleus of the patriarchal attitude towards women—the biological destiny of permanent and altruistic bonding to their children—and calls it a lie:

Perché nella maternità adoriamo il sacrificio? Donde è scesa a noi questa inumana idea dell’immolazione materna? Di madre in figlia, da secoli, si tramanda il servaggio. È una mostruosa catena. Tutte abbiamo, a un certo punto della vita, la coscienza di quel che fece pel nostro bene chi ci generò; e con la coscienza il rimorso di non aver compensato adeguatamente l’olocausto della persona dilettata. Allora riversiamo sui nostri figli quanto non demmo alle madri, riniegando noi stesse e offrendo un nuovo esempio di mortificazione, di annientamento. (182)

The protagonist does not negate her maternal feelings but, rather than remain in an unhappy and destructive family out of a sense of guilt and duty, fostering the continuation of the female cycle of subordination and depersonalization, she opts for authenticity and loss. Rejecting her role, “in certo modo legittimando una ignobile schiavitù, santificando una mostruosa menzogna” by continuing to wear “la maschera di moglie soddisfatta” (189), the woman escapes in order to be true to herself and survive. To do so, she must give up her child, thus proposing another ancient archetype found in the myths of the mother goddesses who, like Isis, must sacrifice their sons to renew themselves. While ending on a note of closure—the end of a marriage, a social condition, a lifestyle, a role—the concluding section of Una donna subverts the reader’s expectations. Its closure is not a suicide by a personal rebirth: the heroine willingly and knowingly leaves her former self behind to become her authentic “I,” the voice of the narrator. Her act is assertive, not passive. Boarding a train in the darkness of night, she emerges to a new day in a new space which is difficult but open to her: “... mi avviali triste ma
ferma, tra il fumo e la folla, fuor della stazione, m’inoltrai, misera e sperduta, nelle strade rumorose ove il sole sgombrava la nebbia” (199). Desolate over the loss of her child, but “in pace con me stessa” (202), Sibilla Aleramo’s prototypical woman completes her voyage from the enclosed spaces of her traditional past to the open possibilities of an uncertain future, having completed the journey from pre-determination to self-determination in a metaphor of death leading to life and darkness unto dawn.

Compared to the structure of the first and second sections of *Una donna*, Parte Terza is visibly truncated, a mere three chapters covering about one chronological year. Within the thematics of the book, such a reduction signifies open-endedness and promise: the narrator-witness speaking from the “now” about “then” offers an option to all who make the same journey of discovery. It is not coincidental that the final pages of Aleramo’s text present a semantic switch from the Past to the Present and Future tenses proposing hope in place of despair, choice rather than destiny. Within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, Sibilla Aleramo is returning to the model of the male novel of development, but at mid-point, just as the hero is about to venture into the outside world, after having received his early formal education, as yet uncertain as to what awaits him. Having exited from the private world reserved to women in the patriarchy, Aleramo’s narrator and protagonist merge, a character in flux, narrating the past to make it intelligible but also to terminate it. Having experienced her own epiphany, Sibilla offers her life as an exemplar for others. Her autobiography is joined to history: “integrazione di personalità diventa per l’Aleramo anche integrazione della propria situazione con la situazione femminile storica” (in Federezoni 55). Rebelling against polarized gender roles, internalized prejudices, sexual predestination, and enclosure, the author depicts her own awakening as the voyage of Everywoman, thereby creating one of the earliest examples of female rebirth fiction and fulfilling the dream of her protagonist-persona. Within the *Bildungsroman* tradition, she is returning, in essence, to the model of the male novel of development, cruelly truncated in the first chapters of Parte Prima by biological predetermination: this return is at mid-point, just as the *Bildung* hero is about to venture into the outside world, as yet uncertain as to what awaits. The distinctions between male and female are erased offering the beginning, if not the whole, of a genderless novel of development. For her part, Sibilla Aleramo had produced “un libro, il libro... un libro d’amore e di dolore... che mostrasse al mondo intero l’anima femminile moderna.” *Una donna* is her “capolavoro equivalente ad una vita” (122).

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NOTES

* This article, originally accepted for *Quaderni d'italianistica*, appeared erroneously in the volume *Donna: Women in Italian Culture*. Ed. A. Testaferrri. Ottawa; Dovehouse, 1989 (University of Toronto Italian Studies 7). We reprint it here, with some minor changes and adjournments by the author.

1 In Graf. The critical tendency to interpret Aleramo as a confessional writer is constant and fostered by the writer's autobiographical declarations. In his analysis of the novel, Ugo Ojetti suggested it was an "esempio vivo e franco d'una nuova morale che proclama il proprio diritto alla libertà e all'intelligenza attiva." Ojetti's view is echoed in a recent article by Lea Melandri: "La professione insistente di 'sincerità' confonde: Sibilla è così determinata nel voler essere ‘sincera,' semplicemente perché si sente nel ‘vero’ e nel ‘giusto,’ può essere con tanta innocenza spudorata rispetto alla legge morale e alla tradizione, solo perché ha trovata ‘pace interiore' in un'altra ‘legge' e un altro ‘ordin.'" (14).

2 Caretti 170. Aleramo's first novel was immediately embraced by the proponents of the Question femminile as a significant contribution to literature about woman's role in society. Not all reviewers were defendents of the novel, however. Virginia Olper Monis was one of many to criticize the sacrifice of the protagonist's son to her individuality, concluding "perciò non è possibile porlo ad esempio delle donne pensanti." For discussions of *Una donna's* importance for feminist discourse see Caesar, Cecchi, Nozzi, and Pezzini's "L'autobiografismo e il femminismo" in Federezioni, Pezzini, Pozzato. Offering multiple critical methodologies, Contorbia, Melandri, and Morino's *Sibilla Aleramo. Coscienza e scrittura* is an anthology of short essays dealing with the writer's life, works, diaries, and literary connections. It also contains an extensive bibliography. Viano looks at Aleramo's "spazio otobiografico." More specifically literary treatments are found in Guerricchio, Miceli Jefferies, and Jewell. Pickering-Iazzi discusses the theme of motherhood in *Una donna*.

3 In Aleramo *La donna e il Femminismo* 171. The quotation is a diary entry from the *Taccuini*, dated "estate 1903"

4 The autobiographical nature of women's writing is a characteristic and well-studied phenomenon. An interesting investigation into the ways in which women novelists create self-expression is conducted by Spacks in *The Female Imagination*. More recent excursions into the "theory and practice of autobiography" by women are proposed in books edited by the Personal Narratives Group and Stanton.

5 During her long life, Aleramo always kept diaries and regularly affirmed the ties between her existential experiences and her writing. The confessional nature of *Una donna* is reinforced in the final chapter of the book, in which the author declares the work to be a journal for her lost son. The actual diary annotations which inspired *Una donna*, known as the "nucleo generatore," are found in Aleramo's *La donna e il Femminismo*. The best source for biographical information on the writer, based extensively on her works and primary sources, is Conti and Morino's *Sibilla Aleramo e il suo tempo*. The editors of this volume integrate considerable material from Aleramo's fiction and non-fictional writings in their re-creation of her life and time, allowing the writer to speak for herself.

6 *Amore insolito* 335. Aleramo writes that it was at the suggestion of Giovanni Cena, then her lover, that she excluded the story of her affair with poet Guglielmo Felice Damiani from the plot of *Una donna*. Cena believed that the inclusion of an adulterous love would trivialize the impact of the novel and deflect interest from the potent feminist statement desired. Aleramo would later attribute this advice to Cena's bruised male ego rather than to his literary acumen.

7 Aleramo began work on *Una donna* in 1902; it was published in 1906 by STEN after having received several rejections. Her next novel appeared in 1919. In the dozen or so years between works, Aleramo was involved in social work alongside her lover Cena. At first she worked in a clinic for the poor sponsored by the Unione Femminile; later, she dedicated herself to the creation of schools for migrant workers in the Agro Romano. Her social involvements included gathering earthquake relief for Sicily in 1908 and aid to
prostitutes. The separation from Cena initiated a long period of temporary liaisons—well into her middle-age—with several notable and younger figures of the Italian cultural scene, including Vincenzo Cardarelli, Dino Campana, Giovanni Papini, Umberto Boccioni, and Salvatore Quasimodo. She was considered a sexual superwoman of sorts and a proponent of free love. Notwithstanding a normadic existence, Aleramo continued to produce poetry, novels, plays, and non-fiction until her death in 1960. Her attachment to social causes became foremost in her later years, when she joined the Comunist Party and became its active spokesperson.

8 Part of a letter to Angelo Conti, quoted in Guerricchio 81.
9 Guerricchio 81. Lombardi declares that Aleramo is “legata a un clima e a una stagione naturalistica di cui elabora liberamente i moduli con un’espressione precisa ma già ariosa” (737). Preferring a feminist reading, Nozzoli suggests that “i luoghi comuni del romanzo sentimentale e piccolo-borghese, quelli stessi funerei e torbidi del postdannunzianesimo, vengono distrutti in maniera impietosa dell’apprendistato «femminista» di Unadonna, la cui crescita avviene a spese dei tradizionali rapporti maschio-femmina” (37).

10 Consult de Beauvoir, Colaiacomo, Cutrufelli, Donovan, Ellmann, Greene and Kahn, Marcuzzo, Moers, Pratt, Showalter, and Spacks for extended discussions of women writers and feminist discourse.

11 See Guerricchio 90–96 for a stylistic discussion of Aleramo’s use of time, tense, and narrative levels. Guerricchio criticizes Aleramo’s shift from the present to the past tense, believing that it “dates” the text: “Si perde invece nella stesura finale, il carattere di frammenti di diario che l’uso del presente conferiva, nella prima redazione, a quelle stesse sequenze, dove il ricordo perdeva ogni funzione descrittiva per assumerne una attualizzante” (96).

12 For information on the first draft of Unadonna see Guerricchio 94–96, where specific passages are compared.

13 See Pratt’s chapter “The Novel of Development” and Gardiner for discussions of the female novel of development and its relationship to psychological maturation. Also consult Showalter’s “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” in Writing and Sexual Difference and Garner Kahane and Sprengnether. The terms “growing up” and “growing down” are Pratt’s.

14 Kolbenschlag 26. The author analyzes female myths and models of behavior through the psycho-sociological interpretation of fairy-tale figures. Kolbenschlag’s view is feminist, unlike Bruno Bettelheim’s Jungian approach.

15 Susan J. Rosowski, “The Novel of Awakening,” in The Voyage in Fictions of Female Development 49. This book is one of a growing number of recent studies dedicated to analyzing the revision of male conventions within female narratives. On the topic of the Bildungsroman also consult Gilbert and Gubar. Like Pratt’s, these books focus on British and American writers. Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856) is generally considered one of the prototypes for the “novel of awakening.” Other significant female versions of the Bildungsroman are Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813) and Emma (1816), Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847) and Villette (1853), George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper (1892), Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899), and well as Colette’s Claudine series. Aleramo would have been unfamiliar with most of these works, with the exception of Flaubert. However, Aleramo was very taken with the character of Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (1879), whose spiritual ties with Unadonna are self-evident: “sulla scena una povera bambola di sangue e di nervi si rendeva ragione della propria inconsistenza, e si proponeva di diventar una creatura umana, partendosene dal marito e dai figli, per cui la sua presenza non era che un gioco e un dilitto” (151). Later in life, Aleramo would translate Madame de Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves (1678), an early work dealing with female maturation, if not actually a novel of development. Among Aleramo’s Italian contemporaries, a number of novelists writing for and about women were inspired by the traditional acceptance of marriage and maternity as a woman’s ideal lot. The Marchesa Colombi’s Un matrimonio di provincia (1885) was directly inspired by Madame Bovary while Neera
and Regina di Luanto stressed marriage, maternity, and the social role of women. Anna Franchi’s polemical Avanti il Divorzio! (1902) mirrors some of the minor themes of Una donna: the legal inferiority of women and their lack of child custody rights. For more detailed information on the women writers of Aleramo’s time see Morandini.


17 Karen E. Rowe, “Fairy-born and human bred: Jane Eyre’s Education in Romance” in The Voyage in Fictions 69.

18 These patterns are covered separately throughout Pratt’s text. A Jungian, the critic discusses Anglo-American literature but these categories are universal and applicable to all Western culture. The designations used are Pratt’s. Although Spacks does not treat these archetypes as such, she does discuss them as “themes” in literature by women.

19 The Jungian animus and anima could be substituted for reason and emotion, but this would be an anticipation of these categories. Aleramo employs the term intelletto when speaking of the father-figure. This antithesis of male and female is traditional and has developed into various related oppositions such as art/nature, air/water, spirit/body, etc. E. M. Ellmann offers a list of female stereotypes derived from literature that reveal Western (=patriarchal) society’s prejudices. Nine of the ten attributes designated by Ellmann can be applied to the heroine’s mother in Una donna: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, and complacency. The only exception is shrew/witch. Obviously, Aleramo’s mother has internalized her culture’s behavioral expectations for women. One could also conduct a Freudian analysis of the protagonist’s relationship to her parents, particularly the father (a textbook Electra complex), with interesting results.

20 See Guercicchio’s first chapter, “Cronaca e miti,” for more detailed information on Aleramo’s readings and early writings.

21 Mazzotti 215. Besides being a feminist manifesto, Una donna also covers a number of central humanitarian and social issues confronting Italy at the turn of the century: the drudgery of peasant life, the mistreatment of workers, poor sanitation, the abuse of children and the elderly, the right to unionize, and the evils of prostitution. The protagonist, like Aleramo herself, is consistently on the side of the down-trodden, being a victim of social and personal abuse herself. Lino Delli Colli believes the novel was written “all’inseniga di una connotazione positivistica-umanitaria. Un impianto dal quale il romanzo deriva la consistenza per emblematizzarsi a simbolo del riscatto e dell’emancipazione umana e dietro il quale è da ravvisare, almeno in parte, la lezione céniana” (227). For more information on Aleramo’s social involvements see Drake.

22 See Harding. Harding’s Jungian interpretations of ancient myths echo the themes of Aleramo’s portrayal of the mother-child rapport: “She has become identified to the son. Her personal satisfaction is found through seeking his good. Instead now, of seeking her own way, her own advantage in an open egotism, as she did before her submission to instinct in the temple marriage, she seeks the good of her child” (194) only to discover that “in the myths, [she] must always sacrifice him” (192). For more information on the nature of the mother-child relationship and maternal identity, see the special issue of donnafemmina focusing on the topic of maternity and imperialism, particularly Silvia Montefoschi’s study, “Ruolo materno e identità personale. A proposito di movimento delle donne e psicoanalisi.” For the link between biology and creativity, consult Comerci.

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