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The Family Lexicon of Natalia Ginzburg: Re-living Life in Words

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When *Lessico famigliare* (*Family Sayings*) was published in 1963, its author Natalia Ginzburg (1916-1991) already had several works of fiction to her credit. After *Lessico* she continued with her literary career, experimenting with other narrative forms and brought out volumes of plays, essays, short stories and novels, as well as a historical biography, establishing her reputation as one of the most widely-read contemporary writers of Italy.

On the plane of autobiographical narration, *Lessico famigliare* is about identity and family memory, about identification with roots and retrospective cognition. Natalia Ginzburg writes in the Author's Note in *Lessico famigliare* that she did not have a great desire to talk about herself:

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N.B.: English translation of the passages quoted from *Lessico famigliare*, and from all other Italian texts quoted in the essay are mine.

"This, in fact, is not my story, but with all its gaps, it is the story of my family"[1].

Yet, in a distinctive way, she narrativizes personal identity in *Lessico* through the story of her family, re-visits the past, confers a temporal dimension to the self (adding history to the sedimentation of habit, as Paul Ricoeur would say)[2], and thematizes character.

As the title suggests, the writer here recreates in memory the world of her past, tracing the itinerary of *family sayings*, and evokes in the concreteness of 'words' a complex network of values, customs and situations that represented life in the family and created a particular semantic universe inhabited by everyone who participated in its constitution. By bringing back voices of the past through verbatim quotations and recapturing them in the moment of 'utterance', the author relives time in retrospective, in the warmth, directness and immediacy of conversation, and attempts to reconstruct family identity, threatened and dispersed under the shadow of Holocaust. Mentioning that they were five brothers and sisters in the family and explaining the significance of the particular words and phrases, which constituted their family vocabulary, Ginzburg writes:

When we meet we might be indifferent or unmindful towards each other. But just the mention of one word of those family sayings is enough for us (…) to get back at once our old connection, and with it our childhood and youth, bound indissolubly to those phrases, words (…). Any one of those

[1] Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare*, Turin 1963, p.5.

[2] Cfr., Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, translated by Cathleen Blamey, Chicago 1992, pp. 121-122.

phrases would have us recognize each other even inside a dark cave, among millions of persons[3].

Words and expressions thus confer identity to a group in the same way as they give names to things. As a memory account of a formative phase, the text presents a choral narrative, where the author's life can be read in fragmentary sketches, almost incidental, lying entwined with the life histories of others. In a singular iterative style of narration, the writer illustrates in these phrases the traces of a continuous testimony or, as Francesca San Vitale puts it, the 'archaeological certainty'[4] of family identity. Ginzburg writes:

These phrases are our Latin, the dictionary of the days gone by (…) like the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians or Assyrian-Babylonians, the testimony of a vital nucleus that ceased to exist, but survived in texts, saved from the (…) ravages of time[5].

My essay proposes to offer a reading of the text to consider the elements in which *Lessico* emerges as a variant category within the autobiographical genre, employing the representational mode of fiction. It uses a narrative strategy in which the autobiographical subject does not merge into the three concurrent roles of author, narrator and character in the autodiegetic mode, but distances the narrator from the character in the manner of a homodiegetic narrator. Nor does the text adhere to conditions of the *autobiographical pact* as envisaged by Philip Lejeune, who refers to an implicit

[3] Ginzburg, *cit*, p. 28.

[4] Francesca San Vitale, in AA.VV., *Natalia Ginzburg. La narrativa e i suoi testi*, Rome 1986, p.33.

[5] Ginzburg, *cit.*, p. 28.

understanding between the writer and the reader on the expected rendering of 'personal' experiences in autobiography[6]. Here the writer, in effect, denies that the book represents *her* story.

I begin with the Author's Note (*Avvertenza*) which explains the author's rationale behind the text and helps us formulate the premises of our study: "I never had a great desire to talk about myself"[7], Ginzburg writes in the same note, and elsewhere, "I had a horror of writing autobiography". The paratextual elements here provide a key to the analysis of the textual ordering and strategy. She continues in the note: "Places, facts and persons, in this book are real. I have not invented anything (…) even the names are real (…), to me they are indissoluble from the persons in reality"[8]. Having thus affirmed the authenticity of the facts and faces named in the text, Ginzburg hastens to add a cautionary note that her book should be read more as a novel than a chronicle, making allowances for the inevitable lapses in memory: "I have written only what I remembered, and if one read the book as a chronicle one would object that it contained infinite lacunae." Accordingly, she suggests that the book, "even though taken from reality, should be read as if it were a novel"[9]. Facts then would be presented in the manner of fiction, creating a memory narrative, to be read 'as a novel', but denied all the same of the inventive element, given the veracity of the events recounted within. The

[6] Cfr. Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris 1975, 1996, pp.26-36.
[7] Ginzburg, cit., p.5.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

author's note ends with a statement of intention, that of her long-standing project of writing a book on the family, but this again not without reminding the reader about the invariably fickle nature of memory:

In my childhood and adolescence I always thought of writing a book that would tell the story of the people who then were living around me. This is, partly, that book: but only partly, because memory is fleeting and books drawn from reality can often present only but the tenuous glimpses and splinters of what we have seen and heard[10].

These repeated disclaimers on the part of the author as to the documentary import or the chronicle-like testimony of the text, in short, as to its wholeness or the completeness of portrayal, are significant not because they express any doubt on the authenticity of what has been said, but because they direct our attention to what has *not* been said, to what has been excluded or left *unsaid*, that is, to the element of omission implicit in the selection process of memory. It can be read in the almost total absence of the author's voice from the choral repertory of *family sayings*, apart from some of rather marginal nature, for example, an instance of infant chatter about her doll 'Olga', remembered from their Palermo days, of which she "pretended to be nostalgic", but had no recollection herself[11]. Most importantly, exclusion lies in her omitting to narrate consciousness, thought processes or inner reflections of the self in her account, which, to quote Franco Moretti, expresses "a discontinuity between the hero and his

[10] *Ibid*.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 31.

world"[12]. This conscious removal of the self from the level of narration is verified also in the subject's silence on reporting personal emotion, while recounting tragic events of the past. Discontinuity with the world is equally evident in the omission of chronology in terms of calendar dates, months and years, or in the order of the events narrated. While the data pertaining to the world of referential realities find mention in *Lessico* in absolute generic terms, to be gleaned more in the way of inferences drawn from the account of related events in the domestic sphere, temporal indications are given at most as a passing mention of the season or the hour of the day. Express references to historical moments and events are banished from the text unless they enter to form part of the perspective on the family or its ambit, which extended to include a wide circle of friends, relations, and acquaintances. At a personal level, the 'discontinuities' coincide with an unsettling phase in her life marked by isolation, war, and death of her husband. As it stands, Ginzburg would publish a text in the diary form only in 1970 (*Mai devi domandarmi*), with annotations dated and sequenced in chronological order, referring to moments from a later period of life, but was evidently not prepared to talk in a similar spirit about the earlier phase, which unfolds in *Lessico famigliare*. She resolves the *hiatus* by writing a memorial narrative in the form of fiction, which leaves her with the freedom of selection and exclusions, and in choosing to say little about herself she says a lot. We can identify accordingly an ordered employment of the narrative technique of fiction in *Lessico famigliare*, which distances it

[12] Cfr. F. Moretti, *The Way of the World*, London 1987-2000, 2nd ed., p. 147.

from the standard autobiographical text. The discontinuities in terms of narrated time and time of narration, with the condensation of certain episodes into the length of one sentence and the blocked out zones that appear in between disjointed references to different phases of life — all point to the conscious strategy of occultation, if not abolition, in the process of narration, — the 'acts of will', in Freudian term, which are revelatory in relation to the authorial voice. A reading of the text in view of these considerations would render explicit its insertion in the dimension of fiction.

The domestic scene dominates in Ginzburg's account. Born in an Italian Jewish family in 1916, Natalia Levi grew up in the liberal and anti-Fascist intellectual ambience in Turin, where her father Giuseppe Levi was professor of comparative anatomy at the university. We are told that he belonged to a Jewish family of bankers from Trieste, and notwithstanding that, was notoriously lacking in any kind of "money-managing skill", whereas her mother came from a Roman Catholic family background in the same city. The parents offer character studies in contrast: her academic father, who is outwardly stern and gruff in manner, has a diametrically opposite temperament in relation to the chirpy and sunny disposition of her mother, Lidia. The narrative is woven around their life, bringing up children, taking annual vacations in the hills, their social life with different groups of friends and family, their moving houses, and living in Florence, Palermo and Sardinia in the initial years before settling down finally at Turin where her father joined the faculty in the university. Related episodes concerning individual members of the family are grouped as subplots around this central narrative nucleus. Having lived in the

period of Fascist ascendancy from the days of early childhood right through the years of her youth, Ginzburg was witness to traumatic events of history, which, however, can be gleaned in her account only as glimpses appearing from under the flow of the quotidian life of the family. On these occasions her narration, in Genette's term, gets 'focalized'[13], and the gaze is mediated intermittently through a child's eye, which builds an alternative dimension of reality-fantasy in the text. Second, following this inner logic of fiction in the text, the writer relates external events only to the extent they impinged on the life and destiny of the family, and not from the documentary standpoint of History. Domestic themes prevail in Ginzburg's narrative and she quotes the *sayings* of homely figures such as grand mothers and aunts with as much alacrity as those of the public figures whom the family knew or who frequented the house. She remembers, for example, the underground revolutionary Filippo Turati, his companion Anna Kuliscioff (her narration is *focalized*, for example, on this occasion when she reports her perplexity about Anna's status, not able to determine whether Anna was a friend or the wife of Turati), progressive industrialists like the Olivetti family, the publisher Giulio Einaudi, and not least intellectual figures and activists like Leone Ginzburg, Vittorio Foa, Cesare Pavese, Felice Balbo, — an impressive presence of well known personalities, indicating the rich interaction of cultural influences that shaped her formative phase.

[13] Cfr. G. Genette, *Figures III*, Paris 1972, pp. 198, 216-217. Genette uses the term 'focalized' when the 'narrating self' expresses the view-point of the 'experiencing self'.

If in relation to the self, personal feelings were left unuttered, there was no high drama or sentimental effusion that ever finds its way in the narration. The author lived through turbulent times in the prime of her youth, saw anti-Semitic waves and state-sponsored violence that percolated down the levels of state and society marked by sharp divisions on racial lines, circumstances in which it was normal that the distinction between the public and the private would blur. Her Jewish identity, however, does not dominate the narrative and ideological references do not surface if not by way of reporting the tenor of routine family conversation. Her parents admired the 'conspirers' against Fascism, like Turati, the historian Salvatorelli, or Bissolati. She mentions that after their arrests her father grew increasingly skeptic that Fascism shall ever end. But Ginzburg keeps ideology half-hidden under a patina of comic irony:

My mother was an optimist by nature and waited for a sudden change to happen (…). She would go out in the morning, saying: 'Let me go out and see if Fascism is still there. I am going to find out if Mussolini has been thrown out' (…). At lunch, she would tell father: 'There is so much of discontent brewing around. People cannot stand it any more'. My father yelled: 'who told you? And my mother: 'the vegetable seller'[14].

The narration finds its fulcrum in these *family sayings*, reported in direct speech, in which regional dialects and sub-dialects freely intermingle with standard Italian to create the plurilinguistic universe of Bachtin's dialogical modern novel.

An element of drama is added to the quotidian family

[14] Ginzburg, *cit.*, pp. 94-95.

chronicle by creating a tension of contrasts. Inimitable expressions of the father form the leitmotif in her account, as his *thundering voice* reverberate in the house. For example, his onomatopoeic expressions for all manners of slovenly eating (whether it was slurping or dipping bread in soup) and lack of etiquette were '*potacci*' and '*sbrodeghezzi*', whereas every mode of inappropriate behaviour was infallibly "*negrigure*", a term he used mostly to describe the inelegant and careless ways of his children[15]. On the other hand, her mother's pet phrase for describing the rigorous mountaineering trips, which their father organized meticulously for them, was: "the entertainment that the devil offers to his children"[16]. The carefree image of the mother was of one "who found things to love in every situation and was loved in return." Writing about her parents, Ginzburg states that apart from socialism and anti-Fascism, the "things which my father appreciated and held in esteem were: England, Zola's novels, Rockefeller Foundation, mountains and the guidebooks of Val d'Aosta. The things that my mother loved were socialism, poetry of Paul Verlaine, music, particularly *Lohengrin*, which she used to sing for us every evening"[17]. As a counter-point, she adds, "my father hated music", whatever might be the instrument. While the antithetical constructions emphasize the individual contours of characters, the contrasting predilections of the family members are expressed through a collection of emblematic

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[16] *Ibid.*, p.11.
[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

phrases, which are then organized synchronically as the varying episodes of a sub-plot.

Further, a line of romantic interest is opportunely built into the narrative in the manner of a novel. The open household of the Levis was the meeting ground of friends for free discussions and articulation of dissent. It was frequented by her father's friends as well as those of her brothers, — progressive men and women, many of whom were destined to become noted intellectual and public figures in future. One among them was the future industrialist Adriano Olivetti, her brother Gino's friend, who would later marry her sister Paola.

Another was Leone Ginzburg, intellectual activist, the future husband of Natalia. As the romantic involvement between Paola and Adriano unfolds in the story, proceeding through courtship, resolution of doubts, years of marriage and eventual break-up, it utilizes a manner of emplotment, typical of novel. Similar sub-plots are created around the life pattern, marriage and family lives of her three brothers, Mario, Gino and Alberto. The oppositional role of the father who invariably offered an initial resistance to the marriage plans of his children is a common thread, which introduces an element of contrariness as the ingredient of drama in these stories.

There is a thread of adventure too to nuance the narration in the pace and style of fiction. Ginzburg reports the events related to the clandestine group in which her brother Mario and friends were actively involved, and among others, narrates the episode in which her brother Mario and others were intercepted and caught carrying anti-fascist publications and material across the border, with Mario finally managing

a daring boat escape to cross over to Switzerland[18]. Another brother Alberto was arrested and put to prison because of his association with the noted figure Vittorio Foa, both charged as anti-fascist conspirators[19]. Another episode narrated in the tone of an adventure story relates to the days the revolutionary leader Filippo Turati, hunted by the police, stayed in hiding in the Levi household where the plans for his clandestine escape to France were organized.

While she recounts with some details the life choices and experiences of her siblings, Ginzburg, as mentioned earlier, is totally silent on her own inclinations and vulnerabilities, on the individual phases related to her personal growth, from a child to a young woman, or the story of her love and marriage. Apart from an abrupt one-line information that "Leone and I got married and lived in our house at Via Pallamaglio."[20], there is no other mention of their meeting, marriage, relationship or domestic life in her account. The fracture with the world manifests in the fragmentary nature of narration. The task of piecing together the broken ends of life and giving coherence and pattern to the past brings out personal memory, which the past self had guarded in the innermost being. As a solution, the 'narrating self' reduces them in the emotive content and renders only a skeletal account of these moments of scarred memory.

Her father, brothers and friends were members of an association called *Giustizia e liberta`* (Justice and liberty), for which they became the target of attack quite early in the

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.
[19] *Ibid.*, pp.110-112.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

Fascist regime. The family suffered racial persecution after the passage of anti-Semitic laws by Mussolini's government, leading most of them to leave home and the country for prolonged spells (her brother Mario, for example, chose to marry and live in France; another brother Gino went away, taking up a job in Latin America). Her father was relieved of his chair in the university and left the country, taking up a teaching assignment at Liege in Belgium. Again, he had to flee that city at the time of German invasion, but was apprehended at Boulogne by the Germans who later sent him back to Liege. After a year he moved back to Italy but shuttled between different cities, under a different name, trying to hide his identity from the Nazi occupational army.

The days of forced internment of Leone along with Natalia and the children in the Abruzzi, their privations and the difficulties, the arrest of her father and imprisonment of the brothers, are all facts narrated without a harsh line, shorn of brutality or sentimentalism. Holding back on emotive expressions and sentiments is evidently another element of exclusion built into the narrative, in which the gravest of situations finds a matter-of-fact mention, especially those which concerned the immediate family. Her husband Leone Ginzburg, an expatriate of Russian origin, was a writer and an active participant in the underground resistance movement. He was arrested and tortured to death in the Nazi prison cell in Rome in 1944, only a few days before the Liberation. Natalia was left homeless with three orphaned children. After having mentioned that her husband was arrested and taken away from home at Rome, Natalia reports

his death in only one poignant line: "I never saw him again"[21]. She returned home to Turin, and while her parents took care of the children, she joined the Einaudi publishing house, then a fledgling concern. Here Ginzburg worked with distinguished writers and critics like Cesare Pavese, Vittorio Foa, Felice Balbo, colleagues with whom she bonded with a lasting friendship. Their voices appear frequently in her narration, reflecting their impact in her life. She deeply mourned the suicide of Cesare Pavese at Turin in 1950, but mentions the event in her typically measured tone, trying to analyse and interpret:

Pavese committed suicide in summer, when none of us (his friends) were there. He planned his death with the same precision and calculation with which one planned one's daily walk or an evening programme (…). He was always meticulous about everything to the last detail, leaving nothing to chance (…). After the war ended we were all scared that there would be war again, but he was terrified more than any of us. He loathed to be drawn into the vortex of the unforeseeable and the unintelligible — anathema to his lucid intellect — (…), appearing like the dark whirlpool of menacing waves, threatening to submerge the bare dunes of his life[22] (trans. mine).

In the workplace, she remembers Felice Balbo's enthusiastic projects as against Pavese's spirit of irony, which she missed reading in his books and above all his dry sense of humour which used to come out in his carefree moments

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 167.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

with his friends[23]. The story thus continues to proceed across different episodes of varying intensity, involving friends, family and acquaintances, and constructs a choral narrative, sketching cameo profiles of diverse characters that had thronged her universe.

Lessico turns out to be an open-ended narrative, without a specific beginning of any phase in the story, and ends the narration around the thirty-fourth year of her life. The book covers the traces of her life till her second marriage, to literary critic Gabriele Bandini, and transfer of residence to Rome in 1950. There is definitely a moment of conversion in the end in *Lessico*, when the narrator emerges from under the protective wings of parental support and the family home in Turin and moves to Rome, beginning a new, independent chapter in her life, with her own home and family.

Significantly, it initiated the phase which saw the actualization of her potential as writer, fulfilling thereby a promise noted early in childhood. Natalia's second husband died in 1969. She eventually engaged herself totally in writing and came to represent one of the significant voices among the women writers of her time, leading interventions on various political and social issues, and was elected to parliament in 1983.

Natalia Ginzburg died in Rome in 1991. She continued with the surname of her first husband till the end.

Ginzburg attempts to go over the past in a retrospective narration which would offer a more unitary reading on life, offering a possibility that the fractures might heal through narration. Autobiography, in this case, purports to be a

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

transformative experience, which by elucidating the past gives a meaning of life in which even the discontinuities, fragmentariness and incoherence find their exact collocation.

The narrative unity of the text helps the writing subject find, among brief actions, its identity on the scale of an entire period of life. It reminds us of Dilthey's concept of the '*connectedness of life*' in autobiography, to which Ricoeur refers in his theoretical reflections in *Oneself as Another*[24].

Ginzburg's presentation of the book "as a novel" is indicative in this context, for in the very decision to tell it as a story the author exercises her 'will' to restructure and elaborate the past, and recompose it. For the subject, it is a deliberate and *self*-conscious move to connect with the past self, elucidating and interpreting 'experiences' in the light of the present. Ginzburg arrives at a narrative configuration in *Lessico* through what Ricoeur calls 'discordant concordances', meaning the changes from the point of beginning, which are narrated as in a story to give a fictive movement to the account, in the manner of emplotment[25].

Ricoeur's model provides us a key to the narrative strategy. To explain, the upsets, sudden events that change the course of life, disappointments etc. constitute elements of discordance in memorial narrations. In Ginzburg's *Lessico*, fluctuations in the fortune and rhythm of life of the family, her father's expectations in his children not fulfilled and his spirit of conflict with his sons — specifically in case of the life choices of Mario and Alberto, the traumatic events of the war, the arrests, their forced internment, her husband's

[24] Ricoeur, *cit.*, p. 115.
[25] Cfr. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, *cit.*, p.141.

imprisonment, torture and death, her own homeless situation, financial insecurity — are all elements that signify dramatic changes in relation to the initial situation in the author's life and give a twist to the storyline as in a fiction.

In fact, the consonances and dissonances between the past self and the present self, between the "experiencing self" and the "narrating self" — terms introduced by Leo Spitzer — constitute different modes of self-narration in autobiographical texts[26]. A 'lucid narrator', turning back on the track of memory, is able to intellectualize and clarify the ignorance and confusion of the past self, and shed light on things which were hazy and incomprehensible before. Dorrit Cohn, in her analysis of narrative modes of presenting consciousness in fiction, cites Proust's *A La Recherche* as "an inexhaustible source-book for the type of self-narration in which the benighted past self is 'lit up' by a sovereignly cognizant narrator"[27]. Since in dissonance, a distance is established between the 'narrating self' and the 'experiencing self', retrospective narration becomes a cognitive experience for the self as it was for Marcel in Proust's text:

"True life, life at last discovered and illuminated, the only life therefore really lived, that life is literature"[28]. No doubt, in *Lessico* Ginzburg follows a variant line, distancing the self from being the subject of her story, but her subject cannot

[26] Cfr., L. Spitzer, *Stilstudien* II, (1922, rpt. Munich: 1961), p. 478, cited by Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, Princeton 1978.

[27] Cfr., Dorrit Cohn, *cit.*, pp. 145-153.

[28] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Paris 1954, p. 895. ("La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, c'est la littérature;…"). Eng. trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Frederick A. Blossom, Remembrance of Things Past II, New York 1932 p. 1014.

help lapsing occasionally into a dissonant narration — fluctuating between the 'moments of remembrance' and the 'moments remembered', when the ignorant past self is lit up by the cognizant present self.

Two episodes stand out in this context. Recounting the moments in childhood when she had to be hospitalized, Ginzburg remembers her mother telling her that the hospital was the house of the doctor and that the patients roaming around were his children and family: "I believed obediently, though I knew all along that it was a hospital; and then as it was in other times, truth and falsehood mingled in me"[29]. The episode of Turati is another case in point:

"One evening I heard my mother talking to someone in the next room; and I heard her opening the linen closet. I saw shadows on the glass door.(…) Sig. Paolo Ferrari was in the dining room, drinking tea. As I saw him I immediately recognized him as Turati, for he had come once to our house in Via Pastrenga. But since I was told he was Paolo Ferrari, I obediently believed, and thought that he was both, Turati and Ferrari; again truth and falsehood mingled in me". She describes Turati as Ferrari, observing with a child's eye: "Ferrari was heavy, big as a bear…". She remembers that Turati presented to her mother a book dedicated to the memory of Anna Kuliscioff and signed it as 'from Anna and Filippo': "My ideas were always confused; I could not understand how he was Anna and also Filippo, if he was instead, as they said, Paolo Ferrari[30].

[29] Ginzburg, *cit.*, p. 81.
[30] Ibid., pp. 81-82.

In another instance, the author describes thus Adriano Olivetti, then in military service, sitting at dinner at their place:

He had a sad air, perhaps owing to his dislike of military service, and was timid and silent, but when he talked, he talked at length and in a very low voice. His little blue eyes were cold but dreamy and stared into the vacant space while he would keep talking, at once confused and obscure. Adriano then seemed to be the living incarnation of the type my father called '*impiastro*' (odd, painfully shy, fumbling bloke), but he never referred to him as '*impiastro*', or '*salame*' (inept)… he never used his typical epithets on him.

I wonder why: and I think may be my father had a much deeper psychological insight than we credited him for, and he could see through the vests of that shy boy the man he would become in future[31]. (words added within parenthesis are mine)

Thus here we have situations in which elements of discordance are verified as retrospective cognition of the past self. The writer expressly mentions in these instances how things which were unclear and confused at the time of their occurrence in the past became clear and comprehensible with the experience of the present. As we redirect our gaze, — to use the light and shade imagery of Proust — like a lamp throwing light on our life on reverse, just as a photo negative held against light, the past is "illuminated" and understood:

"Only then, when one has thrown light upon it and intellectualized it can one distinguish (…) the shape of what

[31] Ginzburg, cit., p. 72.

one has felt"[32]. It is interesting to note that Natalia Ginzburg was among the first translators of *A La Recherche* in Italian and her translation of the first part of the book was published by the Einaudi. Intertextual links to Proust's *Recherche*, especially to *Côté du Chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*) recur in *Lessico*, and are explicit, for example, in the episodes in which the narrator detects resemblances between M. Swann of *Recherche* and her father's friend and colleague in the faculty Prof. Terni, who was a frequent visitor to the Levi home. To the author, Terni seemed to be "consciously resembling Swann", especially noticeable in his habit of keeping a caramel in the mouth or his penchant for discovering similarities between their faces and those in the famous paintings. The connections compound as it is Terni again who brings into their home a copy of *Recherche*, thus introducing them to Proust's work, which the family grew to love, especially her mother, Mario and sister Paola. Ginzburg does not forget to mention either the keen interest with which her mother would later follow the progress of her work of translation of *Recherche*[33]. Thus, Proust's text is present in Ginzburg's *Lessico* not only in the concept of retrospective cognition of the past through the memorial process, but is further intertexted through these recurring references and constructions of parodic correspondences, which combine a sort of postmodern *pastiche*. In the frequent transtextual addressing to the assumed 'model', in the correspondences traced between Swann and Terni, highlighting the latter's mannerisms and his anxious intellectual air ('*un poseur*', as

[32] Proust, *cit.*, p.896. Eng. trans. Moncrieff, cit.
[33] Ginzburg, *cit.*, pp. 21, 59, 60, 66, 67,123, 214.

her father was fond of saying), the original image in Proust is reinvented with irony, recast in comic lines and lowered into the 'banal'. In terms of textual category, Ginzburg's narration fundamentally deviates from Proust's work in her near obliteration of the self from the text. Unlike Marcel she does not narrate *her* past consciousness, but relives it in the silence of her heart, listening to the words voiced by others.

That she views the period covered in this book as a single phase or a unique chapter in her existence is revealed in the organization of the text. The book is not divided into chapters as other novels but continues in a series of paragraphs, with only a line of blank space left in between. Here we might allow us a little digression, for this feature also brings up in *Lessico famigliare* a structural similarity with the Family Books (*Libri di famiglia*) of the past, in which we might be tempted to trace the antecedents of the structure of Ginzburg's text[34]. To our interest, these family books were written in an unbroken series of paragraphs, without any demarcating line or chapterization, keeping only a single blank space before each new annotation. In these texts, written mostly between fourteenth and sixteenth centuries

[34] Maintenance of 'family books' was an established tradition in Italian society in the period of Humanism and Renaissance. It was prevalent initially among the mercantile class but spread gradually to other classes in the society, as a mode of preservation of family history, carrying forward through generations the record of useful information, data and advice. While the published texts have been found mostly in Tuscany and some areas of Northern Italy, they have been traced in unpublished form in almost all the regions of Italy. While the practice began around 14th century, it peaked during the 15th century and lasted in its usual form till 16th century. However, chronological extensions of the genre can be traced till the beginning of the 19th century. Cfr. A. Cicchetti, R. Mordenti, *La scrittura dei libri di famiglia*, in A. A. Rosa (ed), *Letteratura italiana*, vol. III, Turin 1984, pp. 1117-1159.

(spreading in the period of Humanism and Renaissance, as a popular practice mostly among the mercantile class in Tuscany and regions of northern Italy), apart from business or professional advices, important family events especially the registration of birth, death and marriages were reported with religious regularity, without any significant affective input whatsoever. External events were reported only as a part of necessary information to draw lessons and counsel for the family, and the book continued through generations, regularly updated with new entries, aimed at preserving the record of family identity. Though the *family book* was not typically included in the category of literary genres, an evolution can be traced in the successive changes in its thematic physiognomy. From its initial stage limited only to the reporting of family data and business records, family books extended in later phases to incorporate anecdotes of important events and occurrences of interest to the family, graduating from the purely informative and prescriptive to a proto-narrative text. It was a system through which the *family* sought to continue as an independent organism in which the individual found his identity, institutionalizing the models and norms to be passed in heredity to the coming generation. Ginzburg's text shares two elements of the medieval family book: its narration in quality of reportage, shorn of any affective input, and the formal organization of the text as a *continuum*, without division into separate chapters. Needless to mention, *Lessico* varies from this genre of writing in the story line, in its narrative structure similar to the novel. We are tempted nonetheless to hazard an opinion that in Ginzburg's text one can detect a tenuous strain of the genre of family books which had carried within its fold latent

possibilities of extension into a literary category, attempting to compose in a narrative mode the data of family chronicle.

In the final analysis, *Lessico famigliare*, notwithstanding the author's stated intention to the contrary, reads as a variant category within the autobiographical genre and locates the self in the formative stages of its identity. As Ricoeur writes on the question of the self and narrative identity, the person, "understood as character in a story, is not an entity distinct from his own "experiences" (…). The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told"[35].

Lasting dispositions are formed within the family tradition. While the family has a significant role to play towards character formation through the inculcation of habit and identification with a system of values (which, to say it with Ricoeur, makes us place a "cause" above our own survival, defining the moral aspect of character)[36], it represents a collective identity in its history and experiences with which the self is related and inextricably bound. Thus, in constructing the story of her family, the author of *Lessico* constructs her own identity recognized in each habit acquired, in each value identified and internalized, in each experience confronted, adding structure to character in a relational sense. In *Lessico famigliare*, the author constructs an image of the family as a super individual entity, which has its own history, its typical virtues, its models, its 'myths', in which the self recognizes and re-identifies itself.

[35] Ricoeur, *cit.*, pp. 147-148.
[36] *Ibid*, p. 122.

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