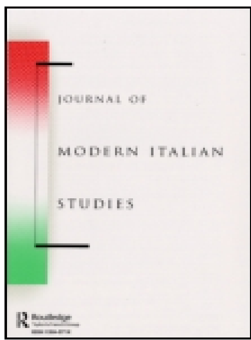

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Special Issue on *Terra Matta*

David Moss

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INTRODUCTION

Special Issue on *Terra Matta*

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Abstract

In 2007 Einaudi published a book entitled *Terra matta*, by an unknown Sicilian author, Vincenzo Rabito, which would rapidly become a bestseller. In 2012 a film derived from the book, *Terramatta*; *Il Novecento italiano di Vincenzo Rabito analfabeta siciliano*, was presented at the Venice Film Festival to great acclaim. In introducing our analyses of that cultural phenomenon, I describe the nature of the typescript and set it in the context of other writings by Italy's *diversamente colti*. I chart the passage from typescript to book to film and outline the interventions – explored in detail by the protagonists in the contributions that follow – shaping its successive incarnations.

Keywords

Terra matta, Vincenzo Rabito, life-writing, Sicily.

Why *Terra matta*?

In March 2007 an autobiography by an unknown Sicilian, Vincenzo Rabito, with the title *Terra matta* was published posthumously by Einaudi in its *Supercoralli* series. Since that series is largely dedicated to the best national and international fiction, it might seem an unlikely location for an autobiography, especially one by a wholly unfamiliar author. Nonetheless, hailed immediately as a masterpiece by literary critics and historians, *Terra matta* rapidly became a publishing success, selling 15,000 hardcover copies in three months: there was even talk of submitting it for Italy's most prestigious literary award, the Premio Strega. In 2008 a conference was organized to discuss the work and its author; and in the following year an adaptation was performed in the theatre and work started on the production of a version for the cinema. In 2012 the film, entitled *Terramatta; Il Novecento italiano di Vincenzo Rabito analfabeta siciliano*, was selected for presentation in the *Giornate degli Autori* section of the Venice Film Festival where it was received enthusiastically and awarded the first of several local, national and international prizes.[1]

Thus summarized, the success of *Terra matta* in both its written and cinematic forms might seem unusual but perhaps not so extraordinary as to warrant a special issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. With promotion

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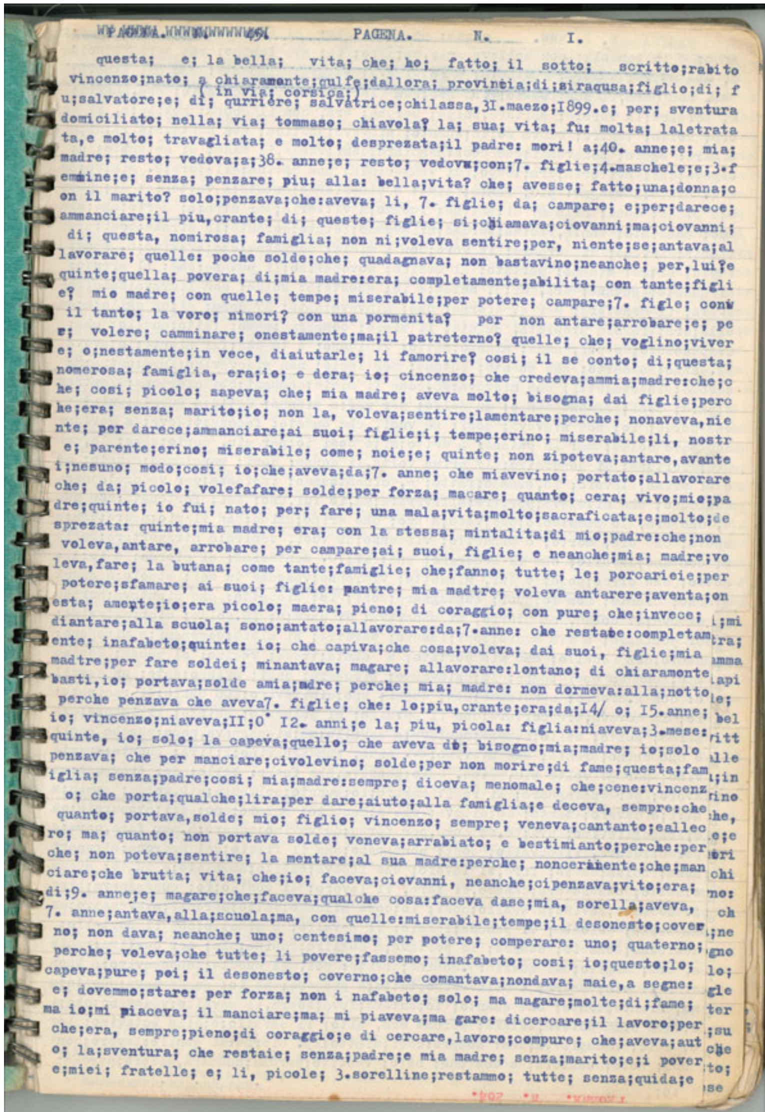
by supportive publishers, unknown authors do produce bestsellers out of the blue, and bestsellers are often enough converted for performance on stage or screen. But if we supply the details of the author and the actual text he produced, we can appreciate how remarkable it really was. Vincenzo Rabito, born in 1899 in the small town of Chiaramonte Gulfi in the Iblei mountains of south-east Sicily, had gone to work as a child to support his destitute widowed mother and siblings, had therefore never had even a day's schooling and had had to teach himself to read and write. He took whatever casual rural work was available, was drafted to fight on the north-east front in the First World War, returned to Sicily to a series of mostly short-term jobs in different places, decided to join the Italians first in Libya and then in Italian East Africa between 1935 and 1939, and got married when back in Chiaramonte Gulfi the following year at the relatively late age of 40. In 1940 he volunteered to accompany his younger brother Paolo to work in the coal industry in Germany but returned to Sicily in 1943, where two years later he found a secure job as a road-mender. On retirement in 1967 he took over the typewriter he had given to the youngest of his three sons, Giovanni, and devoted three years to setting down the story of his life. The result was an uninterrupted flow of more than half a million words in a mix of semi-literate Italian, Sicilian dialect and idiosyncratic coinings, covering 1,027 pages without a single break by chapter, section or sentence but punctuated by semi-colons, commas, question marks or exclamation marks between almost every word. The only divisions were the physical distinctions between the typewritten and numbered sheets of paper. This huge and virtually unreadable typescript provided the raw material for the book eventually published as *Terra matta* and for the film based upon it.

Despite its extraordinary success, the book has attracted rather little academic interest in Italy beyond attention from regional linguists and general appreciations – many by respected historians and literary critics – in newspapers and magazines. This absence of detailed scrutiny may be partly due to the general lack of interest in writing and reading autobiographies in Italy (Hainsworth 2007, 9–10). Perhaps, too, the cultural anomaly of an autobiography by an uneducated manual worker written with exceptional candour has tended to inhibit rather than invite analysis. Moreover, a difficult text by an unknown author, with no other writings and neither himself nor friends any longer alive to supply information, offers few of the usual materials for an extended critical appraisal. Most commentators have praised the extraordinary energy and narrative skill displayed in the book but have left the impression that, given the author's apparently drastically limited cultural background, its appearance has to be treated as almost magical, captivating its readers by the very mystery of its inexplicability.[2] They have taken its principal value to be documentary, suggesting that the story of Rabito's life amounts to a counter-history of twentieth-century Italy or a depiction of Sicilian rural society or, less flatteringly, the self-portrait of a prototypical amoral familist. A similar emphasis appears in the reviews of the film which invariably revert to discussion of the characteristics of the book rather than on the ways it has been cinematically



PAGENA. N. I.

questa; e; la bella; vita; che; ho; fatto; il sotto; scritto;rabito
vincenzo;nato; a chiaramente;gulfe;dallora; provincia;di;siraqusa;figlio;di; f
(in via; corsica;)
u;salvatore;e; di; qurriere; salvatrice;chilassa,3I.maezo;I899.e; per; sventura
domiciliato; nella; via; tommaso; chiavola? la; sua; vita; fu: molta; laletrata
ta,e molto; travagliata; e molto; desprezata;il padre: mori! a;40. anne;e; mia;
madre; resto; vedova;a;38. anne;e; resto; vedova;con;7. figlie;4.maschele;e;3.f
emmine;e; senza; penzare; piu; alla: bella;vita? che; avesse; fatto;una;donna;c
on il marito? solo;penzava;che:aveva; li, 7. figlie; da; campare; e;per;darece;
ammanciare;il piu,crante; di; queste; figlie; si;chiamava;ciovanni;ma;ciovanni;
di; questa, nomirosa; famiglia; non ni;voleva sentire;per, niente;se;antava;al
lavorare; quelle: poche solde;che; quadagnava; non bastavino;neanche; per,lui?e
quinte;quella; povera; di;mia madre:era; completamente;abilita; con tante;figli
e? mio madre; con quelle; tempe; miserabile;per potere; campare;7. figle; conv
il tanto; la voro; nimori? con una pormenita? per non antare;arrobare;e; pe
r; volere; camminare; onestamente;ma;il patreterno? quelle; che; voglino;viver
e; o;nestamente;in vece, diaiutarle; li famorire? cosi; il se conto; di;questa;
nomerosa; famiglia, era;io; e dera; io; cincenzo; che credeva;ammia;madre:che;c
he; cosi; picolo; sapeva; che; mia madre; aveva molto; bisogna; dai figlie;perc
he;era; senza; marito;io; non la, voleva;sentire;lamentare;perche; nonaveva,nie
nte; per darece;ammanciare;ai suoi; figlie;i; tempe;erino; miserabile;li, nostr
e; parente;erino; miserabile; come; noie;e; quinte; non zipoteva;antare,avante
i;nesuno; modo;cosi; io;che;aveva;da;7. anne; che miavevino; portato;allavorare
che; da; picolo; volefafare; solde;per forza; macare; quanto; cera; vivo;mio;pa
dre;quinte; io fui; nato; per; fare; una mala;vita;molto;sacraficata;e;molto;de
sprezata: quinte;mia madre; era; con la stessa; mintalita;di mio;padre:che;non
voleva,antare, arrobare; per campare;ai; suoi, figlie; e neanche;mia; madre;vo
leva,fare; la butana; come tante;famiglie; che;fanno; tutte; le; porcarieie;per
potere;sfamare; ai suoi; figlie: mantre; mia madtre; voleva antarere;aventa;on
esta; amepte;io;era picolo; maera; pieno; di coraggio; con pure; che;invece;
diantare;alla scuola; sono;antato;allavorare:da;7.anne: che restabe:completam
ente; inafabeto;quinte: io; che capiva;che cosa;voleva; dai suoi, figlie;mia
madtre;per fare soldei; minantava; magare; allavorare:lontano; di chiaramonte
basti,io; portava;solde amia;mdre; perche; mia; madre: non dormeva:alla;notto
perche penzava che aveva7. figlie; che: lo;piu,crante;era;da;I4/ o; I5.anne;
io; vincenzo;niaveva;II;0ʼ I2. anni;e la; piu, picola: figlia:niaveva;3.mese:
quinte, io; solo; la capeva;quello; che aveva db; bisogno;mia;madre; io;solo
penzava; che per manciare;civolevino; solde;per non morire;di fame;questa;fam
iglia; senza;padre;cosi; mia;madre:sempre; diceva; menomale; che;cene:vincenz
o; che porta;qualche;lira;per dare;aiuto;alla famiglia;e deceva, sempre:che
quanto; portava,solde; mio; figlio; vincenzo; sempre; veneva;cantanto;eallec
ro; ma; quanto; non portava solde; veneva;arrabiato; e bestimianto;perche:per
che; non poteva;sentire; la mentare;al sua madre:perche; noncerànente;che;man
ciare;che brutta; vita; che;io; faceva;ciovanni, neanche;cipenzava;vito;era;
di;9. anne;e; magare;che;faceva;qualche cosa:faceva dase;mia, sorella;aveva,
7. anne;antava,alla;scuola;ma, con quelle:miserabile;tempe;il desonesto;cover
no; non dava; neanche; uno; centesimo; per potere; comperare: uno; quaterno;
perche; voleva;che tutte; li povere;fassemo; inafabeto; cosi; io;questo;lo;
capeva;pure; poi; il desonesto; coverno;che comantava;nondava; maie,a segne:
e; dovemmo;stare: per forza; non i nafabeto; solo; ma magare;molte;di;fame;
ma io;mi piaceva; il manciare;ma; mi piaveva;ma gare: dicercare;il lavoro;per
che;era, sempre;pieno;di coraggio;e di cercare,lavoro;compure; che;aveva;aut
o; la;sventura; che restaie; senza;padre;e mia madre; senza;marito;e;i pover
e;miei; fratelle; e; li, picole; 3.sorelline;restammo; tutte; senza;quida;e

Figure 1 First Page of Rabito's Typescript.

presented.[3] For this issue of *JMIS*, however, we have set aside the assessment of its literary or historical value in favour of an analysis of the creatively collaborative transformation of the original typescript into a highly regarded object with substantial cultural value. Our concern is to examine how the work originally embodied in a sprawling and partly incomprehensible text was first made readable as a book and then watchable as a film, identifying the motivations, choices,

constraints and decisions that have shaped its successive transformations within and between the two media. Analysing African oral and written culture, Karin Barber has reminded us that 'texts are also things ... social and historical facts whose forms, transformations and dispersal can be studied empirically' (2007, 200). This perspective, central to the expanding discipline of book history, is the one that has organized our contributions: understanding how individuals and institutions have left their own creative imprints on the multiple forms in which the original work we now know as *Terra matta* has been embodied.[4]

The story

Terra matta presents the story of 'la bella vita che ho fatto il sotto scritto Rabito Vincenzo ... [l]a sua vita fu molta maltratata e molto travagliata e molto desprezata' [the fine life that I, Rabito Vincenzo, have lived ... it was a life of great ill-use, affliction and scorn] (Rabito 2007, 3). It is a story that Rabito had begun to rehearse aloud long before he put it down on paper. In the summer of 1943, back in Sicily after working in wartime Germany, he was employed to organize the harvest on a local magnate's estate. The arrival of American troops and the continuing presence of the German forces made the area dangerous as the battle-lines shifted unpredictably. To provide some protection for himself and fellow-workers, Rabito dug out a kind of cave where they could all take refuge at night. There he whiled away the time by recounting the story of his life: 'il mio piacere era questo: di contare tutte li cose che mi avevino incontrato in vita mia ... non pareva tempo di querra ma pareva che c'era il teatro, perché si rideva sempre' [this was what I liked: recounting all the things that had happened to me in my life ... it didn't seem like wartime, more like a theatre because there was laughing all the time] (282). Clearly the reception by his audience was encouraging, but it took a further quarter of a century before he began to put his recreative imagination to work on a written version of his life story. Halfway through he tells us his reason for doing so: to purge himself of the resentment stored up in the intervening years of conflict with his mother-in-law and her kin and to provide his own version of the bitterly hostile relationship with the woman he described as 'la più lurrda e la più delenquente donna che la stessa in tutta l'Italia non zi poteva trovare' [a fouler and more delinquent woman couldn't be found in the whole of Italy] (225, 227). He acknowledged that the result would not please his wife but felt that his commitment to truth demanded it: 'certo che alla mia moglie questo libiro di verita non ci piaceva perche in questo libiro cera scrotto tutte li vercognose vercogne che avevino fatto li suoi parente, ma io tratantese di scrivere la vera virita la doveva scrivere per forza perche altremente la vereta deventavino tutte bucieie e quinte questo libiro non valeva niente' [my wife certainly won't like this book of truths because every shameful thing that her kin did is written down in it, but I had to put them all in because I want to write the whole truth and if I don't my truth becomes lies and so this book will be worth nothing] (Rabito n.d., 1449).

His autobiography falls into two roughly equal parts, each animated by his experience of conflict and the discoveries it produced for him, each displaying an apparently exceptional recall of events from long ago. The first half covers his participation in the wars in Europe and Africa and his increasing appreciation of the huge gap between patriotic rhetoric and military reality. The public dimension of that discovery was accompanied by his realization that, prompted by the demands of war, he had within himself the capacity to turn murderous (Rabito 2007, 112). For the later part he adopted the surname 'Arrabito' because it would push him up the alphabetical order in which the best (but also, as he discovered, the worst) things of army life were distributed (146). The second part, characterized by the chapter title given by its editors – 'La querra in casa' [the war at home] – midway through the published version, opens with his disastrous wedding day (his bride's kin did not keep their promise to attend) and unfolds thereafter against the background of the unremitting hostility towards him of his mother-in-law. Indeed, his insufficiently supportive wife comes in for severe criticism too; and her name is not even mentioned until near the end of the book (375). Here, returned to his native community as Rabito, he carries his story forward with detailed illustrations of how far his life had been made harder by the deceptions and demands of his mother-in-law and her kin, and yet how despite the domestic confrontations, general economic hardships and social claustrophobia of a small Sicilian town, he nonetheless discovered the determination and capacity to build a better life for himself and to provide his sons with opportunities he had never had. While ready to describe at length the reverses he suffered and considered unjust, he also makes no effort to exclude or excuse his own actions which he found, either at the time or on reflection, scheming, shady or absolutely reprehensible.[5] The result is a work of extraordinary candour, the author as unsparing with himself as with others, rich in insight and irony, and by no means the story of unrelieved misery and failure that his opening sentences might suggest.

The typescript breaks off in mid-flow in August 1970 at the point when the author is waiting for his son, Giovanni, then a university student in Bologna and a published poet, to revisit Ragusa. On his departure, and with his father's consent, Giovanni took with him the entire text. Convinced of its value, especially the historical interest of the reminiscences of war, he made several unsuccessful approaches to publishers over the next thirty years and, in the face of rejection and the sceptical comments of friends who had read extracts, endeavoured to revise the text to make it publishable. In 1981 his father died from a stroke without his work receiving any recognition beyond the enthusiasm of Giovanni who had by then settled in Australia. In July 1999 Giovanni sent the revised and shortened text, under his own title *Fontanazza*, to the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (ADN) at Santo Stefano Pieve, a centre established in 1984 to collect unpublished diaries, letters and autobiographies and create a 'history from below' of private life and public events in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy. The ADN's archivists, however, would only accept the original typescript, not

the reworked and shortened version. Giovanni Rabito duly consigned it and agreed that it could be entered for the Archive's annual prize, the Premio Pieve – Banca Toscana, in 2000. To the surprise of almost everyone who had seen the vast and often incomprehensible typescript, *Fontanazza* was awarded the Prize *ex aequo* in 2000. In the jury's judgement, it provided a portrait of life in Sicily so rich as to deserve description as a *Gattopardo popolare*, but it was also, in the phrase of the juror who had championed the text from the outset, 'a masterpiece that [no one] will ever read'.

Such a paradoxically pessimistic prediction might well have come true – the work shelved among several thousand others in the library of the ADN to be consulted mainly by students in search of thesis topics – but for the conviction by the Archivio's senior archivist that the work could be edited in such a way as to be made accessible to a wide readership. He obtained the funds to enable him to devote two years to the revision of the work and to submit his version to five publishing houses. Einaudi, which had already published two Pieve prizewinners (Rossetti 1988; Bordonaro 1991), was the only one to show interest but insisted that the text would have to be reworked with the help of a Sicilian novelist who served as one of its editorial consultants. Publication of even the substantially reduced and drastically edited text was nonetheless regarded as a serious commercial risk: the series editor, Paola Gallo, was asked by one of her colleagues whether she would make her garage available for all the copies which were sure to be returned unsold. The appearance of the Einaudi book seemed to bring the author's story to a close since the published text ends thus: 'The typescript breaks off here, in August 1970. During the remaining years of his life Vincenzo Rabito could no longer write anything. He died on 18 February 1981' (Rabito 2007, 411).

That might certainly seem like a definitive ending, but the impression is deceptive. First, the publication stimulated a cultural historian with expertise in the organization of mass-media projects, based in Turin but with her own family background in Chiaramonte Gulfi, to undertake the project of converting the book into a film. The film was completed in mid-2012 and, accompanied by the production of a commercial DVD, was released for general distribution later the same year. Second, in 2008 Giovanni Rabito revealed that as soon as he had taken the text away, his father had sat down to rewrite his life from the beginning on an even grander scale, using the same continuous flow that he had adopted for the first version, this time running to 1,486 pages, almost half as long again as the original typescript (Rabito n.d.). It also continues the life-story beyond 1970 up to the days before the author's death. The reasons for this rewriting remain unclear but, we might surmise, are likely to have been more complex than those driving the earlier version. Since the typescript of the first version bears very few marks of hesitation or correction and the author insists that at all times he endeavoured to provide an accurate and truthful account, there seems to be little internal evidence of dissatisfaction or perceived inaccuracy which might have encouraged Vincenzo Rabito to try to provide a better account. Perhaps,

since his son had taken away the first typescript and was unlikely to return permanently to Sicily, he wanted to be certain that at least one account of his life would be sure to remain in his home community where his other sons continued to live. Whatever the reasons might be – I return to this issue in the final part of my own contribution – the existence of a second version recasts the earlier account as a first draft, providing an opportunity for comparison to identify choices of style and content which could not be seen from the published version alone. It thus enables us to appreciate the artistry of the author and explore the gap between his autobiography and his life.

Unique?

Vincenzo Rabito's life was by no means exceptional among the fellow-members of his own region, class and generation: premature death of a parent, poverty at home, little or no formal education, experience of two wars, emigration to support a family, political affiliation determined by whichever party seemed most likely to provide help in finding a job.[6] If the author's background and the figure that he presents to his readers can be fitted into familiar social and cultural categories, what about the decision to write his life and the style in which he chose to do it? Sartre observed that, although Valéry was easily recognizable as a member of the *petite bourgeoisie*, hardly any *petit bourgeois* was a Valéry. To what extent is the work that Rabito himself produced unique, or if not unique, at the very least unusual?

Based on his experience of organizing an archive of similar writings in Liguria, Antonio Gibelli suggests that, far from being as exceptional as its reception made it appear, *Terra matta* was in fact 'tutt'altro che un fenomeno isolato e inspiegabile, semmai il prodotto di una pratica diffusa' [anything but an isolated and inexplicable case but rather the product of a widely diffused practice] (Gibelli 2012, 19, fn. 12). Indeed, while writings by the largely uneducated, mainly artisans and shopkeepers, were not unknown in earlier periods, their number and range of authors increased after Unification, no doubt as a consequence of the gradual widening of access to education, the incentives for emigrants to keep in touch with their families back at home, and the experience of having to deal in writing with the expanding bureaucratic state (D'Achille 1994).[7] Nonetheless, any attempt to substantiate Gibelli's claim in detail runs up against an obvious difficulty. Since the texts we know of were not designed for publication and only reached the archives for non-professional writings through unpredictable routes, often after long gaps between their composition and their public disclosure (in Rabito's case, a gap of more than thirty years), we do not know how far the texts that happen to have surfaced publicly can be taken to constitute a reliable sample of the putatively but unquantifiably larger number of similar writings that have been put away in cupboards or destroyed by heirs. The processes by which such writings reach public archives appear too serendipitous to be able to draw many solidly based

conclusions about the real incidence and social distribution of the kinds of texts they exemplify. If *faute de mieux* we rely on the texts that reached the network of archives for non-professional writings that were established in central and north Italy in the 1980s, in particular on the collection at the ADN – the largest depository, and dedicated exclusively to autobiographies and memoirs – then we can perhaps reach tentative answers to the two questions combined in Gibelli's claim. First, how diffuse was the practice of autobiography across different social classes and regions of Italy? Second, to what extent did Rabito's text share or stand out from the writings produced by people from a similar social and cultural background?

The 6,472 texts deposited in the archives of the ADN between 1984 and mid-2012, some written many years earlier, cover a range of literary forms. Autobiographies and memoirs, full or fragmentary, account for two-thirds, diaries for one-quarter, and the rest are mostly letters usually exchanged between clandestine lovers or between husbands and wives separated by war or work. Men (55 per cent) and women (45 per cent) are almost equally represented among the authors who come from almost all points on the social hierarchy. Among the winners of the Premio Pieve, for example, we find aristocrats, professionals, workers, military officers, criminals, drug addicts, peasants, artisans, and victims of domestic, terrorist and wartime violence. Although writers from Tuscany, where the archive is located, provide the largest single contribution, all regions are well represented. Among the 375 contributions from Rabito's fellow-Sicilians, for example, we find that 15 per cent were written by forty-four people whose highest educational qualification was an elementary school certificate and occasionally not even that.[8] Alongside the number of texts collected in similar and more inclusive archives (Lyons 2013), this set of materials therefore tends to confirm the suggestion that autobiographical texts, composed independently by their subjects rather than being solicited orally and then converted into written and invariably modified form by journalists or social scientists, are not rare.

In what ways, if any, does Rabito's text stand out among the autobiographies and memoirs of the *diversamente colti*?[9] Whatever their region of origin, the writings share the set of linguistic features saturating Rabito's original text: the close reproduction of speech forms, heavy reliance on dialect, and inconsistent use of non-standard grammar, orthography and punctuation (Amenta 2004, 2009). Rarely do they seem to have been guided by any preliminary plan or explicit consideration of what to include or exclude, showing little concern to revise or correct in the course of writing, simply inserting at a later point any additional material that has occurred to the author in the meantime on an event already mentioned.[10] Even when they were not composed over several years – as one-third of the Sicilian texts were – this feature is generally present. Although the length of *Terra matta* has struck most readers as exceptional, it is not far from being matched by a handful of other life-writers from Rabito's background. Almost half of the texts produced by the forty-four *diversamente colti* writers from Sicily whose works reached the ADN ran to at least 100 pages, and seven reached

more than 300 pages, the largest with its 811 pages almost rivalling Rabito himself.[11] Such memoirs seem often to have been the latest in a series of experiments in writing which began with diaries, were pursued in the shape of letters to absent family members and perhaps brief descriptions of particular experiences or episodes, and then developed into fully-fledged life-writing. Notwithstanding the awareness among authors of their lack of 'proper' Italian and poor command of the instruments for clear communication, many such texts explicitly or implicitly envisage readers – mostly close kin and descendants – and are rarely exercises solely for personal gratification.

Texts often begin with a conventional phrase of the kind 'This is the life of X, born . . . ', but then recount that life in different ways. Some themes are recurrent: memories of childhood and family life, village customs, love affairs ending well or badly, work, the hardships of migration and emigration, and the suffering and demands of illness: except among activists, politics and religion are only intermittently present. For the older generations, war follows family and childhood as the most common theme, partly because in twentieth-century Italy the major political and social changes thought worth recording followed both world wars, partly because war separates people who want to keep in touch, partly because the experience of war provokes soldiers to reflect on what people are capable of doing and enduring.[12] Based on the accounts that have been published, we can distinguish two broad autobiographical styles according to both motive for writing and content to be conveyed. The styles are not rigidly demarcated nor are they exhaustive, but they help us to place *Terra matta* more precisely. On one hand, as exemplified by Rabito himself, the writer's aim is primarily to construct an *apologia pro vita sua*, designed to rectify any unfair criticisms or misunderstandings of that life, to reinforce the kind of character to which the author lays claim. Antonio Sbiriziola opens his own long account thus: 'Il motivo che o scritto questa mia storia e le o dato il Titolo, Povero, Onesto e Gentiluomo.' [The reason for my writing my life is in the title I have given it: poor, honest, and a gentleman] (Sbirziola 2012, 25) – an illustration of the character traits with which he was able to confront the many difficult, sometimes tragic, situations in which he found himself. The style resembles Ariosto's in its depiction of a protagonist tested by the dramatic challenges that arrive unforeseen in many different places. Italo Calvino describes the *Orlando Furioso* as marked by '*movimento errante*' in which Ariosto seems to begin without a clear plan of how the various plots will unfold but simply plunges straight into the action (Calvino 1992, xliv). Correspondingly, as in Rabito's case, the manuscript or typescript simply breaks off without a conclusion or culmination, even though in most cases the authors are writing in retirement or even late old age. The zigzag presentation of the life mirrors the sense of limited control or sheer happenstance that marks many of its events and movements. Such accounts tend to be written by men and women who spent long periods elsewhere in Italy or abroad and did not experience the settled rhythms of work in agriculture.

The life-stories by men and women more deeply embedded in a single community have a characteristically different style. Their authors are usually concerned to record the social and economic organization of their community in the determination to describe for their descendants and future generations the social hierarchies, practices and technologies that have now disappeared, for better or worse. Exemplified by the memoirs of Gerardo Statuto (Imbriani, Marano, and Mirizzi 1996) and Antonio Mele (Minicuci 1997), the writers submerge their own biographies in the vicissitudes of a particular class (in Mele's cases, the beneficiaries of the agrarian reform in the Metaponto in the 1950s), identifying with pride the contributors and contributions to economic and social development. Only once the collective portrait has been sketched do the writers insert, almost as an afterthought, a few fragmentary details of their own lives and families (e.g. Minicuci 1997, 156–159). Although defined as the story of a life, this genre resembles rather the impersonal history of a social group, recapturing the vanished world in which their own lives have mostly been lived.

Many, perhaps most, of the raw written materials for a first-person 'history of Italy from below' are likely to be lost without trace. All are, of course, at risk of physical deterioration: the paper on which they were written disintegrates and the handwriting fades into illegibility. Diaries, reckoned to contain banal, private or perhaps discreditable or offensive contents, are often destroyed by their writers or heirs; Rabito's own diaries, which he kept for twenty years, have vanished. Letters, full of valuable information and assumptions about local life, may be kept for a while but eventually disposed of.[13] The survival even of lengthy texts such as those of Rabito, Statuto and Mele remains highly dependent both on the deliberate conservation efforts of perceptive family members and on the creation of public archives dedicated to the collection of such materials (Lyons 2013, 24–32). Survival also comes in different forms. Most will remain in the archives or libraries where they were deposited, consultable, unmodified, and with no further circulation. Lives containing matters of local historical interest may sometimes be taken on in a limited print-run by small publishing houses in their author's region, often – as with the memoirs of Statuto and Mele – with the help of academic intermediaries and deposited in a few local libraries. It is the texts that recount the personal saga of the author which have the greatest possibility of survival and recognition. That genre accounts for all the winners of the Premio Pieve, for example, enabling them to attract the attention of major publishing houses. But their texts will invariably undergo more or less radical reshaping before publication to fit them for a readership to which the author had neither directed them nor imagined possible.

Transformations

What changes took place in the successive incarnations of Rabito's work from typescript to book, film and DVD and its resulting compression from 1,027 to 411 pages and subsequent conversion into a 76-minute film?[14] The answer has

to track the relations between the shifts within and between media, worked out by different sets of collaborators in different institutional settings, each set with its own specific expertise but with objectives not necessarily convergent with those of its predecessors or successors. Modification of an author's original text by a sequence of professionals who shepherd it through to publication is characteristic of all domains of literature, not just the literature of the *diversamente colti*, in which perhaps the interventions are usually more clearly indicated. Writers receive advice and instruction from a range of friends, readers, editors and copy editors, and the meaning even of what they think of as their final version can still be changed involuntarily by their own oversights and mistakes by printers. The career of *Terra matta* provides a good illustration of McKenzie's general observation that 'The book as a physical object put together by craftsmen ... is in fact alive with the human judgements of its makers' (1984, 335, quoted in McKitterick 2010, 9). Since the details of those judgements will be explored in the contributions that follow, I shall trace here only the large-scale changes in the career of the work.

The most obvious change is the shift in the title given to each successive incarnation. In leaving the text unfinished, the author had also left it untitled. When his son Giovanni decided to send it to the ADN, he gave it the title *Fontanazza*, the name of a hamlet outside Chiaramonte, which carried various resonances. His father's parents on both sides came from there; his grandfather, father and mother had all worked for the baron whose ancestor had taken his title from the place in 1638; and his father makes several references to having drunk the wine of Fontanazza on the evening that he maintained ruined his life (Rabito 2007, 224–225). To Giovanni, the name *Fontanazza* also carried a deliberate echo of *Fontamara*, Ignazio Silone's well-known account of peasant life in the Abruzzi. *Fontanazza* was therefore the title under which the work was awarded the Premio Pieve and remains the name under which the typescript is catalogued at the ADN. In the revised manuscript, which the Pieve archivist sent to Einaudi, however, the work acquired a new title, *Terra matta in Sicilia*, which the publisher chose to abbreviate simply to *Terra matta*. This choice of title made use of a phrase [*terramatta* = 'madlands'] that occurs in the original typescript only as an insult hurled in the direction of Vincenzo and a Sicilian fellow-soldier by a family in the Veneto which had befriended Vincenzo during the war but had been offended by the loutish behaviour of his companion (70).[15] It denotes the author's place of origin seen from the outside, not by Vincenzo himself, who never uses that or any similar phrase elsewhere in his text but who takes it over here (69) to underline the misunderstanding by his fellow-Sicilians of local customs. The film, however, expands the title to *Terramatta; Il Novecento italiano di Vincenzo Rabito analfabeta siciliano*, beginning with the same phrase but in almost exactly the form used by the author himself. Finally, in the latest incarnation of the work, the DVD based around the film, the title returns to that precise form: *terramatta* followed by a semi-colon.

Although they might seem trivial, these changes in fact signal the changing relations, direct or indirect, between the author and the people who intervene

successively on his text. '*Fontanazza*' has a resonance, unavailable to outsiders, that links Vincenzo's son to his father and relatives and their collective local past. '*Terra matta in Sicilia*', chosen by a non-Sicilian, suggests one kind of external perspective on the society and experiences that marked the author's life. Perhaps the 'crazy' component also suggests something of the manic intensity of the conflict between Vincenzo and his mother-in-law. On a larger scale, we could even extend it to a judgement on the Italy in which the men of the author's generation were exposed first to the particular horrors of the First World War along the Piave and then to the pressures to emigrate simply to earn a bare living. And '*terramatta*;' reproducing exactly the way in which Vincenzo himself recorded the phrase, anchors a film in which official images of wartime and emigration occupy significant space to the private recollections of the author.

An analogous shift takes place in *Terra matta*'s visual incarnations. The film repeatedly draws the spectator's attention back to the text on which it is based, deliberately underlining in a series of striking images its strategy of 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 1996). It opens with the sound of a typewriter and pictures of the typescript; and both the sound and the images recur frequently, invariably when the focus of the action shifts to a new stage in Rabito's life, so that viewers are reminded that what we are watching is a visual version of the life that Rabito has chosen to present to us in his text. Often, too, the appropriate term in the typescript comes into focus on the screen at the moment when the narrator introduces that topic. In the transfer to DVD that reminder is reinforced by the addition to the film of extra material: the reading of an extract from the original text by Roberto Nobile, the narrator in the film; the story of the transformation of the typescript into the version despatched to Einaudi by Giovanni Rabito; a collective interview of Vincenzo's three sons; and an interview with the Einaudi consultant who helped to transform the original text into the published version.

The film's repeated focus on the pages of the original typescript not only underlines its inspiration but points towards the change of balance that the work's sequence of transformations has introduced between public and private material. Rabito's express motivation for writing his life was to provide his own side of the story in the face of the continuous public deceptions and humiliations he had endured from his mother-in-law. However, the space occupied by the family tirades is steadily reduced as the work is transformed; indeed, when we reach the film, the topic of his domestic conflicts has disappeared altogether. Correspondingly, the space given to perhaps the major dramatic event affecting all members of his generation, the First World War, is given an increasingly prominent position. From roughly 10 per cent of the original text, it came to occupy about 25 per cent of the published version. The film makes it even more central, surrounding the quotations from Rabito's descriptions of his experiences with images, drawn from official sources, and thus to provide a dramatic visualization of an ordinary soldier's by no means exceptional experience of war. As the work has moved outwards from circulation within the family to national distribution on a cinema or TV screen, its contents

therefore steadily separate the author from his work. We move away from the autobiography that Vincenzo Rabito intended towards a more general picture of the times he lived through – a shift signalled by the second part of the film's title: *Il Novecento italiano di Vincenzo Rabito analfabeta siciliano*. Only at the end of the film does the personal dimension return, marked by the insertion of a piece of Super8 home movie taken on a family occasion which shows us Vincenzo in person for the first time. And the film closes by returning us to the past. First, it shows us the river Isonzo, recalled by Vincenzo as full of the war dead and now, revisited in his old age, seen flowing peacefully as pages from his text slip transparently across the screen. Then we hear again the typewriter against the narration of how he first learned his letters with the help of his sister. The ending of the film thus closes the cycle of transformations by reminding us of the acquisition of the basic resources without which neither text nor film would have been possible and accompanying it with an image of his gravestone: there, signalling the parallel transformation of the author's identity thirty years after his death, the description 'Writer' is inscribed.

Our contributions

As McKenzie observed, taking proper account of the full range of intermediaries between what the author wrote and what we now read over his name shows us how often that author 'disperses into his collaborators, those who produced his texts and their meanings' ([1986] 1999, 27). The key intermediaries in transforming Rabito's original work play a central role in the contributions that follow, exploring the making of *Terra matta* in its different forms and reflecting on their own work. Those internal accounts are supplemented by external contributions making use of different disciplinary resources to illuminate the making of the work as it appeared in print and on the screen.

The Archivio Diaristico Nazionale at Pieve San Stefano played a major part in enabling Rabito's typescript to become available to both specialist and general publics. In her contribution, Anna Iuso provides a political and social context for its work by rehearsing some of the history of the archives for so-called *scritture popolari* ['popular, i.e., non-professional, writings'] in northern Europe and identifying the different purposes that inspired their collection and determined how they were treated. She outlines the evolution of the ADN, emphasizing the vital role played by its founder, the left-wing journalist Saverio Tutino, who was also responsible for establishing the Libera Università dell'Autobiografia at Anghiari near Pieve in 1998. She also notes how in recent years the ADN's success has attracted the attention of non-professional writers and has unintentionally helped to shape the ways in which some have constructed their texts.

Luca Ricci and Evelina Santangelo then describe the process of transforming the original typescript into the published *Terra matta*. Neither editor worked from a theoretical background in bibliographical or textual studies; both used

their different practical experience in handling texts to guide them. Clearly, Rabito's 1,027 pages had to be reduced, and their evident problems of intelligibility and repetition addressed, if his story were ever to have the readers it deserved. Within these general constraints, the editors were faced by a choice which we can summarize crudely: to enable readers to see what Rabito had written or to encourage them to hear what he had said? Very roughly, the first option gives the text the central role, so that wherever the editors had intervened could be seen and the original left visible, even if that entailed making the reading exceptionally difficult. The second option makes the author the primary referent for editorial work and ensuring, even at the cost of substantial modification to the written script, that Rabito's distinctive voice was preserved. Ricci describes how he sought to leave that choice open, allowing for the possibility of publication either by a specialist publisher interested in making available a text as close to the original as possible or by a commercial publisher interested in its widest possible diffusion. Working with both Rabito's original text and Ricci's edition, Santangelo illustrates how she brought a novelist's perspective to bear in meeting the demands of a commercial publisher chiefly interested in bringing out the work's literary qualities.

We owe the idea of *Terra matta* as a film, its script – co-written with the director Costanza Quatriglio – and its production to Chiara Ottaviano. Here she analyses the features of the text which attracted her to the project of converting it into a film, particularly the opportunities it offered for identifying still inadequately explored aspects of Italian history in the twentieth century. She underlines the importance of local social networks in making the film: its funding, casting and promotion. She also reflects on her own involvement, as the child of parents who grew up in the same town as Rabito, and on the ways in which Rabito's work is acting as a portal to the wider project of recovering the social and cultural history of the Iblei region of south-east Sicily.

In the interview that follows, Costanza Quatriglio sets her direction of *Terramatta*; in the context of her previous work as a documentary film-maker. She identifies the ways in which the documentary she derived from *Terra matta* is distinct from a biography of Vincenzo Rabito himself and identifies the metaphors and cinematic strategies that organize the film. Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo then analyse how the film embodies the director's longstanding interest in marginal and invisible subjects and in the journeys that shape their lives. They also examine the subtle relations established visually and aurally between Rabito's text, the voice of the author as presented by the actor Roberto Nobile, and the images of both wartime and peacetime drawn from official archives. Central to their analysis is the way Quatriglio handles the clash of versions of the same events, juxtaposing the official visual records with the representation of Rabito's experiences and underlining the contrast between forms of public and private memory.

We now know that Vincenzo Rabito rewrote his entire life story after his son Giovanni had taken away the first version. The second version remains

unpublished – although Giovanni Rabito has put his own reworkings of the text online for brief periods. In his interview here Giovanni comments on some of the differences in style and content between the two versions. He enables us to see how his father developed the skills of envisaging and addressing a wider audience than the first time while maintaining the features of his distinctive voice. The comparison between the two texts provides an insight into the choices that Rabito made in selecting and presenting materials and so moves us away from thinking of his writing as simply the flow of an untutored stream of consciousness.

Finally, I explore how an anthropological perspective can illuminate the production, circulation and consumption of *Terra matta* by inserting it into its social and cultural context and invoking comparisons with a classic piece of ethnography. Anthropologists have particular experience in collecting and analysing oral literature, embodied in the forms of narrative, poetry, song, myth or folklore and usually created in groups with restricted literacy (Barber 2007). More recently they have renewed the discipline's equally longstanding attention to material objects of all kinds by developing a biographical approach to their role and value in the social networks in which they circulate (Appadurai 1986). But they have shown little interest in the point at which these two interests intersect – the book as simultaneously a literary and material object – despite its centrality in the social organization and cultural hierarchies of many societies. Literacy may have long been a standard research topic but literature in its written forms has not. I therefore offer an anthropological approach to the processes of constructing and enhancing the cultural value of this particular kind of material object. In conclusion, I suggest that taking into account the evidence from Vincenzo Rabito's other writing, not only the second version of his autobiography described by his son Giovanni but also his letters and diaries, produces an even more remarkable author and valuable autobiography than we have so far recognized.

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I am very grateful to all of my fellow-contributors to this issue who have freely provided information and have helped me to appreciate *Terra matta* much more fully than I could have done on my own. All readers of the book also owe a particular debt to Vincenzo Rabito's three sons, Turi, Tano and Giovanni, for their generosity in agreeing to make available to the widest possible public a text that includes harsh words about their closest relatives and which many families might well have preferred to keep private.

Notes

1 At Venice it received the inaugural Civitas Vitae prize. Among subsequent awards are the 'Film della Critica' by the *Sindacato Nazionale Critici Cinematografici Italiani*, the

Nastro d'Argento by the *Sindacato nazionale giornalisti cinematografici italiani* as the best documentary film of the year, and the first prize in the documentary section at the 5° Festival of Italian cinema in Madrid.

2 The captivating role of inexplicability in the impact of art objects is explored by Gell (1998, 68–72).

3 For the full range of reviews, see http://www.progettoterramatta.it/.

4 Finkelstein and McCleery (2013) provide a succinct survey of the field of book history past and present.

5 The most reprehensible is participation in the particularly brutal sexual assault on a Friulian girl at Planina during the First World War (Rabito 2007, 127).

6 In 1901 the illiteracy rate for the population aged 6 years and over in the province of Ragusa was 79% (*Censimento della popolazione* 1934, p.xv). For Italy in the same period, the average time spent in school for those aged between 15 and 64 years was less than one year, and only one-third of 6–14-year-olds were actually enrolled in school (Brandolini and Vecchi 2011, 18, 43, Figure 15).

7 For collections and analyses of letters by emigrants, see Baily and Ramella (1988) and Franzina (1979).

8 Among the authors, men outnumbered women two to one. See Franceschetti (2009) for brief summaries of the contributions by Sicilian emigrants.

9 I prefer the term '*diversamente colti*' [differently cultivated] to the traditional '*semi-colti*' [semi-cultivated] since it invites us to enquire into the cultural resources their authors actually made use of rather than define them as deficient with respect to the literary standards of others.

10 For exact reproductions of original texts which show the limited extent of revisions, see Minicuci (1997) and Imbriani, Marano and Mirizzi (1996).

11 All these are dwarfed by the 12,100 pages compiled by Antonio Sileci, a clerk from nearby Grammichele and evidently the local Frank Harris, in which he claimed to describe eight years of conjugal infidelities and the strategies used to hide them from his wife. At the other end of the scale, some compress long and eventful lives into no more than two dozen pages.

12 The Archivio storico trentino specializes in accounts of wartime experiences by ordinary soldiers and women displaced by war; it has collected several hundred memoirs describing the experiences of war on the north-eastern front, where Rabito himself served. The Italian post handled 4,000 million items between 1915 and 1918 (Antonio Gibelli, quoted in Lyons 2010, 59.5).

13 Some lengthy exchanges do reach public archives: the Archivio di storia popolare in Trento has a large collection, the most notable being the 1,371 letters between a young soldier and his wife written between 1914 and 1920 (Antonelli 2005, 4).

14 A version for the theatre was adapted and performed by Vincenzo Pirotta in Catania and elsewhere in 2009 but seems to have left no public trace apart from brief extracts on YouTube. The music composed by Luca Mauceri for the show was recorded and is available under the album title *Terra matta* on CD.

15 In its plural form, *terre matte*, the phrase seems to have been in common use among soldiers in the First World War to refer to the battle-front, where the rules and rhythms of ordinary life were turned upside down (Caffarena 2001). I thank Fabio Caffarena for this reference and Gino Moliterno for the suggestion of 'madlands' as its translation.

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