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The Literary Construction of Mediterranean Identity: Memory and Myth in Maria Corti

Non si sa mai veramente quando le cose comincino. Meno dubbi esistono sui luoghi dove le sirene trascorsero in secoli lontani non tutto, ma buona parte del loro tempo, luoghi iscritti nella mappa mediterranea.

Maria Corti (*Il canto delle sirene*, 22)

Abstract: Definitions of identity open a field of research crisscrossing several disciplines, not at least literary studies. This contribution is aimed to detect possible aesthetic approaches how to construct identity throughout literature, focussing on Mediterranean issues.

Matters of identity can be well observed in the works of the Italian writer, critic, philologist and founder of semiotics Maria Corti (1915–2002); the aesthetics of *L'ora di tutti*, a novel in three parts dealing with the conquest of Otranto by the Ottoman Empire in 1480, and *Il canto delle sirene*, a hybrid text consisting of fictitious as well as research chapters and turning ancient Mediterranean mythology into global literary discourse, allow to analyse the ambiguity of concepts about the individual I and its consolidation within, as well as its outbreak from beliefs, customs and traditions constituting culture. While Corti seeks in both works to interweave topics of individual identity with intercultural questions, she exposes her narration in between the poles of memory and myth, finally recalling memory of historic events through their myths and declaring mythology as cultural memory. As observations on etymology and on intertextual notions in Corti's works demonstrate once more the connectivity of Mediterranean cultures, in a conclusive moment Corti's interpretation of literature as a communicative system able to define a *luogo mentale* will emerge as basic aesthetics of constructing Mediterranean identity beyond cultural fragmentation.

Discourses about the construction of identity in literature reflect questions concerning the relation between real and imagined trueness and its perception through aesthetic and poetological methodology. Transferring this profoundly communicative conception of literature onto a spatial topos such as the Mediterranean does not imply that literature studies are limited to research on the depicted inner-, inter- or transculturality along the Mediterranean shores, but instead it calls for a focus on the aesthetic construction of the Mediterranean and its concep-

tualization within literary texts. The Italian philologist, critic and writer Maria Corti¹ articulates the term *luogo mentale* to describe the mental interaction of imagination and reality, which converges into cultural memory as conceptualistic phenomenon:

I luoghi mentali sono costruzioni della mente che nascono da idee, individuali o di gruppo; c'è quindi sempre all'origine del luogo mentale qualcosa di astratto, un'idea con carattere di assoluto, un'operazione simbolizzante applicata a un oggetto che può anche non essere stato mai visto. Perciò le realtà terrene inserite in un luogo mentale vengono a recitare nella storia della cultura un ruolo particolarissimo, a costituire nella società una realtà nuova. [...] Da qui l'importanza storica assunta nella cultura da queste costruzioni simboliche della mente, che spesso si presentano come contenitori di due punti di vista antitetici [...]. (Corti 1997, 33)

Expanding this abstract concept onto the figuration of the Mediterranean in literature, its pluralistic receptions, depictions and modulations become obvious, as Corti points out: “Può accadere che due culture, fra loro diverse per epoca e per valori, diano vita a uno stesso luogo mentale, ma per vie di approccio assai differenti sicché gli adepti alle due realtà storico-sociali coltivano un comune luogo mentale senza rendersene conto.” (Corti 1997, 33). Therefore, the detection of the Mediterranean identity demands a textual investigation on the prevailing concept of culture and its individuals; the dialectic interpretation of these polarizing but also converging terms then flows into an examination of identity.² This implies a dichotomous understanding of identity, which is proposed to consist of, on the one hand, a subject's congruency with, or delineation from, its experienced or imagined social and cultural surroundings (a kind of outer, cultural identity), and, on the other hand, of the subject's personality producing its capacities, thoughts, emotions, decisions and actions (the inner, individual identity).

Based on this notion, studies on literary texts are able to discern “the” Mediterranean identity as well as the plurality of identities constituting and constituted

1 The work of Maria Corti (1915–2002) is extensive and diverse; to recall all her scientific, literary and editing merits she obtained as scholar of philology, as University teacher at Lecce and Pavia, as co-founder of the journal *Strumenti critici* and as editorial member of *Alfabeta*, as literary critic and as collector of manuscripts of Italian writers stored in the Fondo Manoscritti at the University of Pavia (insights in its foundation are given in Corti's book *Ombre dal Fondo*), as collaborating editor at the publishing houses Einaudi and Bompiani, and not at least as novelist, is recommended to consult the detailed bibliography also including critics on her works provided by Cristina Nesi (Corti 2006, 217–345) and the memorial volume published in Corti's literature journal *Autografo* (Cremante and Stella 2002).

2 Otherwise criss-crossing several scientific disciplines, the questions of identity are here going to be seen both as subject of narration as well as derivations from aesthetic constructions in literary texts.

by the Mediterranean. The dichotomous reading of identity is intrinsically related to the imagining of the Mediterranean, which analogously happens to be the object of discourses on congruency and delineation when seen as synthesis or polarization between its cultures, languages and literatures. Hence it is not only necessary to adopt a pluralistic view on the Mediterranean reality, determined by exchange, integration, connectivity and also confrontation, but also to consider the various imaginings of the Mediterranean,³ capable of literary configuration as *topos* by symbolizing elaborations and variations of its memory and myths.

These reflections on identity and the literary Mediterranean lead to a further exploration of the philological genesis of the term *mediterraneum*.⁴ Etymological dictionaries declare the semantic of this Greek and Latin compound as originally related to regions inside the mainland and not along the coast.⁵ The comparatist Predrag Matvejević notes Cicero's use of the continental semantic of *mediterraneum*,⁶ which is also found in Boccaccio (DEI, 2404) and was in use up to the eighteenth century (DELI, 955). Nevertheless, according to Matvejević a transfer of the strict continental semantic onto the sea seems to have taken place as early as the seventh century, in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville.⁷ The term *mediterraneum*

3 The comparatist Armando Gnisci discusses various imaginings of the Mediterranean beginning with the “palimpsest” of the historian Fernand Braudel's opus magnum *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, dissolving *exchange* (translations of the contribution's author if not indicated otherwise) in *mixture* and transforming Braudel's *stacking* into *slitting* of cultural layers (Gnisci 2000, 166, 168). Gnisci's own imagination focusses on the notion of *net* (Gnisci 2000, 167) which accords with the idea of Mediterranean *connectivity*, established by the medievalist Suzanne Conklin Akbari as a fundamental concept in interpreting Mediterranean issues (Akbari 2013).

4 A deepened research on the various semantics and use of the term *mediterraneum* can only be fulfilled in separate contributions exclusively dedicated to this issue; therefore this examination refers on other sources giving a literary-historical synopsis.

5 According to etymological sources, the literal meaning of the calque of the Greek *mesógeios* and the Latin adjective *terraneum* (“in the middle of mainland”) was used as opposite to *maritimus* (*Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* [thereafter DELI] 1999, 954–955; *Dizionario Etimologico Italiano* [thereafter DEI] 1952, 2404).

6 Matvejević (1998, 14). Matvejević refers to the following passage in Cicero's second oration, book five against Verres, the trialed proconsul of Sicily: “Ad homines a piratarum metu et suspicione alienissimos, a navigando rebusque maritimis remotissimos, ad Centuripinos, homines maxime mediterraneos, summos aratores, qui nomen numquam timuissent maritimi praedonis, unum te praetore horruissent Apronium, terrestrem archipiratum.” (Cicero 1995, 494). Using the adjective “mediterraneos” in context with “aratores” and “terrestrem”, Cicero confirms its inner land's semantic and its opposition to “maritimus”.

7 Matvejević (1998, 15). Matvejević points out Isidore's description of the “Great Sea” under the heading “De mediterraneo mari” (Isidore 2006: 277–278): “This is also called the Mediterranean because it flows through the ‘middle of the land’ (*media terrae*) all the way to the east, separating

then acquired the semantic of a sea which is completely surrounded by continental coasts and became used as maritime adjective. The antonymic coexistence of these opposing semantics over several centuries characterizes a strong but polysemantic polarization of the Sea versus the Continent.⁸ The genesis of *mediterraneum* as an oxymoron also mirrors questions concerning cultural identity, which pertain to all the Mediterranean coasts. Connected- and otherness were already established in the Roman description of the Mediterranean as *mare nostrum*, emphasizing an inner and an outer aspect of cultural belonging.⁹ Further, the plurisemantic variety of expressions indicating the Mediterranean Sea in the different languages along its shores¹⁰ makes apparent the plurality of perspectives concerning questions of Mediterranean identity.

Literary correspondence to this essential theme is found in Maria Corti's novel *L'ora di tutti*, where she narrates using a pluriperspective form the conquest of Otranto by the Ottoman Empire in 1480 and the later liberation of the Apulian

Europe, Africa, and Asia." (Isidore 2006, 277, English translation of Stephen Barney et al.; italics within quotations from original version if not indicated otherwise).

⁸ This polarization finds expression within Fernand Braudel's analysis of Italy's predominant cultural and economic position around 1450 in Europe and the whole Mediterranean area, when he describes certain Italian dominions within the Mediterranean as "coast stripes without an inner mainland" (Braudel 2003, 25).

⁹ Elisabeth Arend summarizes this Roman ideology as follows: "Das identitätsgewisse und besitzerstolze *nostrum*, das die Römer von den Griechen zur Bezeichnung des Meeres nahmen, an dessen Küsten sie ihr Reich ausdehnten, beschwört [...] Gemeinsamkeiten zwischen Eroberern und Eroberten. Wer nicht in dieses *nostrum* eingeschlossen ist, steht auf der anderen, der falschen Seite." (Arend 1998, 263). Braudel describes Italy's domination of the Mediterranean rooted in its geographic position: "Die schmale Halbinsel hat sich dieses ganze Binnenmeer untertan gemacht, diese riesigen Wasserflächen, die sie, wie um sie besser beherrschen zu können, in zwei aufteilt, gerade als wollte sich eine hilfreiche Geographie in den Dienst ihrer Größe stellen." (Braudel 2003, 25; German translation of S. Summerer and G. Kurz).

¹⁰ Matvejević opened his lectures about the Mediterranean Sea as follows: "Le denominazioni del mare dipendono dalla sua posizione, dal rapporto con le terre che bagna e dai legami con i popoli che vivono sulle sue sponde. [...] Il mediterraneo venne chiamato anche Mare del Nord o del Sud, a seconda della posizione di chi lo solcava." (Matvejević 1998, 13). One paradigmatic case of this variety of terms figures the Latin translation of a probably Aristotelian text, where the Mediterranean is called "the inner sea" in delineation to the Ocean as "outer sea" (Arend 1998, 263; Matvejević 1998, 14). Even various colour attributions in the terminology of the Mediterranean Sea can be found in different languages (Arend 1998, 263; Matvejević 1998, 18). The Moroccan poet and scholar of literature Mohammed Bennis relaunched a philological conscience of a cultural North-South-division of the Mediterranean by remembering the historic denomination of the Mediterranean Sea in Arabic with the terms "mare romano" (which referred to the Byzantine reign) and "mare siriano" (Bennis 2009, 3).

port city and its surroundings.¹¹ This former part of “Magna Grecia” works as a prism for studying Mediterranean issues, due to its role as a crucial medieval connecting port between the Occident and the Orient as well as the intense presence there of several Mediterranean powers and cultures over many centuries.¹² The assault of Otranto by the Ottomans and, above all, its cruel climax in the massacre on Minerva’s hill represent a historic moment that became steeped in religious myths and legends, which have also been iterated in literature.¹³ Perhaps owing to her biographical background,¹⁴ this ambiguity between memory of the events and their mythification became Corti’s basic narration strategy in *L’ora di tutti*: she commemorates on the one hand the historical events of the assault (also quoting local chronologies and underscoring their inflictions of myth: “[...] se ne riparte con un ritmo irreal, di favola, nell’anima, lo stesso ritmo delle vecchie cronache locali.”; Corti 2004, 12), but she also seizes on folkloristic myth to constitute a *luogo mentale* of this part of the Mediterranean, completely avoiding any miraculous de-

11 In the days of July 1480 Otranto, reigned by Ferdinand I. from Aragon as part of the Kingdom of Naples, was assaulted by the Ottoman Empire on the background of Mohammed II.’s imperialistic strategy to dominate the Mediterranean’s Occident invading Puglia (and thereafter the whole Italian peninsula) across the Adriatic Sea and to isolate this way the maritime power Venice in the North (Andenna 2007, 274). Because of territorial rivalry and ongoing political tensions between the several reigns of the peninsula, Ferdinand did not send immediate military support to Otranto’s defenders, who were left alone during the sever Ottoman attacks and therefore had to give up after several days of heavy bombardment.

12 In various historic studies on Otranto its geoposition between (Byzantine) Orient and Occident is focussed as central (e.g. von Falkenhausen 2007); in Marina Falla Castelfranchi’s observations on artistic culture in medieval Otranto the port city is also called “the Occident’s bosfor” (Falla Castelfranchi 2007, 281).

13 Some of these texts and their reproduction of myths are going to be investigated later on. Many myths have been created on the massacre from 12 august 1480 (problems of the precise dating and textual sources are discussed in Houben 2008, 14–15), when a high number of Otranto’s defenders and inhabitants was beheaded on the city’s hills – the most diffused myth treats the Pascià’s negotiations which apparently offered the prisoners to save their lives by converting from Christianity to Islam. But it seems indeed historical fact that in Otranto the Pascià did not demand religious conversion while the financial treatments for release are historically confirmed (Andenna 2007, 258–259, 274); nevertheless, the victims of the massacre were later sanctified and kept in memory as the eight hundred martyrs of Otranto (this number of victims is based on one of the rare testifying narrations of the event written down in 1539; Andenna 2007, 259).

14 Corti’s relation to Apulia is not limited to the cathedral at the University of Lecce, but derives from her childhood, when Corti’s family moved from Milan to Apulia, a period where her mother fell seriously ill. This loss and the following “orphanage” in Milan colleges (Corti’s father continued to work in Apulia) fundamentally influenced Corti’s work and especially *L’ora di tutti*; Gino Pisanò, one of Corti’s former disciples, gives valuable biographical insights on this aspect (Pisanò 2008, 212–213).

velopments and breaking with common expectations related to these myths, which, in the course of time, had become religiously canonized.¹⁵ These inversions turn out to be the fundamental methodology used by Corti for constituting identity, as we will observe later in the construction of the novel's feminine protagonist, Idrusa.

Within the tension between the commemorated history and its myths, Corti develops the polyphonic image of the Mediterranean through the introspections of five narrators, which are conceived as individual entities with different sociocultural origins.¹⁶

With the exception of the final chapter, they occur at the point of death, which assumes a meta-categoric significance throughout the novel and is employed as a fundamental narrative perspective.¹⁷ Further, that the novel's title is also announcing death, while additionally indicating the issues surrounding identity in the

15 That Corti's novel is in historical researches on the assault considered as precursor in spotlighting the betrayal on Otranto's defenceless inhabitants (Andenna 2007, 244, 274; Houben 2008, 9), confirms the historical veracity on which *L'ora di tutti* is mainly based and hence Corti's inversion of the myths as aesthetical construction. Among the vast field of research on the literary function of myth, the studies of Eleazar Meletinsky assembled in the book *The Poetics of Myth* (English translation by Guy Lanoue and Alexandre Sadetsky, 1998) also treat the variety of scholarly approaches to the subject. On the intrinsic relation of folklore and myth, Meletinsky applies a semiotic reading of myth very similar to Corti: "Another source of myth in literature is folklore. Although a later development than myth, folklore is impregnated with traditional symbolism and is a source of concrete mythical imagery that has inspired many writers over the years [...]" (Meletinsky 1998, 122).

16 Corti's narrative choir consists of Colangelo pescatore ("Per me niente stava al paragone con Otranto, [...]; non c'era sulla terra mestiere che i pescatori otrantini non avessero gusto di fare, quando i cavalloni della tramontana impedivano la pesca [...]" ; Corti 2004, 1748); Captain Zurlo, announced gouverneur of Otranto and dying while combating the Ottomans ("[...] egli [Akmed Pascià] nascendo portò in germe i dolori che avrebbe dato a me."; Corti 2004, 104); Idrusa, underestimated and solitary textile artist ("Andavo sì scalza, come tutte le mogli dei pescatori, ma a differenza delle altre annodavo con cura i capelli e li fermavo con cordelle di seta colorata, perché non mi lasciava mai la volontà di essere bella."; Corti 2004, 165); Nachira, imprisoned after the fall of Otranto and suffering martyrdom ("Contarono i primi cinquanta, fra cui capitai anche io, e ci avviarono al colle della Minerva, legati alle corde. [...] quegli oleandri del colle della Minerva furono l'ultima cosa che vidi in vita mia. Chi l'avrebbe mai detto."; Corti 2004, 310-311); Aloise de Marco, representative of Otranto's nobility and one of the city's liberators ("Quando il duca Alfonso radunò le truppe per liberare la città dall'occupazione turca, mi trovai di mezzo fra gli agi pacifici della vita napoletana e il richiamo sottile della mia giovinezza [...]" ; Corti 2004, 313).

17 This analysis is confirmed by Pisanò's consideration that "[f]in dalle prime movenze narrative, aleggia nel romanzo un diffuso senso di morte" (Pisanò 2008, 210). Four of the five narratives are obituaries in terms of a retrospective search of identity, all of them confluent in the events of the assault and finally in death (Pisanò 2008, 211, describes this narration technique as "explicit del racconto").

novel, is expressed by the following reflection: “[...] a ciascun uomo nella vita capita almeno una volta un’ora in cui dare prova di sé; viene sempre, per tutti. A noi l’hanno portata i turchi.” (Corti 2004, 148–149). The observation on Corti’s methodology, concerning the interplay of the memory of the historical battle and its myths as a narrative space for the construction of individual identities, finds herein a profound confirmation.

Due to Corti’s scholarly observations on literature it cannot be ignored that she demands semiotic reading of these individual identities in the context of culture; she discusses literary characters as *personaggi-specchio*, representative entities with symbolic or emblematic significance (Corti 1997, 93).¹⁸ In an earlier approach that was even more imprinted by semiotics and structuralism, Corti considered these characters signs, which form with their complex of semantics a *hypersign* (Corti 1976, 8, 108, 122), transmitting a new configuration of knowledge (Corti 1997, 56, 93).¹⁹ This implementation of issues of identity, the dichotomy of the individual’s polarization versus culture as well as its contextualization in culture, offers a field of conflict, prosperous to Corti’s narration, that is constituted by signs; due to the signs’ communicative capacities²⁰ their detection is important in research on literary constructions of the Mediterranean and its identities.

18 Corti’s construction of the narrators between memory and myth underscores their semiotic significance: Colangelo is a mere imagination of Corti in act to figure the Mediterranean fisher forced into warfare and narrating the first moments of the defeat, while Captain Zurlo is in actual fact a historical character in the battle of Otranto, mentioned in documents of that time (see Andenna 2007, 254, 256, 259) and narrating the crucial abandon of helpless Otranto by Naples. Idrusa, embodying feminine emancipation, and the fisher Nachira originate from myth; the latter is mostly used to reject the glorification of martyrdom and to precisely narrate the terrified prisoners’ anxieties. A further secularization of the mythical narrations is given by Aloise de Marco, representing Otranto’s nobility enjoying Naples’ wealth.

19 In this contribution Corti’s notion of hypersign is transferred on the term *concept* to signalize the signs’ semantic complexity; their connectivity and composition within the text is here suggested as conceptualistic methodology.

20 Considering literary texts as communicative system, Corti describes her semiologic approach on literature along the communication model of Roman Jakobson: “[...] la grandezza di un’opera è direttamente proporzionale alla forza della sua funzione segnica. Le grandi opere inoltre, adattandosi in virtù appunto del loro grado avanzatissimo di polisemia, alla lettura in funzione di molti e diversi modelli epocali [...], provocano la fase massima della comunicazione artistica come dialogo dei destinatari col testo lungo l’asse del tempo.” (Corti 1976, 67). This contribution uses the term *sign* in continuation to Corti’s binary writing activity as scholar and as author, not only coexisting but emerging as confluence in Corti.

In *L'ora di tutti*, Corti transposes her conceptualistic methodology on the significant outer form of the novel as tryptich.²¹ As its frame, the introduction establishes the Mediterranean sea as a reference paradigm ("Mentre le piante dei piedi si espandono, illese, sul sentiero, esse [le donne otrantine] guardano con la pupilla fissa in direzione del mare, uno sguardo asciutto, ereditato da generazioni di otrantini vissuti in attesa dello scirocco e della tramontana, per regolare su di essi pensieri e faccende."; Corti 2004, 9). This imagery is also supplied with the charnel memorial in the cathedral of Otranto, as sign of cultural memory but also of the individual fates of the martyrs: "Gravando sulla roccia con il peso dei suoi muri romanici, la cattedrale è il cuore di Terra d'Otranto, perché dentro ci sono Loro [the martyrs], in fondo all'abside, a destra, come il nocciolo in un frutto." (Corti 2004, 10).²²

The tryptich's middle and main part, which appears in contrast to the other parts, is not subdivided, and is by far the longest section. This is narrated by Idrusa, Corti's feminine heroine, who embodies conflicts of individual and cultural identity embedded in the Mediterranean. The figure of Idrusa is much more related to myth than to memory, in that her literary construction is representative of Corti's inversion of myth. While the name Idrusa does not emerge in most of the few historical sources about the assault, various literary works on the Ottoman conquest of Otranto predating Corti's novel do mention a feminine figure called Idrusa, who seems to originate from folkloristic mythology of the Salento (Andenna 2007, 244; Fiore 1967, 3; Laporta 2008, 207). Dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, Idrusa is once named in Francesco D'Ambrosio's *Saggio storico della presa di Otranto e stragge de' santi martiri*.²³ D'Ambrosio included her as projec-

21 As Cesare Segre concludes, the structural element in Corti's narrative work is "unavoidable" (Segre 2018, 5). In this contribution Corti's notion of hypersign is transferred on the term *concept* to signalize the signs' semantic complexity; their connectivity and composition within the text is here suggested as conceptualistic methodology.

22 The martyr's bones in the Cathedral of Otranto form a significant part of Corti's childhood memories embedded in Otranto (Pisanò 2008, 212); reminiscent of this horrifying sight as she is confessing in the introduction ("L'autore di questo libro dovrà giustificarsi di averli destati, condotti a quell'avorio della memoria che non sappiamo se per i morti sia più o meno struggente che per i vivi."; Corti 2004, 12), Corti installs them as sign of death and also cultural memory.

23 Published in 1751, this report is obviously inspired by the many myths about Otranto's martyrs; as primary textual source among others, D'Ambrosio indicates Giovanni Michele Laggetto's *Historia della Guerra d'Otranto del 1480*, probably written in the middle of the seventeenth century (the problematic dating and origin of the latter as derivation of Francisco de Araujo's *Historia de los martires de la ciudad de Otranto* from 1631 are revealed in Houben 2008, 9–14). D'Ambrosio, according to the frontispiece a catholic archpriest from Castiglione in Apulia, deepened in his narration the recurrent reading of the assault as religiously motivated and diffused the legend of the demanded conversion in exchange for life.

tion object of the Ottomans' atrocity during the siege of Otranto and presented the myth of the pure maid dying out of desperate compassion with the martyrs.²⁴ A first literary manifestation of Idrusa is found in Giuseppe Castiglione's *Il rinnegato salentino* ossia *I martiri d'Otranto*.²⁵ Published in 1839, this historic novel aims to enter into the literary contexts of the masters of Italian Romanticism, such as Alessandro Manzoni, through quotations from their works heading each chapter. Castiglione narrates in dialogical prose the assault of Otranto alongside the fate of Idrusa's parents; now gaining a central position within the sujet, Castiglione's Idrusa emerges, in a continuation of D'Ambrosio, as a symbol for the wise, innocent and devoted feminine, evoking in Christian contexts the Godmother Maria.²⁶ This image of the heroine is further developed in Francesco Tranquillino Moltedo's "cantica" *Idrusa ovvero I musulmani in Otranto* from 1871, but for the first time Idrusa emerges here as an engaged woman and appeals rather to pathetic morality than to loyalty to Christian belief.²⁷ Although suggesting Idrusa as the main char-

24 D'Ambrosio's Idrusa only symbolically joins with her death the martyrs' fate: "Nell'incamminarsi [...] al destinato luogo, occorre, che una bellissima giovane, per nome Idrusa, menata da due capitani turchi, i quali contendevano tra di loro, chi ne fosse il Padrone, vedendo due suoi fratelli legati esser condotti fuori della Città, spargendo dagl'occhi amare lagrime, disse loro: Fratelli miei, dove andate così legati? Cui rispose uno di essi: andiamo a morire per Gesù Cristo: Alle quali parole cascò tramortita a terra la povera Donzella; onde un Turco, volendola far alzare con impazienza, ed ira le diede un colpo sulla testa sì empivamente, che la fe subito morire [...]" (D'Ambrosio 1751, 49). As we will see further on, other elaborations of Idrusa imitate this construction of her death.

25 This romanticized novel is mostly appealing to belief and patriotic attitude in conflict with affairs of personal revenge. The "renegade" is Idrusa's father, who returns after years of exile as an Ottoman warrior to realize his plans of revenge; after archaic debates and the devastating battles in Otranto he completely reconverts to Christian belief. Otranto's renegade is a recurrent figure in the narrations of the massacre in tight relation to the religiously motivated conversion myth and occurs in many variations, also in a rather inverted depiction in Corti as a former Catholic priest (Corti 2004, 290).

26 Giuseppe Castiglione (1804–1866) used a metaphorical system based on religious comparisons and vocabulary when describing Idrusa: "bella come l'angelo casto d'amore" (Castiglione 1839, 46); "la calma della vergine innocente" (Castiglione 1839, 47). Castiglione elevated Idrusa to an angelic figure suggesting the mercy of Maria, the Mother of God, when she seems "il genio del dolore, piangente sulla tomba dell'innocenza" (Castiglione 1839, 47). He knew D'Ambrosio's narration of the tragic events in Otranto, quoted this author as historical source (Castiglione 1839, 182) and adopted the motive of the virgin martyr. The literature journal *Rinascenza salentina*, which ceased in 1943, hosts a defensive article by Ettore Vernole, underscoring Castiglione's merits as a pioneer in depicting folkloristic traditions (Vernole 1942, 178) and a biographical information focussing on Castiglione's origin from Gallipoli (Mazzarella 1943).

27 The priest and educator Moltedo, born 1839 in Naples (further biographical information is found in Laporta 2008), claims the utility of the "cantica" to moral education in his introduction

acter of this highromantic elaboration, Moltedo creates a triangular construction of equal protagonists, involving Idrusa, her groom and his father, the mythical martyr Primaldo.²⁸ Some decades later, Giuseppe De Dominicis' patriotic reminiscence *Li martiri d'Otrantu* emerged; this was written in 1902 in the dialect of the Salento and therefore did not gain a high diffusion.²⁹ De Dominicis emphasizes the religious mediation of the assault and depicts Idrusa in only a few of the eight hundred verses as a feminine slave who consciously demands to die as martyr.³⁰ The image of a pious and merciful Idrusa representing feminine sainthood is obviously continued in this poema, hence De Dominicis choosing San Luca's Madon-

(Moltedo 1871, 3) and confesses to be entirely inspired by the heroine Idrusa (Moltedo 1871, 4). Because of the text's lyrical construction (each of the four "canti" is written in tercets with chain rhyme), Moltedo's ponderous "cantica" is even supposed to imitate stylistically Dante and to refer to Petrarch, Boccaccio and Leopardi (Laporta 2008, 203).

28 In his introduction Moltedo admits that although rendering Idrusa's role more important than in previous sources, this character should contribute to emphasize the fate of Antonio Primaldo (Moltedo 1871, 4), the first of the legendary eight hundred beheaded martyrs. Primaldo is at the centre of Otranto's mythology: it is narrated that after his beheading Primaldo's body remained in upright position until the last of the martyrs was murdered (Houben 2008, 17; there Houben is giving insight in the textual sources of this myth). In Corti, this myth occurs highly altered and marginalized, rendering this character secular and equal to the other martyrs (Corti 2004, 309). Moltedo's "cantica" is an example of the literary construction in between history and myth, which is, in contrast to Corti's novel, not developed as aesthetic strategy but as mere self-reference. Moltedo enriches every "canto" with explanations to sources and historical backgrounds in notes; considering Idrusa he admits her poetical, and not historical elaboration (Moltedo 1871, 4). **29** Probably in the 1960s, the poet Carmine Cucugliato transfigures the poema into standard Italian language accompanied by an introduction of the Apulian writer, scholar and critic Tommaso Fiore (contributions on his work are collected in *Tommaso Fiore. Umanista, scrittore, critico*. Ed. Giovanni Dotoli. Manduria 1986). Because Fiore published many contributions on the dialect poetry of the Salento, he obtained the merit to have provided academic recognition of Apulian dialect poetry (Giancane 1986, 163). Fiore was highly fascinated by the poems of Giuseppe De Dominicis (1869–1905), also known as "Capitano Black". This young poet gained a central position in the dialect poetry of the Salento at the end of the nineteenth century. A relevant view on De Dominicis' work is given in the volume *Giuseppe de Dominicis e la poesia dialettale tra '800 e '900* (Rizzo 2005).

30 The probable symbolic value of de Dominicis' eight hundred verses in context with the mythic number of the eight hundred martyrs of Otranto indicates a high presence of symbolizing strategies in this poema. In contrary to Alessandro Laporta's consideration of Moltedo's "cantica" as predecessor for the further imaginations of Idrusa (Laporta 2008, 208), there is no influence of Moltedo's *Idrusa* perceivable in De Dominicis' poema, which follows D'Ambrosio's emblematic appearance of Idrusa in the dramatic moment of the martyrs' procession towards their death: "Due rinnegati/ammannettano pure una ragazza/di nome Idrusa [...]" (De Dominicis 1967, 47; to provide full comprehension here is chosen the transfiguration of Cucugliato).

nas as Idrusa's pictographic equivalent.³¹ As a mere temporal predecessor to Corti's novel is Luigi Sansò's piece *Idrusa*, published in 1928 with disturbing imprints of ideologized aesthetics³² and presenting an implausible heroine resisting the Ottomans' suppression but completely subjugating herself to her groom.

That Idrusa gained a certain interest in literature not earlier than the nineteenth century³³ can be related to the increasing interest in Romanticism for investigating medieval history with a new sensitivity, actualising literary genres as the heroic epos on which the observed cantatas lean; further, in terms of constituting cultural identity during the decades of the Risorgimento, the importance of local mythology as a microcosmos mirroring the nation, or as rejection of the new reign's centrism, increased. In fact, with the exception of the Neapolitan Moltedo (see Laporta 2008, 201–202), all the mentioned authors were local writers of the Salento; through their elaborations, the assault on Otranto becomes perceived as national tragedy, receiving the myth of Idrusa as its feminine component.³⁴

Certain emblematic motives of the mythical Idrusa are iterative: Idrusa's uncommon beauty, her devotion to faith and her loyalty to family, her emancipation

31 De Dominicis (1967, 47) declares Idrusa as “bella come una Madonna” and uses an iconographic metaphor: “San Luca, il santo dei pittori,/profuse i suoi colori,/per lo splendore della tua bellezza,/martire Idrusa” (De Dominicis 1967, 48). Aiming to dismantle the religious myths on the assault as ecclesiastical strategy, Corti mentions in her novel San Luca's Madonna, which probably once hung in the cathedral of Otranto and was said that it miraculously ascended as a gleam of light to comfort the martyrs the night before the massacre (Corti 2004, 321–325).

32 Although Tommaso Fiore considers Sansò's Idrusa as successor of Torquato Tasso's Christian heroines (Fiore 1967, 3), we rather meet a piece infiltrated by a certain kind of cultic symbols (fire and flames are frequently appearing in Sansò) and by an excessive glorification of martyrdom (“Rinuncia [...] feci a la gloria del martirio ed al premio del Cielo”; Sansò 1928, 136); the importance of martyrdom in “fascist mysticism” is outlined in Berghaus (1996, 54). Unquestionably, Sansò considered this piece of a pamphletic significance as it is called a “poema” on the frontispiece despite its purely theatrical style and paratexts.

33 Indeed, Idrusa does not even emerge in a poema about the assault of Otranto from the seventeenth century, *L'Idriade* di Francesco Antonio Megha (1626–1701), which passed to us incomplete. Megha, an Apulian judge and politician, was inspired to versify in manneristic style the siege of Otranto probably by the process of sanctification of Otranto's martyrs, which was beginning then (Margiotta 1985, 5, 8; Margiotta enriches her introduction to the *Idriade* with further biographical indications about Megha). Megha emphasizes the religious aspects and cultural confrontation of the assault and chooses a heroic depiction of his main characters, according to the epic tradition of the “poema religioso” arisen after Tasso and influencing the Salento's literary tradition as described by Marco Leone (he quotes Megha as one of the authors remembering Otranto's martyrs by amplifying the mythical narrations of the Ottomans' cruelty; Leone 2005, 487).

34 Expandable to all elaborations of Idrusa is the following consideration of Laporta regarding Moltedo's Idrusa: “Il poema [...] ha fatto emergere quel femminile che mancava o che, appena abbozzato, era latente nella vicenda otrantina.” (Laporta 2008, 206–205).

from enslavement, her death accompanying the other's martyrdom. However, Maria Corti does not continue this image and consciously breaks with the traditionally held expectations concerning Idrusa.³⁵ Corti's heroine is an outstanding figure because she follows her individual thoughts and emotions and no longer a requested devotion to faith or socially established customs.³⁶ Idrusa, as an orphan driven early into an unhappy marriage, is positioned in Otranto's poor social class of the fishermen; she asserts herself as a feminine subject in contrast to the repetitious and monotonous life that is the usual lot of Otranto's wives by an extramarital love affair, doomed to failure and culminating in a disillusioned vacuum of abandon. Idrusa's desperation is not caused by martyrdom as in the previously described literary elaborations, but by her otherness, which she perceives as guilt ("Io non ho fatto niente [...], però devo aver colpa lo stesso. [...] Io non sono come le altre [donne otrantine]. [...] Le altre sono meglio di me, ma a me la loro non pare vita."; Corti 2004, 195).³⁷ Idrusa is indeed struggling with her identity and questioning her decisions ("Io volevo distruggermi [...]. [...] Mi domando come sarebbero andate le cose, se invece che a me fossero successe a un'altra persona."; Corti 2004, 256–257). But at the Ottomans' arrival Idrusa does not flee, and confirms her solidarity and connectedness with Otranto's inhabitants: "Io di qui non mi muovo. [...] Farò tutto quello che faranno le altre otrantine e la loro sorte sarà la mia." (Corti 2004, 259). Corti's semiotic movements in constructing Idrusa's identity are in focus and best observed in the heroine's death:

35 This poetological movement of Corti is important to note, as she is discussing the literary iteration of motives and topoi embodied by imagined characters (Corti 1997, 89–90); Corti's inversion on this principle is a strong manifestation of Idrusa's fictitious self-assertment and of Corti's real emancipation as feminine writer. Regarding Corti's textual sources, Hubert Houben is convinced that she based her novel on the historical report of Giovanni Michele Laggetto from the late sixteenth century (Houben 2008, 9). But Corti probably knew De Dominicis' poema as he also mentions Nachira (De Dominicis 1967, 56) as Corti did, while this character is not traceable elsewhere.

36 Oreste Macrì notes in his preface that the feminine element (which in first row means Idrusa) in *L'ora di tutti* is not based on sainthood and virginity as it was seen in other literary texts on the assault and relates this fact to a "biographical mystery" in Corti (Macrì 2004, VIII–IX). However, Corti courageously develops Idrusa's ambiguous character as the main protagonist in search of truth in emotional and social relations throughout the first two parts of the triptych (which means the narratives of Colangelo, Zurlo and Idrusa), never succumbing to sentimentalism as it is found in the previous Idrusas.

37 Corti declares fantasy (in the sense of creativity) as reason for Idrusa's otherness; in the novel a monk responds to Idrusa in crisis with herself and full of doubts about her integrity: "Sono cose che succedono alle persone piene di fantasia. [...] gli uomini di fantasia corrono sempre un grande pericolo a vivere." (Corti 2004, 215).

Tre o quattro turchi mi furono sopra [...] e un delli mi venne addosso col pugnale in mano; vidi sotto le ali della zàrcola due occhi che mi guardavano con forza straordinaria e io pure lo guardai, ferma. Tardò col pugnale in aria, finché la sua faccia infuriata si aprì in una smorfia, che pareva un singhiozzo di gioia. Mise il pugnale nel fodero: “Bella, bella,” grugnì nella nostra lingua, afferrandomi le spalle. Sentii le sue mani sul collo e barcollai, ma poi fui più svelta di una gatta, e coprendogli gli occhi con una mano, presi con l'altra il suo pugnale e me lo ficcai nel petto. Scivolata sul pavimento vidi, per un attimo, sopra di me gli occhi del turco, che mi guardavano stupefatti, pieni di interrogazione; altri, vicino, scoppiarono in una risata e la faccia del turco scomparve. (Corti 2004, 270–271)

All polarizations of Idrusa's identity are solved in this moment: although perceiving and demonstrating once more her otherness, Idrusa integrates her strongly criticized capacities in defence of the other's life by giving way to the engrained sense of guilt and emptiness (“[...] io non trovo scopo, ecco.”; Corti 2004, 216). Idrusa's death portrays a feminine subject emancipating herself and not accepting enslavement or any other form of limitation, through the most extreme gesture. The ambiguity between belonging and self-determination of the feminine ‘I’ is fully illustrated by this polysemantic perspective of her death, which is possible to interpret both as suicide or homicide in the context of martyrdom. In Corti's work, this secular martyrdom is treated as individual freedom of decision embodied in Idrusa, which results in a strong contrast to the previous literary elaborations of this character. Bipolar patterns are the basis of Corti's construction of Idrusa's identity: “Era una donna diversa da tutte le altre Idrusa [...]; mi viene alla mente l'idea che volesse appropriarsi di tutto, appropriarsi del dolore e della felicità del mondo.” (Corti 2004, 61). Idrusa's desperate desire for life and her seeking of death (“E di me che cosa potevo fare? Tutto quello che avevo desiderato, era finito. Potevo morire.”; Corti 2004, 232) reflect a bifocal vision of identity; her repetitious oscillation between other- and connectedness subsequently results in a transfiguration of the imaginations of the Mediterranean, discussed earlier on in this text.

Corti's Idrusa also becomes on other levels a paradigmatic sign of a Mediterranean identity: first of all, etymological, since her name is rooted in Otranto and descends from languages spoken along the Mediterranean shores, mirroring again its connectivity.³⁸ Further, the toponymic relation creates semiotically Idrusa's

38 Fiore explains the name Idrusa as “eponym” of the river “Idro” and the historic name of Otranto, “Idruntum” (Fiore 1967, 3). Supposing that these names etymologically have the same origin, it is suggested that “Hydruntum” derives from Adriatic-Balcanic varieties meaning “mountain” (von Falkenhausen 2007, 21–22; Otranto is situated more in height above the sea). Several Greek inscriptions with slightly different terms can be found already from prebyzantine era on and later in the times of “Magna Grecia”, wherefrom the Greek origin of the city's name cannot be denied, most probably deriving from Greek “water” or “watersnake” (Antonaci 1954, 2–3).

Mediterraneanism, which then becomes enforced by the mythological substrates throughout the earlier mentioned literary predecessors based on folkloristic notion of Idrusa. Corti explains the name as originating from Greek, meaning a race-horse soaked with sweat (Corti 2004, 214); this name's etymology with the function of metaphor results in a sign for Idrusa's personality. The high semiotic impact of the Mediterranean is evident in Idrusa's reflections and her self-image, mirrored by the surrounding nature: "La unica abitudine che mi fosse rimasta della vita di prima era quella, di stendermi sulle dune di sabbia a pochi metri dalle onde, e a guardar camminare la sorte fra i cespugli di finocchio selvatico." (Corti 2004, 259). Idrusa's creative production is also connected to the idea of the Mediterranean as she describes the motives of her embroidered artefacts as traditions "portati da oltre il mare" and "di uso antico" (Corti 2004, 183).³⁹

Synthesising this Mediterranean cosmos in a semiotic paradigm of questions on existence and identity, Corti's aesthetic construction is also constituted by shifting time levels, creating synchrony and diachrony at once and therefore establishing the Mediterranean as *luogo mentale*.⁴⁰ This strategy is manifested even throughout the introduction, when Corti overlaps present and past as well as memory and myth:

Ma mettiamo di soggiornare a lungo nella vecchia Terra d'Otranto, di scendere al crepuscolo verso il molo del porto, durante una bufera di tramontana, quando i pescatori siedono in terra alla turchesca, la pelle abbronzata, guardando pian piano il mare, riflettendo da soli, aspettando in silenzio, come suoi fidati amici, che quella furia gli passi. [...] Le cose allora cambiano, ogni distanza nel tempo cade [...]: sono ancora Loro che abbiamo davanti, gli stessi pescatori, salvo [...] qualche frastuono momentaneo attorno alla loro persona [...]. [...] ci si allontana dal molo pensando che quanto narrano le cronache non è lava impietrata, ma ancora calda in questo corno d'Italia, *sus la senestre corne d'Ytaile*, e che i pescatori d'oggi hanno solo dato il cambio, a metà del viaggio. (Corti 2004, 12–14)

39 The strong implementation of other Mediterranean culture's heritage from across the Orient side and its influence on artistic production in Otranto is also noted in Falla Castelfranchi (2007, 324).

40 Pisanò (2008, 210) describes this methodology as echo of Corti's contact with neorealist literature at this time and considers Corti's Otranto a mere allegory of the present (Pisanò 2008, 211); here is enforced Corti's appealing to a meta-temporal reading configured by semiotic interpretation which is perceivable in the novel's narrative construction. Corti herself confirms this approach: "[...] quanto più l'opera è artisticamente complessa e originale, [...] tanto maggiore è la sua disponibilità a differenti letture sul piano sincronico e diacronico; orbene, questo tipo di presenza, che produce un senso di perenne contemporaneità e universalità del capolavoro, consegue al fatto che la carica polisemica del testo permette la sua fruibilità in funzione di modelli letterari [...] delle varie epoche." (Corti 1976, 18).

Bursting through time levels, Corti turns at the novel's end directly to the reader and reconnects the introductive frame to the finished narration: "Quanti anni sono passati da allora? Solo i vivi contano gli anni. Ed è mutato qualcosa?" (Corti 2004, 335). The paradoxical contemporaneity in Corti of present and past as well as here and beyond becomes even more evident in her book *Il canto delle Sirene*, a hybrid form of research and literary writing⁴¹ published in 1989. Temporality is transferred to metaphysical significance when the sirens, considered by Corti as timeless metaphors, comment on mankind: "C'è una grande quantità di intelligenza che gli uomini sprecano in operazioni dannose [...]; pare non sappiano distinguere bene quando vanno avanti e quando vanno indietro.' 'E così non sanno se si trovano nel passato, nel presente o nel futuro.'" (Corti 2018, 182).⁴² Corti continues to construct the Mediterranean as *luogo mentale* where the sirens existed in myths and narratives ("luoghi iscritti nella mappa mediterranea"; Corti 2018, 22); seizing on this duplicity of the real Mediterranean and its imagining in Greek mythology, Corti's sirens embody the concept of *intellectual seduction*, the artistic or scientific curiosity for gaining and creating new knowledge. This concept was founded in *L'ora di tutti* with Idrusa's dichotomous search of identity beyond the borders of her regular everyday life, earlier considered as creative fantasy; this desire is now interpreted as seduction inflicted by intellectual thinking, which in the end demands the questioning of identity. The semiotic imagery of Ulysses and Orpheo navigating through the Mediterranean and tempted by the sirens becomes in Corti's narratives a dynamic *luogo mentale* based on cultural plurality and the connectivity of its texts, captured by the sirens: "Stiamo navigando nel mare delle scritture. [...] Qui non c'è silenzio marino, ma mille voci che [...] parlano insieme e raccontano." (Corti 2018, 105). Despite the sirens' Mediterranean semantic, Corti turns them into a global literary discourse as she outlines the reception of the sirens in various cultures and literary periods,

41 Corti's *Il canto delle sirene* is an extreme example of applied formalistic methodology: The book's construction between academic and literary writing becomes in many varieties also object of content. Due to the complexity of Corti's *Il canto delle sirene* and the survey on its Mediterraneanism, focused on here, it is noted that Corti investigates the different acts of writing (academic research and fiction) on the concept of *curiositas* embodied by Ulysses and Orpheo, giving way to autobiographical elements especially in the narration of a becoming author entitled *La sconosciuta* (Corti 2018, 137–178). Further insights on the mythological impact and on the importance of Corti's medievalist studies on Dante discernible in *Il canto delle sirene* are given in the already mentioned introductions by Macrì and Segre, but also in a contribution of Alessandro Cinquegrani in the multi-volume *Il mito nella letteratura italiana* (Cinquegrani 2007).

42 Analogously to *L'ora di tutti*, the book's macrostructural construction turns from the past "back" into the presence perceived as future in contrast to the narration, giving a dark view on the *conditio umana*.

such as by Nordic Romanticism (“involgarimento ottocentesco”; Corti 2018, 110), while still being anchored in the Mediterranean: “La sirena, spintasi in traversata solitaria sino al fondo del fiordo, si scoprì bloccata ormai dal ghiaccio sulla via del ritorno all’oceano [...]. [...] Qui tutto taceva assolutamente come se le case fossero deserte, gli uomini le avessero abbandonate nell’orrore della notte nordica. [...] Non ci sarebbe stato né un Orfeo né un Ulisse e nemmeno uomini curiosi dell’ignoto.” (Corti 2018, 115).⁴³

The Mediterranean Sea as ancient, classique, byzantine, medieval and then (geographically transposed) modern topos for the navigator, a metaphor of the artist (and in Corti mainly the poet) and the scientist, not ambitious in relation to material prosperity but instead in pure curiosity, is emphasized in a glance to the initially noted semantic polarization of the sea versus the mainland: “L’alto mare offriva l’abbandono dei pensieri di terraferma; bisognava che il navigatore vivesse momento per momento secondo i voleri del mare, imprigionato nelle sue tempeste e nelle sue bonacce, passando senza soluzione di continuità dal giorno alla notte e dalla notte al giorno e rinunciando a tante ragioni dei comuni gesti terrestri; proprio come accade al mendicante e al poeta.” (Corti 2018, 25).

That knowledge can be configured by cultural memory iterated through literature is visible in the sirens’ elevation of the Mediterranean poet Orpheo to the only form of existence that promises salvation: “Ricordate quando Orfeo ci vinse al tempo degli argonauti? [...] Il poeta si salva da sé e le sue relazioni sono fra le più brillanti che esistano al mondo. [...]” (Corti 2018, 184). Corti employs the aesthetic constructions described here to create Mediterranean identities, as was shown with the polyphonic example of *L’ora di tutti*, and to develop the Mediterranean identity through the navigating poet Orpheo and the seduced Idrusa, who was confronted with an existence between otherness and connectivity. The semiotic reading of the many intertextual notions⁴⁴ and the descending semantics con-

43 The notion of *intellectual seduction* becomes transposed on Nordic mythology accompanied by remarks on language, as a Nordic fisher is pointing out: “Io conosco solo la storia dello Strömkarl, perché è uno spirito marino che suona uno strumento dolcissimo a corde, si può udirlo dalle nostre acque fin su alle terre polari. Di lui parlano le canzoni antiche, recitate nel vecchio dialetto, non nella lingua, che è molto meno avvincente e qualche volta viene a noia, cosa che non succede mai nel vecchio dialetto. Una volta ho scovato nella vallata a nord-est una vecchia canzone sullo Strömkarl, che faceva lavorare la fantasia [...]” (Corti 2018, 129).

44 While *Il canto delle sirene* is mainly invaded by the ancient myth of Ulysses and Orpheo and its mediation through antique and classic authors as Homer, Plato, Cicero, Horace and Ovid (but also considering the sirens’ transpositions by Goethe, Kafka, Borges and Nerval) as well as by many quotation segments in Latin, also in *L’ora di tutti* we find languages and their literature employed as philological signs of the Mediterranean: Latin as the ecclesiastical language is juxtaposed to poetry in Italian (Corti 2004, 131; there Petrarch is quoted as reply to a psalm), singular elements from

verge into interwoven concepts that constitute an image which Corti aims to transmit in the form and content of her narration. This literary imagery built on history and culture is developed, as we have seen, in dichotomous confrontation with the individual in search of identity. Therein the Mediterranean rises as a semiotic universe, far from cultural fragmentation but instead leading to identity through connectivity of knowledge, conveyed in literature through its elaboration of memory and myth.

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Spanish language (e.g. "adelantado", Corti 2004, 171, 241), some references to Greek (Corti 2004, 214) and citations in the dialect of the Salento (Corti 2004, 10, 11) evoke the multi-lingual Mediterranean.

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