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Fausta Cialente's *Natalia*: Representing Transgressive Female Formation During Fascism

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The concept of transgression—in this case the refusal, or inability, to abide by the social and cultural norms imposed by Fascism—is at the forefront of Fausta Cialente's *Natalia* (1930), a novel that is surprisingly subversive given the political and cultural context during which it was produced and into which it was released. In this essay, I use the conceptual lens of the female *Bildungsroman* as a means to explore the multiple ways in which Cialente uses her work to breach traditional representations of female development.[1] The *Bildungsroman* is a form that is normally associated with males; even the most liberal characterizations of *Bildung*, a term that encompasses a variety of notions pertaining to a young person's process of maturation, "presuppose a range of social options only available to men."[2] The very use of this genre to depict a woman who consistently and deliberately disregards the social constraints placed on her, often through shifts in identity, is thus in itself a divergence—here from the *Bildungsroman* as it is traditionally defined.[3]

With the goal of elucidating how self-fashioning and transgression feature prominently in *Natalia*, my study focuses on the romantic and sexual formation of the title character. I preface my analysis of the protagonist's transgressive path toward womanhood with a discussion of certain qualities of Cialente's prose. In describing the aesthetics of the work, I suggest that the modified use of Magical Realism—a kind of experimentation that constitutes part of the author's own intellectual development—facilitates the entwining of thematic and aesthetic characteristics of the text and can be construed as a departure from popular literary trends of the time.[4]

An underlying contention of my investigation is that subversive elements of the novel can be linked to Cialente's political views, which manifest in a protest against fascist myths of women and motherhood.[5] A brief consideration of the issue of political intent is therefore germane.[6] Cialente wrote *Natalia*, which was released in 1930 in Italy with the publishing house Sapentia, while living in Egypt, where she moved with her husband in 1921 and stayed until 1947. In an interview with Sandra Petrignani in the 1990s, Cialente recognized that she was lucky to have lived "così a lungo in quello straordinario paese" since it granted

her "la possibilità di trascorrervi tutto il vergognoso periodo fascista."[7] Although she was not especially active in politics in the 1920s and 1930s, her political orientation since the Second World War was unequivocally anti-fascist. Concrete actions attest to her commitment to this cause. For example, in October 1940, English officials asked her to broadcast a daily anti-fascist program on Radio Cairo; in October 1943, Cialente and Anna Caprera founded *Fronte Unito*, a weekly anti-fascist publication for Italian prisoners of war.[8] Given not only Cialente's physical distance from Italy for the entirety of the fascist period, but also the fact that all of her novels until *Un inverno freddissimo* (1966), with the notable exception of *Natalia*, were set outside of Italy, it is somewhat difficult to evaluate how, and indeed if, the anti-Fascism that led her to later become so heavily involved in anti-fascist propaganda is reflected in her earlier narratives. I would argue that in *Natalia*, the crux of Cialente's dissent lies in her open challenge to presiding gender norms. The regime's refusal to allow a second printing of the prize-winning novel unless Cialente modified certain passages, including those detailing the protagonist's lesbianism, is evidence of its politically contentious nature, and Cialente's defiant reaction—to forego a reprint rather than make the required changes—implies that she valued and was aware of the book's controversial posture.[9] Because of her unwillingness to bend to the demands of fascist censors, *Natalia* would not be re-published until 1982, when Mondadori issued a new revised edition. My analysis refers to the original, unmodified 1930 version.[10]

Due mainly to the qualities of Magical Realism in the text, the general idea of transgression is also applicable to aesthetic properties of the work. As a novel that resists most customary notions of narrative, above all those pertaining to literature written by women, *Natalia* is difficult to categorize.[11] Very much a transitional text occupying a unique place in Cialente's *oeuvre*, it differs from her early production of short prose with more markedly "magical" attributes and from her later, more obviously realist novels. Notwithstanding this stylistic ambiguity, it has appreciable and significant affinities to the Magical Realism theorized by Massimo Bontempelli.[12] Several critics have made this connection. Carlo Bo, for instance, states in his brief introduction to the second edition of *Natalia* that, faithful in part to Bontempelli's model, "la Cialente ha adottato la formula del realismo magico ma senza portare alle conseguenze estreme l'interrogazione astratta e sterilizzata del suo maestro."[13] Because he leaves his insightful comment unelaborated, expanding on Bo's observation regarding the expression of this conspicuous influence on Cialente's prose is a useful exercise. While Magical Realism is essential to the novel's aesthetics, its characteristics are attenuated and altered when compared to the literary style as Bontempelli originally presented it. Of great importance to Cialente's personal brand of realism are questions of perception and oneiric features, particularly the nebulous relationship between reality and dreams, but not to the exclusion of traditional mimesis, which remains

dominant. This approach complements the thematic content of the work and is an effective means with which to narrate Natalia's idiosyncratic development, the subject of close examination later in this article.

Bontempelli outlined his theory of Magical Realism in several articles printed in the literary journal *900* beginning in 1926, explaining his conception of the genre in depth beginning with the assertion that "il dominio dell'uomo sulla natura è la magia."[14] Two aspects of these programmatic writings are especially notable: his admiration for three fifteenth-century artists, Masaccio, Andrea Mantegna, and Piero della Francesca, whom he sees as combining magical with realistic elements in a manner that resonates with his own goals; and his criticism of more contemporary movements such as Impressionism and Futurism, whose representation of reality he does not respect.[15] Although a detailed analysis of Bontempelli's theories is beyond the scope of this essay, a 1930 statement in which he sums up a chief quality of Magical Realism is expressly relevant to an evaluation of *Natalia*, since his assertion that "la vera norma narrativa è questa: raccontare il sogno come se fosse realtà, e la realtà come se fosse un sogno" reflects traits of Cialente's work.[16]

The entanglement of different realities is in fact a recurrent feature of the novel, affecting and involving most major characters. For example, Malaspina—a soldier and Natalia's eventual husband—sees her in the sky before their first meeting.[17] Natalia's dreams are sometimes monopolized by him, unsettling her moments of repose:

> Dormendo sognava cose straordinarie e avventure impossibili e in mezzo a tante visioni ritornava sempre quella di Malaspina, bianco in faccia, che si apriva il petto e le mostrava come ci avesse dentro un bel fuoco acceso: lei gli diceva che poteva spegnerlo, da solo.[18]

Natalia's relationship with Silvia, on the other hand, is an enchantment that lasts both day and night. The same phrase is used twice to describe how she changes in Silvia's presence: when she is still a young adolescent but already captivated by Silvia, the narrator states: "Natalia era scesa nell'incanto."[19] More than one hundred and thirty pages after Natalia and Silvia's first encounter, Natalia is again said to have descended "nell'incanto."[20] The semantics of these sentences suggests that episodes with Silvia occur in a place removed from reality, where everything revolves around the here and now of their relationship.[21]

Of the characters in *Natalia*, Valdemaro, an acquaintance of the protagonist, most consistently straddles the line between the states of reality and dream. As Paola Malpezzi Price summarizes his "bizarre" daydreaming: "his visions present a parade of painters obsessed with dead women, pianists with haunted pianos, and saxophonists playing in trees."[22] Other facets of the text similarly demonstrate its affinities with Magical Realism. In Marianna Nepi's opinion, a component of

"l'influenza bontempelliana" in *Natalia* resides "nell'atmosfera alle volte in bilico tra una visione lucida e realistica delle cose e una immaginata e distorta, negli oggetti che sembrano animarsi e partecipare della realtà dei protagonisti, nel gioco di avvicinamento e distanziamento messo in atto tra fantasia e realtà."[23] Because of descriptions scattered throughout the novel that give everyday objects and situations symbolic weight, the protagonist's life becomes irreversibly fused with a magical dimension. The novel's alternate reality is not so far removed as to be deemed totally absurd, but varies enough from widely held ideas of normality as to render uncertain some assumptions about human existence, interpersonal relationships, and connections between people and things. An illustrative case is the following description of Silvia as a tree, which Nepi notes is a natural element that is "qualcosa di radicato per sempre in un luogo, che per secoli si nutre della stessa terra e della stessa acqua."[24] This becomes a complex metaphor:

> I piedi stretti e lunghi nella scarpetta di tenero camoscio bigio avevano qualche cosa di arboreo, erano la fresca radice di tutto il suo corpo in fioritura. La caviglia rotonda modellava una calza leggera come la muffa, ma là dove cominciava la purezza di una linea curva cadevano fitte le pieghe della vesta [. . .] Un ciuffetto d'erba cresciuto a l'ombra del sedile si affacciava di sotto l'orlo e innalzava, salvo, un fiorello bianco. Essere quel fiore sotto la campana misteriosa e aperta di quella gonna. Un ginocchio posato su l'altro segnava la linea di un frutto nascosto, rotondo, e di là partiva il raggio delle pieghe cadenti.[25]

Aside from showing the interweaving of the human world and nature, this passage, which appears early in the book, evidences Natalia's desire for Silvia, presaging their later sexual relationship.[26] It furthermore stresses their contrasting personalities: Silvia is grounded, while Natalia is flighty, romantic, and seldom comfortable with her situation for more than a short time.

The first edition of *Natalia* was awarded the *Premio dei Dieci* literary prize by a jury over which Bontempelli himself presided, a fact that may strengthen the hypothesis that there is a link between the novel and Bontempelli's Magical Realism. Whether or not Cialente's deliberate goal in incorporating magical elements was to create a Magical Realist text is nonetheless unclear, even if the work's magical characteristics serve important functions. A final, equally crucial consideration related to and stemming from the similarities to Magical Realism is one that crosses over from aesthetics to plot: the notion that our understanding of reality is spurious or, at the very least, that reality is more complex and unpredictable than we normally judge it to be. Indeed, both Natalia's predilection for lying and the constant vacillation between the characters' conscious reality and a parallel world cast doubt on the veracity of the story as a memoir of an unreliable

young woman whose unconventional ways are frequently at odds with what society would expect of her.

To be sure, Cialente did not shy away from provocative themes in this novel of formation. *Natalia* narrates the protagonist's growth from a twelve-year-old child whom her mother calls "molto viziata" to a young woman who, after several misadventures and revelatory experiences, appears to content herself with a life in wedlock.[27] On the complicated path leading from the conventional beginning to the equally conventional end of Natalia's maturation, a series of episodes emerges, which shows a nonconformist female who evades uncomfortable realities by compulsively and habitually reinventing herself in order to test the limits of her influence, mollify her family, and overcome the tremendous self-doubt and loneliness that are a consequence of her awareness of her alterity and fear that she might have "un cuore sterile, incapace di dare un'emozione [. . .] né di riceverla."[28] Character development occurs primarily by way of the frequently deceptive actions with which the protagonist tries to reconcile her "natura sensuale e [. . .] trasgressiva" with both external pressure and internal, but intermittent, volition to conform.[29] The agency that she maintains while navigating her situation is telling; though limited by restrictions that should affect the options that are open to her, she seldom yields control. Instead, Natalia's many self-adaptations and the power demonstrated by her manipulation of others reveal the extent to which her conduct is subversive even when she is trying to create an acceptable position for herself.

The novel's rather complex plot involves at least eight of Natalia's distinct identities, most derived from her repeated and purposeful transformations, and few of which conform to the ideals of womanhood propagandized by the fascist regime (however contradictory these models may have been).[30] Natalia's first identity is that of her girlhood. She fashions the second via her correspondence with Malaspina. Next she evolves into Silvia's lover, perhaps the most genuine of her roles. Another is the *femme fatale* she describes in a lengthy letter to her brother, Jacopo, in which she lies about a rendezvous with Malaspina. Faced with the challenge of gaining Jacopo's forgiveness after he discovers that she has deceived him, Natalia subsequently tries to fabricate an image of herself as a charitable, altruistic woman. When this proves a fruitless effort, she half-heartedly marries Malaspina, thus becoming a wife and potential, though ultimately defective, mother. Now embittered and disenchanted, Natalia deserts her husband and family and, as she later reports to Valdemaro, establishes a new life as an independent woman, finding a place in a boarding house for women and a job in an office. Her final identity, again as Malaspina's wife, differs from her first attempt at domesticity since she has apparently ceded some of her characteristic intransigency and meekly re-enters marriage as a more complacent female. Considering Natalia's complex psychology and the precedent set by her previous volatility, it seems unlikely that this final variation of her character will endure.

Of Natalia's many identities, those that best display the extent to which she transgresses sociocultural codes regarding the behavior of women are the one she takes on in her relationship with Silvia and the ones associated with different phases of her relationship with Malaspina. The sexual coming of age shaped by these identities is categorically at odds with the fascist archetype of submissive femininity, first because Natalia's early sexual experiences are with another woman, and second because her treatment of both romantic partners bespeaks her willingness to deceive in order to maintain a position of power. Her final epiphany—that she has loved Malaspina all along—is almost an afterthought, an orthodox ending to a markedly unorthodox story.

As the attempted censorship of sections of the novel that recount the women's romantic connection might suggest, probably the most subversive of Natalia's identities is that of Silvia's companion. This is not only the role that evidently comes most naturally to her, but also the one that gives her the most pleasure and satisfaction. Margherita Adda observes that while in the countryside with Silvia, Natalia lives in "una dimensione di verità, in cui è sincera, appassionata, non ha bisogno di fingere di fronte a se stessa e di fronte a Silvia."[31] This situation, in which Natalia is able to affirm the legitimacy of her otherness and embrace her desires, is necessarily transient. Although they can justify their actions in this separate space, removed from the judgmental eyes of society, neither woman is willing or able to give herself fully to a lifestyle so incompatible with prevailing mores.

The opening section of the novel contains many sensual descriptions that foreshadow Natalia and Silvia's later affair, which takes root as they take each other's hand and set foot on the "strada incantevole" that leads to their eventual sexual experimentation with one another.[32] Well before their friendship has fully metamorphosed, Natalia recognizes that she has already been profoundly altered by her attraction to Silvia. In one of several crises of identity that prompt her sexual development, or at least help advance it, Natalia posits that due to a "risveglio" that took place during her adolescence, she is not pure "secondo la morale e la religione."[33] She does not explicitly state what has caused her awakening. However, the nature of her contemplation indicates that it was Silvia who changed her perspective on love, a hypothesis supported by the fact that their first interactions took place primarily in the gardens surrounding the country villa, recalled here in her reference to "i giardini della malizia" and rumination on original sin.[34] She is obsessed with the idea that she must conceal a part of herself from Malaspina, who if told that she has never felt "la benda fredda della purità" would assume that she has had a lover when she is in reality still a virgin.[35] Unsettled by the fear of being criticized, she concludes that it is too late to "rimontare la corrente" that carries those who remain untainted.[36]

Her feeling of impurity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that is actualized as Natalia rejects Malaspina during their first meeting and then approaches Silvia,

returning to see her after some time away. She is portrayed as stumbling into the initial sexual act, surprised by her own capacity to seduce:

> Non poteva vedere che gli occhi di Silvia erano velati perché gli ultimi bagliori chiazzavano appena l'orlo della sua veste: e non seppe mai come fu che baciandola poté lentamente rovesciarla sul tappetto [. . .] Natalia, che non aveva voluto proprio questo, fece di lei quello che aveva confusamente sognato di fare.[37]

The women unite physically in thinly veiled sexual encounters on several other occasions before Natalia returns to the city.

While their separation is involuntary, as Natalia must visit her sick mother, it is not wholly unwelcome. Natalia is by this point conflicted, but not because she is particularly concerned that her romantic involvement with Silvia is illicit. Rather, she has grown bored of their shared life. Their intrinsic dissimilarities, which had fed Natalia's adolescent fascination with Silvia, therefore become starker and more problematic:

> Silvia porta in sé le ventiquattro ore e quelle notturne, prossime, sono le più dolorose. Averla guardata tutta la giornata è stata una sofferenza. Ma non è niente: bisognerà toccarla, fra poco, e baciarla. Natalia non si sente preparata a un rito che è quasi sempre lo stesso e la guarda (sorride ogni tanto alla madre e al viscido segretario) con gli occhi bruciati.[38]

As this passage communicates, it is not the sexual acts that bother Natalia, but the monotony of their routine, which has come to represent obligation instead of excitement. The consequences of their affair, which comes to a relatively hasty close, reverberate through much of the work. Natalia's lasting feelings for and about Silvia are the impetus for later endeavors to generate and project a more stereotypical female identity and continue to influence her actions well after she has acknowledged that the key to external success, if not inner happiness, is the acceptance of a conventional role.

It is important to note that Natalia dominates the majority of the interactions between the two women. Although she has affection for Silvia, Natalia approaches their relationship selfishly. That she finds Silvia physically appealing is undeniable: when she sets eyes on her for the first time in several years, Natalia "la vedeva così bella che ne aveva il cuore ferito."[39] Her wish to touch Silvia is nevertheless incited, at least in part, by her desire both to effect change and to test the limits of her power. Further facets of Natalia's character emerge through her conduct with Silvia. Her palpable desire for validation, which makes any sign of rejection crushing, is one example. Possessive even after it has become evident

that she has no real interest in staying with Silvia indefinitely, she reacts swiftly and insolently to imagined indiscretions. Closely linked are the sense of entitlement that is a factor in her frequent and consuming jealousy and the preference for passion over reason that causes her to behave impulsively. After she has left the country home but before marrying Malaspina, Natalia laments that "era stata ragionevole troppo a lungo" and fantasizes about rekindling her bond with Silvia.[40] As is often the case, she is motivated by her desire for conquest and her compulsion to confirm that she is wanted and needed.

If Silvia is the recipient of Natalia's most subversive gestures, Malaspina, with whom Natalia exchanges letters during the war, is the most obvious victim of her manipulation. Assuming that their communication will be only epistolary, Natalia uses it as a game whose objective is to see how quickly he will fall for the false persona that she has created. Her immense command over him is accentuated by the fact that he does not really want to love her—in reality, "ella gli faceva paura"—but is powerless before her allure.[41] Flattered by his pursuit of her, Natalia refuses to forfeit the attention he pays her and so shamelessly exploits him.

Natalia's marriage to Malaspina is colored by her awareness that she has compromised the part of her personality that eschews practicality. She is not fully comfortable with the identity that she is about to assume; when she first applies the word "fidanzata" to herself, she feels that she wears it "come il vestito di un'altra persona."[42] Due to the shock of the engagement and the revelation that Silvia has also found someone, she faints, suffering a blow to the head. Her injury is symbolic since it demarcates the end of her former existence and the beginning of a new one in which her fantastical romanticism has been transformed into a more pragmatic worldview. This period with Malaspina is one of uncharacteristic realism for Natalia, who quickly adapts to the rhythms of her new life.

Pregnancy is one of the first-mentioned repercussions of Natalia and Malaspina's romantic and physical connection. While her same-sex relationship with Silvia was the result of instinctual actions, childbearing—arguably a more usual state for women—is for Natalia an unnatural, destabilizing, and disagreeable ailment. When she discovers by accident that she is with child, her reaction intimates that motherhood is something to which she has never aspired, perhaps because she does not want to be "una delle donne fecondate, sparse nel mondo. Che travaglio."[43] Although this has the potential to be what Nepi calls "l'evento decisivo per un recupero della normalità," a process that was initiated by Natalia's marriage, it ends in a tragedy that reinforces the impression that she is innately ill-suited for maternity.[44]

Her initial emotions regarding her condition are as extreme as they are mercurial. It is likely reflective of her earlier sexual experiences and relative naivety about male-female intercourse that she seems not to have considered the possibility of becoming pregnant. In short order, shock and distress give way to the realization that this is a second chance: with a "germoglio nei fianchi,

possibilità di un avvenire che non fosse maligno," she might summon the energy necessary to look ahead and "guardare i giorni a venire."[45] While the pregnancy represents an opportunity for Natalia to definitively move beyond her earlier sexual misdeeds and prove herself a "real" woman, her obsessive musings hint at the improbability of a positive result. She lacks confidence in her ability to successfully carry the baby to term and is terrified of making a critical error that might harm the small, unformed being she fears she could break in two "solamente a pensarci."[46] The fetus, for its part, is a judgemental presence that Natalia imagines watching her every action. Despite her fear and occasional antagonism, Natalia's motherly instinct to preserve her offspring remains largely intact. She understands that even if the child has been sent for her salvation, she will have to save it from herself; overwhelmed by the responsibility that she faces and haunted by "il ricordo di un istinto perverso," she is afraid that the sins that have indelibly stained her will also tarnish the infant in her womb.[47] The impending birth eventually becomes a source of great excitement and anticipation, yet the negative effects of the pregnancy—such as weight gain, which is characterized as a gradual physical deformation—are never far from her mind.

The setting in which Natalia gives birth—a peaceful home surrounded by plant and animal life—underscores her variance from the sanctioned female role from which she has diverged since childhood. Alternating descriptions of her labor and that of a female goat, which gives birth to healthy, active twins, are particularly effective in showing how far removed she is from conceptions of femininity (including the fascist one) in which proficient and prolific motherhood are prominent.[48] Natalia is not even afforded the opportunity to grieve naturally: the stillbirth is kept a secret from her by her family members, who tell her that the baby is healthy and "bello."[49] She remains in limbo for days before realizing that he has passed away, a sad conclusion that confirms her longstanding suspicion that pregnancy is a kind of affliction. Because she is unable to compensate for former transgressions by fulfilling her biological duty, absolution evades her.

At this critical juncture in the novel, Natalia is disabused of the notion, entertained since her marriage to Malaspina, that she could be a good wife and mother. Devastated by bereavement and its emotional ramifications, she tries to come to terms with her failure to produce a healthy child but is unable to transcend her intense grief or free herself of nagging questions as to what has become of the baby. Her efforts to resist her inclinations in order to conform to societal expectations have been in vain. Having lost not only her son, but also the maternal identity that she had been attempting to adopt, she consequently formulates a plan to run away from Malaspina and her family, who give up on trying to find her once "la premeditazione divenne certa."[50]

Natalia ultimately decides to re-enter society in an act of reconciliation. Her fate, however, is by no means unequivocally favorable. Rather, there is the definite

sense that by choosing marriage, she has sacrificed the freedom and contentment that she experiences only while rebelling. Though still the same person, the protagonist of the finale, which Malpezzi Price rightly calls "ambiguously 'happy,'" is almost unrecognizable when juxtaposed with the fiercely independent female of earlier in the novel.[51] The abrupt conclusion is therefore another subversion, this time of the generally obstinate and often manipulative character that has been developed to this point.

For a *Bildungsroman* written during the fascist period, *Natalia* is extraordinary in the degree to which it is subversive. It is also rife with potential, and likely necessary, ambiguities. The political dimension is a case in point: the work takes place in the years surrounding and including the First World War, not during the regime, but nevertheless retains a message of protest that plays out through textual strategies, most of which see the author depicting a woman who makes astonishing choices given her position in society. Cialente's prose allows for a heightened awareness of the ambiguous relationship between truth and untruth. Perhaps the most significant contradictory factor is the protagonist's sudden shift from transgressor of social norms to a compliant wife. Yet the reversal of Natalia's attitude does not negate the transgressive actions with which she struggles to mature or her resolute bid to stay true to her desires and personality. Undeterred by the constraints imposed by the social roles predetermined for her by virtue of her gender, she navigates a path to development that is incontrovertibly discordant with the one imposed by a stifling, repressive society that is hostile by design.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay, I use the terms "*Bildungsroman*" and "novel of formation" interchangeably.

2. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 7. For possible translations and definitions of the word *Bildung*, see Pauli Siljander, Ari Kivelä, and Ari Sutinen, eds., *Theories of* Bildung *and Growth: Connections and Controversies Between Continental Educational Thinking and American Pragmatism* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 2–4.

3. Although most theoretical explorations of women's novels of formation deal primarily with Anglophone literatures, some of their observations about characteristics distinguishing female from male formations are nevertheless useful for an examination of Italian narratives of female development produced during Fascism. See, for example, Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, *The Voyage In*; Lorna Ellis, *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman, 1750–1850* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999); Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "The Female *Bildungsroman*: Calling It into Question," *NWSA Journal* 2, no.1 (1990): 16–34.

4. See Ann Hallamore Caesar and Michael Caesar, *Modern Italian Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 158–187 for a good summary of the state of literature during the *ventennio*.

5. There is a large and ever-growing body of work on the position of women in fascist Italy and the regime's complex and contradictory attitude toward women. See especially Michela De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall'unità a oggi: modelli culturali e comportamenti sociali* (Roma: Laterza, 1992); Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Mariolina Graziosi, *La donna e la storia: identità di genere e identità collettiva nell'Italia liberale e fascista* (Napoli: Liguori, 2000); and Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

6. It should be noted that *Natalia* is technically set in the years leading up to the beginning of the fascist period, not after Mussolini had taken power. This does not, in my opinion, detract from the weight of its clear flouting of the fascist vision of womanhood, particularly since Cialente included few historical references in the novel; this scarcity of explicit contextualization gives the work a sense of (limited) temporal non-specificity.

7. Sandra Petrignani, *Le signore della scrittura* (Milano: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1984), 86.

8. Marianna Nepi, *Fausta Cialente scrittrice europea* (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 2012), 10-11.

9. Ibid., 19.

10. Most published analyses of *Natalia* coincide with and refer to this second edition.

11. This is not to ignore the fact that some women produced literary work contradicting dominant ideologies and expectations despite the generally oppressive climate. For a useful exploration of such examples, see Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), which offers several essays discussing innovative literary contributions made by women.

12. As does Cialente's "Marianna." This story, which Bruce Merry calls "a minor masterpiece," appeared in *Fiera letteraria* in 1930 and was awarded Bompiani's Galante prize in 1932. Bruce Merry, "Fausta Cialente," in *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Rinaldina Russell (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 76–84; 76.

13. Carlo Bo, dust jacket of *Natalia*, 2nd ed., by Fausta Cialente (Milano: Mondadori, 1982). Bo's short analysis of *Natalia* appears on the dust jacket of the 1982 version, which includes no other introduction.

14. Massimo Bontempelli, *L'avventura novecentista*, ed. Ruggero Jacobbi (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1974), 10. The four preambles expounding the principle characteristics of *Novecentismo* were originally published in French in September 1926, December 1926, March 1927, and June 1927. Italian translations of the "Giustificazione," "Fondamenti," "Consigli," and "Analogie" are contained in the 1938 collection *L'avventura novecentista*. I quote here from the 1974 Vallecchi republication.

15. Ibid., 21–25.

16. Ibid., 161.

17. Fausta Cialente, *Natalia* (Roma: Sapentia, 1930), 73.

18. Ibid., 80.

19. Ibid., 12.

20. Ibid., 145.

21. In a passage that illustrates how Natalia has difficulty seeing beyond the present moment, the narrator comments: "il mattino andava a spiarla mentre dormiva anche se aveva passato la notte con lei. Non poteva immaginare la sua grazia alterata dalla vecchiaia o dalla morte e le nasceva dai ricordi della notte la tenerezza del giorno." Cialente, *Natalia*, 146.

22. Paola Malpezzi Price, "Autobiography, Art, and History in Fausta Cialente's Fiction," in *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy: A Modern Renaissance*, ed. Santo L. Aricò (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 108–122; 110.

23. Nepi, *Fausta Cialente*, 27.

24. Ibid., 25.

25. Cialente, *Natalia*, 12–13.

26. In fact, the description of Silvia as "un frutto," this time "molle, sul tappeto," appears again during a later erotic scene. Ibid., 111.

27. Ibid., 8.

28. Ibid., 203.

29. Margherita Adda, *Fausta Cialente (1898–1994)* (Padua: Casa di Cristallo, 1996), 5.

30. De Grazia addresses these contradictions, which stemmed in part from the fact that women were to be a "remarkable new hybrid: she served her family's every need, yet was also zealously responsive to the state's interest." De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 77.

31. Adda, *Fausta Cialente*, 5.

32. Cialente, *Natalia*, 16.

33. Ibid., 52.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 53.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 110–111.

38. Ibid., 154.

39. Ibid., 92.

40. Ibid., 180.

41. Ibid., 45.

42. Ibid., 204.

43. Ibid., 233.

44. Nepi, *Fausta Cialente*, 24.

45. Cialente, *Natalia*, 233.

46. Ibid., 234.

47. Ibid., 235.

48. Indeed, as patriotic Italians, women's primary function was, according to much fascist propaganda, to be "reproducers of the race." De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 147.

49. Cialente, *Natalia*, 250.

50. Ibid., 273.

51. Malpezzi Price, "Autobiography," 110.