

Anche da questo punto di vista, lo specchio della letteratura per l'infanzia diventa paradigmatico per cogliere polarità di discorso che tendono a costituire un rapporto subordinativo tra i generi e che insistono nel reiterare la preferenza per l'estensione di una sorta di appello, rivolto alla nazione, per l'adempimento di un tipo di modernizzazione 'maschile' e virile: un indirizzo, non privo di estensioni ideologiche di stampo conservatore, la cui presa simbolica può apparirsi all'interno di un alveo largo di narrazioni destinate all'infanzia e alla gioventù. Esse tornavano a portare in primo piano la necessità di coltivare virtù di disciplinamento per la formazione del carattere nazionale, istituendo un tono che complessivamente assecondava l'instaurazione di un modello formativo volutamente inteso 'al maschile'. In ciò, la narrazione per l'infanzia conferiva plasticità ad una proiezione formativa spesso identificata con l'acquisizione di un tratto militare-sco e orientata a riconoscersi nella celebrazione retorica delle 'virtù eroiche'.

L'analisi dei testi considerati dal lavoro di Maria Truglio spazia su un repertorio largo ed abbondante che certamente annovera le firme di primo piano della letteratura per l'infanzia secondo-ottocentesca e primo-novecentesca – da Collodi a Bertelli, da Capuana a De Amicis, da Baccini a Perodi – ma che scende anche dentro un circuito di trame e di autori, segnalando la necessità di attivare la conduzione di un esame testuale sviluppato su maglie di grana fine.

La puntuale ricerca della studiosa americana consente pertanto di ampliare il reticolo delle operazioni interpretative in corso sul tema del '*nation making*' italiano, segnalando di rinvio la vitalità espressa intorno ad un simile tema di applicazione storiografica dal contesto degli studi americani, il confronto con i quali può senz'altro permettere di acquisire motivi di allargamento conoscitivo e sollecitare l'apertura di ulteriori promettenti piste di lavoro.

Letterio Todaro
Università di Catania
ltodaro@unict.it

GILLIAN M.E. ALBAN, *Melusine The Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's Possession and in Mythology*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2003, pp. 308.

GILLIAN M.E. ALBAN, *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2017, pp. 299.

Gillian Alban's works are not only fascinating, especially for those who, like Virginia Woolf, cannot live without books, they are also supporting scholarly research. Indeed, if we are to effectively deconstruct the patriarchal imaginary, a continuous, coordinated and symbiotic interaction needs to be established between author and reader. It also essential that we have faith in this type of investigation. In this regard, a book can be much more successful than a host of other publications, and this is the case with *Melusine The Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's Possession and in Mythology* (Lexington, 2003).

This book raises intriguing questions about myths, legends, the oral transmission of such, and contemporary literature. The reader is drawn into different temporal dimensions—from the Neolithic to the present day, into cultural and psychological experiences regarding the phenomonology of the snake-woman. Alban shows how, in an androcentric system, a powerful and sacred female icon was gradually replaced by an image of monstrosity and evil. Through

her analysis of A. S. Byatt's seminal work, she confronts and documents the consequences of gender hierarchy, dualism, and the obliteration of the gylanic cultures—discovered by Gimbutas and Eisler—that characterised Old Europe. In other words, she sheds new light on many passages in human history that progressively divided the world up between men and women, and how, with the advent of monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), we began to worship a single supreme power and to consider transcendence as the only cosmic force. This transformation enabled the vital force of immanence—perfectly represented by the original Melusine in the neolithic pantheon of serpent gods—to be overturned.

For centuries male narrators performed complex acrobatics in order to persuade us that evil, violence and ugliness were the result of two opposing powers, two phenomena that were largely dependent on femininity. This is only one of the flaws in the dualistic, transcendent world-view, as the Western accounts of snake-women (goddesses, faeries and monsters) repeatedly demonstrate. In particular, the vigilant gaze of Alban settles upon the way in which mental representations can safeguard or destroy—through images and language—the equilibrium in relationships between the sexes.

Her examination of the medieval folkloric tradition of Melusine in French texts reveals a solid example of this mechanism. In the Europe of four thousand years ago, when human communities tended to be egalitarian, female potential was certified by the sacred authority of Melusine; it is only by being aware of this heritage that we are able to understand—together with Alban's inspirations, Maud, LaMotte and Byatt—that the viruses spread by distorted historical choices which turned women (especially those accompanied by serpents) into marginalised and dangerous creatures, are destined to be eradicated.

On a similar note, Alban's *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) examines the interaction between ideas, images and narration in light of the perspective provided by feminist literature, as well as psychological and psychoanalytical theories. She explores the way in which two complex symbols, the gaze and the mirror, became inseparable from the dreaded Gorgon in Ancient Greece, and how, since then, these attributes have shaped and distorted communication between men and women. In the first two chapters of *The Medusa Gaze*, Alban reveals how Lacanian psychoanalysis, Sartre's phenomenology, and Freudian theory reassess and reinterpret the gaze, showing how the metaphor of vision is intimately connected with the construction of gender and sexual difference. Phenomenological interpretation of an encounter with the Other *via* a look deprives women of voice and identity. Thus a person—a 'subject'—is 'objectified' by the gaze of another. According to Vernant, the petrifying Medusa—one of the most powerful images of women from Greco-Roman patricentric mythology—is emblematic of this dualistic and hierarchical process.

Alban's approach is particularly interesting when she collocates the relationship between mother and daughter in the network of visual exchanges from the perspective that "the forceful agency of women [...] is also returned against them through their Other or alter ego" (111). This is the case of contemporary women writers, who, through literature, make creative use of the powerful gaze of Medusa as an instrument of empowerment and an icon of the female gaze.

This stimulating window onto the construction of identity and alterity guides the reader away from the historical view of the female monster's trap. At the same time, it focuses their attention on the possibility of creating other images. The force for change liberated by a series of feminist authors of English, French and American contemporary fiction (from Virginia Woolf, Angela Carter, Iris Murdoch, A.S. Byatt, Toni Morrison, Jean Rhys and Sylvia Plath

to Hélène Cixous, Margaret Atwood and Amy Clampitt) has had the cumulative effect of transforming Medusa in a way in which no-one had imagined or desired, although Christine de Pizan would have heartily approved. Indeed, this extraordinary Medieval author dreamed up and, in her *City of Ladies* (1405), promoted a very special Medusa; in de Pizan's account, Medusa is, for the first time, the best personification of Beauty, Benevolence and Peace. As a consequence, the reader understands that the masculine myths on Medusa are more powerful than it would have been possible to imagine. Alban shows how they erected insurmountable psychological barriers that promoted the passive acceptance of oppression and violence; the entire social apparatus was based on the conviction that the Gorgon's Otherness in the Greek myths presupposed male supremacy.

The collapse of patriarchal narration began with those who ceased to identify with this type of imagination. Indeed, why would female writers, poets, novelists and literary scholars maintain an imaginary that they did not believe in? Hence the female voices of contemporary fiction incorporate—in the fabric of their daily lives and through their fairy tales, accounts, novels, poems, stories and images—a different imaginary order. In particular, the third and fourth chapters of Alban's book bring into focus the effects of the representations of the malign powers of Medusa on the experiences of maternity, nurture, and relationships between mother and child. The Freudian association between femininity and danger/death has gradually snuffed out the vital spark that conferred value and meaning on this relationship, and generations of daughters have failed, and still fail, to understand their real value. According to Alban, this misunderstanding has the following effect: "The daughter's journey from loving intimacy with her mother to maturity and independence may cause her to dislike her mother, even while the mother remains or retains a significant influence over her daughter into adult life" (116).

Indeed, the mother proposed by traditional psychoanalysis is, herself, the daughter of a monster, Medusa. To understand this psychological archetype is to discover that the destructive side of the Great Mother is the phantasmic Devouring Mother. Therefore, the mother-daughter relationship—another mirror of the experiences of the Self and Other—is marked by personal and collective traumas and lack of feeling. Alban urges her readers to look again at this process in order to comprehend the intrinsic meanings behind the deadly gaze of Medusa (an intricate matter that led me too to investigate the multifold forces responsible for the invention of the snake woman).

The final two chapters of *The Medusa Gaze* (the fifth and sixth) reinterpret destructive or protective goddess myths through contemporary women writers who embrace the female divine as a force of inspiration for women. In them, Alban investigates the textual strategies that are employed by women writers in order to subvert and revise the patriarchal ideology in ancient and Classical myths, and to come up with alternative definitions of female identity and their own, gynocentric, myths. By these means, Alban manages to free her readers from the chains of the established imaginary, convincing them of the necessity of revisiting the myths, and in this specific case, to leave behind the lethal gaze of the first female monster in Western history—the Medusa, symbol of a series of oppositions which slowly but surely became cornerstones of male-centered thought and emotions. She reveals how investigation into alternative routes in feminist literature (narrative construction of reality, symbolism, metaphor, myth, novels and autobiographies, etc.) is a fundamental tool for creating new potential worlds (in the meaning proposed by Bruner)—other realities, other identities and other possibilities for action.

These female narrative voices teach us how to modify the past, and Alban's book, a highly successful reconstruction of such a complex reality, provides an important contribution in

this regard. It has also achieved a strategic milestone: to make us desire the return of the vital force of the Gorgon in order to breathe life into an alternative imaginary with a different very different impact on our lives, to change our mental and emotional models. Indeed, thanks to authors such as Alban, we are able see that there is no further need for the world to be divided up into that which belongs to “us” and that which belongs to “them”.

Angela Giallongo
(Università di Urbino Carlo Bo)
giallongo.angela@uniurb.it

FRANCO CAMBI, M. GENNARI, *Leopardi come educatore*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2018, pp. 90.

Che Giacomo Leopardi sia un classico della letteratura italiana è cosa arcinota e una volta le sue poesie, insieme a quelle di Carducci e Pascoli, accompagnavano i bambini sin dalle elementari. Solo in anni relativamente recenti, anche se Giovanni Gentile (*Poesia e filosofia di Giacomo Leopardi*, 1939) ne aveva già sottolineato la vivacità speculativa, si è letto Leopardi in chiave filosofica in saggi, da *Il nulla e la poesia. Alla fine dell'età della tecnica: Leopardi* (1990) e *Cosa arcana e stupenda. L'Occidente e Leopardi* (1997) di Emanuele Severino, che ne hanno rilevato l'indubbia importanza.

Ora l'agile volumetto di Cambi e Gennari affronta la riflessione leopardiana dal punto di vista educativo. Come gli autori scrivono nella Prefazione, «il primo saggio [di Gennari] fissa la trasversalità del pedagogico nel pensiero leopardiano e il suo obiettivo legato ad un umanesimo non retorico ma critico [...]. Il secondo [di Cambi] si colloca sul fronte dell'analisi del moderno che Leopardi compie reclamando nell'uomo una coscienza inquieta che oscilla, ma costruttivamente, fra nichilismo e speranza possibile» (pp. 8-9).

Il saggio (*Il pensiero pedagogico di Giacomo Leopardi*) è in effetti una puntuale lettura del pensiero del recanatese *sub specie educationis*, individuando una sorta di realismo icastico «con cui avviene l'interpolazione tra il *pensiero dell'anima* (nelle sue reminiscenze metafisiche, volte a comprendere l'infanzia e i complicati moti immaginifici depositati nel ricordo del tempo fuggito) e la *conoscenza della realtà* (nelle sue disillusioni mondane, rappresentate dal quotidiano riconoscimento dell'inganno con cui il mondo si presenta all'uomo e l'uomo è costretto a vivere nel mondo)» (pp. 14-15). La visione pedagogica, anzi l'esortazione pedagogica leopardiana sarebbe quindi, per Gennari, il cercare le modalità della umana formazione in un mondo che non conosce la libertà. Di qui lo scavare «un solido *realismo* della finitudine» (p. 32) per pervenire ad una specie di dubbio metodico «come esame critico del valore conoscitivo posto in essere dalla sistematicità della determinatezza con cui si esperisce l'indeterminato, fino a porre in radicale discussione ogni certezza» (p. 48).

Da parte sua Franco Cambi, nel suo saggio *Leopardi come educatore dei moderni*, spiega la “costruttività” del pessimismo leopardiano. Di qui la sua grande attualità in quanto il suo realismo, proprio della contemporanea società del disincanto, «non prosciuga il bisogno di idealità, di prospettive valoriali forti e nobili, di speranze audaci» (p. 62). In altri termini, Leopardi è sempre pronto a rimettere tutto in discussione e a proporre nuove sfide, nella consapevolezza della loro fragilità nella realizzazione temporale ma al tempo stesso della loro non