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Mythopoetic Bodies
Representations of Disability in Contemporary Italian Narratives

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Introduction

My article aims to explore three topics related to disability studies in contemporary Italian fiction: the totalizing perception of disability, the fictional representation of a rebirth/second life, and the effects of guilt and blame that are projected on people with disability. I am especially interested in the mythopoetic qualities that are associated with these topics and to verify whether prominent examples of Italian narratives align with or challenge them and how. My approach originates from Pramod Nayar's reflections on how physical impairment tends to be perceived as the predominant trait of one's identity, overshadowing other qualities and characteristics. According to Nayar, 'an impaired body is reduced to its impairment: impairment is the individual's primary identity'.[1] In connection with these premises, other subtopics emerge in relation to, for example, social class, financial possibilities, and the presence of a supportive family. These subtopics supplement the discussion because they are often instrumental in the creation of an environment in which an impairment does not necessarily entail a disability, an opposition that has become more and more central to the contemporary "social model" in the context of disability studies.[2]

In modern times, the literary representation of disability in Italy has implied the study of a few publications that have – legitimately – become inescapable references. Above all, Dacia Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* and Giuseppe Pontiggia's *Nati due volte* have been marketed abroad and have inspired cinematic adaptations, while receiving extensive scholarly attention. More recently, the autobiographically oriented works of Barbara Garlaschelli, particularly *Sirena. Mezzo pesante in movimento* and *Non volevo morire vergine* have modernized the fictional representation of the disabled by including, among other notions, the desire to satisfy one's sexual drive. Garlaschelli's works have been especially timely if one considers them in the context of, for example, the interest generated by Raúl de la Morena's *Yes, We Fuck!* documentary, aimed at surprising those among the non-disabled who often

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[1] P. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, Cambridge, Polity, 2014, p. 105.

[2] 'Impairment neither causes, nor justifies disability; however only people with impairments are subject to disability; they may also experience other forms of oppression simultaneously. Disabled people are those people with impairments who are disabled by society'. P. Thomas, 'Defining Impairment within the Social Model of Disability', *GMCDP'S Coalition Magazine* (1997), https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/thomas-pam-Defining-Impairment-within-the-Social-Model-of-Disability.pdf (Accessed 10 December 2023).

overlook sexuality as a primary need of people with functional or neuro diversity.[3] While Maraini, Pontiggia, and Garlaschelli's narratives undeniably remain cornerstones upon which the literary discussion of disability has been constructed, my intention here is to focus on fictional examples that have not always been thoroughly analyzed from the interpretative key of disability studies. While these stories may not always be predominantly centered around disability, disabled characters play an important role that I consider worthy of attention.

Secret weapons and superpowers

In her work about disability in literature, Ria Cheyne reminds us that one of the foundations of genre fiction is the activation in the reader of a series of expectations that may eventually be satisfied or not, but whose promise is necessary for a novel to be categorized as part of a given genre. More specific to crime fiction, the promise of a sense of closure adds to the competition between reader and detective and the expectation that a certain degree of justice should eventually be delivered. In the context of this genre, the presence of disabled detectives, villains, or victims has often contributed to the reinforcement or the dismantling of preconceptions about disability. These characters are often represented as engaging in a dual battle: to defeat their enemy and to simultaneously overcome the limits imposed by their cognitive or physical impairments. Among the most stereotypical images, the trope of the "supercrip" has often attempted to counterbalance disability by accomplishing unrealistic goals or by unnecessarily glorifying average achievements, in contrast with the opposite exaggeration of disabled people who can never constitute competition to non-disabled characters.[4] The concept of disability as a form of superpower has been discussed and criticized, for example, in relation to Lincoln Rhyme, a character who could legitimately claim significant investigative skills already before becoming disabled.[5] This falls under the umbrella of what Noson studies as "superabilità", a term she defines as serving 'the logic of compensation whereby disabled people are often represented as being superhuman and driven to achieve beyond the level of the average person'.[6]

Alessandro Perissinotto and Piero d'Ettorre's *Cena di classe* combines the tropes and expectations of a legal thriller with those of a detective novel: as attorney Giacomo Meroni appeals a verdict that condemns his client to a life sentence, he simultaneously investigates the hit-and-run car accident after which his wife, Rossana, has lost the use of her legs. Rossana primarily embodies two values: one is to oppose the ableist assumption that no life can be considered fully lived with disability and another is to actively contribute to the solution of the legal case, challenging the preconception that 'disability and achievement are incompatible'.[7] Rossana counters Giacomo's argument that the accident ruined her life, a standpoint that he supports in good faith but that reinforces an ableist interpretation of disability: 'Gliel'aveva

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[3] Combining gender identity, functional diversity, and non-traditional forms of sexual expression, de la Morena's documentary sheds light on a world that is often marginalized, if not entirely excluded in the context of mainstream media. A few scenes especially convey messages that can be put in relation to what will emerge in my article. A degree of creativity can be connected to the mythopoetic qualities of disability studies when one of the people who are interviewed states that 'you need imagination to fuck'. A more general attempt to make people feel at ease speaking about their sexuality (and even performing sexual acts on camera) emerges: 'there's always a degree of fear in sex – but not now'. Finally, the documentary invites viewers to embrace sex and sexuality in their evident complexity, overcoming psychological and physical barriers: 'it took me a while to understand that sexuality is something more complicated that covers absolutely everything, and not only a standard way of moving'.

[4] This concept is explained in S. Mintz, *The Disabled Detective: Sleuthing Disability in Contemporary Crime Fiction*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 25.

[5] R. Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction*, Liverpool, Liverpool UP, 2019, pp. 62-63.

[6] K. Noson, 'From *superabilità* to *transabilità*: towards and Italian disability studies', in: *Modern Italy*, XIX, 2 (2014), p. 137.

[7] Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre*, cit., p. 65.

detto mille volte di non usare quell'espressione, di non parlare di vita "rovinata". La sua vita non era una rovina, almeno fino a quando non erano gli altri a descriverla così'.[8] In this sense, Rossana carries the important role of correcting Giacomo's fallacies and preconceptions that he arguably shares with other people who do not have direct experience with disability: that life must necessarily be better without disability (an assumption that implies problematic consequences on "cure narratives" based on the eradication of disability and the dream of a future where disability does not exist) and that the non-disabled claim the right to impose their own ableist point of view on disabled people.

The other topic that the interaction between Rossana and Giacomo introduces is the question of achievements and expectations, and how these notions supposedly change when they concern people with disabilities. The stereotype of the "supercrip" has been studied with connotations that resemble Giacomo's awkward attempt to walk a mile in Rossana's shoes: perhaps with good intentions, the process through which ordinary achievements are perceived as extraordinary when they are performed by people with disabilities ends up delivering counterproductive results:

> Supercrip can be defined as a stereotype narrative displaying the plot of someone who has "to fight against his/her impairment" in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely "success." When uncritically interpreted, this type of narrative can be regarded as positive, contesting dominant views regarding disability as "negative" and "inferior." However, it is the negative "ethos" of disability that feeds the low expectations placed on the individual labeled as disabled in a way that any achievement is easily glorified, no matter how insignificant.[9]

Perissinotto and d'Ettorre cleverly take on the risk of stereotyping not only by mocking it, but by actually rephrasing it in such a way that it becomes instrumental to the contribution that the disabled character makes to the mechanisms that are typical of the legal thriller and detective novel. In many examples, investigations are carried on by disabled detectives whose sidekicks perform legwork on their behalf, facilitating practical contact with larger society. This trope can be extended to a transmedial interpretation that even includes Gregory House, whose diagnostic ability is heavily based on techniques that resemble criminal investigations and whose information-gathering process heavily relies on his assistants completing tasks on his behalf. The very notion of doing "legwork" implies mobility that supplements supposed limitations in the main character. *Cena di classe* is based on a different premise: the disabled character is not the main investigator but the one who provides additional support, often using disability to her advantage. The power to dismantle preconceptions, stereotypes and assumptions by mocking and exploiting them particularly emerges from a passage in which Rossana contributes to the process of information gathering, questioning a distrustful barista who would otherwise reject Giacomo's curiosity, considering that the latter character lacks the investigative authority of a detective. Rossana reassures and motivates Giacomo with words that allow the investigation to progress in a moment when he can only see obstacles: 'Ma tu hai l'arma segreta: la paralitica. A una povera paralitica non si rifiuta nulla, non è politicamente corretto.'[10] This passage is based on two powerful images: one is the hyperbolic representation of a secret weapon, while the other is a form of sense of guilt that the non-disabled feel when facing a disabled character, the result of a tendency to 'make other people uncomfortable'.[11]

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[8] A. Perissinotto & P. d'Ettorre, *Cena di classe*, Milano, Mondadori, 2022, p. 81.

[9] C.F. Silva & P.D. Howe, 'The (Invalidity) of *Supercrip* Representation of Paralympian Athletes', in: *Journal of Sports and Social Issues*, XXXVI, 2 (2012), pp. 178-79.

[10] Perissinotto & d'Ettorre, *Cena di classe*, cit., p. 95. These words resemble Mintz's reading of the diminishing effects of ableist perceptions of disability when she mentions, regarding Dick Francis's *Come to Grief*, that one could hardly consider taking on a person who is missing an arm (Mintz, *The Disabled Detective*, cit., p. 142).

[11] Mintz, *The Disabled Detective*, cit., p. 92.

By referring to herself as a secret weapon, Rossana demonstrates awareness of the stereotyping of which she is victim and an ability to reverse the situation and take advantage of it. On the other hand, she makes use of the controversial feelings that her presence in a public business inspires when businessowners are annoyed by the legally required expenses for disability accommodations (bathrooms, ramps, etc.) but simultaneously are awkwardly eager to display that such commitments have been honored. With this narrative device, Perissinotto and d'Ettorre fictionalize the uncomfortable effects that disability can have on the non-disabled population and the possibility to use them to the advantage of the disabled. This mechanism is similar to what Cheyne has studied in relation to the character Tyrion in the *Game of Thrones* saga, when she mentions how 'Tyrion's awareness of the feelings produced by his appearance, and his willingness to exploit them, is made explicit'.[12] Thus, *Cena di classe* becomes part of the conversation about the many institutional attempts to address the difference between impairment and disability by removing architectural barriers, and their practical application in everyday experience. The United Nation's CRPD, the US ADA Act and, in Italy, the laws on school (1992) and workplace integration (1999) face challenges coming from limited welfare funds. In addition, as Davis notes, lawsuits are expensive and not viable for every citizen: enforcement needs to be guaranteed and applied at the institutional level,[13] so that the legal victory (the passing of a law) can find practical applications in the everyday life of the average citizen. As Rossana asks for access to the bathroom, the narrator clarifies this psychological process:

> Benissimo. Fallo sentire straordinariamente buono solo perché ha obbedito a un obbligo di legge, ma mettilo anche un po' a disagio; costringilo a ripensare a tutte le volte che, nella mente, ha contato tutti i soldi buttati via per 'sti cazzo di handicappati, che se ne stessero a casa loro. Era chiaro che Rossana non sapeva minimamente se davvero il barista la guardasse con pietismo ipocrita o se fosse l'uomo più sincero e di buon cuore che la città conoscesse; fingersi vulnerabile e discriminata faceva parte di una strategia di sopravvivenza che metteva in atto solo in casi estremi, quelli in cui era in ballo il destino di una persona o quelli in cui c'era da mortificare un grande stronzo.[14]

Indeed, in this case, someone's destiny is at stake, and the contribution of the disabled sidekick substantially adds to the process of information gathering that is so central to the legal thriller as a genre. For all the reasons indicated above, *Cena di classe* introduces disability from the interesting perspective of a protagonist (Giacomo) who is moved by genuine intentions but risks reinforcing ableist assumptions, a process that is reversed by the punctual intervention of the disabled character who simultaneously mocks and disproves such assumptions, while changing the perception of disability as necessarily being in contrast with professional achievements. Rossana is not to be seen as "condemned" to her wheelchair: she actively participates in the other form of condemnation (the judicial one) that motivates the narrative and that targets the person who is responsible for a murder. In this sense, this novel becomes part of a wave of narrative fiction that denies those totalizing effects of disability that Nayar laments in the quotation through which I began my argument. As a frequent stereotyping of the disabled, the encompassing identification of their identity and their impairment is what Thomas has studied as an outside-in perspective on the disabled and the risk of 'reducing them to a single dimension, denying their complexity, and eliding the contextual factors that oppress them',[15] a concept that is similar to Ferrucci's warning that 'immaginiamo spesso che la disabilità abbia

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[12] Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre*, cit., p. 122.

[13] L. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, London, Verso, 1995, pp. 159-60.

[14] Perissinotto & d'Ettorre, *Cena di classe*, cit., p. 95.

[15] C. Thomas, 'Signifying Selves', in: C. Barker & S. Murray (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2017, p. 199.

privato la persona anche di altre qualità'.[16] In *Cena di classe*, the self-aware mockery of stereotypes and ableist assumptions suggests a more inclusive interpretation of genre fiction and the expectations that are activated in the reader: the disabled character can be open about her sexual life and desires, can correct ableist assumptions emerging from both unsympathetic characters and those in good faith, and reverse the stereotype of the disabled as the helpless victim of crime in need of special assistance. In this sense, the depiction of disability in this novel contributes to the interaction with previous legal thrillers and detective novels, a process that Cheyne sees as inevitably taking place in genre fiction: 'For genre fiction, perhaps more than any other type of literature, the narratives of the past shape the narratives of the present: genre fiction is always meta-genre fiction, as genre fiction writes back, either directly or indirectly, to previous works in that genre'.[17]

Something is missing

Two characters in Italian contemporary literature share a similar destiny: they lose one leg and, unlike other characters, can never process this loss in a positive and forward-looking way. I am referring to Nicola, one of the protagonists in Michela Murgia's *Accabadora*, and Captain Torquemada, the leader of an unlucky crew of sailors in Michele Mari's *La stiva e l'abisso*. Their similarity comes from an ableist mentality that magnifies the disabling effects of their impairment. For this reason, these two characters embody the 'tendency to configure disability as absence, lack, loss, problem or tragedy'.[18] I argue that Nicola can be read from the perspective of the negation of a 'second life', the interpretation of disability as a turning point indicating a strict before/after separation that, if properly accepted and processed, can lead to a satisfactory existence that avoids the risks of falling under the totalizing fallacy.

References to disability as initiating a new life are innumerable, to the point that it is possible to consider this association as a recurring rhetorical device that is commonly employed in disability studies. In *Nati due volte*, this reference is central to Pontiggia's depiction of the parent-child relationship, in a novel that is based on the role that family plays in the second life of the disabled, a life that is facilitated once parents learn to accept disability not as a fault but as a condition that can be faced together. In this sense, embracing a new set of values is a process of rebirth that parents share with the child. Such rebirth also entails steering away from disability intended in terms of a purely medical paradigm: 'the *rinascita* undergone by the child's parents could be seen as a transition to the social model of disability, to an understanding of disability that does not equate with tragedy'.[19] Particularly important to this process is the rejection of feelings of blame, shame, finger-pointing, self-accusation, and frustration that, for example, Sarah Patricia Hill has isolated in the film *La ragazza del lago*, in which Mario's father reflects on the condition of a family coexisting with disability: 'Come faccio a spiegarglielo a Lei? Magari Lei ha dei figli belli, sani, intelligenti. Come faccio? Pensi male di te. Pensi che sia colpa tua. Tutto finisce, tutto diventa nero. Solo chi ci passa può capire. Solo chi ci passa'.[20] Griffo has remarked the quality of resilience in the context of the

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[16] F. Ferrucci, 'Disability and work inclusion in Italy: between unfulfilled promises and new disability culture'. In: *Modern Italy*, XIX, 2 (2014), p. 192. Examples abound in addition to Nayar, Couser, and Ferrucci's warnings against the totalizing effects of disability. Lennard Davis notes that 'Disabled people are thought of primarily in terms of their disability, just as sexual preference, gender or ethnicity becomes the defining factor in perceiving another person'. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, cit., p. 10. In her struggle against MS, Nancy Mairs powerfully states, 'I am not a disease. And a disease is not – at least not single-handedly going to determine who I am, though at first it seemed to be going to'. N. Mairs, 'On Being a Cripple', in: *Plaintext*, Tucson, U of Arizona P, 1986, p. 17.

[17] Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre*, cit., p. 186.

[18] S. Murray, 'The Ambiguities of Inclusion', in: C. Barker & S. Murray (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, cit., p. 101.

[19] Noson, 'From superabilità to transabilità', cit., p. 138.

[20] S. P. Hill, 'A family affair: the depiction of disability in contemporary mainstream Italian cinema', in: *Modern Italy*, XIX, 2 (2014), p. 177.

second life that needs to be constructed after the acceptance of disability, defining it as 'the capacity to deal with traumatic events in a positive way, or to organize one's life positively when faced with difficulties; it is the capacity to rebuild one's life while remaining aware of the positive opportunities offered'.[21] Even the character of Marianna Ucrìa, despite the limited understanding that her society has towards disability and the needs of people with disabilities, can start a new life once she embarks on the journey that closes the novel, turning her disadvantaged position upside down: 'è proprio la disabilità della duchessa a fungere da attante e innescare il suo percorso verso la costruzione di una nuova identità in cui sia proprio la sua condizione di sordomuta a renderla unica e a distinguerla'.[22] Arguably, the most powerful interpretation of life with disability as a form of rebirth comes from Barbara Garlaschelli, who goes beyond the somehow limited concept of 'second life' and extends it to the many milestones one encounters in a lifetime. A new life comes with the swimming accident causing her disability, but many others come afterward: when she learns that life can still be enjoyed, a new romantic interest enters her life, when she can embrace and enjoy her sexuality, and when she eventually marries the love of her life. In this sense, disability as a condition that interrupts her way to experience life is, to Garlaschelli, a limited notion: rather, it opens different possibilities, a new perspective on life that would have not emerged otherwise and that she declines in epistemological terms: 'Non è esatto dire che si 'perde' la sensibilità: se ne acquisisce una nuova, una sensibilità "non convenzionale". Ci vuole tempo per imparare a conviverci. Ci vuole tempo per capire che questo è il nuovo modo di percepire la realtà'.[23]

In Murgia's *Accabadora*, the character Nicola embodies a peculiar interpretation of disability not as disclosing a second life, but as anticipating death. Having lost his leg in a shooting resulting from a family feud, his amputation becomes symbolic of the incomplete life that awaits the young man. Being a strong proponent of an ableist mentality that measures masculinity and virility according to physical performance, Nicola becomes a victim of the same preconceptions that, before the shooting, gave him relevance in the Sardinian town of Soreni. In this sense, I read Nicola as a disabled character who stubbornly continues to support an ableist view of society, with a perverse form of coherence that his experience of disability does not change, but rather reinforces. This interpretation of disability as corresponding to the end of life fits the rural setting of Sardinia in the 1960s, which Paul Bailey has described as 'an atmosphere reminiscent of the Sicily evoked in the magnificent stories of Giovanni Verga − a place where expectations can never be great and passion is a substitute for common sense'.[24] It is also reminiscent of the direct link between disability and death that distinguished infanticide in ancient Greece, a habit that Martha Rose has studied but also reexamined as a practice that should not be analyzed with the use of modern perceptions of medical and aesthetic standards.[25] In a context where providing for one's family mainly results from manual work, losing one leg does not merely introduce a disability, but it carries a highly symbolic meaning: that of a perpetual reminder of Nicola's defeat against another man, a daily humiliation of his sense of virility. Because he knows the social context of Soreni so well, Nicola cannot embrace the sense of rebirth that we have identified in other characters and writers and that in *Il figliol prodigo*, the second installment of Perissinotto and d'Ettorre's franchise,

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[21] G. Griffo, 'Models of disability, ideas of justice, and the challenge of full participation', in: *Modern Italy*, XIX, 2 (2014), pp. 151-52.

[22] S. Lorenzetti, 'Chiocciola e non gallina: la rappresentazione della disabilità ne *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* di Dacia Maraini,' in: D. De Liso et al (eds.), *Oltre il limite. Letteratura e disabilità*, Napoli, Loffredo, 2022, p. 171.

[23] B. Garlaschelli, *Non volevo morire vergine*, Milano, Piemme, 2017, p. 49.

[24] P. Bailey, 'Accabadora, by Michela Murgia', in: *Independent*, 2 dicembre 2011, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/accabadora-by-michela-murgia-trans-silvester-mazzarella-6270413.html (accessed 28 October 2023).

[25] M. Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus. Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 2003, p. 31.

allows the narrator to state that 'due gambe non funzionanti non erano la fine della vita'.[26] Nicola's feelings constantly express the idea that he already lost his life because he has lost his position in society: as he invites the accabadora to end his life, he keeps claiming 'sono già morto, e voi lo sapete'.[27] In this heavily ableist interpretation, disability becomes a 'lutto troppo doloroso da essere compiutamente elaborato e superato'.[28] As a result, rural Sardinia in the 1960s seems to function according to biases that Fratini illustrates as typical of contemporary societies, based on a narcissistic imposition of the self that takes place through the display of an able body. Thus, the narrative technique at play is that of disability as a symbol of defeat: 'In questo clima di rapporto la sconfitta è difficilmente tollerabile, perché è molto poco tollerabile l'esperienza della fragilità e della vulnerabilità. Mostrarsi vulnerabili significa, infatti, apparire perdenti'.[29] In addition to the topic of disability as an anticipation of death, the novel contains another major trope of disability studies: the feeling of inadequacy applied to romantic relationships. In his plea to receive assisted suicide from the accabadora, Nicola introduces the two topics as inevitably related: the impossibility to envision a future with a stable romantic partner is one of the signs that his life is already over, in a vision that reinforces an ableist perception of gender roles:

> Guardatemi, Tzia, guardatemi la gamba: perché prendete in giro la verità? Maria non mi sposerebbe mai, nessuna mi sposerebbe mai, perché sono storpio. Non posso lavorare, non posso mantenere una famiglia, non posso fare niente di quello che una donna si aspetta da un uomo. [...] È come se fossi già morto.[30]

This part of *Accabadora* finds its place as part of the tradition of the many romance narratives that are centered around disabled characters. Feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness often arise in disabled characters but, in the typical romance novel, they are usually overcome. While disability *per se* may not be an impediment, the self-conviction that such impediment does exist motivates characters to hesitate in front of a romantic experience: 'while disability is rarely a direct barrier, the primary barrier is nearly always disability-related, centred in a sense of unworthiness that arises directly or indirectly from disability'.[31] The perception of disability as loss, lack, and an anticipation of death makes it impossible to envision a future where Nicola is not entirely identified with his missing leg but (as it happens in Garlaschelli's memoirs), he could still fully experience and enjoy many aspects of life. In this sense, one could argue that the problem lies in the values and ideals that Nicola already upheld before losing his leg, and that are magnified once he becomes disabled. Nicola's totalizing interpretation of disability becomes inescapably entangled with the idea that only direct experience can deliver true understanding of his condition, a notion that prefigures for him a future of emotional and physical isolation from the surrounding community: 'Voi non sapete niente di quello che mi è successo […] cosa ne sapete voi? […] voi, vi assicuro, non sapete di cosa sto parlando'.[32] Because of his awareness about the social context he lives in, Nicola can be seen as a character who quintessentially embraces the totalizing effects of disability from which this article started and who denies any possibility about a positive form of rebirth or second life to be experienced after the amputation of his leg. 1960s Sardinia cannot be aware of the much-referenced 'social model' that distinguishes between disability and impairment and whose origin is associated

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[26] A. Perissinotto & P. d'Ettorre, *Il figliol prodigo*, Milano, Mondadori, 2023, p. 64.

[27] M. Murgia, *Accabadora*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014, p. 75.

[28] T. Fratini, 'Sul padre e il disagio della civiltà, sulla funzione paterna, sulla paternità nella diversità,' in: *Rivista italiana di educazione familiare*, II (2018), pp. 129-30.

[29] Ivi, p. 132.

[30] Murgia, *Accabadora*, cit., p. 67.

[31] Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre*, cit., p. 144.

[32] Murgia, *Accabadora*, cit., pp. 62-63.

with the United Kingdom in the 1970s. Rather, it is possible to argue that the totalizing perception of disability is connected to the mentality that dominates the town of Soreni. In this sense, Nicola becomes one exponent of a larger phenomenon related to the role men play on the stage of social life in rural Sardinia. Especially one episode illustrates how this set of values is inherited from the previous generations that have raised Nicola and the other young men: the conversation between Raffaele and Bonaria, which takes place while he is about to leave for WWI. It is noteworthy that the Great War and its aftermath had strong implications to the social perception of disability and the steps society took to acknowledge it from an institutional point of view. It represents a turning point that marks the creation of the first Italian associations in support of the disabled, such as the Opera Nazionale per l'Assistenza e la Protezione degl'Invalidi di Guerra and the Associazione Nazionale fra i Mutilati e gli Invalidi di Guerra, which were both formed in 1917, and many others that followed shortly afterwards.[33] The enormous flow of disabled, mutilated, and traumatized soldiers returning from the trenches made disability more visible and more present to the average citizen, magnifying the necessity for legislations and interventions coming from the public welfare. If seen from this perspective, one positive consequence of the tragedy that WWI entailed is to have contributed to a process through which public and private institutions would start to offer support to the disabled. Historicized as a quintessentially "modern" conflict, WWI joined industrialization (with its unsafe heavy machineries) as a disability-generating phenomenon that produced visible reminders that modernity (in these cases, in the form of warfare and assembly lines) comes with a price. As Raffaele prepares to leave for the front, his conversation with Bonaria conveys a strong distinction between her common sense and his ableist convictions that, decades later, Nicola's generation would inherit and embrace as inevitable. It also displays his rejection of the 'rhetoric of the glorious war invalids'[34] that would be used for political propaganda beyond the end of the Great War:

> Mi vorrai ancora se torno come Vincenzo Bellu?
> Senza un braccio? Certo, così ti fanno cavaliere di Vittorio Veneto, e io diventerò cavallerizza!
> Bonaria aveva riso sommessamente, sfiorandogli le orecchie con una carezza distratta.
> Non sto scherzando. Mi vorresti anche storpio? Sordo per una granata, o senza gambe come Luigi Barranca?
> Io ti vorrei indietro in tutti i modi, basta che non sia morto.
> La risposta categorica di Bonaria non l'aveva rassicurato. La voce di Raffaele in quella posizione aveva un tono più cupo del solito.
> Forse tu puoi sopportare l'idea di avermi indietro come un verme, ma io preferirei morire dieci volte da vivo che vivere anche solo dieci anni come uno che è morto. Se mi succede una cosa simile, faccio come Barranca e mi sparo.[35]

All the characteristics that are common to the perception of disability in Soreni and that we have observed so far are condensed in this short passage: the totalizing identification of the disabled with their disability, the refusal to envision a romantic relationship between disabled and non-disabled characters, and the negation of an optimistic rebirth that rather generates the belief that no life is worth living when disability is involved.

Blame the Victim

The attribution of blame on disabled characters is a frequent trope in Italian fiction that engages with disability. This form of accusation especially takes the shape of a perceived intention to not fight strongly enough against one's disability, as if willpower alone could solve

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[33] M. Schianchi, *Storia della disabilità. Dal castigo degli dèi alla crisi del welfare*, Roma, Carocci, 2012, p. 124.
[34] Ibidem.
[35] Murgia, *Accabadora*, cit., p. 71.

what, in this view, is interpreted as a problem whose effects are self-inflicted and magnified by negative attitude. This tendency mirrors the persistence of traits that are typical of the "medical approach", one that purely focuses on disability as illness and thereby excludes a critical reflection on the adjustments that society can make with different forms of accommodations. The accusatory use of disability is strictly related to the medical approach; according to Griffo, the medical paradigm 'ascribes blame to a person with functional differences for being unable to live in the spaces and with the rights of other citizens'.[36] It also finds several points in common with a certain rhetoric, frequently employed in popular publications about fitness, according to which several methods and products exist for the enhancement of our body, which implies that lack of perseverance and true commitment (including failure to spend enough money to purchase certain products) is to blame for failure. According to this view, our body necessarily is the result of the choices we make, a mentality that obviously refuses to acknowledge the many involuntary changes caused by illness or even simply by aging, seen not as an inevitable phase of life but as a result of negligence. Vallorani has proposed a linguistic and rhetorical examination of magazines that, by glorifying the ideal of a body that never ages, support the lucrative ambitions of commercial medicine. The illusion of retaining decisional power over our body actually hides the opposite effect, that of losing control by continuously chasing the next product or trend:

> L'*empowerment* che conferisce il potere sul corpo è subordinato a due categorie di condizioni dalla cui preliminare soddisfazione viene fatta dipendere la realizzazione degli obiettivi: l'acquisto di una gamma infinita di prodotti cosmetici e soprattutto una disciplina costituita da azioni (pulizia del corpo, esercizio fisico, massaggio, dieta, trattamenti, uso dei cosmetici stessi). Questo implica che, al contrario, non acquistare i prodotti raccomandati e omettere le azioni prescritte comprometta l'*empowerment*. Da cui consegue che chi non presenta un fisico conforme ai canoni predominanti debba avere almeno un po' di senso di colpa per non avere seguito tutte le azioni di consumo e di auto-disciplina che avrebbero potuto portarlo alla perfezione.[37]

This glorification of the transformative potential of cosmetics, medicine, and fitness results in a simplistic message that 'where there is a will there is a way', a concept that cannot be realistically applied to the entirety of the population, part of which is expected to feel guilty for failing to change their bodies. It relates to disability studies when this field is faced with invitations to acritical optimism with, once again, the effect of denigrating those who take positions that are more rooted in factual reality. The work of, among others, American writer Audre Lorde has denounced this rhetorical mechanism. As Kafer and Kim have noted with regard to Lorde's critical approach to naive motivational rhetoric, the writer was concerned with a form of 'cultural imperative to overcome illness and disability by "looking on the bright side of things," noting that such imperatives lead to "blame-the-victim thinking" while obscuring "realities of life"'.[38] Simply put, failure to overcome disability would be caused by lack of positive attitude or application. It is noteworthy that more socially-oriented approaches to this discussion have reversed the mechanism of blame by openly using this term against ableist societies: 'it is not the disabled person who is to blame, but society'.[39]

Examples of blame against disability as an intentional choice or as the consequence of one's laziness abound in Italian fiction. Marianna Ucrìa's mother accuses her of lacking goodwill,

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[36] Griffo, 'Models of Disability, Ideas of Justice, and the Challenge of Full Participation', cit., p. 148.

[37] N. Vallorani, *Dissolvenze. Corpi e culture nella contemporaneità*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2009, p. 110.

[38] A. Kafer & E. Kim, 'Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, cit., p. 131.

[39] T. Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 269.

‘non hai volontà’,[40] as part of a psychological mechanism that transfers on the disabled character feelings of guilt related to the parents’ unforgivable fault of not opposing to the sexual abuse Marianna has suffered. In *Nati due volte*, Pontiggia illustrates and denounces institutional inadequacy in the school setting with the highly symbolic character of Cornali, the professor who embodies the opposition between the mere presence of a law and the actual understanding of special needs. Here, the projection of blame is twofold: it is transferred on a disabled student who is accused of being lazy, but it is simultaneously extended to the academic system that, according to Cornali, fuels such laziness by petting students with disability: ‘Era convinto che la ragazza non fosse disabile. Aveva riluttanza a credere ai disturbi della mente, forse perché se ne sentiva minacciato. E tendeva ad attribuire a una volontà inerte, a una pigrizia innata, a una viltà occulta l’incapacità di superarli con la ragione’.[41] In this sense, Italian fiction often represents an interpretation of disability that is reminiscent of the divine punishment for one’s faults or moral failure: in Biblical terms, ‘simbolicamente, la disabilità non rappresenta solo l’umana debolezza, ma il male’.[42] Especially physical deformity was seen as either a punishment for one’s immoral or depraved deeds or as a bad omen prefiguring disaster. According to Roger Caillois, in archaic communities ‘a physical malformation and a failure are to blame as much as a perverted desire and are considered its sign and consequence’.[43] In addition to the accusatory connotations that the medical approach carries, the perception of disability as a divine punishment is rooted in a centuries-old tradition. Gian Antonio Stella has remarked the Medieval association between disability and evil, deformity and the devil, sin and damnation.[44] Arguably, the most famous example is the so-called ‘monster of Ravenna’, whose deformity was interpreted, in relation to the historical episode of the battle of Ravenna, either as a form of punishment or as a bad omen. Such an association is at the center of characterization in Pupi Avati’s *Il signor diavolo*, a novel − later turned into a film adaptation − that heavily identifies the character Emilio’s devilish connotations with his beastly appearance. The notion of blame is here transferred to young Emilio as a public accusation against his mother who, according to the local *vox populi* of rural Veneto in the 1950s, ‘to have that child slept with a beast’.[45] Thus, Emilio is the person who embodies the exemplary punishment for a sin his mother has committed and for which she has generated ‘un essere umano fisicamente deforme ma soprattutto mentalmente compromesso’.[46]

The fictional identification of physical disability and evil intentions has a long and rich literary history. The moralizing intentions of this practice come to mind especially when one considers the transnational tradition of fairy tales and children’s literature. In *Pinocchio*, the moral depravation of the Fox and the Cat is associated with physical impairments that, initially simulated, eventually emerge as real, once the moralizing objective of the story becomes more evident and disability is supposed to punish their villainy. In the paramount teaching moment, Pinocchio loses his legs in a form of moral punishment for disobeying his father.[47] This perception of disability in children’s literature is obviously echoed in the construction of other characters, such as *Peter Pan*’s Captain Hook and the many one-eyed or amputee pirates that populate adventure novels. Similar to Tom Shakespeare’s denunciation of disability as a ‘lazy shortcut’ that often reinforces negative stereotypes that ‘are not accurate or fair reflections

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[40] D. Maraini, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1990, p. 29.

[41] G. Pontiggia, *Nati due volte*, Milano, Mondadori, 2010, pp. 33-34.

[42] Schianchi, *Storia della disabilità*, cit., p. 52.

[43] R. Caillois, *L’uomo e il sacro*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2001, p. 50.

[44] G. A. Stella, *Diversi. La lunga battaglia dei disabili per cambiare la storia*, Milano, Solferino, 2019, p. 78.

[45] P. Avati, *Il signor diavolo*, Milano, Guanda, 2018, p. 73.

[46] Ivi, p. 104.

[47] P. Ponti, ‘La volpe «zoppa» e il gatto «cieco». Le insidie della disabilità nelle *Avventure di Pinocchio*’, in: De Liso et al. (eds), *Oltre il limite*, cit., p. 96.

of the actual experience of disabled people',[48] the immediate association between wickedness and amputation suggests that something missing in the body necessarily implies that something is missing in one's moral compass, too.[49] The temptation to suggest a connection between one's behavior and a disease still resurfaces today, sometimes even in critically acclaimed and well-informed narratives. It is the case of the Strega prize winner memoir, *Come d'aria*, in which the narrator interprets her own fatal illness as a form of atonement for desiring and actively trying to facilitate her abortion.[50]

The topic of disability as blame and a physical sign of one's moral flaws heavily returns in Carmen Verde's *Una minima infelicità*, where the body is portrayed as intentionally refusing to grow and thereby mirroring what wrong can be found in one's personality. An interesting combination between divine punishment and the medical approach emerges here. Indeed, if God is 'altezza suprema',[51] a body characterized by unusual shortness reinforces the distance from the divine dimension. Simultaneously, the medical approach uses tools that categorize people based on numbers and measurements, in the attempt to extrapolate the essence of disability as a purely scientific problem that can be tackled through the use of calculations: 'Chi è "piccolo"? Nessuno può dirlo esattamente, se non i medici con le loro tabelle'.[52] The notion of disability as a form of stubbornness, an intentional choice that could have been avoided by employing a little goodwill and as something for which one should take responsibility and apologize returns frequently throughout the story. These connotations especially characterize the mother-daughter relationship at the center of this family saga that embraces different generations. The description of photographs, around which the narration revolves, matches the narrative needs of the novel in combination with physical diversity: to be particularly short is an immediately visible condition that cannot be temporarily disguised as it could happen with other disabilities. The heritage of the religious approach, in combination with feelings of guilt and sins for which one should atone or apologize, is conveyed by the pictures portraying Anna and her mother:

> Nelle fotografie sediamo sempre vicine, io e mia madre: lei pallida, a disagio, con uno sguardo che pare scusarsi. A quei tempi pregava ancora Dio che le mie ossa si allungassero. Ma Dio non c'entrava. Se ci vuole ostinazione per non crescere, io ne avevo anche troppa.[53]

Disability as the sign of one's stubbornness lies at the very center of fictional representations that, like *Una minima infelicità*, are based on a controversial relationship between the disabled and their parents. The supportive and open-minded families of, for example, Garlaschelli and Mazzariol's writings, consistently make right decisions, utter comforting sentences, and occupy with their constant presence the void that is left by the institutions and society at large. Verde's novel presents an upbringing and family setting whose main characteristic is resignation in front of disability, here also interpreted as one more struggle in the context of a life that can never promise positive outcomes. Personal and professional ambitions are never truly taken into consideration, in a perspective that suggests a connection between disability and failure to improve one's social condition, as emerges from Annetta's words: 'avevo imparato dal mio

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[48] T. Shakespeare, 'Art and Lies? Representations of Disability on Film,' in M. Corker & and S. French (eds.), *Disability Discourse*, Buckingham, Open UP, 1999, p. 165.

[49] 'Deformity is more often associated with bad character than function impairment, and deformities are more often described as generating fear, self-dissatisfaction, ruthless ambition, and ridicule'. J. Essaka, 'Disability and Deformity', in: Barker & Murray (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, cit., p. 59.

[50] A. D'Adamo, *Come d'aria*, Roma, Elliot, 2023, p. 75.

[51] C. Verde, *Una minima infelicità*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2022, p.6.

[52] Ivi, p. 19.

[53] Ivi, p. 7.

corpo ad accontentarmi dello stretto necessario, a rinunciare ad ogni ambizione'.[54] The analogy that such mentality entails is evident: to physically occupy little space prefigures that one's position in society will remain marginal. Once again, the social difficulties illustrated in the novel correspond to a historical record of marginalization for exceptionally short people. Stella has remarked the traditional association between dwarfism and evil,[55] but also the humiliating history of this condition being seen as a marketable trait the generated laughter in exchange for the means to satisfy one's bare necessities:

> La figura del nano, chiuse le corti regali e principesche, si travasò pari pari, nel mondo dei circhi. Sempre con lo stesso ruolo millenario: far ridere. Un ruolo che pesava umanamente su ogni singolo clown brevilineo. Ma permetteva loro, in cambio, di avere bene o male un lavoro.[56]

Especially in opposition to *Non volevo morire vergine* and *Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri*, Verde's novel answers the question of how contemporary literature can portray youth and disability when picture-perfect families are replaced by more troubled counterparts. In *Una minima infelicità,* Anna's parents are unfaithful, uncommunicative, unloving, and they make questionable financial decisions. The representation of disability as a sign of destiny or a bad omen remarks the unhappy condition that has accompanied this family for several generations. Anna's unusually small body adds to her grandmother's struggle with mental health and her father's OCD, through which he seems to balance lack of control over his life with excessive control over irrelevant details. Mental health, too, is presented with connotations that resemble an intentional fault to be blamed for; talking about her ancestor, Anna's mother lets these feelings emerge: '"Ma lei non era pazza" mi disse un giorno mia madre, come per scusarsi'.[57] Physical diversity becomes a form of accusation that mirrors personal, professional, romantic, and financial failures, a visual reminder that something is wrong with the Baldinis. This mechanism is reminiscent of disability being constructed as stigma, a process that, for example, Mintz has identified in the works of Lucy Grealy.[58] Central to Grealy's literary production is the perception of a person as still being disabled even when they have regained functional independence after illness, and only scars are left of the condition that once caused impairment.[59] Verde's character experiences a similar condition: her extremely small stature would not, by itself, truly compromise the possibility of fully experiencing life. A large part of her disability resides in the way others react to a person standing at one meter and twenty-five centimeters, addressing her with the same condescending attitude adults often assume in conversations with children.

The disabled person becomes representative of all the negative connotations that are associated with her family: mediocrity, unfaithfulness, poverty, and the low esteem that others display towards the Baldinis. The house, an element that symbolically mirrors the status of those inhabiting it, is left in a state of deterioration that, once again, suggests a form of accusation against the person with physical diversity. When the maid says, 'in questa casa niente funziona come dovrebbe',[60] she addresses Anna, in the attempt to suggest an opposition between an ideal, functioning body and what she sees in Anna: something that only resembles

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[54] Ivi, p. 92.

[55] Stella, *Diversi. La lunga battaglia dei disabili per cambiare la storia,* cit., p. 142.

[56] Ivi, p. 134.

[57] Verde, *Una minima infelicità,* cit., p. 62.

[58] S. Mintz, *Unruly Bodies,* Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P., 2007, p. 56.

[59] Grealy's work also reinforces the centrality of the totalizing rhetoric applied to disability. With a reflection that resembles Nayar's comments that inspired this article, Mintz remarks how the person with disability is also identified with nothing else than disability: 'the deviant characteristic overwhelms all of a person's other, unmarked aspects' (Ivi, p. 34).

[60] Verde, *Una minima infelicità,* cit., p. 34.

a desired form but evidently falls short of expectations, just like the house in which she lives. The abovementioned tendency to limit personal and professional ambitions as a result of Anna's small body is not an innate feature but is generated by others' reactions to her body. Particularly the repeated accusations of how she falls short of expectations increases her feelings of inadequacy to such a degree that it even distorts her connection with factual reality, in a way that resembles the mechanism of dysmorphia or that of a psychosomatic condition fueling itself after receiving the stimulus coming from a trigger. This process has been, for example, illustrated by Connie Panzarino in *The Me in the Mirror*, her recollection of how people's actions and words affected her perception of her own disability as a condition that made her unreliable: 'after being contradicted so many times, I didn't trust my own sense of reality'.[61] This mechanism is particularly problematic because lack of trust in one's judgment increases their sense of dependence on others, initiating a vicious circle in which the stigma of disability establishes a form of oppression. Marianna Ucrìa knows well the consequences that condescending comments and behaviors have on her self-esteem. Maraini renders these effects with passages in which 'nessuno la interpella, come se non ci fosse, come un fantasma',[62] and with a shared understanding that 'una mutola non può fare quasi niente',[63] a mechanism that evidently imposes firm boundaries on the character's ambitions and expectations.[64] In Verde's novel, feelings of inadequacy and renunciation to life fulfillment are summarized with Anna's acceptance of the fact that 'non è indispensabile essere felice'.[65]

The use of photographs as an inspiration for narratives revolving around unusually short people invites a comparison between *Una minima infelicità* and Simona Vinci's short story, *Fotografie*, contained in the collection *In tutti i sensi come l'amore*. Verde uses this device in a way that becomes instrumental to the creation of a family saga. Family members are portrayed at different stages of their lives and with body language that often mirrors the troubled condition of the family at a given time. The use of tables as a way to statistically keep track of Anna's disability in the medical environment becomes highly representative of the dehumanizing condition to which many women have been relegated in relation to their disability. According to Barbuto and Napolitano, women with disability feel as though their bodies are at the mercy of those around them:

> Physicians, nurses, other healthcare workers. These professionals often focus solely on the physiological and functional aspects of the women's health and in doing so fail to respect and attend to their intimacy and privacy. Indeed, in the medical setting, the body of a disabled woman is often acted upon without discretion and treated solely as an object to be studied. This attitude often results in their bodies being used in videos, medical journals and other media without their consent. Moreover, girls and women grappling with women's health issues often encounter violent practices by healthcare professionals who fail to relate adequately to their bodies. Many of these women, in fact, have spent much of their lives in these contexts naked, exposed to the cold and curious stares of the very people who are charged with their care and protection.[66]

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[61] Mintz, *Unruly Bodies*, cit., p. 107.

[62] Maraini, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, cit., p. 75.

[63] Ivi, p. 91.

[64] A similar portrayal comes from Anne Holt's *1222*, in which the protagonist reflects on the effects that her wheelchair has on the interaction with others. Similar to Marianna Ucrìa, people act, in her presence, as if she were absent: 'it defines me as something completely different from all the rest, and it is not uncommon for people to assume that I am stupid. Or deaf. People talk over my head, quite literally, and I simply lean back and close my eyes, it's as if I don't exist'. A. Holt, *1222*, New York, Scribner, 2011, p. 23.

[65] Verde, *Una minima infelicità*, cit., p. 55.

[66] R. Barbuto & E. Napolitano, 'Women with disabilities: from discrimination and violence towards an ethics of reciprocity', in: *Modern Italy*, XIX, 2 (2014), p. 163.

This is in line with the words of Panzarino, who has spoken not just for herself when voicing her uneasiness in the medical setting. As Mintz reports, Panzarino felt 'angry about how our bodies had been looked at by doctors, by men, by family and by other lesbians'.[67] In light of these reflections, clinical tables and the use of pictures to remark one's short stature become, in *Una minima infelicità*, highly symbolic of the limitations that the medical approach carries when it fails to consider patients as well-rounded individuals whose existence goes beyond their disability.

In Vinci's *Fotografie*, Tommaso comes to realize that his partner has secretly kept pictures of him with the goal of tracking the effects of a condition that makes his body increasingly small. In doing so, *Fotografie* is reminiscent of the dehumanizing effects that the medical approach to disability has imposed on patients, very often precisely with the use of photographs intended as a way to collect scientific evidence and data or for training purposes. Tommaso himself suggests the connection between the pictures his partner takes and doctor's examinations:

> Per le misurazioni, c'erano e continuano a esserci, i medici. Le visite continue, regolari, che scandiscono la mia vita. Mani nude, lisce come sapone oppure ruvide, mani guantate che puzzano di latex e disinfettante, mani che confrontano, palpano, fanno prelievi di sangue e di altri liquidi organici. Sono abituato da sempre all'invasione: un solletico leggero, le loro mani addosso e il freddo del metallo. Abituato, come sempre ci si abitua a qualunque cosa, tanto da non pensarci quasi più.[68]

This passage suggests how the medical approach delivers consequences that resemble the condescending attitude that makes people with disabilities question their own judgement: a sort of desensitization to being treated as not equal, with the observing gaze assuming a superior role that dismisses the individual who is observed and who is thus identified with "otherness". This reminds of what photographer David Hevey discusses in relation to photographical anthologies of the disabled and to a possible connection between the medical and the colonial gaze. Davis refers to Hevey's work when he writes, 'When he looked for any images of disabled people, he found either medical photographs in which the "patients" appear "passive and stiff and "done to", the images bear a bizarre resemblance to colonial pictures where "the blacks" stand frozen and curious, while "whitey" lounges confident and sure"'.[69]

The abovementioned connection between an unusually small body and the conviction that one falls short of expectations leads to a cornerstone of the discourse about disability: its perception as a source of narrative inspiration and a form of mythopoesis that leads to the creation of literary works and to the visualization of an alternative world in which the stigma against the disabled no longer exists. Many stories highlight this creative ability, often as a reaction to and a way out of the limitations that an ableist society imposes on characters. In Verde's novel, Anna comments that 'noi piccoli dobbiamo integrare col pensiero ciò che manca al corpo. Una parte di noi è pura astrazione'.[70] In Mazzariol's *Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri*, Giacomo remarks that Giovanni 'creava mondi'[71] and, at the end of the story, reinforces the conviction that their bond is based on their collaboration in creating stories. Garlaschelli suggests that this mythopoetic quality goes together with the different epistemology that one has to construct after acquiring a disability: 'senza il corpo, inventiamo un nuovo modo di

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[67] Mintz, *Unruly Bodies*, cit., p. 117.
[68] S. Vinci, 'Fotografie', in: *In tutti i sensi come l'amore*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, pp. 34-35.
[69] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, cit., p. 150.
[70] Verde, *Una minima infelicità*, cit., p. 38.
[71] G. Mazzariol, *Mio fratello rincorre i dinosauri*, Torino, Einaudi, 2016, p. 125.

essere',[72] adding that 'l'immaginazione è tutto'.[73] Precisely this epistemological reflection and the notion of reinventing oneself are at the center of, for example, mystery novels in which the protagonist is disabled and needs to readjust to a condition that, by granting a non-conventional perspective, can provide an investigative advantage.[74]

Thus, the narratives studied here offer an Italian perspective on a topic – mythopoesis in relation to disability – that has an extremely long, diverse, and transcultural tradition. Homer, an allegedly blind man, is the quintessential example of mythological creativity and visionary qualities. In more modern times, mental illness has often been associated to extreme peaks of literary creativity, such as in the case of Sylvia Plath. Alda Merini, Dino Campana, and Vitaliano Trevisan are among the Italian writers who have notoriously undergone treatment in psychiatric hospitals. In the contemporary landscape, an increasing autobiographical tendency emerges in the attempt to recollect one's struggle with psychological distress (among others, it is the case of Simona Vinci's *Parla, mia paura*) and severe illness, as in Ada D'Adamo's *Come d'aria*, reaffirming Athena Vrettos's concept that 'to be ill is to produce narrative'.[75] As Lennard Davis argues, 'disabled stories, stories of people's bodies or minds going wrong, make compelling tales',[76] and the Italian narrative landscape certainly contributes to this tendency. Especially the autobiographical and autofictional tendencies of disability studies, so evident in the Italian context and abroad,[77] justify Thomas's statement that 'today, as never before, disability writes.'[78] As for the commercial success of these stories, one could argue that the uneasiness that the non-disabled feel when interacting with people with disabilities also delivers a form of interest and self-discovery. If, as Pontiggia stated, 'il disabile inquieta non perché in lui troviamo il diverso ma perché vi troviamo il simile, sia pure in un aspetto deformato',[79] it is possible to identify in this interaction the same mechanisms that generate the Freudian uncanny, the combination of familiar and unfamiliar qualities that motivates the desire to know more about the source of estrangement. Disability challenges the assumptions and the comfort to which an ableist society is accustomed, and precisely this degree of separation from the everyday experience generates an interest in its mythopoetic value. On the other hand, in the context of an increasingly aging population, the average Italian moves to a stage of life where disability will inevitably become part of life: despite the abovementioned degree of separation, the stories here analyzed can thus be received as

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[72] Garlaschelli, *Non volevo morire vergine*, cit., p. 50.

[73] Ivi, p. 65.

[74] About disabled detectives, Mintz has written that 'sleuths need to develop alternative epistemologies'. Mintz, *The Disabled Detective*, cit., p. 98.

[75] M. Davison, 'Paralyzed Modernities and Biofutures', in: Barker & Marray (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, cit., p. 74.

[76] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, cit., 153.

[77] In addition to the most evidently autobiographical texts, such as Mazzariol's *Mio Fratello rincorre i dinosauri*, Garlaschelli's memoirs, and D'Adamo *Come d'aria*, even Verde's novel borrows from factual reality. As Verde explains: 'Essendo il mio romanzo di esordio posso dire di averci lavorato tutta la vita. Dentro c'è il mio essere cresciuta con una persona piccola di statura, mia zia, che ho amato tanto e alla quale ho dedicato questo romanzo. Da alcune fotografie che ci ritraggono insieme è nata l'idea di raccontare quel dolore che intravedevo in lei, quando era costretta a scegliere scarpe per bambini perché non ce ne erano mai della sua misura, o vestiti cuciti su misura perché non ce ne erano della sua taglia. Ecco, questo è un romanzo che io ho costruito su misura per lei, per questa zia che nella mia immaginazione è gigantesca. Annetta, la protagonista del mio romanzo insieme a tutti gli altri personaggi, non è reale ma rappresenta la forma letteraria che io provo a dare ai miei rovelli, alle ossessioni che tornano'. M. Formisano, 'Carmen Verde unica scrittrice campana al Premio Strega', in: *Il Mattino*, 18 April 2023, https://www.ilmattino.it/cultura/libri/carmen_verde_scrittrice_libro_premio_strega-7351395.html (accessed October 28, 2023).

[78] Thomas, 'Signifying Selves', cit., p. 210.

[79] F. Millefiorini, 'Giuseppe Pontiggia di fronte alla disabilità. "Modificando l'immagine della norma"', in: De Liso et al (eds.), *Oltre il limite*, cit., p. 185.

relatable, which supports the thesis of disability being perceived as familiar even to those who do not currently experience it directly.

Conclusions

The works of contemporary fiction studied here revolve around the cornerstones I exposed in the introductory section: the totalizing representation of disability, the trope of the rebirth/second life, and the depiction of disability as a form of accusation heavily recur in today's Italian fiction. It seems evident that such a prominent presence functions as a challenge to common places and stereotypes: the characters who uphold them are either defeated or portrayed with negative connotations. In Perissinotto and d'Ettorre's *Cena di classe*, the protagonist inadvertently supports an ableist mentality, only to be educated and corrected by the character with disability. In Michela Murgia's *Accabadora*, the characters (Nicola, but also Raffaele) who interpret amputation as a threat to their masculinity are denied the possibility of a "rebirth" that, as happens in Garlaschelli's memoirs, would unlock previously unimagined epistemological and mythopoetic capabilities. The many characters who suggest a connection between disability and blame often use the tools of the "medical" approach. In doing so, they exemplify a paradigm that has failed to deliver any substantial form of social justice to people with disabilities. This emerges, above all, from the attempt to oversimplify disability by using measurements and tables, as it happens with the characters at the center of Carmen Verde's *Una piccola infelicità* and Simona Vinci's *Fotografie*. Arguably, the most interesting effect that all these narrations carry is the mythopoetic quality that disability studies magnify. With works that combine autobiographical references and fictionally-oriented elements, the portrayal of disability in today's literary landscape emerges as a powerful tool that unleashes creativity with the additional advantage of disseminating, through narrative, awareness on disability studies. If one considers Italy from the perspective of an increasingly aging nation, the stories analyzed in this article are likely to become, in the immediate future, points of reference that legitimately receive the legacy of what Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* and Pontiggia's *Nati due volte* represented for Italian writers in the 1990s and the 2000s.

Keywords
disability, social model, medical paradigm, ableism, autofiction

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RIASSUNTO

Corpi mitopoietici. Rappresentazioni della disabilità nelle narrazioni italiane contemporanee

Il presente articolo investiga la tendenza a rappresentare la disabilità come una condizione totalizzante che non lascia spazio ad altre caratteristiche dell'individuo. Nel fare ciò, il saggio analizza alcuni *topoi* della costruzione narrativa della disabilità: l'accostamento ad una seconda vita, la visione della disabilità come accusa o colpa, e la sua percezione come una forma di mancanza. Tale approccio fa risaltare la capacità mitopoietica alla base di un notevole *corpus* di produzioni narrative nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo. Al centro del discorso si trovano, fra gli altri, autori come Alessandro Perissinotto, Piero d'Ettorre, Michela Murgia, Carmen Verde, e Simona Vinci, scrittori che l'articolo propone come riferimenti contemporanei al tema della disabilità e che ricevono il testimone da autori più canonicamente studiati come Dacia Maraini e Giuseppe Pontiggia.