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Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli: A Beginner

Let me begin with a very personal memory. It was 1972 and I was expecting my first child. I was happy but I wondered if this would not compromise my future in the university, still strongly male-dominated. When, after giving her the news, I manifested my fears, Biancamaria laughed heartily, and told me: “Look at me: I have six children!”

Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli would become for me more than a “professor” or a guide to research. She would be a path-opening woman. Initiator of American studies in Italy, one of the founders of the American Studies Center and of the Italian Association of North American Studies, founder and first President of the Third University of Rome: Biancamaria showed that with intelligence, generosity, energy, determination, constant work and investment in the future, many difficulties could be overcome. When, in the last part of her life, she agreed to become the President of the Levi Montalcini Foundation, once again demonstrated how much she cared for the education of women.¹

I have been associated with Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli for 52 years, about the same years I have spent with my husband. Over time, Biancamaria has been a teacher, a research director, a colleague, and, last but not least, a dear friend. I shall concentrate on three nodal and germinative moments and aspects of our relationship to highlight the core of what she gave me in life and left me in inheritance. The first focuses on Professor Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, the teacher who in 1968 aroused my interest in American studies; the second on the scholar and introducer to Walt Whitman’s poetry and his search for an “American” language; the third on her participation in the *Networking Women* research project.

Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli: The Professor

It was the academic year 1968-69. In those fiery days, almost no professor had access to the classrooms of the Faculty of Magistero, in Piazza della Repubblica in Rome. No one, except Professor Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli. Perhaps, because she was young. Or maybe because, having rebellious children of her own, she knew how to “handle” us students and capture our attention. Or it may have depended on the fresh air we felt entered the classroom when we read works that seemed relevant to our persons, or to our present. So it was that we, mostly young women variously repressed by a patriarchal culture, found liberating the explosive words of Emily Dickinson, or those of Emerson, who urged us to have confidence in ourselves, or Whitman’s personal invitation to celebrate and free ourselves.

But the days came when the struggle hardened, and the doors of the Faculty were definitely barred. Class meetings at that point were moved from the closed classroom to the open air of a bar in front of the Magistero. Then, everything changed. Then, the real educational and mental revolution began. Leaving the professorial chair, Biancamaria became an initiator of readings and a stimulus to critical thinking. She invited everyone to name our favorite American authors and why we liked them, even to suggest our own reading list for the whole class. I chose Allen Ginsberg, who then “howled” in the way I would have liked to, had I been able to gather the inner authorization and courage to rebel against institutions and a culture in which the Latin professor could still write on the blackboard of a classroom full of women students “Here only Troy smokes”.

The small group of students gathered around Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli that year included, besides me, two other girls who would become Americanists, and whom I would like to remember: Caterina Ricciardi and Fedora Giordano.

1978, 1992, 2023: Germinating Whitman

Language, style, and artistic experimentation were always at the center of Biancamaria’s interest. In 1978 she started a research project on the idea

and practice of an “American language” in Walt Whitman, in which she involved me. That summer, we met in Washington, DC, where we worked on Whitman’s “Language Notebooks” in the Library of Congress Archives. It was a time of extraordinary discoveries and encounters.

The publication of several essays and books and my first lectures at the University of Palermo would be the outcome of those studies. But it was the International Conference held in 1992 at the University of Macerata for the Centennial of the publication of the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* that constituted the connecting event for the future of Italian and transatlantic Whitman studies. The major Italian and international scholars, including the European dean of Whitman studies Roger Asselineau, participated in the Conference. Their contributions are collected in the volume that takes its title from the opening essay by Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, *Utopia in The Present Tense: Walt Whitman and the Language of the New World* (1994). Among the US participants was Ed Folsom of the University of Iowa, the Whitman scholar who would later create, along with Kenneth Price of the University of Nebraska, one of the most prestigious literary digital archives, *The Walt Whitman Archive*.² The subsequent collaboration with Folsom and Price led to the idea of including translations of *Leaves of Grass* in several languages in the archive. My student Caterina Bernardini, after a period of training, and while carrying out a joint doctorate with the University of Nebraska, was entrusted with the task of preparing for the archive the first Italian edition, of 1907. The work is still in progress.

In 1997, on the initiative of the French scholar Éric Athenot, and with the participation of Mario Corona and myself, of Ed Folsom, Kenneth Price, Betsy Erkkila, Walter Grünzweig and others, The Transatlantic Walt Whitman Association (TWWA) was founded. A year later the first Walt Whitman weekly Seminar and Symposium were organized in Dortmund. Since then, and with the exception of the two-year interruption due to the Covid pandemic, yearly student Seminars and Symposiums for younger scholars have been held in various universities on both sides of the Atlantic. This year, 2023, the University of Rome “La Sapienza” has hosted them.

2000-2004: Networking Women

In 2000 we were awarded a national grant for the research project *Networking Women: Subjects, Places, Links Europe-America. Towards a Rewriting of Cultural History, 1890-1939* (2000-2004). This time, I was responsible for the whole project, which involved six Italian and three foreign universities, while Biancamaria coordinated the large Roman group and its website.

To re-examine the turn-of-the-century and modernist cultural history we focused on the complexity of cultural dynamics, and took into consideration personal, emotional, and intellectual affiliations, as well as power relations. We unearthed archival papers, went through letters and manuscripts, leafed through dusty magazines, sometimes feeling that very few scholars or readers had brought to life their pages in the intervening years. We carried our discoveries to our meetings and seminars, as if we had found gold in our treasure hunting, and shared the sheer pleasure of discovery which acted as an energizer in our research work. It was an innovative experience for all of us, but for Biancamaria, then President of the University of Rome Foro Italico, it was like the opening of a path where all her personal and intellectual research interests could converge. We created a website, making our best with what was technically available, and what the pre-Web Internet allowed us to do at the time.

Besides two international conferences and individual books, research results were collected in the two volumes: *Networking Women: Subjects, Places, Links Europe-America. Towards a Re-writing of Cultural History, 1890-1939* (2004); and *Words at War: Parole di guerra e culture di pace nel "primo secolo delle guerre mondiali"* (2005).³

Biancamaria contributed two very accomplished essays, respectively, "A Knot of Salons" and "Americane-europee in due guerre mondiali." The first centers on turn-of-the-century salons in Paris and the group of women who animated some of them, with a particular attention devoted to Gertrude Stein, Natalie Clifford Barney, Marie Laurencin, and Romaine Brooks. Growing out of the first, the second essay focuses on Romaine Brooks's and Natalie Barney's response to the two European wars. Afterwards, she would keep on working on the two women, in particular on Natalie Barney's

unpublished autobiography, and the theoretical problems related to the study of Barney's autobiography and Brooks's self-portraits.

When, in her last years, illness kept her at home, I would visit with her at regular intervals. Those visits were for me a sort of continuation of our personal and research relationship. She would pull out from under a pile of papers her xerox copy of Barney's manuscript autobiography, select a few art books with reproductions of Brooks's paintings, and comment on them. She would ask my opinion about this or that, always thinking that sooner or later she would be able to produce a final essay relating writing to painting, autobiography to self-portrait.

She loved art and music. She spent hours sitting in her drawing room, looking at the many modern art paintings that hung on its walls. They kept her company, she told me. She basked in their colored forms and was happy, happy to spend her remaining days in that world of infinite beauty.



Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli (center) and colleagues
at the AISNA Conference in Sardinia, 1976
(photo by Marina Camboni).

Notes

¹ See her speech at the Conference *Prima le mamme e i bambini* (Milan, Nov. 16, 2013): <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4hiEmcOgfE&t=44s>>.

² See Marina Camboni (ed.), *Utopia in The Present Tense: Walt Whitman and the Language of the New World*, Roma, Il Calamo, 1994; and the *Walt Whitman Archive*, <<https://whitmanarchive.org/>>.

³ Marina Camboni (ed.), *Networking Women: Subjects, Places, Links Europe-America. Towards a Re-writing of Cultural History, 1890-1939*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2004; and Marina Camboni, Gigliola Sacerdoti Mariani and Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli (a cura di), *Words at War: Parole di guerra e culture di pace nel "primo secolo delle guerre mondiali"*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2005.