

Excerpt from
The Corsair
by
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English translation © 2018 by Anne Milano Appel

Around the mid-eighties I found myself climbing a wide dark staircase in a historic Roman building, the seventeenth-century Palazzo Naro in Piazza Campo Marzio number 3, a stone's throw away from the Pantheon. About eighty steps and then another twenty-two, divided into two narrower flights, to get to the attic where Natalia Ginzburg lived. I hadn't accomplished much in my first thirty years of life, an age when she had already had three children, published a number of stories, a beautiful poem, and a novel, and had translated Vercors' *The Silence of the Sea* and Proust's *Swann's Way*. When I reached the top I was surprised to find a brass plate on her door bearing the names Gabriele and Natalia Baldini, written on one line. Gabriele Baldini was her second husband, who'd died in 1969; he had taught English Literature at the university in Rome where I had also studied. But in people's minds, and in mine as well, Natalia was eternally the widow of Leone Ginzburg, father of the nation, a Great Soul, to use a term I would have drawn on back then, a time when I cultivated yoga and studied Gandhi, following a vagabond, flowery period of hippyism. Leone Ginzburg had been – alongside Giulio Einaudi – the founder and “mind” of a publishing house that continued to shape my generation as it had shaped previous ones, at least

since the post-war period; this to me was almost more important than having given his life to change the world. I had an installment plan with Einaudi and I would buy books a few at a time from a salesman as young as I was, who came to my house; together we would leaf through the white booklet with the list of new releases and discuss the many back list offerings. My interests were vast, ranging from literature to anthropology, from poetry to folklore, from magic to the history of religions, from fairy tales to psychology. I found food for all my pursuits in that catalog, and just scrolling through the titles excited me, making me hunger to own all those texts. In front of the door that showed me a Natalia Baldini who agreed to come second after her husband's name, a suddenly ordinary, domestic Natalia, I must have wavered. Not only because it offended my passionate feminism, but because it did not match the image I had, that everyone had, of her. She was History because, when Leone, Einaudi and Pavese were making that publishing house great and unique during and against fascism, she was actually there.

She had now become "*the* Ginzburg," the author of *Lessico familiare* (*Family Lexicon*), a book-legend. She was editorial power, denied to any other female creature. She was an unusual yet successful theatrical author. She was the feisty columnist of the great Italian newspapers and her positions stunned us, irritated us, captivated us. Like the corsair Pasolini,¹ she was able to stir up the rebellious minds of post-Sixty-eight. An austere, sad woman, who rarely smiled, she dressed monastically, in dark clothing and low-heel men's shoes. She wore her hair short, not bothering to have it styled, as if she cut it herself, not caring about the result. Not a trace of makeup, no mascara, powder, lipstick, nothing. A secular nun. She inspired awe, for what she represented, for what she was. I was seventeen when one of her articles in *La Stampa* (April 6, 1969) convinced me to read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*² and at the same time – in a climate of neo-avant-gardist declarations on the death of Art and the Novel – reassured me about the possibility of continuing to write in a comprehensible way. "The novel is among the things of the world that are both useless and necessary" she'd decreed in the article on García Márquez. She was always rather peremptory when she wrote in the newspapers. We could therefore stop massacring texts, deconstructing them, deluding expectations, repeatedly breaking the spell of a narration, and we could stop pissing on readers as had actually happened during a Carmelo Bene³ performance: an actor had peed on the audience, deemed guilty of being bourgeois.

She had summoned me to talk about a manuscript I had given her to read, a chaotic draft of a novel. It portrayed a woman who was very different from her, and was the story of a choice between a tempest of erotic-sentimental desire and writing, though writing was presented as waste and dissipation. Everything was cast in a meta-historical universe through the perennial figure of a Circe who was both Homer's Circe and a contemporary enchantress, half gypsy, half hippie. I don't remember why I'd thought of having Natalia of all people read that lost cause; I was probably counting on the fact – as it happens, not decisive – that she was a woman. I didn't know how little she liked to see herself reflected in frailty, in the confusion of a woman.

She herself came to open the door for me, a little taller than I, wearing a gray pleated skirt and a shapeless blue cardigan. She led me into the living room, to a dark blue armchair beside the sofa. She sat down on the sofa, close to the armrest, and rested her arm on it. To look at me she had to turn her head, its short hair starting to turn gray. The manuscript lay on the low table in front of her. I recognized the pale blue folder in which I had assembled my pages. She looked at me fixedly, studying me; her eyes were very dark and very piercing, “black, sharp eyes, feminine eyes” Cesare Garboli, the great friend of her adult life, described them in his introduction to *Mai devi domandarmi (Never Must You Ask Me)*.

“I didn’t understand this book,” she said. “Since I didn’t understand it, I don’t like it. And since I didn’t understand it, I can’t offer an opinion.” She picked it up from the table and handed it back to me. I don’t know what I managed to stammer in response. I sensed that she was not saying that just to say something, because convention called for it or anything like that. She was tremendously sincere. And this made it all the more irreparable and bitter for me. I remember confusedly feeling that I should be the one to console her for the fact that she’d had to hurt me, when she actually had a certain fondness for me. Every so often strange cries came from a raised loft accessed by a wooden staircase set in the wall at the back of the room, a short flight of steps on which one of those wheelchair-accessible seats had been mounted, making the situation vaguely surreal. For some reason I figured it was a bird in a cage. At times the cries rose up into actual screams. Natalia did not react, nor did she offer explanations. She kept on staring at me with her intense gaze, with curiosity and, yes, perhaps fondness, because of my youth, or maybe because of whatever unreadable, elusive quality she sensed in the aspiring writer that I was. In hindsight, I have the impression that I had aroused in her a ghost of the past, perhaps I reminded her of something or someone, and this translated into a hint of sadism, practically a secret satisfaction at having shattered my dreams. I was hurt by such extreme harshness and afterwards, on the stairs, I collapsed on a step and cried.

I was equally surprised some time later, when I received a note from Natalia on paper bearing the letterhead of the Chamber of Deputies: she had been a member of Parliament since 1983. This time I have a precise date, indicated on the envelope: March 7, 1987. She took the trouble to praise me, with very affectionate words in a sprawling, slanting handwriting, for a story of mine that had been published in the *Corriere della Sera* a few days earlier. She told me that she liked the story so much that she had cut it out to keep it.

I, too, of course, kept her note.

[...] She was not the type to offer explanations, I think she followed her infallible instinct. Giulio Einaudi said of her: “She possesses mysterious antennae that capture a great many of the untold feelings that people have,” and he wrote it in his *Frammenti di memoria (Fragments of Memory)*. Or maybe she had seen a gesture that I used to do compulsively back then and was frightened by it. I would often twirl a strand of hair around my index finger, absent-mindedly. It was a kind of tic. One day Einaudi, who had noticed it, practically lit into me. “Stop it,” he said, though still with a twinkle in his eyes, “don’t do that anymore,” or words to

that effect. I was baffled, and asked him why he found it so annoying. “It’s a suicidal gesture. Cesare Pavese always did it.” Pavese was an author whom I’d loved for the poems of *Verrà la morte* (*Death Will Come*), for the three novellas that make up *La bella estate* (*The Beautiful Summer*) and above all for *Il mestiere di vivere* (*This Business of Living*), his diary. But more than with him, in my chaotic youth, I identified with the women he fell in love with, seductresses in spite of themselves, cruel without meaning to be or knowing they were, always in love with someone else who did not love them, capricious, unhappy. Had Natalia seen that in my Circe? Was this the hated ghost that my debut novel had resurrected in her? She had been very close to Pavese; Pavese had helped her recover after Leone’s death. When she was derailing, he had given her an important role in the publishing house, had supported her and pushed her. She wrote memorable pages about Pavese, the most beautiful and profound pages that have been written about him, in which she also recalls his gesture of twirling his hair. That gesture had so struck her that she gave it to some of her characters to indicate uneasiness – for example to Nini in *La strada che va in città* (*The Road to the City*) and to Tommasino in *Le voci della sera* (*Voices in the Evening*) – not however relating it to suicidal intentions as Giulio Einaudi had done that time with me. Nonetheless, since then, I’ve been very careful not to repeat it. I do it unthinkingly from time to time, but when I realize it I immediately stop myself.

Another memory associated with Einaudi brings me back to Natalia Ginzburg yet again. It was October 8, 1991. Natalia had died during the night. I went to say goodbye. Once more I climbed the wide, dark staircase in Palazzo Naro. I passed through the living room, because this time I had to climb the internal stairs, the one with the closed door at the top from which years ago I had heard the screeching of a bird. Now I knew that the cries were Susanna’s way of expressing herself: the disabled daughter born on September 4, 1954 from the marriage to Baldini. Natalia was very attached to this creature and worried constantly about her; she was also convinced that she understood those incoherent sounds. The door was open. Susanna had been taken away. Natalia was lying in the center of a double bed. The dead frighten me and I didn’t look at her for long. She seemed incredibly small, for someone who had been a tall woman. In that big bed, she just about disappeared. And one of her early stories came to me, like a punch in the gut, a beautiful sad story called “*La madre*” (“The Mother”) in which she describes the body laid out on the bed, the body of the protagonist who took her life: “She was small, a small dead doll.”

[...] Anna Foa, daughter of Vittorio Foa and Lisetta Giua, told me that, when it became known that Natalia Ginzburg was writing a novel about all of them, “there was some concern in the house: ‘Dear God, who knows what Natalia will write!’ my mother would say, being a very reserved type of person. You also have to keep in mind that people in Italy weren’t accustomed to autobiographical books. But then, when *Lessico familiare* came out, everyone took it well, and indeed they enjoyed it.” Giuseppe Levi, a widower for the past six years, also had the same reaction. At first he was very upset by the news of his daughter’s book

about their family, fearing that she would sling mud over them all, but when he read it, laughing heartily on several occasions, he grumbled, relieved: “But it’s not true that I yelled so much!”

[...] There is a 1912 painting by Casorati, *Bambina*, which for me embodies the image of Natalia in that period. Reclining in the middle of a large red carpet with blue, pink and green floral motifs that form a charming, repetitive pattern, is a little girl around twelve years of age, dressed in blue, her arm resting on a red pillow. Lost in thought, she is petting a little curled up dog. Various objects surround her in bored disarray: books, toys, a fan, fruit, boxes of bonbons. Captured in her are the future of the woman and the past of the child. She is an incidental figure in transit, suspended in a dimension of unawareness and apathy. She doesn’t feel watched and she isn’t looking, except within herself, at obscure, worrying thoughts. The legs, slightly parted and sprawling – the feet half in and half out of patent leather shoes, which, you can tell, she is dangling distractedly – are covered in long dark stockings; they draw the eye, because they are both childish and provocative, oblivious, desolate, sad. To know what the little girl is thinking, I go back to the *Piccole virtù* (*The Little Virtues*), to the story-reflection on human relationships and her childhood that Natalia Ginzburg wrote in the early fifties: “‘But God does not exist’ we think, after an entire night shivering on the floor with our limbs numbed by cold and sleep. God does not exist because he could not have invented this absurd, monstrous world, this complicated contrivance in which a human being walks alone in the fog each morning, between high houses inhabited by his neighbor who does not love him and who is impossible to love.”⁴



Felice Casorati, *Bambina che gioca su tappeto rosso*
(Girl Playing on a Red Carpet), 1912

Translator's Notes

¹ A reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Scritti corsari* (*Corsair Writings*), a collection of essays published in the *Corriere della Sera* and other venues between 1973 and 1975. The volume appeared posthumously in November 1975. Like the essays in Pasolini's *Lettere luterane* (*Lutheran Letters*), the writings in *Scritti corsari* express the author's belief in change and transformation and suggest a future that is a radically different prospect from the present.

² A 1967 novel by Gabriel García Márquez.

³ Carmelo Bene was a prominent exponent of the Italian avant-garde theatre and cinema.

⁴ Natalia Ginzburg, *The Little Virtues* (Arcade Publishing, Reprint Edition, 1989), Dick Davis, tr., p. 80.