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Grazia Deledda: A Legendary Life (review)

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Martha King. *Grazia Deledda: A Legendary Life*. Leicester, UK: Troubador, 2005. Pp. x + 235.

A reticent and meditative Deledda responded in 1924 to a journalist inquiring about her life: "Why talk about myself? And why is it important? Better to close the books, to speak of the snow that whitens my hair, a sign that the day is coming closer when only one book counts: the active and passive book of our life, if we have really done anything [. . .]" (180). Martha King's biography of Grazia Deledda unearths the biographical and literary paths that have provided a positive answer to Deledda's ultimate question about the significance of her life and work. Released one year prior to the seventieth anniversary of Deledda's death, the eightieth anniversary of her Nobel Prize for literature, and exactly 30 years after the first and hitherto only English biography of Grazia Deledda, written by Carolyn Balducci (*A Self-Made Woman*, 1975), King's timely volume bears witness to a recent, renewed interest in Deledda's work and interpretation in North America. Suffice it to mention Jan Kozma's monographic study on Grazia Deledda's *Eternal Adolescent* (2002) and long-needed versions in contemporary English of famous novels, such as *Ashes* (2004), translated by Kozma, as well as much-awaited first English translations of Deledda's less-known novels, such as *The Church of Solitude* (2002), beautifully rendered by E. Ann Matter.

At the center of Martha King's biography is an effort to solve the "puzzling mystery" (ix) of Deledda's success, which crowned her "legendary life" with the 1926 Nobel Prize, awarded the following year: "The perplexing and ever recurring question when dealing with Deledda's early life is how did she ever allow herself to think she might become a writer in the first place, considering her time, and place and gender?" (ix). Martha King—an established translator of modern and contemporary Italian literature into English, from Pirandello's *Her Husband* (2000, with Mary Ann Frese Witt) to Dacia Maraini's *Darkness* (2002); from Anna Banti's *The Signorina and Other Stories* (2001, with Carol Lazzaro-Weis) to Giorgio van Straten's *My Name, a Living Memory* (2003)—has skillfully crafted the English versions of Deledda's *Cosima* (1988), *Chiaroscuro and Other Stories* (1994), *Elias Portulu* (1995), and *Reeds in the Wind* (1999). Not surprisingly, then, her Deledda biography resonates with King's passionate knowledge of the subject matter, which derives from her decade-long familiarity with Deledda's work, roots, Sardinian culture, and traditions.

Grazia Deledda: A Legendary Life is divided into two parts. The first section comprises seven chapters and maps the beginnings of Deledda's writing career up to the encounter with her life companion and husband, Palmiro Madesani, and their departure for Rome in 1900. The second part covers the years from 1900 to 1936, which are explored in nine chapters. The author's declared intention is to "let Deledda write this life herself [. . .] by speaking through her letters and works themselves" (x). Accordingly, the thread that weaves throughout the chronological unfolding of Deledda's "legendary life" consists of the writer's correspondence with editors, translators, friends, and family members, which reveals the multifaceted personality of the otherwise reserved author. King delves into Deledda's epistolary and unveils the relevance of these private writings for the interpretation of the author's corpus. For example, Deledda's letter from 14 October 1893 to linguist and ethnologist Angelo De Gubernatis, with whom she collaborated for the *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro in Sardegna* (1894), casts new light on the significance of Deledda's early and generally neglected novel *Anime oneste* (1896), which she wrote during her self-acquired cultural apprenticeship. While commenting on the similarity between Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and her *Anime oneste*, Deledda writes: "I wanted to write a novel to show that only agriculture can save Sardinia. [. . .] Unknowingly I had conceived a Sardinian Levin [. . .]" (65). By foregrounding Deledda's correspondence during her formative years with her first editors and supporters—in particular Antonio Scano of *Vita sarda*, Luigi Falchi of *Terra dei Nuraghes*, and Epaminonda Provaglio, editor of *L'Ultima Moda* and other journals of the Roman Perino publishing house—King underlines in the third chapter, "Letters to the Editors," two of the writer's main goals: "literary glory for herself, and through that the betterment of Sardinia" (67). The third goal, as Deledda phrases it in a letter from 18 December 1899 to her future husband, is "to be loved exclusively and completely for myself, for what I am and for what I represent" (82). Only Palmiro Madesani, employee of the Ministry of Finance from the Mantua region, succeeded in fulfilling Deledda's dream of love as dedicated partnership among equals, which her previous suitors had deeply disappointed, as King points out in the fourth chapter, "Lovers by Mail," about Deledda's sentimental epistolary relationships with journalist Stanis Manca, and teachers Andrea Pirodda and Giuseppe De Nava between 1891 and 1899.

While the first part of the biography hinges more on the historical, sociological, and familial context in which young Deledda learned how to cope with her "two compulsions—to write, and through her writing to make

Sardinia known and loved" (73), the second part attempts to depict a broadening of the Sardinian horizons through the new life in the expanding Roman metropolis. Although this second section devotes more attention to Deledda's literary writings and illuminates the significance of forgotten works, such as *I giochi della vita* (1905), *Nostalgie* (1905), and *Nel deserto* (1911), King continues to emphasize the role of Sardinia as "the unifying force" (103) of Deledda's allegedly best writing. In the wake of canonical Deleddian criticism, from Emilio Cecchi to Natalino Sapegno, from De Michelis to Arnaldo Momigliano, King contends that "when [Deledda] did try to describe modern urban life, as in *Nostalgie* or *La danza della collana* [1924], her work lacked the authenticity and coherence found in her best efforts" (140).

One of the most intriguing sections of the second part of King's biographical study is the tenth chapter, "Her Husband: 1909–1911." Pirandello's *Suo marito* (1911), republished posthumously in a revised version as *Giustino Roncella nato Boggìolo* (1940), is analyzed here as sarcastic criticism of literary consumerism, opportunism, and emptiness, which reigned among the Roman literati of the early twentieth century. From this perspective, the biographer convincingly elucidates the problematic relationship between Deledda and Pirandello, who was very likely attracted by the "public mask" of the "modest, shy, unassuming persona" (127) that Deledda wore as a self-defense strategy consistently throughout her life. Thus, it is not surprising to recognize strikingly "Pirandellian" motifs in Deledda's epistolary with younger friend and poet Marino Moretti, which enriches the account of Deledda's last 20 years. In a letter from 23 December 1913, Deledda praises Moretti's novel *Guenda* for its symbolic layer, and then she adds: "I love life as it is: naked, terrible and beautiful in its nakedness: the most profound symbol of life is in its nakedness, I believe" (141).

Throughout the epistolary, King observes the continual growth of a "sense of detachment from the exterior vicissitudes of the tumultuous life of our time" (180), as Deledda expresses it in a 1925 letter to Luigi Falchi and in numerous others to Moretti, Georges Hérèlle, and Dino Provenzal. This progressive disentanglement from the external world manifests Deledda's Spartan work ethics and habits, upon which King repeatedly insists, on the one hand, and, on the other, her intellectual and psychological independence from cultural trends and critical appraisals of her work. The combination of these biographical elements, in addition to the wise administration of her international reputation through highly visible translations and reviews of her works and a favorable political constellation, led Deledda to

the Nobel Prize, awarded on 10 December 1927, an event that King recounts with plentiful anecdotal information.

The sixteenth and last chapter, "The Church of Solitude: 1928–1936," concludes the journey through Deledda's life by briefly examining the autobiographical nature of several late writings, including *Il paese del vento* (1931), *La chiesa della solitudine* (1936), the posthumous, unfinished *Cosima, quasi Grazia* (1937), and more obscure sketches of the last decade. Through the analysis of these works, King focuses on Deledda's construction of the "personal legend" through "her desire to mythologize her life and place," which had always formed "the products of her imagination" (212). *Cosima* becomes the quintessential response to the initial question that King posed herself about the "puzzling mystery" of Deledda's compulsion to write and achieve literary success despite the obstacles of her origins and gender: "*Cosima* is the truth of metaphor, the multiform truth of legend" (212). Still, when King deserts the metaphorical layer of Deledda's writing, which Anna Dolfi cogently explored in her 1987 *Grazia Deledda: Biografia e romanzo*, her more literal explanation leaves us perplexed: "Always extremely aware of the simultaneous formation of her writer self and personal self by geographical and social determinants [. . .] [s]he believed that an individual's life was plotted from birth to death with a cosmic blueprint as irrevocable as one's personal aggregation of DNA. [. . .] Deledda lived out her appointed destiny, and by doing so created her own myth, or legend, as she called it. [. . .] And yet, in spite of this conviction—and perhaps this is the real basis for her personal legend—she almost single-handedly forced her own destiny by her will. Against all odds she willed herself to be a published writer, a celebrity, and she willed herself to leave Sardinia and found the means to do it. The story is all retold in *Cosima*" (212–13).

The inherent contradiction between predestination and *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae* seals King's intriguing and provocative biography of Grazia Deledda and encompasses further contradictions that strike the reader. For example, the author highlights Deledda's interest in the feminist movement through her participation in the First National Congress of Italian Women, held in Rome in 1908, alongside Matilde Serao and Sibilla Aleramo, and her partaking in the "Inquiry into Feminism," featured in *La nuova antologia* from 1 July 1911. To the question on the intellectual and social value of feminism, Deledda replied that an adequate response would require "a profound understanding of humanity's principle social problems, and a lengthy preparation concerning the great civil and economic problems. I write novels and

short stories: that is my specialty. I consider it just as right for a woman to *think, study, and work*" (125). In tune with these principles, King analyzes *I giuochi della vita*, *Nostalgie*, and *Nel deserto* as interesting reflections on feminism and socialism (107–16). However, the author repeatedly insists on gendered remarks on Deledda's self-consciousness as a writer, a woman, and a Sardinian. For example, in order to clarify how Deledda succeeded in obtaining support in "the inner sanctum of the male dominated publishing world" (48), King asserts: "Bravado was not a characteristic that came naturally to most nineteenth-century women, particularly Sardinian women, but when it came to promoting her own creative work, Deledda exhibited an exceptional aggressiveness" (48). For, "[w]hat other weapon did a young woman in the nineteenth century possess, aside from her talent and ambition? She practiced the powerless woman's arts of wheedling, cajoling, flirting and ingratiating" (47). The "ritual combination of coyness, humility and overweening ambition" (47), which allegedly constitutes the kernel of Deledda's letters to editors and suitors as well, reminds us of a second contradiction of this book.

The predominant presence of Deledda's letters as biographical sources is certainly the volume's major strength, for it makes accessible to a large audience epistolary documentation that is scattered in numerous volumes of literary criticism, journals, and conference proceedings, often difficult for the nonspecialist to retrieve. Moreover, King's linguistic talent infuses Deledda's letters with the intellectual energy and irony that characterize the Italian originals, unfortunately unavailable in this book. This is even more regrettable because some of Deledda's letters to Georges Hérèlle, the renowned French translator of her works for *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, who also introduced D'Annunzio, Pascoli, and Pirandello to French readers, are still unpublished, according to King's brief mention in the acknowledgments (viii). Yet, even more unfortunate is the fact that all letters are only cited with the indication of place and date in the endnotes without references to the bibliographical sources.

Last but not least, King's biography indicates on the one hand the accurate research of biographical documentation in Deledda's epistolary, narrative works, archival materials, and personal interviews with family members. On the other hand, the typographical form is extremely inaccurate, and the reader wades through an alarming number of typos. Suffice it to mention the repeated misspelling of the 1910 novel's title *Sino al confine* as *Sino al confino* (120, 121), thus juxtaposing the image of the internal exile for political reasons with the metaphorical borderline between life and death; or the distressing

conclusion of Deledda's laconic acceptance speech at the Nobel ceremony: "Via la Svezia, viva l'Italia [. . .]" (193).

Despite the contradictory aspects in the interpretive approach to Deledda's life, suspended between determinism and free will, between women's studies and gender and cultural discrimination, and the flaws of the typographical layout, Martha King's *Grazia Deledda: A Legendary Life* represents a significant contribution to the "undergoing reappraisal [of Deledda's production] in the wake of new possibilities offered by post-feminist canons" (ix). This passionately written and thoroughly researched biography provides Deledda's readership with a unique insight into her epistolary in relationship with frequently neglected works, and a thought-provoking analysis of her inherited and self-acquired cultural and gendered identity. Furthermore, King's work invites Deledda scholars to finally devote their efforts to an organic and comprehensive edition of her letters (and corpus!). In conclusion, King's book on Deledda's "legendary life" reminds us of the etymological meaning of the gerundive from which "legendary" is derived: a life that "has to be read" once again through its creative expressions, for, in Deledda's words, "[t]hrough my literary works the picture of my life may seem full of events. At times it also seems like a legend to me" (8).

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John Picchione. *The New Avant-Garde in Italy: Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 250.

There is no question that the experience of the Italian neo-avant-garde marked a turning point in Italian literary culture and that its influence continues to be felt 35 years after its demise. It is also true, however, that its significance in the broader context of world literature is generally underestimated, owing in part to the lack of criticism available outside of Italy. As John Picchione rightly claims in his recent *The New Avant-Garde in Italy: Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices*—to date the only comprehensive work on the subject in English—the debate it sparked "embodies the last theoretical attempt to draw a general map of literature within the context of late capitalism" (vii). *The New Avant-Garde in Italy* is both a demonstration of the richness and complexity of the theoretical writings associated with the neo-avant-garde, and an analysis, with a view to these theoretical principles, of highly original creative works that constituted an important challenge to