

Tiziano Scarpa is Milena Fiotti: A True Story

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Abstract

Tiziano Scarpa (1963) is an Italian writer who has achieved fame as a novelist and poet. He received great critical acclaim in 1997 with his debut novel *Occhi sulla graticola*. Right at the beginning of his career something curious happened. Scarpa took part in a collection of stories named *Anticorpi*, where we can find his *Madrigale*. The writer, however, has signed on to write two short stories, and not just one as the other writers. Indeed, a few years after the book publishing, he admitted to also having written *La correzione*, initially signed as Milena Fiotti, a woman. This is a peculiar choice considering that a few years later the writer asserted that '[i]n the real world, people do not give any credit to those who are not ready to stand up for what they say using their own name and surname. Imagine an appeal against the death penalty signed using a nickname. Otherwise, would you accept a *cheque* signed with a nickname?'. The aim of this article is to explain the reason of this choice, a one-off in the author's career.

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Who is Tiziano Scarpa?

This paper aims to analyze a short story by Tiziano Scarpa. Some of you may not have heard of this writer. I will briefly introduce Tiziano Scarpa. Tiziano Scarpa is an Italian writer who was born in Venice in 1963. He debuted in 1996 with the novel *Occhi sulla graticola* (*Eyes on the Gridiron*).¹ Two very important works produced by him are the autofiction *Kamikaze d'occidente* (*Kamikaze of the West*) published in 2003 and the historical novel *Stabat Mater*, set in 18th-century Venice. Thanks to this book he won the prestigious Strega Prize in 2009 and became very popular in Europe. Scarpa is not only a storyteller but also writes poetry and theater performances. It is important to mention the poem *Groppi d'amore nella scuraglia* (*Knots of Love in the Dark*) which is considered by many as one of the most beautiful books of Italian contemporary poetry. The novella I will discuss in this paper is called *La correzione* (*The Correction*) and it has been published in the Einaudi anthology *Anticorpi* (*Antibodies*). This anthology tried to repeat the success achieved by an anthology of short stories by young rookies the previous year. I am talking about the famous anthology *Gioventù cannibale* (*Cannibal Youth*). *Anticorpi*, however, did not have the expected success. The story, although by Tiziano Scarpa, is signed under the name of Milena Fiotti. And, even when carefully examining the anthology *Anticorpi*, there is no concrete evidence that Milena Fiotti and Tiziano Scarpa are the same person. So there are two stories in the collection by Tiziano Scarpa. The first of these is called *Madrigale* (*Madrigal*). And it is published under the name of Tiziano Scarpa, whereas the second is called *La correzione*, and is signed by Milena Fiotti.

¹ In the brackets you can find the translation of the book's title in English beside the original in Italian. Unfortunately, there are no English translations of these books so the translations from Italian are mine.

This kind of operation is unique in the writings of the Venetian writer. The author, when asked about the reason for this choice, stated that Einaudi deemed that only one female writer (Simona Vinci) was insufficient as compared to the far more substantial representation of men. Hence the need to include in *Anticorpi* another story signed by a woman. Thus Milena Fiotti was born. In the afterword, as is the case for the other authors, there is a short biography by first-time writer:

Milena Fiotti was born in Biancade (Treviso) in 1969 and graduated in Spanish language and literature. She currently lives in Madrid, where she is carrying out a research on the folk origins of Don Giovanni prior to *El burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de piedra* by Tirso de Molina (Scarpa *et al.* 1997: 181).

Milena,² a name of Slavic origin, is quite common in northern Italy, while the surname Fiotti is rare. In fact, according to name.statistics.it there are only 27 people in Italy that bear this surname. Interestingly, in Italian *fiotti* means ‘streams’, ‘rush’ and it is usually used together with the word blood. When you have a serious injury sometimes there is a rush of blood from the wound. Rush of blood in Italian translates as *fiotto di sangue*. The place where Milena was born is called Biancade, a little town near Treviso. The historian Ivano Sartor attributes the origin of the name to the Venetian dialect word *sbiancade* by which the ‘deforested areas’ were indicated. From 1000 AD, in fact, there was a large agricultural development after the destruction of forests and the reclamation of the lands. This etymology, however, is not important for our reflections. In this fake biography Scarpa plays with the colours that the words Fiotti and Biancade suggest to the Italian reader. I shall explain why. If the surname Fiotti brings to mind the colour red, Biancade makes think of the colour white instead. In fact the word *bianco* in Italian means ‘white’. According to the author, this is the first small clue that makes us realize Milena Fiotti does not exist. A much more interesting clue is the relationship between Tiziano Scarpa and the town of Biancade. The family Scarpa is originally from Biancade and the maternal grandparents and uncles of the writer lie in the village cemetery. The writer’s keen interest in Biancade already at the time has led him to consult the book written by the aforementioned local erudite Ivano Sartor *Biancade documentata* (*Biancade Documented*). What we witness is borne by the author himself in *Soprattutto*, supplement to *The Gazzettino* on September 3, 1999. In 2003, the writer visited the grave of his dead relatives who rest in the little town near Treviso. After this experience, the author composed the poem ‘Incontro con Dio e con i miei morti a Biancade’ (‘Meeting with God and with my Dead Relatives at Biancade’). In the poem, one beside the other, the names that the Venetian writer reads by the graves of his ancestors are cited. Very curiously they are all written with the initial lower-case letter.

[...]

I go to the cemetery
to greet the surface of the tombs

² It is the feminine form of Milan, a Slavic name based on the root *mil* ‘dear’, ‘pretty’ and it was originally a hypocoristic of other names.

the outside of the tombs
of my grandparents
of my uncles
[...]
eugenio assunta renato ernesto luigi maria antonio
alessandro

You came to see me all together
how do I look?

alessandro maria ernesto
born in 1879
I do not know you
tell me who you are
you have touched me lightly
you have touched me
long-range dead
you died before I was born. (Scarpa 2006: 62-63)

The fact that Milena was born in Biancade makes her ideally a close relative of the author. This allusion, however, can only be understood by someone who knows the biography of Tiziano Scarpa very well. The much more interesting piece of information is that Milena ‘currently lives in Madrid, where she’s carrying out a research on the folk origins of Don Giovanni prior to *El burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de piedra* by Tirso de Molina’. As everyone knows the tradition of Don Giovanni begins with *El burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de piedra*, published in 1630 by Tirso de Molina. In fact, this is the first work that features Don Juan, then made famous by the opera *Il dissoluto punito ossia Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The character was later reused by various authors in theater and literature: Molière, George Gordon Byron, Aleksandr Sergeevič Pushkin, José Zorrilla, José de Espronceda and José Saramago.

The Name Milena Fiotti is Similar to the Ones Featured in *Occhi sulla graticola*

This biographical data is the only one that makes the reader suspicious. But Tiziano Scarpa does not use the name Milena Fiotti only as a pseudonym. In fact Milena Fiotti is also the name of the protagonist of the short story *La correzione*. So the story written by Milena Fiotti has Milena Fiotti as its protagonist. Probably in 1997 some readers believed that *The Correction* was an autobiographical account. Before talking about the story it is interesting to note that Milena Fiotti is similar to other names of female characters that are present in the first novel of the author, *Occhi sulla graticola*, as we can see from this quotation:

For seven months one character has been using the name Maria Grazia Graticola ('Rack'), but her real name is Carolina Groppo ('Knot'). As Maria Grazia Graticola she gets paid to draw male and female genitalia on Italian translations of manga, the Japanese comics (Scarpa 1996: 7).

From the very first lines of his debut novel it is understood that Scarpa has a fascination with the *nom de plume*, which in the case of Carolina Groppo comes from a practical need: to ensure the anonymity of a college student who agrees to draw male genitalia for Italian translations of Japanese cartoons. In fact, if in the Japanese original print private parts are systematically censored, Tullio Parmesan, the director of KissManga decides to restore them in the Italian version to give greater commercial appeal to his magazine. He, like Carolina Groppo ('Knot'), and together with the whole KissManga crew conceals his identity under a female pseudonym:

Behind the pseudonym Manuela Manopola ('Knob'), director of KissManga, hides a very clever man who graduated in Japanese Language and Literature, Tullio Parmesan of Sboldrigo, province of Vicenza, 1969 class (i.e. 26 years) (Scarpa 1996: 49).

This choice to conceal all employees under female names is not a random choice. It is Parmesan himself that unveils his editorial strategy in detail:

[it is] clear to me that the manga should be adapted to Western tastes. It's useless doing philology with comics. There is little to do, for us Westerners the erect penis continues to be the hub of porn, vagina still represents the abyss of meaning, the well of Saint Patricia. If we want to sell in Italy all those things we have to show them, draw them, overexpose them. [...] ... clear that the names of the editors are all fictional, what did you think? But did you read well the editorial column of the credit? It does not take much to figure it out! Manuela Manopola ('Knob'): the managing director! Valentina Veleno ('Poison'): translator! Stella Tacchi ('Heels'): art director! Gianna Gargianti ('Brights'): adapter of onomatopoeia and Japanese alphabet! Amelia Miele ('Honey'): lettering! Maria Grazia Graticola ('Gridiron'): inguinal graphics! Hi hi! But where have you ever seen it? This is also a political choice! [...] ...impersonate women in editorial credits of the magazine is not a false modesty. All women, yes, from the director to the assistants, to the last office boy. It's a move that displaces and reassures. Shock and comfort in one fell swoop. A fist and a caress. (Scarpa 1996: 52-53)

Probably Tiziano Scarpa decided to sign this short story with a female pseudonym also for the reasons explained by the character of his novel Tullio Parmesan. So the choice to sign the story *La correzione* with the name Milena Fiotti is not only a publishing necessity but also a communication strategy. In fact, as we shall see, the ending of the story will have explicit sexual content. And indeed the publication of that story with a male author's name could have offended the female audience.

It should however be emphasized that there was a prestigious example of an artist who decided to disguise himself as a woman: that of Marcel Duchamp who became Rose Sélavy, a character created by the French artist and at the same time the author of some of his works. In the 90s this experiment was picked up by John Frusciante. In fact the American guitarist, after leaving Red Hot Chili Peppers, devoted himself to record his first solo album, *Niandra Lades usually just Wears a T-shirt* (1994). The album was released under the name John Frusciante but the cover portrays his feminine alter ego that is precisely Niandra Lades. This is obviously a clear homage to the French, as Frusciante himself has candidly admitted. In 1994, the record was a dismal failure, but it should be stressed how the fact that ‘John Frusciante had left the group’ had a wide resonance in the music world and beyond. Just think of the famous book by Brizzi *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (‘Jack Frusciante Left the Group’) where the name of the American musician was only slightly changed to avoid copyright issues. There is no doubt that Scarpa refers directly to Duchamp, but considering the vastness of the interests of the Venetian writer, it is possible that the news of Niandra Lades could have reached his ears. However, it is certain that in 2003 Tiziano Scarpa in the autofiction *Kamikaze d'occidente* cites Marcel Duchamp, putting in the mouth of the character Tiziano Scarpa these words: ‘I am the Marcel Duchamp of sex’. Maybe during the whole novel the only time when the character Tiziano Scarpa says the words ‘I am’, a phrase that, I am sure, if we dwell on it, lead to interesting insights.

What is the Topic of *La correzione*?

Now it is time to talk about the character Milena Fiotti. The editors of the anthology, Mauro Bersani and Ernesto Franco, summarize the story as follows:

Milena tells us about the professional initiation of a young teacher, which, in the hands of a crazy old professor, also becomes a sexual initiation. The body threatened and abused [...] here is bureaucratized, rendered abstract by procedures and practices, but comes back to life in the obsessions caused by the same school life. (Scarpa *et al.* 1997: IX)

The story is written in the form of a letter addressed to the Director of Education of Treviso Guglielmo Guerrazzi. In the letter Milena Fiotti writes about her recruitment as an alternate in Spanish Language and Literature at the private Institute ‘Magagnis Sisters’ and the troubled relationship she had with an elderly teacher who is called Irma Zazzi. The name Guglielmo Guerrazzi appears only at the beginning of the story but it is very interesting. The name derives from the Germanic name **wilja*, ‘will’, and **helma*, ‘helmet’. Furthermore, the Guerrazzi surname derives from the Germanic **werra*, which means ‘fray’, ‘war’. In my opinion this name anticipates the subject of the story, or the ‘ideological war’ that will take place between Milena Fiotti and Irma Zazzi.

The Institute Magagnis is a private Catholic school and most of its teachers are nuns. The school is run by Mother Adele who, when she meets Milena, asks her to show exemplary behavior. In fact, the elderly nun is troubled not only by the young age of the alternate, but

also because Spanish is a very sensual language. The name Adele, as that of William, is of German origin and is derived from **athala*, which means ‘noble’. The school seems to be a parallel dimension in which the sexual revolution of the 60s has not taken place. There is an almost medieval atmosphere of repression and closure. Milena Fiotti is troubled by the workplace and does not know how to deal with it. On the first day of school Milena Fiotti enters the class 5th B and meets Irma Zazzi. The old Professor is doing a lesson on the text that the pupils will bring to the high school final examinations: *Lives and Memorable Sayings of the Mothers of the Desert*. For the uninitiated, this work, also known as *Meterikon*, can be considered the first work of Christian spirituality built solely for women. In *Meterikon* not only the teachings and maxims of the great solitary of the Egyptian desert are collected, but also those of other well-known mothers who had lived in solitude. Thus, from the point of view of a single book, the result is an insight into the varied experience of the ancient female monasticism. In *La correzione*, while Milena’s going out of the classroom, she hears the name of St. Mary of Egypt, the patron saint of repentant prostitutes.

In the short story, the two women seem to be hopelessly incompatible and far from each other. In fact, there is a profound lack of communication between the young Spanish teacher and Irma Zazzi. But, unexpectedly, Irma Zazzi decides to invite the young fellow teacher home with the aim of correcting an Italian task together. The student’s name is Debora Bondi and will be present in person at the correction. The title of the task is: *Say how you spent the last night of Carnival*.

Milena Fiotti is shocked by the odd title. How do you prepare a verification test of maturity training with such an easy task? Irma Zazzi begins to correct the writing and argues with Debora Bondi:

Well, here you say that you were on a skiing holiday in the Dolomites – Prof. Zazzi indicated the mistakes of the task with a monumental red and blue pencil. – On the evening of Shrove Tuesday you took part in a torchlight skiing and then you went to a costume party dressed as a baby with a pacifier and diapers. You drank five glasses of brandy, and at midnight you let a guy you had just met take you to bedroom. You locked yourselves in to chat and had an interesting exchange of views for two hours. [...]– But it is exactly what happened ... It’s all true! – Protested Bondi snuggling even deeper behind her glasses. We didn’t do anything wrong! – Exactly! That is the point! (Scarpa *et al.* 1997: 77)

Irma Zazzi is angry because Debora Bondi spent the night chastely with the boy. So she decides to put the pencil under the skirt of the girl. This is the correction to which the title refers. When the young student understands the intentions of the elderly Professor she decides to run away. Milena Fiotti, however, decides to submit to the will of Irma Zazzi:

It was a short surgery. I heard the Red and Blue Pencil rummage inside me and lacerate the hymen. Eventually, the pain was sharp as the relief. [...] I hope that your spirit of understanding will prevail over your charge, Mr. Director. In any case, apply to me the measures you deem most appropriate. As for me, I’ve already decided by myself: I will not teach anymore. (Scarpa *et al.* 1997: 79)

This story may possibly offend. But it must be considered that it was written in 1995-1996 when the Pulp phenomenon was at its height. In those years many young writers deliberately wrote short stories and novels with gory content. And Tiziano Scarpa is not the Marquis De Sade! The Venetian writer in the first phase of his career interrogates himself on the relationship between bodily impulses and intellectual activities of the human being, and notes an irreconcilable conflict between these two opposite poles. In fact, for all the characters there seems to be no other way than repression or trauma and the subsequent insanity.

The analysis of the name Irma Zazzi allows us to understand more precisely the message of this particular story. In fact the name Irma is derived from Germanic word **ermina*, meaning ‘whole’, ‘universal’. Names derived from the same root are Ermengilda, Ermengarde and Emma. The surname Zazzi is very interesting and represents the author’s taste for names of great phonetic impact. Speaking recently on the name Irma Zazzi, Tiziano Scarpa said:

I invented Zazzi because it allowed me to create many words with zed as zazzizzazione, zazzizzare, etc..., And so it is, phonetically, a run-name, a word-pad towards the suffixes, the individual name that flows into the universal, the kind that opens on gender, etc.³

So Irma Zazzi is an individual name which flows into the universal. The pencil is reconnected to the body in the same way as the literature, once arbitrarily divided from the body of the author, gets back its entirety. And this is the correction mentioned in the story. Italo Calvino in *Una pietra sopra* claims that ‘The author is an author since he plays a role, as an actor, and is identified with the projection of himself when he writes’. In our case, the authorial projection Milena Fiotti, however, is ‘corrected’ by Irma Zazzi, representative of wholeness, universality against fragmentation. In conclusion, therefore, we can say that this story is a recovery tool, a way to claim a relationship between author and writing that in the Postmodern era was deemed impossible.

Let’s Say Goodbye to *Nom de Plumes*

The experiment of Milena Fiotti is unique in the career of the writer Tiziano Scarpa. And it will most likely remain so, because in the introduction to *Batticuore Fuorilegge* (2006) Scarpa reflects on the nicknames used on the net; such reflection may also be extended to the use of classic pseudonyms:

While there are more and more books attributed to powerful people and celebrities (as are also the clothes of designers and design objects), on the other hand there are more and more speeches left to themselves by anonymous authors who write on the net, which holds blogs and news on personal or collective sites, which are also very interesting and lively. I call them abandoned speeches, because their authors, in the

³ A quotation from an e-mail that Tiziano Scarpa sent to me in January 2014.

great majority of cases, sign with nicknames, that is to say that in fact they do not identify themselves, thus avoiding having to take responsibility for what they say. The network has allowed a healthy, truly democratic, diffusion of the individual writing. But the habit of disguising oneself under nicknames weakens the political clout of a large part of the internet outside of it, in the society where the writing flows with very different procedures. In reality you do not give credit to the words of those who are not willing to defend what they say with their names and surnames. Imagine an appeal against the death penalty signed with nicknames. Or would you accept a check signed with a nickname? (Scarpa 2006: 12)

This sums up a critical position that Scarpa had already stated in an article dated June 16, 2003 and published on the website *Nazione Indiana.com* with the title ‘Bloggers, you’re Worse than Liala’. The article caused a big controversy. In 2003, the blog had been on the net for a few years and had strongly changed the reality of those who wanted to pursue a career as writers. If before there was a whole editorial process that made a selection of the wannabes, now everybody could become a self-published writer and, in some cases, gain visibility, and maybe even get a publishing contract with a few clicks:

Today anyone can publicly go to the depth of one’s self, without having to go through any social filter – the filter that, for convenience, we shall call ‘the publisher’, whether a publisher of newspapers, books, etc. or, why not, a webmaster with esoteric html knowledge, a professional who until a few months ago, before everybody could start a blog for free, you had to pay for building and updating your personal website – I said, a whole series of social filters that until a few years ago (a few months ago!) allowed the authors to be published only by the editorial system of publishing (newspapers, books, etc.). (Scarpa 2003b)

This revolution was not only to question the social role of the writer but also the word itself, sucked into the vortex of the internet, often detached from its author, who not only could decide to self-publish but also choose to remain anonymous or hide behind a nickname. ‘Bloggers you’re Worse than Liala’ is a title that deserves our attention. Liala was a writer of great success who owed her fame to serial novels often in a military setting. In fact the *nom de plume* Liala was given by Gabriele D’Annunzio: ‘I’ll call you Liala so that there’ll be always a wing in your name’.⁴ So the title of it sounds a bit as: ‘Bloggers you’re worse than serial novel writers’. But there’s something more. In the essay *Cos’è questo fracasso?* Scarpa devotes some thoughts to the figure of Liala that are worth reporting here:

Liala is the one writer who has crossed our century telling us compulsively of the sexual attraction between males and females, forcing her stories to stop in front of the bedroom door. Meanwhile, the 20th century was neurotically jumping on the mattress of hundreds of couples. Chatter pillow, pillow conversation, kamasutra character, empires of the senses in a double bed, post-coital cigarettes narrative. D’Annunzio,

⁴ *Ala* in Italian means ‘wing’.

the baptizer of Liala, in the 19th century had already set up an entire novel on the revealing lapse of Andrea Sperelli who blurts out the name of an ex-lover while he is making love to another. On the cover of the novels of Liala there is a card hanging on the handle commanding the plot: do not disturb. Of course silenced sex is the best way to erect a monument to it. [...] Sex is the inexpressible, the ineffable, the unheard. It is, at the same time, the vulgar and the sublime. And it is the double bottom to which language never ceases to refer, while not being able to designate it. God's not to be taken in vain, or rather, it is useless to hope to be able to give it a name. Old reactionary myth, that there is an afterlife of words, an armored elsewhere, a core of uranium of meaning that would melt all of our vocabularies, and that makes Liala akin to noir subgenre of so-called 'locked room mysteries', where a corpse lies lonely in a room barred from the inside. (Scarpa 2000: 45)

It is worth noting, however, that name is mentioned twice, in a context that apparently seems to refer to something completely different. This was not surprising, since the name is a single reference term, while 'sex is the double bottom in that language never ceases to refer, while not being able to designate it'. In the blog *Nazione Indiana* Carla Benedetti also took part in the controversy with the intervention 'Why bloggers use the cover of nicknames'. Also in this case the target of the intervention is not limited to name only but also to profound implications that the use of a nickname has on the written word:

I was struck by reading the dialogue between Tiziano Scarpa and Marsilioblack on *Nazione Indiana*. One writes: 'Dear Tiziano Scarpa'. The other replies: 'Dear Marsilioblack.' What a strange thing! On the one hand, there is an individual with a personal data, an age, a face, a shaved head, the author of those particular books (which, if I want, I can even read, to check the consistency of what he says). On the other an entity in a costume, like a super-hero in disguise. Or: one is a human in flesh and blood, the other a cartoon – like in the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Yet they are facing one another, to discuss the same things, as if their words could affect the world in the same way. As if the world could react to what they say in the same way. Between these two statements there is a difference in height, a different level of reality, an abyss. (Benedetti 2003)

But this controversy certifies well what had happened in the five years from 1998 to 2003. The advent of the internet had opened up new possibilities for the publication of literary works. No wonder, then, that the story of Milena Fiotti, aka Tiziano Scarpa, dates back to 1997. Within a few years the use of an author's name and its implications changed radically. Scarpa would never have written a short story in 2003 under a false name. Even in 2014 the Venetian author published the essay *Disavventure del mio nome* ('Misadventures of my Name') devoted entirely to his real name. This attitude is at odds with the phrase contained in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter night a traveler*: 'How well would I write if I were not there'. Scarpa is not the only one having a deep relationship with his name. There is another great Italian writer who even came to put his name in the *diegesis* of his work. And not as a

character, but as an author who enters suddenly to speak about himself. His name is Antonio Moresco. But that's another story.

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