

Crafting Stories, Speaking Personally: in Conversation with Anna Maria Dell'Oso*

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My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no
doubt, older than me.
(Trinh Minh-ha, 1989: 123)

Anna Maria Dell'Oso was born in Melbourne in 1956 of Italian parents who migrated from Abruzzo and for many years worked double shifts in inner city factories. She started to play the violin at the age of 12. After completing secondary school, she studied briefly at the Tasmanian Conservatorium before winning a cadetship on the *Christchurch Star* in New Zealand where she trained as a journalist. She returned to Australia in 1978 and worked for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Her weekly essays for the *Good Weekend* attracted a large number of faithful readers and were re-published as a collection in 1989 in a book entitled *Cats, Cradles and Chamomile Tea*.

Since working for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, she has written poetry, short stories, two opera libretti, plays and film scripts, has contributed regular columns for *New Woman Magazine* and other newspapers and magazines, and has worked as a film critic for ABC TV. In 1984 she was awarded a General Writing Grant by the Literature Board of the Australian Council and in 1987 she won a three-month grant (also from the Australian Council) to attend the Australian Film and Television School to study screenwriting. In 1991 she won the Noosa Arts Theatre Playwriting Competition for the Play *Tinsel and Ashes*, and in 1999, she was awarded the Steele Rudd Australian Short Story Award for *Songs of the Suitcase*, published the previous year.

The subject matter of Dell'Oso's stories has clearly developed from her own experience. She has explained that her stories are not autobiographical, but she does claim an 'emotional reality' for her characters that is drawn from her own life. Hence her writing crosses the boundaries of both culture and genre. Standing between two cultures, she writes stories that are on the cusp of autobiography and fiction, and that allow her simultaneously to stage and to question her own desire to construct a narrative of the self.

Since the publication of *Songs of the Suitcase*, readers have been waiting for Dell'Oso's next book. Family circumstances, especially the birth of her third child and the developmental issues he faced, slowed her output. Nevertheless she has been working on two novels:

I call them twin novels because they were born at the same time. ... One novel is called Beating Time. I have written several drafts of it and now am about to review them. This novel is about the musical world and the violin as a person. The violin as an instrument of change - and an instrument of music of course - and it is about two sets of musicians and together they make a quartet, which is sort of four stories. And there are two in the higher strings - violin one and violin two - and they

form the heart of the novel and then there are the lower strings and they work in a different part of the musical world – not the classical world but the world of busking, street, folk music. And they are the viola and the cello. And it is all based around the concept of a particular group of lost instruments made by Stradivarius. These instruments were destroyed in a fire in the 17th century in Germany ... but it is known that not all of them were lost. So I am basing the novel on these 'escaped' instruments: where are they?

The device is not that of the lost manuscript which is commonly used, most notably, by narrators of historical fiction when trying to problematise the relationship between history and fiction.

*In this case the lost instrument concept is different because the novel is about transformation. ... I think in the end I realised that the story of the instruments could only be used as a thread and a structure. The quartet of the instruments gets together as a meta-narrative within the story, an over-arching narrative in which the instruments emerge as a process and then the separate stories of these four different kinds of musicians are carried throughout. And there are different themes - really about transformation. The novel is called *Beating Time* because it is about midlife and deals with where we wish to be at a particular time in life and how we transform ourselves and find ourselves. The characters contrast and clash against each other.*

For instance, there is a musician who tries to balance motherhood with being an elite musician. However, in the string orchestra that she works with, she does not get the promotion she wanted because a new player arrives and this player is a bright young 'thing' who is 17 and a wonderful player. But when she fronts the orchestra something happens – she is given a fraudulent instrument and she starts to fall apart as she realises that the instrument is not playing the way it should. So it is like the instrument is internalising her psychological state.

This idea came from something that happened to my husband, who is also a musician. One of the violin makers in Sydney faked an old Italian violin to prove to everyone that a modern instrument could be as wonderful as those old instruments so idealised, to the point that people believe modern instruments cannot be as good. He used various techniques to 'antique' a modern instrument to make it look like an 18th century instrument. And without telling my husband one of the jokers in his string quartet said: 'try this, it's believed to be a Peter Guarnerius.' So David started to play on this instrument, but after a few weeks the sound quality began to deteriorate. What interested me then was how a player reacts to this kind of challenge to expectations. When David started to notice the subtle deterioration, he thought at first it was internal, his fault, something to do with his playing, and there was a period - not a long period of time but a short period, a couple of weeks perhaps - where he started to think: 'what am I doing wrong?' And then he thought of many physical reasons why the deterioration in sound was happening – the instrument hadn't been played on, it needed adjustments and so on. Then the true history of the instrument was revealed. But I have always thought: wouldn't it be interesting if you were already in a fragile emotional and vulnerable state and you think this deterioration is due to your playing. And that is what happens to the 17 year old girl wunderkind in my novel.

Dell'Oso has been thinking about *Beating Time* for some years and, even from this general summary, one can find links with stories from *Songs of the Suitcase*. Music and its resonance through our memories, dreams and struggles is an obvious

connection: *Songs of the Suitcase* is divided into sections called Ballads and Arias. As Dell'Oso has stated elsewhere:

Ballads are narrative songs with repetitive refrains. So are the storytelling pieces with their recurring chorus/refrains/leitmotifs of keys or suitcases or dreams or a question about love or a refusal to say someone's name. An aria, on the other hand, is a more elaborate song for solo voice. The spotlight is on the special qualities of the singer as well as what is being sung. (Harper Collins interview: URL)

Another evident link with previous stories is the thematic *topos* of Italy. The title of the 'twin novel' which she has been writing, *Geppetto's Daughter*, is a meaningful indication both of the book's nature.

I wanted to write a novel about Italy as the anima (soul) for English speaking cultures. I noticed a lot of coffee table books in bookshops about Tuscany and fantasies of renovating big old derelict houses in Tuscany. This is a notion of Italy which is in contrast to the projections of Italy as the rejecting mother land, with which I grew up. As the daughter of immigrants, I saw Italy as lost homeland that I knew and that I never knew at the same time, a place of memory, a place of nostalgia, a place from which I was locked out, a place about which one could tell stories: my mother's world, my mother's universe.

*I have not decided all the narrative structure and plot details of this second novel but the most important detail of the book is that the main character is an artist or a writer. It is a story of a second generation Italo-Australian artist or a writer of some kind who comes from the 'wrong side of the tracks' in Western Sydney and she just cannot break through to the mainstream. Which is something I kind of identify with, as I still have the feeling that I was part of a literary phase in the 80s that enjoyed some visibility in the mainstream but has now been marginalised again, an attitude of: 'we have heard the migrant story, we don't care about it anymore.' So what happens in *Geppetto's Daughter* is that this girl - because she is so frustrated by not breaking into the mainstream as an immigrant storyteller - she creates for herself a more acceptable, more 'media friendly' European background. So she invents an aristocratic Italian background, very chic and 'interesting'. Well, firstly she goes to New York and then she invents a new family for herself and for her art and her writing. Everything goes really well, so much so that a major magazine wants to do a big photojournalist spread on her and that is a good thing for her career.*

However, they want to go to the place where she (supposedly) comes from and photograph her ancestral villa - they are interested in photographing her life for the weekend. In order to find a villa in which to stage her invented background, she searches on the internet and finds a place she can hire in Italy that would be her village. She hires an entire Italian 'Italian' village - the inhabitants act the Bella Tuscany type of inhabitants, the quirky characters, the houses, the relatives, the cousins, the servants, the whole thing. But the complication is that my heroine is of Italian parentage and this is actually her homeland, where her parents immigrated from. There is a true village underneath the commercial 'Italian' village. And she has her family's photograph album, which dates back to before the War. And every time my artist heroine makes something up about her false 'Italian' background, something changes in the photo album - characters and people appear that were not there before - and the more she comes up with lies about her background, the more it leads to the truth of what actually did happen in this village, which impacts on the stories that she is writing, the art that she is making.

With these novels, Dell'Oso is moving from writing short pieces and short stories to longer fiction and is conscious that the rhythm of this writing is quite different.

I try to apply the same principles when I write, which is to think about the structure first. Writing novels is very different because you need to write over a long period of time, and also when you are writing over a long period of time and things do not work out then you start to get very lost, you feel lost and so you need to be able to be really strong within yourself. I have learned a lot of different disciplines of concentration, organisation and of storytelling. Also the discipline of throwing away a lot of stuff. Not literally throwing it away, but putting it aside and seeing what happens with it. It is a very long process. I used to think, how can it possibly take years to write a novel? But it does. ... When you are a female writer with children, and there are challenges with them, especially if there are serious problems with your children, it can be very difficult to keep going. But, the one thing I have learnt is that if you are a writer you will still want to do that no matter what, the desire to write does not go away.

What kind of writer would you like to be?

I would like to be the kind of writer who is actually quite good at imagining a unique world. I often feel that the writing in my first stories was not 'real' writing, because it was just writing about what I know. However, in my view, to be an author means to have authority over a creative domain. What I am saying is that I would like to have authority over a world which I just totally invent, the world of the story, a world that a writer wills into being through the imagination. And I am starting to wonder whether that is possible.

So I work on a lot of writing projects at once, they are all under construction. And my frustration with myself is that their completion may be almost a bit too far in the future and how do I know that I am going to be healthy and focused and well enough to be able to complete these tasks? If not, there are always my journals. That is my basic method, to write everything in the journal,, to begin from a base of journal writing and then construct narratives, journalism or other pieces once I get the flow of writing going. Because to me writing is a creative practice, a daily practice, and this is what I tell my students. Writing is not always and only something that is project-based. It can be done for no logical reason or for no particular project or publication. It is a part of breathing, living, learning ...

I keep a daily discursion and expressive journal, I keep an ideas journal, and I keep a notebook entirely for scenarios, plots and writing problems to do with the current work I am doing. I keep many different forms of journals so that even if I happen to get run under a bus tomorrow my kids or researchers would still have the plots, the characters and my intentions in the structure journals and the daily flow of lives in the personal reflective journal. In this I very much get my inspiration from visual artists because that is what they do, they sketch, the doodle, they make plans and their artist notebooks are works in their own right ... it is all part of being a writer, all this noticing, everyday noticing and musing, reflection, comment, surmising, dreaming and wondering, and instead of keeping it all in your head, it is brought out onto the page, so it makes a bridge between the internal realities and the external ...

At this point of the conversation, it becomes apparent to us that, for Dell'Oso, survival is contingent upon narrative. Telling stories nourishes the writer and imparts

meaning, narrative has the power to transform and create a sense of self, to deal with the fragmentation of the self and the multiplicity which flows from it. In all of this, the idea of place plays an integral part in this process, as is evident in 'Ghosts', one of the stories in *Cats, Cradles and Chamomile Tea*:

...smell the waters of the river, the rushing and quickening of stories bubbling and troubling. ... A world without story is a world without the possibility of beginning, middle and end, and then the miracle of end-as-beginning again. If you can't tell your own story, your soul is lost: if you can't imagine the story of your life, you can't conceive of how to live it (1989: 20).

What is significant about this argument is its promotion of the value of deconstructive, as opposed to merely descriptive, representations of experiences of displacement. It works towards an idea of the 'nomad' not simply based on the desire for home characterised by notions of departure and arrival, loss and redemption but, in a wider sense, as the interrogation of the social and cultural boundaries which inform both the production of meaning and also its relation to the social processes of (individual) subject formation.

A lot of Italians do sit around and tell stories, my parents did that. It is something migrants do when they get together, but not only migrants do it – in my world of motherhood there is a lot of storytelling that goes on as well. I tell my students all the time that you can never be bored as a writer, you must never be bored because wherever you are you must look underneath the surface, see what lives there, see what is conflicted there and what seeks to be told.

I grew up with a mother who lived in the past, and who still continues to reconstruct stories – and inconsistent stories too, because she goes back, revives, deletes, adds and thus recreates a fiction ... digging back to the truth and then right down into the layers of a social identity. My mother has always had a fragile sense of identity, for psychological reasons, not just cultural reasons, so she was always searching and telling stories to give herself an identity. This is why I have always kept a journal, since I was a child. I was just trying to figure out what was really going on in my family, trying to name things – why am I different?, why are these things happening?, why is my mother so isolated?, why does she spend all day in bed?, why does she cry all the time? I had a very depressed mother, I was dealing with someone who was very, very depressed and no one told me why – nobody ever told me why, 'we don't know.'

In many of your stories, you talk about Italian migrant women taking drugs (particularly Valium). Do you think the kind of depression you are referring to was a common problem among the Italian community and that it manifested itself in different ways?

It was a very common problem it was everywhere! Everyone had these little tablets, everybody. You know that is not really so different to today, only the name of the drugs are the Prozac's and so on. It is just endemic to femaleness. Now the problem of stress and the female condition is coming out but, as it does, as women talk honestly and bring it out, we find that these shadows are endemic to our whole society really, men and women, because we are dealing with unhappy people, disassociated people. Our whole society is now going through identity crisis, and

those people who have all been questioning their identity for a long time – people such as immigrants and other marginalised people – they find themselves used to the situation of questioning identity and reality and of always being in a fluid state. So it comes as no great shock to some of us when identity and national certainties are challenged because we are used to it. We may even have the psychological advantage of not being surprised or shocked.

How about the notion of an Italian community? When you have a community around you, albeit confining, you have someone outside of yourself, someone who is not your mother or your father. This community, somehow, gives back to you that sense of Italianness, what ever we may mean by it. In your case, however, this community is missing. It is just you, your siblings and parents. Indeed, it seems like it is you and your mother, and that there is nowhere to go.

And it is an island. But I had to be creative somewhere and I was also being parented by a wider world that was English speaking, a strong influence precisely because we were not connected to the Italian community. And that was an unusual experience because my family's isolation contrasted with the other Italian families, an unusual isolation compared to the lives of other Italian families that I have since been able to meet. In my family we did not have the experience that there are always a thousands relatives to count on. And now there is sadness because I regret this loss.

Writers like Dell'Oso are difficult to categorise. In the preface to *Cats, Cradles and Chamomile Tea*, Australian journalist Philip Adams, with conscious irony, describes her as a 'female foreigner.' Generally, literary critics use the label 'migrant' for writers whose names signal their descent from non Anglo-Celtic parents or grandparents. Sneja Gunew points out that the term "migrant writing" is used not simply to designate those writers born overseas, but rather misleadingly to describe the writings of all those Australians perceived as not belonging to the literary and cultural traditions deriving from England and Ireland' (1994: xi). According to Gunew, related expressions (to the term migrant writing) such as "ethnic' or 'multicultural' writer are coded terms for continuing to maintain these divisions' (1994: xii). Perhaps a more appropriate definition for non-Anglo-Australian writers would be that of the 'hyphenate' writer. How would you react to being defined as an Italo-Australian writer? More generally, what do you think such a definition conveys to a potential readership?

I think people always describe you whichever way they wish to and you can either like it or not like it. So I would not dislike it but I would disagree with being an Italo-Australian writer because I feel that that is putting me into a category – I mean we do not describe Helen Garner as a Carlton-Australian writer. She is an Australian writer and I feel I am an Australian writer as well. I think if you have to look at my work and ask: 'what is it about?' it is about living in Australia in a certain way.

It is about living in Australia and living in this world with particular issues to contend with and conflicts that stem from having Italian migrant parents. This is the history of Australia! I'm never worried about the labels. I am never worried about anything like that because I feel that I have got the longer view. I take the long view – you have to as a writer – that down the track there has to be a time of greater clarity when the confusing issues of the day are stripped off and what remains is the worth of the work (or not!). That this is all going to come out in the wash. We go through our little fashions, our obsessions with this, that and the other, but later whatever remains will be interpreted in the light of time. And this is why I decided to

call my forthcoming novel Beating Time because it is about time, it is about taking a long view.

Returning to the issue of place and what has been termed 'literary psychogeography'. How do particular places feature in or influence your writing?

I do identify personally with Sydney the city but when I was writing a column for the Good Weekend I found that I had to take into account Melbourne because of our readership there, and that gave me the opportunity to go back into my childhood. This aspect of taking into account both cities made the columns what they were, because Melbourne is a place that I can look back to. It is a bit like any writer who moves away from where they have been and suddenly, with distance, they find they can write about that place. And because I live in Sydney, the place in which I live my daily life – I do not romanticise it or look back and tell stories about it, except for Unravelling, which was the last piece of fiction that I have published. And I thought I was just beginning then to really write down Sydney, and I hope to continue.

In that short story I write about Newtown, my micro-environment, my home. Since then I have become very passionate about Sydney as a character and I have been wanting to describe Sydney and develop it as a character in my writing. What is happening is that I am just noticing more and more about the city, falling more deeply in love with it. I have been in Newtown for years and years and I have never been able to go anywhere else, I have been trapped here really, while many of my colleagues were going overseas, getting grants, doing all of this and I had the kids and after that many other life challenges that held me at home. I was forced to look more deeply into my daily environment and not project my desire for adventure and new experience outward onto another city or country. I was forced to truly settle and look carefully into one small slice of Sydney, to know it as deeply as I could. It was only then, when I accepted that I wasn't going anywhere else in a hurry – and I never even had a car – when I had to live in this tiny environment and there was only one way to go creatively in this space – and that was deeper – that I started to notice everything more carefully and find riches there. So I know Newtown, I observe Newtown, I love Newtown.

Much contemporary Italian literature seems to convey almost an obsession with geography, and the representation of place and space. This is connected to place, locality and identity. When you say that you can write about Melbourne, or you could write about Melbourne because you left it, and you are only now beginning to write about Sydney, are you suggesting that the topography acquires some kind of almost second identity which, in turn, feeds back into the characters?

Yes, as the London of Dickens' time. I think one of the reasons I have come to this view of Sydney may well be because I have been really isolated in, and from, greater Sydney. With my son especially, due to his developmental problems, I was almost under house arrest for several years. Because he could not walk and he would not understand the social purpose of walking, we were trapped in a small house for days and days and weeks and weeks at a time. And under that sort of circumstance your mind starts to see things really differently. Once you get out into the streets you feel this amazing feeling of light-headed freedom, a gratefulness that you are out and about, you notice things you have never noticed before. A writer just makes the best of wherever they are. You don't stop thinking just because experience shrinks or your life circumstances change. Your mind keeps searching for things to notice, stories to tell.

These days, I want to think about (and in many ways take apart) what is it that makes you think a place is better to do something in than another place. What is it, really, that you are looking for in an environment? Colleagues? Opportunities? Are you looking for connections, are we talking about the mind, inner space? That is what I want to challenge, these ideas that physical reality brings us inner changes, that a rich environment necessarily gives you rich experiences.

And that takes us back to what you were saying earlier about the author; the whole discussion about the role of the author.

Yes, but I also love craft and I love the craft of storytelling, even though it is an old fashioned idea to love craft. The story is a choice of a series of events that the author makes. Originally to plot something meant to make your way through a series of choices to an end, to choose a path through events that was meaningful. The selection of the events is very significant to the whole story – the plot then speaks of the entire work like a character speaks to the story. I mean, if you select a character doing one thing or another thing, then that stands for that character - the action demonstrates the character. And so plot – the writer's choice of events, the writer's invention of what happens in a work – demonstrates the nature of the work. Plot and meaning, plot and theme, are one and can't be separated. Plot should not be demeaned as 'only' the plot – that is to misunderstand the metaphoric power that a plot has in a work of fiction. That's why it is the hardest thing to create an engaging and unique plot. And I think there is not enough understanding about story telling in general. Somehow in this century, and starting in the late 20th century, our ability to tell stories started to disintegrate, respect for the craft was lost, and I think that we are just starting to get sick of that. The author is dead and I find that really disturbing.

Authority comes together with finding your voice, and claiming that voice as your own. This is a complex issue for women writers, much more than for male writers.

Authority for women is new and for so long women have had that authority undermined.

What is it like as a writer, to find your position – to tell yourself: I am a writer and I am claiming that position – only to be told that that position somehow is not justified, it is not tenable any more?

It is difficult and once again there is a connection with storytelling. I would describe myself as a story teller. In my fiction, I want people to enter the created world of the writer, an invented, consistent, literary world. I want them to forget where they are, forget that they are reading, forget that they are thinking, and I do not want them to notice the writer as such. I don't want them to notice my writing at all, whether it's clever or whether it's interesting or whether that description was 'beautiful' or challenging or whatever. The writing should be invisible in the experience of reading. I am talking about the experience of forgetting that you are actually reading. And to me that means that the writer is in touch with the reader's mind.

As a reader, I do not like being told what to think about a character. I like to enter a world that seems to exist whole, where I witness the character revealing himself or herself to me in action and see and make up my own mind about them. That is why I love plot, which for me is the defining component of a good story – the fact that one is able to select those events that reveal so much about a character's

choices. I think probably my film background gave me that view of the importance of story and respect for dramatic structure. In a way I am more influenced by films than by literature. This is because I am always straight away looking for where the story is. I think it is a great skill to be able to write for your time and place, and someone like David Williamson, for instance, does that. And Helen Garner of course but she is completely different again. I think she really has a gift for intimacy with the reader. You really enter into her created worlds, you forget you are reading, it is a completely absorbing experience, just you and the writer's world.

Though Dell'Oso's stories are almost always confronting in some way, the line she draws at 'The King of the Accordion' (1998: 221-368) does seem to divide well crafted stories from those which also demand greater resources of feeling and understanding. One aspect which contributes to making this particular story so confronting is the role that violence, specifically violence within the family, plays in the story.

Firstly, I wish to say that I really enjoyed, and was relieved to read, a lot of what you wrote in your article because it sums up very succinctly many of the issues I have been grappling with and do not have the words for. Because as a writer of fiction and as a journalist, I do not have those literary theories and the perspectives they bring. I am referring in particular to the point you make about writers like myself being cultural representatives of our communities - which is something that never occurred to me, I never thought I would become pressured to be a role model for the community I wrote about. Of course I was naive in not thinking that would be the case because, of course, that was going to come up and started to come up very early on - the pressure to write nice things about the Italian community, and nice things only. Yes, the positive is fine, and everybody wants to own the positive. But when you start to write things that are not so happy, than everyone starts to ask: 'why do you write these dark miserable things? We're not like that! That's not very supportive! You're a traitor in our midst! Why don't you write happy stories about things that go nicely and where no one has any problems and the community looks really good?'*

To me the fiction comes first. It has to work as a story, as an enquiry into the human condition. It has to reveal truth, to tackle something worth telling, something worth exposing. I saw a lot of stuff happening in the community, good and bad. If you are a writer, you move without a passport wherever you need to go, psychologically. All that happens in the migrant community is legitimate ground for enquiry, it is all going to come up, good and not so good, and that has to include violence. Looking at it crudely, in 'The King of the Accordion' the father was the violent person. But that violence could have easily been transposed to the mother. It didn't have to be men are violent, women are not. Certainly, if I have to write a violent scene I want to call up a time of violence in my own personal experience, which I have either witnessed or directly experienced. But in fiction, it does not have to emerge exactly how it happened. My mother was quite upset about that story because my father was not violent. The violent father of the story was simply not based on him, that was obvious. It was fiction.

Yes, it is a very dark story, but it was also an interesting story for me to write. ... I wanted to write a story about creativity and what happens to creativity when it is locked away. What happens when one's creativity is stopped and

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suppressed. I wanted to write about common genius and how we throw it away. In a way it is really like a testimonial to all those migrant kids - or to all kids out there - who never got a chance. And it is a dark tale of opportunities lost and talent wasted.

So the violence is to do with the repression of ability. This mainly affects women because I can see how much we have lost, and how much we have allowed ourselves to lose. We have lost our genius, our creativity. Like the story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's sister - she was also called Mariana - and the interesting thing about her is that today we really do not hear much, if anything at all, about her. Even musicians do not know much about her. But of course she was the first prodigy, because she was older than Mozart. As children they went on tour together. And then her father told her she was not allowed to go on tour any more because she was reaching adolescence, and females did not travel or go on the road in the way that men did. When she found she was not to go on the first Italian tour, she apparently took to her bed and psychologically went downhill from then on.

*I really identified with her because of that cultural stereotype that you, a girl, are not allowed to do certain things. I was raised in a culture that said: 'you cannot be the musician in the family, it has to be your brother.' So the character in my story spends all her energy on her brother, who is not interested. He squanders his talent. Yet he is just as trapped in his culture as she is. But creativity will find an outlet. And that is probably the worst violence of all, when one suppresses one's own creativity and it must find strange ways to emerge. I was very, very happy with the 'King of the Accordion' because I wanted it to draw its language and mood from music. I started to develop the literary language of describing music-making from the perspective of being a musician, because music is another language, and I wanted to find a way of making music inside a page. To have the reader immersed in musicality even if they were not musicians, to know it from the inside. And that too was a happy experiment for me. And now, in *Beating Time*, I want it to go further and really, really 'write music' - the experience of being a musician. I have had positive responses to 'The King of the Accordion' from the non-Italian community (and the Italian community as well). And there have been several people who wanted to develop it into a screen play. If I were to do that, I would change many things ..., build a better story and introduce more contrasts of character, musical worlds and moods.*

When we advocate attention to the personal in writing, we are talking about discursive strategies through which writers can present themselves as historically situated subjects exploring how their knowledge has been shaped by lived experience. This sense of the personal encompasses Dell'Oso's understanding of the writer's subject position. It includes Jane Tompkins' notion of 'speaking personally' as well, which she explores in her essay 'Me and My Shadow.' Speaking of women writers, Tompkins contends that the personal is 'what is important, answer's one's needs, strikes one as immediately interesting' (1991: 1089). As a discursive stance, it breaks down the public-private dichotomy by activating feelings suppressed by traditional academic discourses, so that discussion of literary influences or the works of other writers, is not 'segregated from meditations on what is happening outside [the] window or inside [the] heart' (Tompkins, 1991: 1080). Speaking personally, then, broadens and complicates the critical attitudes writers exercise as scholars. The personal inevitably draws women writers to speak about fascinations, curiosities, confusions and aversions, which have attended their inscriptions of themselves as professionals. Thus, to articulate the personal is to write the self reflexively, as an historical subject who tells stories from lived experience, yet also draws on ways of reasoning, arguing and writing that empower her as a professional.

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