

University of Birmingham  
Research Seminar, 9 December 2014

**Proposed title:**

‘Maternal dislocations: Memory, Selfhood and Mother-Tongue in Goliarda Sapienza’s and Elena Ferrante’s Works’

**Abstract:**

The mother’s death – be it metaphorical or autobiographically inspired – is one of the key triggers of the female protagonists’ troubled and disjointed journey back to memories of the spaces and the language of childhood in both Goliarda Sapienza’s *Lettera aperta* (1967) and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969), as well as Elena Ferrante’s *L’amore molesto* (1992). In both authors’ writings, the central characters are in their late thirties to mid-forties as they start exploring the various stages of identification with and rejection of the maternal figure, in a confrontation that preserves many of the ambiguities first experienced in childhood.

With a specific focus on the recuperation of infantile memories, this paper sets out to explore the conflicts and tensions arising from the unique positioning of the mother and the mother-tongue in the works of Sapienza and Ferrante. While on the one hand the origins of dialect (Sicilian and Neapolitan, respectively) in the oral sphere invite associations with corporeality and the maternal as privileged by French feminist thought, on the other the mother-tongue is firmly rooted in and identified with precisely those patriarchal structures and spaces that the authors set out to subvert and evade. Investigating the complexities of what constitutes the ‘maternal’ function in both authors’ texts, this essay examines how the *genetrix* assumes a central role both in the narrator-protagonists’ act of self-analysis and the subversion of culturally constructed stereotypes of motherhood and feminine identity.

**Mini-bio:**

Katrin Wehling-Giorgi is Lecturer in Italian at the University of Durham, UK. She completed her DPhil in comparative literature in Oxford (2010), and was previously IAS Postdoctoral Research Fellow and Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Warwick. She is author of *Gadda and Beckett: Storytelling, Subjectivity and Fracture* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014), and has published articles on Céline, Gadda, Morante, Joyce and Beckett in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, *Italian Studies*, *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujour’hui* and *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*.