



Paola Masino. *Album di vestiti*. Marinella Mascia Galateria, ed. Rome: Elliot, 2015. 280 p., ill. ISBN 9788861928626. €19.50 (paperback).

This volume presents for the first time in its entirety the text that Paola Masino (1908-1989), an important Italian writer, wrote between 1958 and 1963 in her private notebooks. In what the author describes as “un’autobiografia narrata secondo la memoria degli abiti che indossai” (101), Masino evokes her life and that of the people around her through the memory of the clothes they wore. As in a metaphorical fashion show, the book captures moments and anecdotes from Masino’s life. As she wanders through her past (“questo mio peregrinare per la terra della mia memoria,” [101]), *Album* takes us back to the Rome of her childhood and the Tuscany of her maternal grandparents (from the Sforza family). We also follow her move to Paris, at the beginning of her lifelong love for the intellectual Massimo Bontempelli (opposed by Paola’s family and quite unacceptable at the time, given he was separated from his wife and 30 years older than she was). The latter episodes capture the lively intellectual scene of Paris in 1929-31 and Masino’s friendship with great artists and expats. The text also bears witness to other events: her “golden exile” in Venice in 1938 after Bontempelli’s detachment from the fascist regime; the death of their beloved friend Luigi Pirandello; Paola’s and Massimo’s clandestine life hiding during the Nazi occupation of Rome

in 1943; her father's and later Bontempelli's death.

Yet events are not organized chronologically as in a traditional autobiography; as the editor Marinella Mascia Galateria aptly observes, Masino's text is comparable in its structure to a Proustian *Recherche* (5). The author gives her thoughts and memories free rein ("li lascio a loro piacimento avanzare sulla pagina, senza ordine e senza giustificazione," [84]); images arise, in a kaleidoscopic fashion, filled with colors and details. *Album* was written at a difficult point in Masino's life, when the now mature woman felt empty and "disoccupata nel mondo" (185), due to Bontempelli's illness and death as well as her fear of having exhausted her creativity. Yet through this text she manages to recapture and preserve the memory of her childhood, adolescence and youth; even though decades have passed, the various events are still alive in her memory and meaningful. Indeed, as she states, her book is "[un] panorama di moda in cui si svolse la mia vita più importante: quella che supera il logorio degli anni e che mi accompagna - sia pur soltanto come riflesso di colore e di suono" (64). A master at visually evocative details, in a particularly vivid passage Masino imagines looking at her past self as if from a window and seeing the hats she wore as a girl clamoring to be remembered: "Ma una raffica di vento bonario solleva da terra [...] e mi fa volteggiare d'intorno quali foglie strappate dai rami i cappellini che in questo cammino a ritroso ho scordato di cogliere. Suonano e tinnano, battendo sui vetri, mi chiamano, vogliono raccontarmi i pensieri infantili che levarono sotto le loro ali, le paure, i pudori, le gioie che mi corsero la fronte [...]" (78). Far from being a mundane, frivolous item or distraction, clothing also becomes indicative of one's values and ideals. As the author reflects on her family's choices in relation to Italian society in the first decades of the twentieth century and during fascism in particular, good taste could become a moral and even a political statement: "era allora un tempo di imperante cattivo gusto: avere buon gusto voleva dire andare contro corrente, essere un 'originale' [...]" (112). Always a believer in the value of individuality ("Diventare 'individui' è lo sforzo costante degli uomini" [164]), Masino discusses the negative effects of the regime's choice of imposing a uniform: "Chiusi i cervelli nel fez, i cuori nella camicia nera, i passi negli stivaloni, si impedì facilmente alla grande maggioranza di pensare, di sentire, di agire" (164). Among those who resented the uniform, including the one required of members of the *Accademia d'Italia*, she remembers Pirandello and Bontempelli. The memory of the "maglioni blu da marinaio" (168) that she picks out for them leads her to talk of their growing opposition to the fascist regime's taste for the ornate and the military and their final rejection

of its political ideals: “Tanto più l’epoca s’agghindava e sovraccaricava d’orpelli falso impero, pennacchi da maresciallo [...], tanto più loro si spogliavano d’ogni abito borghese, d’ogni divagazione” (169).

As Masino writes in *Album*, “Veder chiaro è sempre stato il mio difetto; e la mia colpa, dire quel che vedevo” (210). It is a sentence that encapsulates the author’s innate ability to critically examine reality and her unrelenting courage to speak up in her life and works, even in times of political turmoil or dictatorship. As readers of Masino know, her unforgiving views on society, the family and the regime made her the object of critique and censorship, as was the case for her novels *Periferia* (1933) and *Nascita e morte della massaia* (first published in *Tempo* in 1941-42 and in volume in 1945), a parody of fascism. While critics and censors probably considered this trait a defect or fault, it is this very ability to see, question and speak up that allowed her to stand out in times of conformity and fear. The garments and accessories worn by her become symptomatic of her own originality, rooted in her family’s desire to be unique, tasteful and thrifty. Thus she recounts how she decorated her boring high-school uniform with quotes from her favorite books, giving rise to the ironic remarks of one of her professors: “Ma quant’è istruita” (149). Talking of her unusual evening gowns, she sets a parallel between creation in art/writing and her own fashion choices: “La bellezza dell’arte, il piacere dello scrivere sta tutto nell’inventare. Così io mi ricordo i miei abiti da sera come ‘invenzioni’” (84). This will not come as a surprise to readers and scholars of Masino, a writer skilled at creating fantastic and inventive scenarios. Never a conformist in her writing, this trait also appears in her personal choices as recounted in *Album*; writing about her first evening gown, made of pink *taffetas*, she recalls an evening spent with Bontempelli when, having been asked to dance by Guido Cristini, president of the fascist Special Tribunal, the young Paola responds: “Non ballo con gli assassini” (83). She also describes the shock of the regime’s minister Giuseppe Bottai upon seeing the necklace made out of ivy that Masino used to decorate her dress for an event organized in his honor at the Italian embassy in Paris. To Bottai’s comment “Che coraggio, a portare una collana di tal fatta”, a 22-year old Paola replies: “Perché? Le altre donne non portano pietre al collo? Pietre o foglie non sono tutti prodotti della natura?” (218). In short, an acute, outspoken observer of life and culture in Italy (and abroad) before, during and after fascism; this very same sincerity and anti-conformist attitude permeate all her novels and short stories.

Always humble, Masino does not flaunt her past creative achievements; only a couple of

passing references to her published work appear in *Album*, as when she describes the beautiful *tailleur* (by the famous designer Biki) she was given by her publisher Mondadori in recognition for her novel *Nascita*. While her literary production is not at the center of *Album*, this is an extraordinary volume for scholars and readers of Masino. Indeed, as the editor states, the book reveals “il profondo nesso tra autobiografia e opera della scrittrice, sempre accuratamente celato” (23). Indeed scenes, characters, and her family background give us a glimpse into her world, one that informs her works yet is transfigured by Masino’s unique style, where reality, fantasy, the surreal, the magical, parody and the grotesque often coexist.

The volume, entirely in Italian, includes a detailed and exhaustive introduction by the editor Mascia Galateria who offers an overview of *Album* and positions it in relation to the writer’s life, production, interest in fashion and in fashion writing. The in-depth introduction is followed by the integral version of *Album*; detailed endnotes provide useful information relative to the characters and events that appear in the text. The volume concludes with an appendix containing photos, drawings of or by Masino and portraits of the author.

Album is a true gem for readers of all backgrounds, never dull but witty and vibrant in its details, episodes and characters. It is a volume that could lend itself to being utilized in undergraduate and graduate courses on the history of fashion in Italy, on twentieth-century Italian culture and literature, as well as more specific courses dealing with twentieth-century Italian women and/or women writers, their lives and/or writings, and Masino’s production in particular.

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