

“Insomma, una Beffa”. Humour as a Form or Re-writing, Re-engaging, Re-thinking Women. The Experimental Poetry of Giulia Niccolai

Marzia D’Amico*

Centre for Comparative Studies - University of Lisbon

Abstract: The aim of this essay is to present a critical-practical reflection on the use of humour in poetry as a form of subversion of power (Colebrook, 2004). It will be seen in more detail how power is not a useful dimension for the feminist battle (hooks, 1990) and the expression of non male subjects, who rather create a different framework in which they operate (Borghì, 2020). Through a reading that revisits the term empowerment (Naidotti, 1998), a word nowadays expropriated of its political and subversive charge, we can return to reading Giulia Niccolai’s poetry, over the course of an entire career, with examples from her earliest and latest production, as a posture in the world made up of sincere and critical irony and conscious stance.

Keywords: concrete poetry, feminist theory, humour

Resumo: O objetivo deste ensaio é apresentar uma reflexão crítico-prática sobre o uso do humor na poesia como forma de subversão do poder (Colebrook, 2004). Veremos em pormenor como o poder não é uma dimensão útil para a batalha feminista (hooks, 1990) e para a expressão de sujeitos não masculinos, visto que criam um enquadramento diferenciado para operar (Borghì, 2020). Através de uma leitura que revisita o termo empowerment (Naidotti, 1998), palavra hoje expropriada da sua carga política e subversiva, podemos voltar a ler a poesia de Giulia Niccolai, ao longo de todo o seu percurso, com exemplos da sua produção

mais antiga e mais recente, como uma postura no mundo feita de ironia sincera e crítica numa posição consciente.

Palavras-chave: poesia concreta, teoria feminista, humor

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a critical-practical reflection on the use of humour in poetry as a form of subversion of power. This research develops in the framework of “ironic feminism”, aimed at tackling the constraints imposed by dominant language in public and poetic discourses, concerning in particular women and minority groups. In the realm of comedy and satire, irony effectively challenges and undermines the authority of dominant language, often eliciting laughter. This work relies on the wit study and commentary produced by Claire Colebrook (2003).¹

The contribution shows in detail how power is not a useful dimension for the feminist battle and the expression of non-male subjects, who rather create a different framework in which they operate. More specifically, Naidotti’s coining of the word *impoteramento* (*Scrivere al buio*, 1998; a dialogue with bell hooks) and its decolonial application to the world-system in Rachele Borghi’s critical reflection (*Decolonialità e privilegio*, 2020) helps us to reflect on the overtly feminist practices of the poetic works of the 1970s and since.

Through this reading that revisits the term empowerment, a word nowadays expropriated of its political and subversive charge, we can return to reading Giulia Niccolai’s poetry, over the course of an entire career, with example for her earliest and latest production, as a posture in the world made up of sincere and critical irony and conscious stance.

Ridiculous and ridiculed power dynamics

Humour as a socio-literary element of enormous rhetorical value has been written about extensively (Critchley 2002; Attardo 2017; Westbrook/Chao 2019; Derrin/Burrows 2020), and so has its specific weight in power relations.² While being in no position to retrace exactly each of the theoretical and critical stages on the subject, as a matter of relevance as much as of space, it is certainly useful to frame through one of the various possible paths the influence on social relations that the use of humour in literature has had. Moreover, in this paragraph it will be instructive to discuss more precisely what is meant - in fact - by humour as part of the framing for the analysis hereby presented, and to understand its various variants and stylistic stratifications in Western culture.

Humour as a genre is rooted in the human relational capacity and interpretation of reality, combining a laugh or a smile with the reflective faculty of the world's distortions. Not only the motive but also the manner is a strategic resource for humour, a necessary mode of expression for the reader or audience to be taken into participation.

A perfect summary of the use of humour rather than comedy as a political resource is given by Umberto Eco in his *Tra menzogna e ironia*, in which he recalls that "For Hegel, it was essential to the comedian that they who laugh feel so sure of their truth that they can look down on the contradictions of others with superiority. This certainty, which makes us laugh at the misfortune of an inferior, is naturally diabolical" (2020: 65).³ Eco further reinforces this, again summarising as he was capable of centuries of literary history in witty and pithy observations: "Pirandello sees very clearly that in order to move from the comic to the humorous one must renounce detachment and superiority (classic characteristics of the comedian)" (2020: 71).

Precisely because of this inherent quality of observation and representation of the world, humour has presented itself as a social resource of reflection on the state of things, and therefore capable of transversally accommodating people and thoughts of different backgrounds and origins. In order for this quality to be embraced and expressed in its entirety, one can only agree with Pirandello in establishing a necessity for humour - unlike comedy - to avoid a separation from the world, a detachment dictated by superiority, as much as a need to immerse oneself completely in the reality being described.

However, it is important to state that humour does not stand in inherently critical opposition to power, but has instead begun to accommodate it, including its most ironic, cynical, and subversive qualities that have served power itself and contributed to the *status quo*.

Surreal as it may seem, a similar story to that of the term 'humourist' (as opposed or at least compared to 'comedian') can be found in the historical evolution of the term 'philosopher'; in particular, it is relevant to observe here the variant of the term that was offered to us by Hannah Arendt's rejection of the term philosopher and who rather preferred the definition of political thinker. The choice to distance herself from the category of philosopher - and not of philosophy - lies in the deep-rooted choice to exist in the world in a way that sees thinking and life as inextricably intertwined. Arendt professes an ethical and political necessity of the thinking, through a participation in public life, unlike Plato to whom she imputes various faults.

[...] nonetheless follow, for the philosopher, even more serious crimes than the sin of naive vanity. The greatest of all, according to Arendt, is that of making himself at home in the

realm of pure thought and of judging the world of human plurality to be superfluous. Universal Man thus comes to eclipse the uniqueness of each human being. The theory expels the politics of plural interaction and replaces it with the rule of the few over the many. In other words, the metaphysical tradition is centered on the category of death - to which Arendt opposes her political conception of action and birth (Cavarero 2000: 128)

Deeply grounded in historical time, Cavarero's relative narratives thinking - impacted by Arendt's enormously, as repeatedly stated by Cavarero herself - takes on a particularly relevant value for the performative exercise of one's identity in public. More specifically, for this case, it is to be observed women's struggle to emancipate themselves from the role of subalterns and gain, to all intents and purposes, *authorial* presence in the public dimension, a matter that takes on a value that is twice as relevant. As per Arendt directly:

By word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take on the bare reality of our original physical appearance. (Arendt 1994: 127)

Regarding the concept of assimilation to a single abstract identity, similarly to what Arendt theorised but with a more distinctly feminist observation reflecting on the concept of the representation of the universal through Man alone, it is useful to turn to the words of the aforementioned political philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who can briefly summarise the reality of a world that tends to simplify identities and the expressions associated with them.

'Man' is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one. It disincarnates itself from the living singularity of each one, while claiming to substantiate it. It is at once masculine and neuter, a hybrid creature generated by thought, a fantastic universal produced by the mind. It is invisible and intangible, while nevertheless declaring itself to be the only thing 'sayable' in true discourse. It lives on its noetic status, even though it never leaves behind any life-story, and impedes language with the many philosophic progeny of its abstract conception. (Cavarero 2000: 9)

Siamo alle comiche!: the *impoteramento* through humour as a feminist power subversion

Irony, known for its subtle and occasionally humorous twists, has always been a formidable instrument in the feminist discourse toolbox. It functions as a subversive catalyst, disrupting established norms and laying bare the incongruities, contradictions, and injustices ingrained in patriarchal societies. As a literary and

rhetorical device, irony provides feminists with a means to scrutinize, challenge, and stimulate contemplation, all while maintaining a degree of ambiguity and intricacy. In this exploration, we delve into how irony operates as a subversive form within feminisms.

Feminisms encompass diverse perspectives when it comes to addressing social and political issues. The emphasis on the plural form of feminism is crucial, as it challenges the prevailing narrative that has historically centered on the binary gender perspective within a white, middle-class context. “White feminism”, as discussed by Chela Sandoval in “Methodology of the Oppressed” (2000), fails to acknowledge the variations within social categories, including race, class, gender, and religion. This approach, rooted in the ideals of women’s unity from the second wave of feminism, unintentionally separates the struggles against sexism and racism, as pointed out by bell hooks in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). Nevertheless, as the dominant narrative predominantly addresses various facets of patriarchal oppression, alternative viewpoints have sought to broaden the binary perspective through approaches like intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her paper “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991).

Feminist ironic discourse is of value to rhetorical studies based on how it (re)defines the ways in which women ironists participated in various traditions, the possibilities for their participation, and what it means for them to participate at all. (Graban 2015: 4-5)

One of the most potent applications of irony in feminisms lies in its capacity to unveil the hypocrisy woven into patriarchal conventions and institutions. Irony accentuates the dissonance between society’s declarations of gender equality and its actual practices. This subversion of the prevailing narrative prompts readers to question established power structures. Irony fosters critical thinking by presenting ideas in a manner that necessitates active engagement with the text; it beckons readers to challenge assumptions, contemplate alternate perspectives, and decipher concealed meanings (Rainford 2005).

Feminist irony compels readers to confront their own biases and societal conditioning, urging them to reevaluate their viewpoints on gender and power dynamics. It unveils concealed truths, dismantles stereotypes, and empowers marginalized voices, all while involving readers in reflective analysis.

Irony is thus investigated not as a universalist practice but as a linguistic module, a discontinuous line of questioning “that inevitably blows up any attempt to universalise and unify discourse in a neutrality that does not account for the partiality of the thinking subject” (Forcina 1998: 21).

In the ongoing pursuit of gender equality, irony remains a potent weapon in the feminist arsenal, encouraging us to perceive the world from a different vantage point and inspiring transformation through its subtle, thought-provoking, and occasionally humorous subversion of the established order.

Donna Haraway observed the revolutionary and insurgent power of humorous words and the adoption of humour as a rhetorical strategy to destabilise power, perfectly inscribing in the Western question the difficulty of voicing the needs and rights of subaltern groups, among which feminist thinking stands out in its intersectional approach. As precisely stated in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, her best-known publication:

Writing has a special significance for all colonized groups. Writing has been crucial to the Western myth of the distinction between oral and written cultures, primitive and civilized mentalities, and more recently to the erosion of that distinction in 'postmodernist' theories attacking the phallogocentrism of the West, with its worship of the monotheistic, phallic, authoritative, and singular work, the unique and perfect name. (Haraway 1985: 175)

Through the use of humour, the solidity and propaganda effectiveness of the status quo is undermined, effectively disrupting the entire concept of power. It is once again a great resource to refer to Donna Haraway's position on the use of irony by subaltern groups, and in particular that which is identified as 'feminine', for a (hopefully) socio-political as well as literary clairvoyance.

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. (Haraway 1985: 150)

A feminist reading such as the lesson of bell hooks allows for reflection not only on strategies but also on the intrinsic value of power and the consequent rejection of it by the organisation of subalterns. Similar to the very use of humour that has sometimes served and still sometimes serves power, in the same way a number of words that have found vigor in the battle against injustice have even been emptied of their revolutionary meaning and ideological bearing. Among them, sadly, mainstream, Anglocentric and white feminism has led to an overuse and disempowerment of the once piercing term empowerment.⁴ However, this circumstance has led to an interesting debate on the very principle of the rejection of power, forcing even literary and translation solutions of a certain level of semantic and semiotic reflection. This

is the case with Maria Naidotti’s translation of “empowerment” in the dialogue-book *Scrivere al buio* (1998),⁵ in which Naidotti coined the term *impoteramento* and most recently adopted by intersectional feminist theorists and practitioners to distinguish the said intersectional feminist practice from any form of pseudo-resistance subjugated to institutional and overt power. That’s the case of Rachele Borghi.

Following Naidotti’s example and expanding its powerful intuition, Rachele Borghi calls *impoteramento* not a simple translation of empowerment - which neo-liberalism has stripped of its revolutionary scope - but rather “a space of creation and not subjugation” (Borghi 2020: 5). For this reason, Borghi acutely reasons how to transform the use of the term from power to potency, deliberately alienating the very concept of power from the rampant overturning of autonomous feminist practices by the cisheteropatriarchal system. In this chapter, we will see how such a space for creation has always been a tool for resisting assimilation, and in particular the role it played in the poetry and poetics of Giulia Niccolai.

Giulia Niccolai

Giulia Niccolai (1934-2021) was one of the most influential poets of her generation and worldwide renown, despite the little attention she received in Italy.

Niccolai began her career in the early 1950s working as a photographic journalist, carrying out photographic assignments for a wide range of Italian, European and American magazines and newspapers. Very few women were involved in the profession at the time, particularly in Italy where it was often dominated by the antics of the paparazzi and a macho attitude towards the “hunt” for a great photograph. Niccolai’s experiences as a photographer were to have a lasting impact on her aesthetics and poetics, and also shaped her first and only novel, *Il grande angolo* (Wide Angle), published by Feltrinelli in 1966. The novel is a fascinating account of a young photographic journalist, Ita, who views the world as though through the lens of a camera and tries to use this way of seeing to come to terms with the suicide of her photographer partner, Domínguez. (Hill 2004: n.p.)

Niccolai’s entry into the poetic dimension is exuberant and convincing from the very first moment. In fact, Niccolai’s poetic practice encompasses the major experimental theories of her contemporaries, but with a very acute and particular reworking that will make her recognisable thanks above all to the use of irony and a subversive feminist charge. For the purpose of this contribution, we will focus on a few examples from different moments of Niccolai’s artistic career, specifically the poetic debut and the conclusive poetic form she invented, unfortunately leaving aside other expressions equally important.

The first plaquette published by Niccolai was edited for Edizioni Geiger (Turin) and it dates to 1969, a year significantly charged with historical and social value as it was on the heels of the workers', student and feminist upheavals that characterised the national and international scene. In the context of committed poetry, in its various meanings and successful practices, Niccolai decided to devote herself entirely to linguistic experimentalism and to the decomposition on the page of the visual results of a minimalist filing and rewriting of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Giulia Niccolai, speaking of herself in the third person, stated that:

In the early 1970s she founded the poetry magazine 'Tam Tam' with Spatola. Much of what she learnt about making poetry, she learnt by working alongside him from '68 to '79, first in Rome, then in Mulino di Bazzano (Parma), in the "kitchen" of "Tam Tam"; reading texts, handling correspondence, making packages and critical cards. This is how she began to feel inside literature and this was perhaps the only possible way, given that she had always considered herself to be a basic element and not the summit, for that was never allowed to take shortcuts'. (Piemontese 1989: 238)

We can already discern that Niccolai's work was heavily marked by a contemplation of work inequality within both the public and private spheres in the social context. Although she expressed this concern in a subdued manner, as stated by the author herself elsewhere, she consistently engaged in an examination of gender disparity in both the realm of existence and representation. Additionally, she focused on the same issues that occupied prominent figures in the feminist movement during the revolutionary atmosphere of 1968, such as Carla Lonzi (see Lonzi 1974; 1978). These concerns encompassed topics like unpaid labor that consumed the time and energy of women. In the years of poetic community nurtured by human and intellectual cohabitation at the Mulino, Niccolai chooses to remove herself from the generic power dynamics that mark society by aspiring to a non-reproduction of the same. Despite her awareness of the opportunities offered by the privilege of being white and bourgeois, the author had perhaps not reckoned with how much her being a woman would impact relationships even in a structure that wanted to reinvent itself beyond the social and political structure of the world we inhabit. The decision to move away, later, from the context of the Mulino and from the work that had marked her days is part of that process of *impoteramento*, rather than empowerment, that we contextualised previously: in fact, the very moment Niccolai began working as the person in charge of the care of the place, the objects, and the inhabitants of the community of poets she had founded, she simultaneously made her own the role that those tasks assigned to her, mutating it into an artistic reflection that would find a highly original explosion (above all) in the fundamental text and masterpiece of concretism that is *POEMA & OGGETTO* (Niccolai 1974; 2014).

This dynamic of co-participation in the poetic act will remain a fundamental element of her poetics, reaching even an original structural formula such as the *Frisbees*. As argued by Giammei: "Putting aside the laboratory tools of nonsense and closed the books, the poetry enters personal experience and searches there for sparks of meaning hidden, to be revealed" (2013: 45). Through a practice that collects the external experience, metabolises them by making them one's own and then returns them for others to collect, the form-frisbee is the latest enchanting gift that Niccolai, then a Buddhist nun, created first in the early 1980s and has continued to process and send out into the world, always listening for answers.

The word has connotations of play, exchange, youth, airiness, even, originally, delicious pie! Giulia has thought about her chosen term, as is seen in some of the Frisbees she wrote that are included in this anthology: "One doesn't play Frisbee with words alone./ It's good to do it also with arms and legs." [...]

Similarly, these Frisbees are collaborative, in the sense that they are often dedicated to and shared with friends, who in turn make suggestions for new compositions. They are also random in that they depend on the unpredictable nature of everyday experience, which brings to us not only events and encounters but also thoughts, questions, and insights that we cannot plan or predict. In the poet's own words, they are "internal Polaroids," snapshots that originate in observations of the seen, and are then "framed" in the form given them. Giulia's early work as a photographer comes back strongly in these compositions. (West 2013: n.p.)

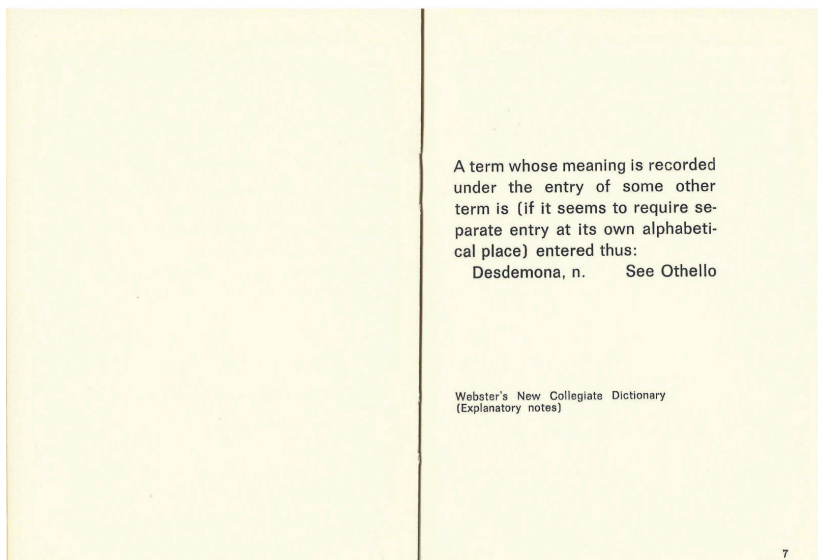
Humpty Dumpty. Visual re-writing to build a home: the decomposition of the master's tool

As already pointed out, this book visually interprets Lewis Carroll's language using the techniques of concrete poetry. What Giulia Niccolai articulates is a revision and rewriting by borrowing the vocabulary of a nonsense master.

She materialises, if one may say so, hidden meanings: the semantics of her second-grade compositions were already present in the smallest quoted portions of the text, in the microscopic morphology that becomes observable to the naked eye. Her experiments are not aimed at experimentalism per se, as an absolute value, but all tend towards a demonstrative end: they unveil the ganglions that operate the nonsense. (Giammei 2013: 44)

Before delving into the heart of the poetic question, using as a lens for our investigation both humour, a key word in this interpretation, and feminism in its non-mainstream version, which we have recognised in *impoteramento*, it is important to

dwell on the epigraph itself at the opening of this work. Exactly as she proceeded to do from the text of *Alice in Wonderland*, we find in the epigraph a direct quotation from Webster's dictionary: a text that was always dear to the author and would remain on her desk until the last days of her life.



(Photo-reproduction. From *Humpty Dumpty*, p. 7)⁶

It is important to note, first and above all, that the dictionary, in its own concreteness, has a conditional signification; it is, in fact, an element that proposes the cataloguing of knowledge. However, with this responsibility also comes direct regulation of that same knowledge. It seems obvious to say and yet necessary to add that the meaning of words comes from their use and that it is the people who use them who invest them with meaning, but when it comes to certifying the value of words and their importance, one cannot set aside the reflection on who uses, promotes and manages those same words.

Then there is the nominative choice of the example given in the epigraph, namely the relationship of dependence and belonging between Desdemona and Othello. In fact, when looking for the definition of Desdemona's self - feminine, singular - there is nothing singular about her. Her story is completely encapsulated in the reference to the more famous and majestic companion: her murderer, a man whose imposition on her destiny is final. For those who approach the attempt to define Desdemona, there is no alternative but to take Othello's story and peek at what space in it Desdemona occupies, thus never autonomously representative of herself because completely assimilated.⁷ There is no independent reading but only a mirroring of herself in his,

Desdemona exists only in the act of looking at Othello; a ‘looking at’ that is also a subtle order received.

The question of the gaze is fundamental in feminist theories. In this short transposition reduced to little more than two-nouns-and-a-verb, Niccolai brings into play a series of relationships between the protagonists and the readers by playing with a verb as simple as ‘to see’. In addition to wondering whether it is possible, therefore, ‘to see’ Desdemona beyond Othello, and having been instructed to look at Othello - literally, therefore, to change the page of reference and access another story - in order to understand Desdemona, who alone exists (and whose story is known to be built on male gaze and consecutive actions), it is worth wondering how much that apparently simple phrase is also charged with an imposing meaning.

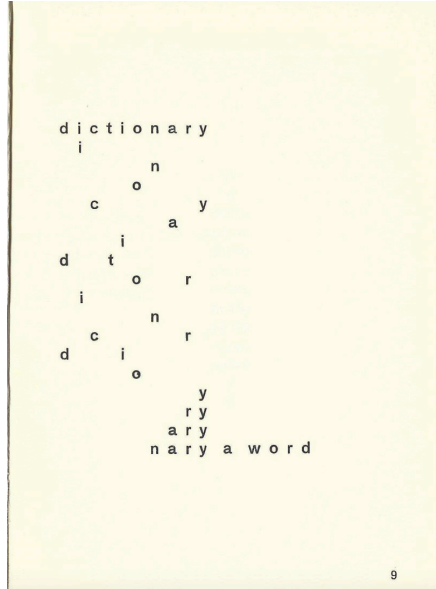
“Desdemona, See Othello!”: if read with the intonation of an autonomous sentence, it is possible to perceive the imperative implied by the dictionary on Desdemona. Therefore, not a suggestion but a proper order given to the female subject (objectified in the request) to look to the male, to address its counterpart⁸ - so to speak - as demanded by the established order, as imposed by patriarchy, as it has always been. Desdemona, a literary and human archetype of events that have very little to do with humour, right up to the point of *feminicide*, is a relational model in many respects and a cumbersome presence in the literary and social landscape. In a socio-literary dimension in which non-masculine models for non-masculine subjects are still few and far between, the delineation of the “feminine” category according to the dictates of the hetero-patriarchy hardly breaks away from the tradition that sees the female subject as passive, assimilated, marginalised. In fact, subordinate; more precisely, subaltern.

For there to be knowledge, Desdemona must look to Othello and we must too, along with her: this is what the certified text of the dictionary tells us, this is what happens in the dimension of institutional language. And if we do in fact move within the system as we know it, this seems the only way to exist to be recognised (but at what price? Desdemona knows) in the space defined by the master’s language (a language that can never really be functional to womxn).

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change (Lorde 2007: 99)

It is not surprising that an observer and practitioner of the linguistic dimension such as Giulia Niccolai would begin her own work of deconstructing Carroll’s vocabulary, a rewriting therefore that reworks sign and meaning through metabolisation and re-appropriation, starting with the word dictionary itself. Through a detailed breakdown that spills onto the page in a sprinkling of the letters

that made up, at first, the word dictionary, we arrive at a constitutive revelation of the same that was previously hidden from the eyes in an anagram, and now is revealed.



(Photo-reproduction. *Dictionary*. From *Humpty Dumpty*, p. 9)

The deconstruction of the phallogocentric and (thus) institutional system⁹ represented by the Dictionary, in Niccolai's work of careful observation and consequent reworking, unleashes its clearest truth: nary a word. Not a single word, in fact, is contained in its true meaning in the non-inclusive language that is that of the master, and since we cannot, as Lorde teaches us, dismantle the master's house with his own tools, we can only dismantle those tools and build new houses. In the same way, with biting humour, Niccolai was able to make since the beginning of her poetic career through a gender awareness that is not silenced but yet quietly enters the artistic dimension, overturning the deepest meaning of the meaning of poetry itself.

Frisbees. A game for those who want to play, a home for the non-poetry of subaltern subjects

The dimension of playfulness always present in Giulia Niccolai's work finds particular encouragement in her own existential experience as a bilingual subject. It is often from bilingual mixture and stumbling that some of her wittiest insights on language and life are developed, and what had cost her marginalisation by her fascist teacher in her youth would later prove to be a generative space for mixing. In fact, her instantaneous bilingualism never finds resolution, but rather one

language enhances the possibility of the other one in a singular and yet accessible hybridisation. An example of a consideration useful to our discourse, which analyses both the formal linguistic aspect as well as its constitutive character of presence in the artistic and social world is a late Frisbees that Niccolai dedicates to her own role. Here, in addition to the proposal to define herself according to her profession, which Niccolai first states is that of translator (already, in itself, an interesting case of putting forward the re-proposal of other people’s works rather than her own poetic “*authorial role*”¹⁰), a grammatical and political oscillation poses a problem. Indeed, there is the problem of naming oneself a poet and not, perhaps, a poetess, an idiom that is grammatically correct but encumbered by various stereotypes and *minorisation* of the output. This is an open and still unresolved issue, because on the one hand the use of poetess is a valid attempt to restore the correct value to the term – once and for all, an equal to the word poet – and its bearing in the way of the marked feminine, and similarly the use of poet as an equal claim through the acquisition of the term as falsely neutral brings about as much political and artistic discussion; on the other hand, as stated by Alma Sabatini at the end of the 1980s in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana (Sexism in the Italian language)* supported by the Italian Prime Minister’s Office, a variant of feminine termination markings that leaves the suffix *-essa* in the grammatical historical record could open the way for a decisive revision (the constant use of the feminine article to precede the otherwise identical noun would clarify its revolutionary adoption).

Paraphrasing Judith Butler, Colebrook says:

The minute we speak or act with others we are already committed to a system or language whose origin we neither constitute nor control. And language must then have the function of a law: of a system that enables us to speak and act, but also precludes us from speaking or acting from some point beyond the system. (Colebrook 2003: 126)

Similarly, the discourse around the appropriation of the term ‘poeta’ results problematic in the in the literary space of the use of the language and for the communication system, but as a derivation of a certain reading of the casuistry. Specifically, I refer to the fact that Giulia Niccolai is perceived in her identity performance as a woman (even before, one might say, her own identity declaration as such). The reading of her name on paper and her features in the encounter immediately determine her as a filler of otherness with respect to the masculine, neutral and universal, determinant. This is specifically relevant when we analyse the text of the Frisbee together with its intentions.

Io mi presentavo sempre come
“traduttrice”, se poi mi capitava

di aggiungere: sono anche poeta,
immacabilmente l'interlocutore
mi correggeva: vuoi dire poetessa?
La volta successiva, con un'altra persona,
se dicevo: sono anche poetessa,
venivo comunque corretta con un:
vuoi dire "poeta"?
Insomma, una beffa.
Ora sono monaca"¹¹
(Niccolai 2012: 26-27)

In response to each of the options, Niccolai is reprimanded: depending on who is in front of her and perceives her, the alternative is proposed. In particular, it is slyly suggested that the option not chosen by the author is the correct one through the rhetorical question 'Do you mean [to say]?' (literally: *Vuoi dire?*) - which openly questions the authorship over the chosen words of Niccolai.

To this problem, which only arises in Italian and not in English, clearly demonstrating that it is therefore a problem of language and not of its communicative meaning and conveyance, Niccolai - who is poet and not *la poeta* or *poetessa* - responds with an extra-linguistic solution: mockery. Specifically, to the mockery that is this constant questioning of the self by others in the artist's self-determination, Niccolai finds resolution in her being a *monaca*.¹² She not only escapes the semantic field but above all chooses to emphasise being a *monaca* before being a translator, and thus well before being a poet. As Rebecca West had introduced to *Frisbees*:

Instead, wit, a great sense of humor and of the absurdities of life, and always a deep love of what is genuine in both existence and in artistic creation, fuel her ongoing investigations into thought, perception, language, and spirit. (West 2013: n.p.)

What was interesting to examine on this occasion was a possibility to escape the oppression of language through laughter, even if only the time of the laughter itself; and above all to actively question the authorship still often denied to women by the world. In order to better frame the poetic and trans-poetic power of the Frisbee, it is useful to look at Giammei's definition:

An autoepic poem of reasoned everyday linguistic epiphanies. The Frisbee is the new literary genre on which Niccolai's genius is measured between 1982 and 1985 (and, as we shall see, even beyond); the metrics and rhythm are irregular - we go from the word-verse to the prose line - the contents too, and no model of the tradition is sufficient to exhaust its definition. The first, very strong novelty with respect to the previous creative process

lies in the raw material: there are no more lexical repertoires or hypotheticals in which to insert the destabilising disturbance of the trope and, except for a few quotations and a few homages, the language is that of the author, without borrowings that are not accorded by her life and her things. (Giammei 2013: 70)

Let’s now look at the last of the examples selected for this brief foray into Niccolai’s early and late writings. It is a Frisbee from a collection entitled *Favole & Frisbees*.

I Frisbees si chiamano Frisbees
 e non poesie. Il loro scopo,
 da più di trent’anni, è quello
 di raccontare (?), cantare (?)
 la libertà conquistata man mano nella vita.
 Libertà? Questa sì che è poesia!¹³
 (Niccolai 2008: 136)

Before continuing with the critical reading of the text, it is very important to determine that this is not linear poetry but rather a performative form of thought that becomes language. The non-poetry that is Frisbees is never reduced to the version that we find in the writing and is not exhausted in its form on the page but is charged with various moments – often traceable in the text as well – such as: how the inspiration takes place, how it materialises on the page, how it reaches those who share it and those who read it. In this self-definition of the “new literary genre”, Niccolai presents several keywords useful for our analysis of humour and feminism.

Niccolai states that *frisbees* are what they are and not poems. Their intent is to *raccontare* – recount, to tell – and/or to *cantare* – to sing, to narrate – freedom.

The reported verbs are loaded with literary significance (“Goddess, sing me the anger” says the invocation of Homer’s *Iliad*) and epics in particular, therefore referring to a specific retelling of History rather than stories, a genre of literature that women significantly have long been prevented from practising and have often been denied recognition when they have been brave enough to cross it (D’Amico 2023). In an interrogative and intellectually confrontational manner, Niccolai here declares herself to be able to sing like an epic author immediately after announcing that her work is not poetry. What this Frisbee reveals, in fact, is that after thirty years of poetic activity, Niccolai now says of herself that she is able to make the most courageous choice: to return to her master a new home, made with different tools. A non-poetry made by a subaltern person who no longer needs to recognise herself in the master’s system, no longer needs to find validation in the forms and spaces that the cis-patriarchy has elevated too “unattainable” for women. Freedom –

to choose, to act, to write - has been conquered: this is actual poetry, jokes Niccolai in conclusion; by stating everything and its opposite, in this specific tension of conquered belonging, rejection, and reconstitution of an alternative, it is a laughter that buries the ethical problem.

Feminist Killjoy

As per the decomposition of the dictionary revealing its poverty in words, similarly through the decomposition of the given system its poverty is revealed. A poem capable of not taking itself too seriously is a first step in the alteration of the language imposed in the hope, as Haraway also suggests, of a new linguistic and social horizon that redeems its power - to be understood as an expression of *impoteramento*, to quote Naidotti and Borghi - of revolution and liberation.

For Butler, this is not just an illusion in literature; it has political consequences. The idea of a self before social performance has enslaved us both to notions of the essentially feminine, and allowed us to dismiss certain sexual identities as unnatural. By performing or drawing attention to the structure of gender as performance we will be liberated from a dogmatic politics or a politics that claims to know the real authoritatively. We cannot escape the systems of identity, or the illusion that there is a subject who speaks. But we can perform, repeat or parody all those gestures that create this subject. (Colebrook 2003: 127)

The scholar Sara Ahmed¹⁴ coined a specific terminology for those womxn who continuously react to the injustice of the world: feminist killjoy.¹⁵ Contrary to what may appear, there is no antagonism between the discursive practices of Ahmed and Niccolai. Niccolai's operation of declaring the state of affairs is, in all respects, a "feminist killjoy" practice, with the added value of a stubborn and thoughtful use of irony that conceals a very serious message.

From non-sense to the embodied reality of experience, Niccolai nomadically¹⁶ wanders through poetry and feminism with a smile on her face and putting a smile where it is most bitter.

Notes

* Marzia D’Amico is a Junior Researcher (FCT) at the Centre for Comparative Studies (CEComp), Universidade de Lisboa. Their research explores the interplay between tradition and experimentalism in its forms, expressions, languages, and codes, with a focus on the socio-political implication behind non-male subjects’ production of verbovocovisual poetry. They published a monograph entitled *Figlie del sé. L’epica rivoluzionaria di Amelia Rosselli e Patrizia Vicinelli* (Mimesis, 2023). They are also active as poet and translator, mostly from English into Italian.

¹ In *Irony. The New Critical Idiom* (2003), Colebrook not only presented an in-depth study but also a bibliographic selection very useful for the hereby discussed topic and for which I am more than grateful.

² The contribution focuses on the use of humour specifically in the Western tradition, which on this occasion interests us most for reasons of positioning and canon.

³ Where not otherwise specified, all translations from Italian into English are mine.

⁴ Pun intended.

⁵ I understand the irony of using an Italian word that is an intended mistranslation of an English word for a text written in English. But this, too, is part of the practice of re-engaging with power structures and framing the old and new world which are, sadly, still very much alike.

⁶ The reproduction of these images is possible thanks to the work of the Maurizio Spatola Archive, a champion of free fruition of culture. No profit-making use is authorised, out of respect for the memory of Maurizio Spatola.

⁷ See the previously quoted Cavarero commentary on Man’s universality.

⁸ See Muraro 1991 and 1994 for the most influential Italian books on the *teoria della differenza*.

⁹ This statement can easily be read *à rebours*.

¹⁰ Not authority but authoriality.

¹¹ I always introduced myself as / “translator”, if I then happened / to add: I am also a poet, / inevitably the interlocutor / would correct me: do you mean poetess? / The next time, with another person, / if I said: I am also a poetess, / I was still corrected with a: / do you want to say “poet”? / In short, a mockery. / Now I am a nun (my own translation)

¹² Despite nuns and monks being the correct terms to refer to women and men taking vows, the Eurocentric and Christian reading lens of the world - particularly in Italy - leads to possible under appreciation of women taking Buddhist vows, therefore proving that a vocabulary with a binary tradition and approach, which registers unavoidably sexist variants in its dictionary, the political solution cannot be found by switching language.

¹³ “Frisbees are called Frisbees / and not poems. Their aim, / for more than thirty years, is / to tell (?), sing (?) / the freedom they have gradually gained in life. / Freedom? Now that’s poetry!” (My own translation)

¹⁴ I hereby express my gratitude for Ahmed’s theories and practice on citations as a form of resistance. It is for this reason I have mostly adopted womxn’ studies for the investigation presented, and I thank

all of them and the womxn by them cited before for this alternative genealogy of scholarship.

¹⁵ The subtle irony of self-describing herself as a buzzkill before anyone could do so is not to be ignored.

¹⁶ I am referring to the enlightening theories on subaltern subjectivities by Rosi Braidotti (1994).

Works cited

- Ahmed, Sara (2003), *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. London, Random House.
- Arendt, Hannah (1994), *Vita activa. La condizione umana*. Translated by Sergio Finzi. Milano, Bompiani.
- Attardo, Salvatore (2017), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*. New York/London, Routledge.
- Borghi, Rachele (2020), *Decolonialità e privilegio. Critica al sistema-mondo*. Milano, Meltemi.
- Braidotti, Rosi (1994), *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York Chichester, Columbia University Press.
- Cavarero, Adriana (2000), *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Abingdon, Oxon, Taylor & Francis.
- Colebrook, Claire (2003), *Irony. The New Critical Idiom*. New York/London, Routledge.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1991), "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6: 1241-1299, doi: 10.2307/1229039.
- Critchley, Simon (2002), *On Humour*. New York/London, Routledge.
- D'Amico, Marzia (2023), *Figlie del Sé. L'epica rivoluzionaria di Amelia Rosselli e Patrizia Vicinelli*. Milano, Mimesis.
- Derrin, Daniel, and Hannah Burrows (2020), *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*. Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave.
- Eco, Umberto (2020), *Tra menzogna e ironia*. S.L., La nave di Teseo.
- Forcina, Marina (1998), *Ironia e saperi femminili*. Milano, Franco Angeli.
- Graban, Tarez Samra (2015), *Women's Irony. Rewriting Feminist Rhetorical Histories*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press.
- Giammei, Alessandro (2013), "La bussola di Alice: Giulia Niccolai da Carroll a Stein (via Orgosolo) fino all'illuminazione", *Il verri*, no. 51: 33-77.
- Haraway, Donna (1985), "A Cyborg Manifesto", *Socialist Review*, vol. 15, no. 2: 65-107.

- Hill, Sarah Patricia (2004), “Biography: Giulia Niccolai”, *Italian Women Writers*, University of Chicago Library, <<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/IWW/BIOS/A0036.html>> (last access 29/04/2024).
- hooks, bell (1981), *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA, South End Press.
- Lonzi, Carla (1974), *Sputiamo su Hegel, La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile.
- (1978), *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile.
- Loorde, Audre (2007), “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, CA, Crossing Press.
- Muraro, Luisa (1991), *L'ordine simbolico della madre*. Roma, Editori Riuniti.
- (1994), *Tre lezioni sulla differenza sessuale*, Roma, Edizioni Centro Culturale Virginia Woolf Gruppo B.
- Naidotti, Maria (1998), *Scrivere al buio*. Milano, La Tartaruga.
- Niccolai, Giulia (1969), *Humpty Dumpty*. Turin, Geiger.
- (2008), *Favole & Frisbees*. Milan, Archinto.
- (2012), *Frisbees della vecchiaia*. Pisan di Prato, Campanotto.
- (2014), *POEMA & OGGETTO*. Milan, Il verri. [1st ed. Geiger, 1974]
- (2017), *Foto & Frisbees*. Turin, Oedipus.
- Piemontese, Felice (1989), *Autodizionario degli scrittori italiani*. Milano, Leonardo.
- Rainford, Lydia (2005), *She Changes by Intrigue Irony, Femininity and Feminism*. Amsterdam/New York, Editions Rodopi BV.
- Sabatini, Alma (1987), *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana*. Roma, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri e Commissione Nazionale per la Parità e le Pari Opportunità tra uomo e donna.
- Sandoval, Chela (2000), *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press.
- West, Rebecca (2013), *Introduction to Frisbees by Giulia Niccolai*, translated into English by Paul Vangelisti. Los Angeles, Mindmade Books. [Available online at https://www.academia.edu/16026670/Introduction_to_G_Niccolais_Frisbees (last access 29/04/2024)]
- Westbrook, Vivienne, and Shun-ling Chao (eds.) (2019), *Humour in the Arts. New Perspectives*. Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.