

## **Memory and Trauma in Amelia Rosselli's *Diario in tre lingue*: Feminine Translingual Writing**

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**Abstract:** Amelia Rosselli's *Diario in tre lingue*<sup>i</sup> is linked to a feminine type of writing, which draws on *écriture féminine* and the semiotic, breaking free from the fixed, linear structures of symbolic discourse. Rosselli's diary reveals an obsessive desire to find meaning in sounds, phonemes and words to get to the "significance" or rather their "insignificance". On a biographical note, her diary hints at the suggestion that the self and life are also "insignificant". This article explores how Rosselli's literary text materialises memory by forging a distinctive type of feminine translingual text, through her unique narrative, poetic techniques, innovations, and linguistic experiments. It further explores how traumatic memory works through her diary and is transformed on the page. It recognises that writing and traumatic memory can act as material forces that actively shape the text and its production. Yet, trauma is not always visible, it is a force that works beneath surfaces, resurfacing in unexpected ways. The diary is a living assemblage of affect, where memory converges with reality, the body and history. It is a reminder of what has previously occurred and foreshadows future events. This article shows how the diary can become a repository of memory, and a living entity that mirrors Rosselli's death by suicide, that ultimate desperate act of literary suicide, in a homage to Sylvia Plath. With her passing, Rosselli escapes the haunting memory of survivor's guilt and her father's "undead ghost".

**Keywords:** *Trauma, Memory, Mental illness, écriture féminine, Translingual writing.*

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<sup>i</sup> A *Diary in Three Languages* was written between 1955-1956 and published in 1997.

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### Introduction to Amelia Rosselli's *Diario in tre lingue*

This article analyses Amelia Rosselli's *Diario in tre lingue*<sup>ii</sup> (*Diary in Three Languages*) to explore how trauma is conveyed. It also explores the ways the diary uses different languages, and to what effect. It aims to understand how traumatic memory is transformed through writing and recognizes memory as a material force that can shape the text. It explores how Rosselli's diary materialises and negotiates memory and trauma through different narrative techniques, innovations, and linguistic experiments. Rosselli's *Diary* resembles the performative in its search for the sound presence in words, bringing to the fore the notion of orality. It explores the sounds and phonemes that make up languages, to get to the "significance" or rather the "insignificance" of words and languages or rather, on a biographical note, the insignificance of the self (Rosselli 88). Rosselli's diary is situated in the genre of life writing and is considered in the light of contemporary woman's translingual writing, as a unique, innovative text.

Firstly, this article reviews Amelia Rosselli's (1930-1996) bibliography. It explores her exile, and the relevance that learning different languages has played in Rosselli's life and her work. In this regard, it highlights how languages are connected to one's sense of self and identity. Secondly, it explores the nature of the diary to understand how Rosselli makes use of its contractual form to combine three languages within its structure and boundaries. It associates diary writing with a feminist type of writing, and thus draws on gender studies, *écriture féminine* and the semiotic to talk about women's contemporary translingual writing. Thus, this article aims to analyse Rosselli's diary within the context of contemporary translingual women's writing, to understand the way women break from pre-defined norms and linguistic structures to generate innovative texts<sup>iii</sup>. This article

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<sup>ii</sup> It was written between 1955-1956. (cf. Rosselli 1997) I will refer to the text as *Diary*.

<sup>iii</sup> Parts of this paper were presented at the conference "Across Languages: Translingualism in Contemporary Women's Writing" at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study University of London, May 2019.

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adopts, what I have termed, a “literary translingual practice”<sup>iv</sup> as a methodological framework (Zucca 1). This methodology combines studies in literature with studies in linguistics to analyse what occurs to languages in situations of contact (Zucca 7). It focuses on the ways linguistic elements are exchanged between or synthesised from two or more linguistic systems (1). It aims to focus on texts that use more than one language in complex, enriching, generative and interactive ways, as well as explores a text’s aesthetics, its literariness, and cultural contexts (4-7).

Lastly, this article explores women’s writing and mental illness. It uses critical texts by Daniela La Penna and essays by *Amelia Rosselli*, primarily sourced from *Una Scrittura Plurale: Saggi e Interventi Critici a cura di Francesca Caputo* (*A Plural Writing. Essays and Critical Interventions by Rosselli Amelia* edited by Francesca Caputo<sup>v</sup>). Furthermore, it avails of Rachel Cottam in Jolly, Sarah. M. Edwards in Jolly and Kay Shaffer in Jolly to explore life writing.

### **Bibliographical Resonances, Exile, Language, and Identity**

This section provides an overview and analysis of key autobiographical elements to enable an appreciation of the social and political contexts that shaped the author and her writing. It also examines the impact of exile, to understand what living in diverse cultures and languages signifies at the level of self and identity. Furthermore, it highlights personal details, which may provide further insights into the author’s struggle with mental health, as a response to violence and trauma. Rosselli’s childhood was characterised by multiple traumatic events. Her father Carlo Rosselli, a well-known anti-fascist activist, of Italian origin, was a political leader, journalist, and historian. In 1926, he helped anti-fascists escape, but he was captured and convicted for his participation. He was sentenced to a period of confinement on the island of Lipari in 1927. He escaped to Tunisia, where he managed to get to France. He wrote his most famous work, “Liberal Socialism”,

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<sup>iv</sup> The term literary translingualism is used to refer to texts in which more than one language or a second language is used (Kellman xi).

<sup>v</sup> All translations in this chapter are mine unless specified.

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and founded the movement *Giustizia e Libertà* <sup>vi</sup> in 1929. Rosselli's mother, Marion Catherine Cave, was also an activist and an anti-fascist. She was accused of being complicit in her husband's escape, was arrested and imprisoned, whilst pregnant. She also managed to escape to France, where her daughter Amelia Rosselli was born, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1930 in Paris.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1937, Carlo Rosselli and his brother Nello Rosselli were both assassinated by hired assassins at Bagnoles-de-l'Orne, a para-fascist organisation supported by the Italian government (Princiotta 515). Amelia was only seven years old at the time of this violent event. Amelia and her brother, Giovanni Andrea<sup>vii</sup>, received the news of their father's passing from their mother, who appeared unsympathetic towards the children's feelings. Rosselli records that her mother "ci ha semplicemente chiesto se sapevamo cosa voleva dire la parola "assassinio". E abbiamo risposto di sì" <sup>viii</sup> (515). After her father's assassination, the family had to leave Italy. Amelia Pincherle, Amelia's grandmother, helps the family escape. They find refuge in Switzerland, then in the UK. They finally reach the USA thanks to Eleanor Roosevelt's intervention (515).

Rosselli lived in-between cultures and languages, trying to piece together a sense of identity. Isabelle de Courtrivon claims that "you can never sidestep the question of identity when you learn to live in a new language" (de Courtrivon 4). In an interview with Francesca Borrelli, Rosselli argues that the knowledge of multiple languages is a problem for her, "because if one thinks in three languages, it means that one has not yet decided where one would like to reside" (qtd. in Rosselli 306). Themes of displacement, dislocation, bigamy, and betrayal are prominent features in bilinguals, highlighting the affective dimension of the multilingual experience, which places emotion on the same level as cognition in investigations of bi-/multilingual minds. According to Pavlenko,

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<sup>vi</sup> *trans. Justice and Liberty.*

<sup>vii</sup> He legally changed his name to John.

<sup>viii</sup> *trans.* "She simply asked us if we knew what the word "assassination meant". We told her that we did".

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these metaphors convey an array of emotions: guilt over linguistic and ethnic disloyalties, [...] anxiety about the lack of wholesome oneness [...], and sadness and confusion caused by seeing oneself as divided, a self-in-between, a self in need of translation.” (Pavlenko 5)

In her essay, *On Language Memoir*, Alice Kaplan explores “language memoirs” by multilingual authors and examines the effects of “dissociative multilingualism”<sup>ix</sup> (Kaplan 59). Like Pavlenko, Kaplan highlights the psychological and emotional split that multilinguals may experience when living in different languages and cultures, and what that signifies (69).

In this light, Rosselli’s relationship with the Italian language is problematic and complex. It is the language that allows her to reconnect with her father, but it is also the language that is associated with the memories of her father’s violent death. When she returns to Italy, after years of exile, in 1948, she is institutionalised, at the age of eighteen, for believing she is Beethoven’s incarnation (515). Her father had adored Beethoven (Princiotta 515). In Spagnoletti’s view, she is trying to recover and recompose an image of her father (qtd. in Rosselli 303), but it is an image that haunts, because it has not been fully elaborated and processed, due to its horrific and violent nature.

In *Haunting Legacies*, Gabrielle Schwab suggests that things that are hard to remember, resulting from forms of violence, may “hold[s] an unrelenting grip on memory yet is deemed unspeakable” (1). Nicholas Abraham refers to the place where people bury those unspeakable horrors, events, and losses as a “*crypt*” (qtd. Schwab 1). The creation of a crypt and the process of “encryption” is viewed as a psychic response to trauma (84). Schwab further views the *crypt* as a place where

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<sup>ix</sup> Although she alludes to “dissociative multilingualism”, she does not use the term in *On Language Memoir*. She is keen to understand what occurs inside the head of a person who “finds herself passionately engaged in new sounds and a new voice, who discovers that “chat” (Kaplan 59).

a person “harbour[s] an undead ghost” (1). The development of a *crypt* reflects “failed mourning: it is the burial place inside the self for a love object that is kept inside like a living corpse” (45). In this sense, Beethoven represents the “undead ghost”. He is a means for which Rosselli may recover and revive the lost object, which has been internalised, introjected, and now manifests as a “living corpse”. In a psychoanalytical view, the ego merges and identifies with the lost object (2), causing a loss of self and identity, producing a split persona, dissociated from the self. This dissociation also occurs at the level of language and life writing.

This section has highlighted noteworthy events that have shaped the author and her sense of self and identity, where loss, violence, absence, and traumatic memories are foregrounded. These findings highlight how violence and trauma have shaped the author and impacted upon her life in significant ways. However, it is significant to point out that Rosselli should not only be read in autobiographical terms, even though the autobiographical informs her writing. We need to consider her work in the light of her creativity, musicality, ingeniousness, and her experimental forms, which inform her writing.

### **Feminine Translingual Life Writing: Disrupting Borders**

The diary, which falls under the umbrella term of life writing, is considered a feminine genre in its subversion of traditional linguistic structures and conventions of representation (qtd. in Jolly 269) and in its formal and stylistic elements. It emphasises “non-linearity, interruption and lack of closure” (269). These elements allow repressed meanings to emerge and call into question phallogocentric discourses (269). The diary genre decentres the unified subject as constructed by patriarchal discourse. These disruptive forces can be linked to the concept of *écriture féminine*<sup>x</sup>, a term used by French feminist writers of the 1970s. Feminist scholars

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<sup>x</sup> Julia Kristeva’s semiotic language is not identical to *écriture féminine*. The main difference lies in the assumption that the semiotic “has the power to operate as a disruptive force within the symbolic order.” (Birch 35) On the other hand, the proponents of *écriture féminine*, view *écriture féminine* as “an order of language existing outside patriarchal discourse, on the margins of culture.” (35)

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criticize the patriarchal values of the symbolic order (Birch et al. 31). This tradition is seen as rigid, fixed, singular, and linear. Whilst *écriture féminine* taps into the imaginary, and unstructured forms of the unconscious, the body and the semiotic. The semiotic becomes a subversive force that disrupts the symbolic – the phallogentric order and tradition (cf. Kristeva; Kristeva and Toril Moi; Kristeva in MacAfee; Birch et al.). Rosselli's diary leads us to a re-reading of both *écriture féminine* and the semiotic and highlights how contemporary women's translingual writing<sup>xi</sup> produces innovative, aesthetic texts that transgress genres, gender, and monolingual paradigms<sup>xii</sup>. Her diary also highlights how women appropriate genre to reposition their texts, selves, and voices.

Godela Weiss-Sussex suggests that translingual texts by women authors can provide opportunities for creating new contexts of thought and even new structures of thinking that stretch beyond the boundaries of languages/nations. (Weiss-Sussex) Translingual writing can give rise to an opportunity to produce writing that does not align with the logical and linear exposition of thoughts through clearly defines language (Weiss-Sussex). Translingual feminine writing is still a relevantly new field of study, albeit women have been writing for centuries, from as far back as Enheduanna (c. 2300 BCE), Mesopotamia, Aelia Eudocia (c. 400–460 CE) and Sappho (c. 630–570 BCE), to the 12<sup>th</sup> century work of Hildegard of Bingen, and to more modern and contemporary translingual feminine

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<sup>xi</sup> Parts of this paper were presented at the conference *Across Languages: Translingualism in Contemporary Women's Writing*, at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study University of London.

<sup>xii</sup> Yildiz has termed the dominance of monolingual configurations as the “monolingual paradigm”. She claims that the monolingual paradigm “substantially changes the meaning and resonance of multilingual practices”, though it has not managed to fully eliminate these practices (Yildiz 4). Multilingual forms were previously defined by monolingual constructs, and these provided the framework in which to consider multilingual subjectivities and identities (Yildiz 15). Despite the lasting effects of the monolingual paradigm, which has hindered the development of communicative practices and the theorization of new concepts, multilingual practices have been alive in the west and outside the west, although they may have been “unacknowledged and hidden” (Yildiz 3, 4, 15).

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translingual writers, including Eva Hoffman, Asia Djebar, Leïla Sebbar, Irene Ulman, Catherine Ray, Nancy Houston and Sujatta Bhatt, to name a few.

More contemporary women scholars are looking at translingual configurations from different perspectives, attempting to define translingual writing within the broad definition of life writing. Kaplan first drew attention to the phenomenon of translingual memoirs by using the term “language memoir” (Kaplan 59). However, Mary Besemeres attempts to describe the translingual shift by coining the term “translingual memoir”, highlighting the interconnectedness between languages, culture, and identity (Besemeres 32). In her view, the term “translingual memoir” captures a wider field, including essays and autobiographical writing (32). Translingual memoirs offer profound insights into experiences of living between different languages and cultures, and the impact and effect these experiences may have on writing and the writer.

The theorisation of the translingual in feminine writing, shifts the way we view texts that cross and transgress gender, sexual, linguistic and cultural boundaries. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga have been influential in marking a new trajectory and paving the way for cross-gender border texts. These feminine translingual writers advocate for a new type of writing that transcends limited boundaries and versions of their bodies and languages. Gloria Anzaldúa claims, “We speak a patois, a forked tongue” (Anzaldúa 1987: 77). Moraga uses the metaphor of the mouth; she writes, “*La boca*<sup>xiii</sup> spreads its legs open to talk, open to attack” (142). A woman’s language can no longer be contained, constrained and restrained within a tightly knit singular linguistic system, nor within a cultural and sexual border that limits *écriture féminine*. She further writes, “my mouth cannot be controlled. It will flap in the wind like legs in sex, not driven by the mind” (142). Continuing in the same strain – “There is a woman coming out of her mouth. *Hay una mujer que viene de la boca*” (142). These excerpts highlight defiance, and a desire to fully encapsulate a women’s experience, by writing the feminine.

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<sup>xiii</sup> *trans*. The mouth.

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Rosselli's diary can be viewed in the light of this wide discussion of feminine translingual life writing. Her diary is a composite of different genres<sup>xiv</sup>. It is an innovative and complex text that stretches the use of languages, symbols, and signs. It allows Rosselli to appropriate voice in multiple languages, within a single con/text and allowing her to experiment with verbal and non-verbal language and symbols. She writes,

‘ o o o - o o o o-o o- o o - o  
 non son mai stata così collettiva (però nella lingua)  
 ooo ’ o/o ’ \_\_\_ o ’ o o ’ \_\_\_ oo ’ \_\_\_ o’ .<sup>xv</sup>  
 (Rosselli 96)

In the excerpt above, the writer searches for correspondences between the written word and their phonic sound system through symbols, which represent prosody, accents, and intonation. The symbols located underneath the written sentence give musical value to each word above by conveying a musical system, which articulates the up-tempo and the on-the-beat rhythm. The symbols are not language in the strict sense, hinting at non-verbal language, orality, and mnemonic memory. They convey the writer's search for sounds, patterns and meaning in sounds. In this sense, the excerpt brings the oral and performativity to the fore. To re-read the text in this light, with its corresponding symbols, requires a new mode of reading and interpretation. The excerpt emphasises the subversive force of translingual women's writing, which crosses linguistic boundaries, symbols, and signs for signification.

In Sarah M. Edwards's view, the diary “embodies a marginal form of resistance against prescriptive notions of female silence and exclusion from the literary world” (qtd. in Jolly 951). The diary allows women to give an account of their gendered position (951). In this context, the diary allows Rosselli to

<sup>xiv</sup> The diary is considered for “its openness and inclusiveness across genre” (qtd. in Jolly ix).

<sup>xv</sup> *trans*. I have never been so social (but in language).

communicate verbally within a cultural context that is often documented and reserved for men. Rosselli exploits the literary potential of the diary in unique ways. Her text disrupts the fixed linear features of patriarchal writing and ruptures the boundaries of the diary form. The diary's capaciousness and elasticity allow for different genres to be contained within its boundaries. Below is an excerpt where different genres and languages coinhabit the same page, disrupting linearity and breaking linguistic, literary, and aesthetic boundaries. Rosselli writes,

Dear ,  
 .... have brought surrealism techniques (methods) to  
 the extremes.  
 thought I'd go mad! (somebody else said that).  
vision:  
 cercles vert et rouge tres minces, qui bougent en  
 toutes  
 le directions, en se substituent et en avant <sup>xvi</sup>. (99)

There are two different literary genres, and two languages displayed on the page. The former excerpt is in the form of a letter. Yet, it is incomplete, with no date provided <sup>xvii</sup>. The second excerpt is entitled "vision", but it is not used in that strict sense. The word is also underlined to highlight the switch from the letter genre to a different type of writing.

How do we read these two excerpts? On a level of context, the letter is intimate and autobiographical. Rosselli is conveying her experiments with surrealistic techniques and makes an analogy between the techniques' "extremes" and her mental state: "mad". Yet, we learn that it is someone else who has labelled her as a "mad" person. This latter sentence is placed in brackets and acts as an afterthought or an addition. She could be referring to a medical diagnosis. The shift

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<sup>xvi</sup> *trans.* very thin green and red circles, which move in all directions, alternating between a forwards and backwards movement.

<sup>xvii</sup> Rosselli completes letters to John, while she was composing *Diario in Tre Lingue*, dated around 1956 (La Penna 108).

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from letter form to a vision forms part of a surrealist technique, conveying fragmentation, the juxtaposing of different materials, and the unsettling, transgression of boundaries, with an emphasis on randomness and unpredictability.

Rosselli disregards linguistic and textual borders and boundaries, which is a sign of the uncertainty of the genre of diary writing. Rosselli's diary could be read as a fragment of a greater body, and in a wider context, as both a critical analysis and a literary artefact. The text oscillates between spontaneity and detailed precision; when combined with the different languages deployed, it creates a "capacious hold all" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 269). The diarist's thought processes and memories are stored in an expanding "stow" (*Diaries and Journals* 269). Furthermore, the diary's elasticity, plasticity and non-linear structure enable the writer to perform her experiment with different forms. The diary "lies on the borders between life and its representation" (268). It is a negotiation between the self and a linguistic and poetic experiment. However, it also depicts the complicated and darker relationship between the writer's self-image and her sense of self. The introduction of different linguistic codes "reinforces the intrasubjective schism" of the self (268), where self and identity are fragmented and multiple, "dissociated" from the self. For Kaplan, in language memoirs, "it is not yourself you're growing into, but another self, [...] the change in language is the emblem of a leap into a new persona (69).

Rosselli's diary does not always address the self explicitly. The self is obscured by the necessity, compulsion, and obsession with her linguistic and surrealist poetic experiment. The self is revealed and concealed at the same time, thanks to the obscurity and elusiveness of the diary form.

È un malessere oroscopico

È un malessere microscopico (cutaneo)<sup>xviii</sup>

(Rosselli 95)

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<sup>xviii</sup> *trans.* It is a horoscopic illness/ it is a microscopic illness (cutaneous).

Here the writer reveals the personal in a subversive manner, with the play on words “oroscópico” and “microscópico” and by using the third person, so that attention is placed on the use of language, rather than on the content. The clues also lie in the aside, in brackets. The writer’s malaise occurs at the level of the skin, on and in the body.

The following excerpt intersperses the autobiographical with poetic and surrealistic experiments. In section VIII, she writes,

‘I’m falling apart from work  
wk  
wok  
(allontanandomida) weuk (100)

Here we note the writer's obsessive, compulsive focus on phonemes, phonics, and words. The word "work" goes through a series of aural, topographical, and visual transformations. In so doing, the writer steers us away from semantic meaning, so that the focus is placed on the experiment. The word "work" is taken apart to reformulate novel words and thus produce new meanings. The experiment also attempts to veer the subject from the self. Yet, the self and words are bound together in an indissoluble contract at the level of the text and the body. The Italian word/s in brackets, which may appear less significant or irrelevant to the experiment, because of their placement in brackets, are highly informative. The word (allontanandomida)<sup>xix</sup> has linked the verb, pronominal object, and the preposition together so that the word "allontanandomida"<sup>xx</sup> refers to the writer's need to remove herself from her "weak". The excerpt reveals how the author plays with words so that semantic meaning has secondary importance. At a linguistic level, the Italian morphological interference acts as an aside. It also represents an atypical type of literary, experimental code-switch, which is difficult to define in linguistic terms. The word is placed towards one side as if it is not meant to interfere with the

xix Move myself from.

<sup>xx</sup> I have moved myself.

main work itself. Yet, it is there, it is present, like the self, which makes itself known in asides. The aside is a reminder that there is another language within the text that comes through indirectly, from the margin, speaking in another voice.

By controlling, dissecting, associating and juxtaposing languages, the writer allows the words to reappear in a new guise and new form, so that they have moved beyond their original form, beyond a recognisable self, and the memory associated with words. The word “work” no longer resembles an English word, highlighting that memory is itself unstable and capable of distortions and modifications. More subversively, the new word does not resemble any language or, rather, it resembles a nonsense word, highlighting dysphasic memory. The experimentation has transformed the word into an unknown lexical item, which moves into the realm of an invented language, challenging the notion of borders and boundaries and notions of the self. Furthermore, this analysis conveys the application of a literary translingual practice, which highlights the ways languages interact in more dynamic, enriching, generative and interactive ways (Zucca, *The Origins of Translingualism* 4).

The aside in brackets also represents a distorted version of her father’s language, where unspoken words are stuck to each other, forming incomprehensible language. The asides could be argued are other voices. The writer moves from linguistic and musical experimentation to voices that speak out of turn, involuntary, interrupting the “weuk”, pointing to a schizophrenic personality disorder.

### **Mental Instability and Traumatic Memory**

Mental insanity and affliction come to the fore in Rosselli’s diary, in oblique and unusual ways. The theme of madness in literature has been observed since the Greek tragedies (Small qtd. in Goodman 114). However, it is in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that madness becomes more readily associated with women (114). In Small’s view, it is “disturbing to note how many women writers have suffered from mental illness” (115), as well as artists from Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf,

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Charlotte Bronte, Sylvia Plath, to the Italian author Alda Merini, who similarly to the French sculptor Camille Claudel, were both committed to mental institutes. It is relevant to note that it is Claudel's brother and a doctor who commits Claudel to a mental institution, and Rosselli's brother becomes her legal guardian.

Another important observation to make is whether we are downplaying creativity as a psychiatric syndrome. One could claim that some form of madness, female rage and hysteria has been the price female intellectuals and artists have had to pay to be respected and regarded in their art and work. It is also relevant to highlight that not all female artists are mentally unstable. Yet, where do we draw the line between madness and art? It is often noted that a woman's illogical behaviour is easily and readily categorised and labelled as over-emotional and unstable. She is "objectified" as something "monstrous", uncanny, and frightening and, therefore, something to be enclosed and hidden away.

What does Rosselli's diary tell us about her mental state, but also about her writing techniques and style, her acute intellectual observations, creativity, and play with words? What understanding can be gained from reading her work? The following excerpts taken from page 112 include five different excerpts. Each one appears as a singular fragment and is linguistically sealed off from the others. It is to the thematic threads that we turn to find certain links that may elucidate our appreciation of Rosselli's unique voice and techniques. Below, we note two letters on the page. The former is in English, and it is placed in brackets. The latter is in Italian.

(Dear John:

I'd come within 2 weeks. Would that suit? Will  
bring writings, for you to look at) [...]

Is it only when you are beaten you can have Him? the Angels  
Hack, Play, and Torture me (o tortoise with the broken shell)

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Senti gli strilli degli angeli che vogliono la mia salvezza  
 Ma il sangue è debole e la saliva corre a peccare...<sup>xxi</sup>  
 (try not to smoke)

Caro Albanese  
 ecc.

La mia vita è una lieta infermità. l'autunno si è  
 abbattuto su di noi come una condanna <sup>xxii</sup> (112).

The bracket brings the personal to the fore in an oblique way. The use of asides and brackets has an important and prominent role in Rosselli's experimental diary. The function of brackets is to add something. They are also used to insert explanations, comments, and clarifications. In Rosselli's diary, the brackets function as a secret pact between the reader and the writer, enhancing an understanding of the writer's artistry and her inner life. We know what the writer is thinking at that precise moment, and she is reminding herself, through the reader, that she will be bringing some of her writing to John, an example of a future memory in the present. In the second fragment, the writer places the sentence "(o tortoise with the broken shell)" in brackets. The fragmented sentence connects to the previous lines about the Angels who "Hack, Play and Torture" her (112). There is a phonic play on the sound of the words "tortoise" and "torture". What is their relevance in this context, and why are they juxtaposed? We can infer that the tortoise has been tortured and has a broken shell. She does not tell us directly; she hints at her malaise through her experiment. She is the tortoise with a broken shell.

The last bracket is an aside, "(try not to smoke)". It is an unexpected intrusion in a text that is already fragmented and disjointed. The sentence causes a rupture to the flow, as the reader is propelled into a new space, a translingual space

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<sup>xxi</sup> *trans.* "Can you hear the screams of the angels that want my salvation/ but blood is weak and the saliva runs sinful" (112).

<sup>xxii</sup> *trans.* Dear Albanese/ etc./ my life is a happy affliction. autumn has fallen upon us like a condemnation.

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and a marginal space, in between brackets, where voice/s seems suspended in brackets. Yet, the voice/s tries to evade her experiment so that the self can speak beyond the text. We must turn to the previous lines to appreciate the words in brackets. Rosselli borrows the lines from the Italian painter and poet Gino Bonichi (February 25, 1904 – November 9, 1933), known as Scipione: “Can you hear the screams of the angels that want my salvation/ but blood is weak and the saliva runs sinful” (112). On a bibliographical note, Scipione, like Rosselli, spent time in a sanatorium (Rosselli, *Una scrittura plurale* 317-326). In her diary, the fragment is included alongside other fragments. The possible connection is with the English lines: “the Angels/ Hack, Play, and Torture me”. The two excerpts are linked on a thematic level.

The writer does not end Scipione’s quote, instead, it ends with the sentence in brackets. The writer’s voice or other voices enter the text, in an aside, in an oblique code-switch in brackets “(try not to smoke)” (112). It is of significance to highlight the ways the fragments shift between linguistic codes and what this entails at the level of self and text. Aneta Pavlenko suggests that,

a shift in language leads [...] to the shifts in cultural constructs and memories activated by that language and, consequently, to the shift in self-knowledge, self-perceptions, and self-descriptions as well as a shift of one’s sense of self. (Pavlenko 16)

Is the voice in the brackets the narrator’s voice, or is it another voice talking out of turn, in a moment of schizophrenia? Or is this the voice of the harsh inner critic, who denigrates the writer if she smokes under stress? The switch of language is telling, for it is an Italian voice that speaks out of turn. The letter in Italian to “Caro Albanese”<sup>xxiii</sup> connects obliquely with both the fragments, and the lines on the Angels, at a level of autobiography. She writes, “my life is a happy affliction. autumn has fallen upon us like a condemnation” (112). Like Scipione, she is also

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<sup>xxiii</sup> *trans.* Dear Albanese.



“afflicted” and “condemned” to mental malaise. Scipione’s lines may have triggered a stress response. For the writer, smoking may provide momentary relief.

### **On the Significance and Insignificance of Words and the Self**

Rosselli's diary attempts to decode sounds and words by dissecting them into syllables and phonemes to create new associations or play on words. She pays particular attention to sounds, and maps musical patterns onto words. In this extract, taken from section III, the writer plays with the word insignificant to create new associations and meanings.

Andromaque	1
insignificante	
in-signe fi	
un	4
cante	
singe	
un signe qui chante	7
on ne sait pas pourquoi	
Y! Fie!	9
i,ci.si je nie	
f	11
Iphisigénie	
Se boutta dans l'encre	
Boutte (88)	

The extract begins with a reference to a play, a tragedy by the French playwright Jean Racine (1667). In the play, Andromaque<sup>xxiv</sup>, first introduced in the

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Andromaque’s name means man fighter.

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text in Italian “Idromedea”, is the wife of Hector<sup>xxv</sup> (88). However, in Virgil’s *Iliad*, Andromaque is referenced as Hector’s wife. She is the unnamed woman. This un-naming is significant, as the writer has had to live in men’s shadows; her father’s, uncle’s and now her brother’s shadow, as if she has no name. The act of un-naming is significant because her existence is futile and insignificant. This section of the diary has considered her most autobiographical (cf. La Penna 116). Instead of defining what the word “insignificante”<sup>xxvi</sup> means, she deconstructs the word and assigns it musical value using the hyphen, “in-signe fi” (88). However, she switches the end letter of the central part of the word “signi” to “e” “signe”, thus changing the semantic meaning of the word, which now stands for “signs”. In lines 4 - 6, she writes, “un cante singe” (88) Here, the semantic meaning is overturned. It now signifies “a monkey sings”.

In line 8, she writes, “on ne sait pas pourquoi”<sup>xxvii</sup>(88). Why and how can a sign sing? The sign has shifted from a silent, muted, unnamed and insignificant being to a sign that sings, or one that speaks. The words “si je nie” map the phonology of the name, “Iphisigenie” (88). There is a play on the word, Iphigénie / Iphigenia<sup>xxviii</sup>, which is a reference to another play by Racine, also from Euripides. Furthermore, the name also leads us to Ifis, a myth dense with the symbology of unreciprocated love that culminates in suicide (cf. Tandello qtd. in Rosselli). Why has the text opted to use familiar classical Greek female characters? The extract answers these questions indirectly and obliquely. A word or a name may reveal more than just a pile of letters, but some other meaning. In the process of deconstruction, we glimpse at a new meaning or a distorted meaning. In the sense that meaning is not the primary objective of Rosselli’s experiment. Rather, it is the process itself, the unravelling of the self through words, or words through the self,

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<sup>xxv</sup> Euripides’s play and the third book of Virgil’s *Aeneid* were the points of departure for Racine’s play.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Insignificant.

<sup>xxvii</sup> I don’t know why.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Iphisigenie is sacrificed to the Gods. She is morally the strongest characters of the play, bound to duty to her father and her country to accept the will of the gods.

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which she also perceived as “illogical and unnecessary” (La Penna 118). The plight of these other women is connected to her own story, at a level of female tragedy, violence and trauma.

In the last line of the extract, she writes: “se boutta dans l’encre/ boutte”<sup>xxix</sup> (88). “L’encre”<sup>xxx</sup> is dense, symbolising a more feminine type of writing, as opposed to the phallic instrument of the pen. “Encre” invokes desire and sexuality. Writing is a passion, it is totalising <sup>xxxi</sup>. Yet even this endeavour must come to an ending: “Boutta” (88). The writer has “had enough. Finished!” (88). In the extract, the Italian language intrudes upon the French matrix language in the form of lexical interferences, with Andromeda’s name uttered in Italian and the morphological interference “insignificante” (88). By inserting the Italian words within a pattern of French syntax, the French language is overturned and undermined in both linguistic terms and psychological ways. On a biographical note, the Italian language represents the governmental forces that ordered and committed murder, while her father was on French territory. Yet, again, it is in Italy that she is admitted to a mental institute. Life becomes a series of insignificant events because of their immense significance. Language is unable to completely convey the depth and horror of lived traumatic experiences; hence words are broken down into smaller parts for identification. It is in their minuscule form that the writer can begin to look at them without associating horror with their meaning, for the words lose significance. As a writer, she now has some form of control over when and how to dissect a word, where to place it, in what sequence and to what effect, so that new semantic meaning can be gleamed at or not.

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<sup>xxix</sup> To throw oneself into one’s writing.

<sup>xxx</sup> Ink.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Rosselli admits she did not marry so that she would not have distractions. (qtd. in Rosselli 291)

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### Towards an Ending: Sleep and Death by Suicide

Rosselli's text is liberated from textual, linguistic, and cultural constraints. This is also reflected in the text's ending. It is inconclusive. She writes,

Let's see if we can sleep now...  
(Tu fai troppe cose con la tua Volonta, ci vuole  
Pazienza)<sup>xxxii</sup> Now we'll see it its worth it'<sup>xxxiii</sup> (122)

The open ending questions the outcome of her literary and theoretical experiment. The word "sleep" here is relevant. It signifies a letting go, an ability to set the work, as well as the self-free now that the work is "finished" (88). On a personal note, Rosselli claimed that she suffered from insomnia<sup>xxxiv</sup>. For her "sleep" is a "miraggio"<sup>xxxv</sup> (qtd. in Rosselli 306). It is towards an ending of suffering, affliction, and torment. Furthermore, the word "sleep" with its elongated vowel sound "ee", has a highly feminine richness, which she reveals as "densità"<sup>xxxvi</sup> (306). For Rosselli, writing is something you do in your youth. When you reach maturity, your desire to write lessens (qtd. in Rosselli 290). Thus, "sleep" represents that moment of letting go. Youth has escaped, whilst insomnia continues to keep the traumatic memories alive. In this sense, the text mirrors and foreshadows the author's death. Thus, haunted and plagued by painful memories and survivor's guilt, she anticipates her death. She writes,

I sit, and wait, for death's fine door.  
Open the door, open the door (119)

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<sup>xxxii</sup> *trans.* (You do too much with your Will, you need Patience).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> This could be a typographical error in the text. It should read "if" instead of "it", and "its" should be "it is". This could be due to the immediacy and spontaneity of the genre of the diary.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> In the collection *Documento*, Rosselli has authored a poem entitled *Insonnia* (insomnia) in Italian (Rosselli 438). She has also authored an English poem about *Sleep* and *Sanatorio* (Sanatorium) in French (665).

<sup>xxxv</sup> *trans.* Mirage.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *trans.* Density.

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Will she finally be able to release the burden of her father's death, survivor's guilt, and her mental illness? Suicide becomes the prolonged sleep she yearns for that will enable the self and the words that are bound to the writer to be set free. In certain ways, there are similarities between Rosselli and Sylvia Plath, which become more evident in Rosselli's essay *Istinto di Morte e Istinto di Piacere in Sylvia Plath*<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Rosselli points out Plath's "invidiabile acutezza"<sup>xxxviii</sup>, and argues that Plath should be studied for her "undelimited greatness and for her unusual poetry" and not for her depression and suicidal attempts (Rosselli 176). Rosselli translated Plath's poetry, feeling a deep connection. Is she asking us to give her the same treatment Plath deserves? However, a reading of both Rosselli and Plath unavoidably brings these themes to the fore, for her diary is informed by haunting memories, foreshadowing suicide, and mental affliction.

### Conclusion

This article has explored Rosselli's linguistic experimentation to understand how it conveys traumatic memory, and to appreciate the extent to which trauma has shaped her writing. Traumatic memories are brought to the fore in oblique ways, through asides, in brackets, juxtaposition, the parallels of the lives of women from ancient Greece, and with the analogy of Scipione and his time spent in a sanatorium. My findings suggest that traumatic memory is transformed through writing, and it recognises that memories function as a material force that actively shapes textual production.

Rosselli's diary sheds new light on the phenomenon of writing in more than one language, across languages and beyond languages themselves. In one sense, her diary transcends translanguaging, for words are no longer words, but sounds and patterns: a return to primordial mnemonic sounds, to the womb. Rosselli's diary unearths words and transplants them into a new context. It rearranges words, syllables, and phonemes into new patterns, drawing on Surrealist techniques. It

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> *The Death Instinct and the Instinct of Desire in Sylvia Plath* was first Published in "Poesie" (1991).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *trans.* Envious acuteness.

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uses unexpected associations and semantic ambiguities, where words lose meaning or take on different meanings. Ordinary language is juxtaposed and placed into new contexts. Rosselli's insistent search for linguistic equivalences, mappings and the juxtaposing of linguistic elements at their most basic level, reveals a quasi-obsessive desire; a paranoid schizophrenia, which allows her to get beneath the words, or even beyond the languages themselves, so that everything becomes blurred, sound and nonsense or insignificant. I suggest that the search for meaning goes beyond the words, linking to the world of feelings and her mental malaise.

Rosselli's diary invokes the feminine. She writes with the feminine "encre". Her diary subverts and destabilises patriarchal notions of linearity and logic and pushes the boundaries of languages. Rosselli's diary explores how a literary text materialises and negotiates memory and trauma through unusual narrative techniques, innovations, and linguistic experiments. Her diary is situated at the interstices of languages and memory, forging a unique translingual text that defies the laws of monolingual language systems. Like Sylvia Plath before her, Rosselli's oeuvre is a force that reshapes and rewrites feminine.

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