

# Grazia Deledda Fabulist on Newspapers: The Experience with “Corriere della Sera”

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to contextualize the journalistic apprenticeship of Grazia Deledda inside the polarity represented on the one hand by ethnographic writings published in the magazine «Rivista delle tradizioni popolari», and on the other hand by her novelistic production intended for publication in the Italian newspaper «Corriere della Sera»: a perfect parabola that – almost paradoxically – shows us how the author moves from writing about popular traditions in a magazine (the place of literary productions for leisure and entertainment) to inventing fantasy tales within the pages of a newspaper (the place *par excellence* of chronicles). This writing activity is bound to the request from newspaper’s management of any type of short stories or tales: it was the rule, rather than the exception, from the starting in the second half of 1800s, when Italian publishing market is ever-expanding. All these aspects are well documented in Deledda - «Corriere della Sera» correspondence (1909-1936), kept at the Historical Archive of the newspaper in Milan. The archive consists of one hundred sixty-six epistolary communications, some of which are analyzed in this article to document better nature and purposes of Deledda’s journalistic production.

*Keywords:* Elzeviro, ethnographic, journalism, newspaper, epistolary, faire-tales bestiary, chronicle, fiction

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Grazia Deledda’s writing activity in the greatest Italian daily newspaper, «Corriere della Sera», covers a time-frame extending from 1909 to 1936. We can place it between two extremes, relating respectively to the words 'elzeviro' and 'urgency': the same words that gave the title to a short story written by Deledda herself (*Elzeviro d’urgenza*), whose matter was just her collaboration to the daily newspaper.

The first term of this polarity, 'elzeviro', is an ultimate *vox media*: the very protean keyword of Italian journalism in the Twentieth Century, the «short Twentieth Century» as defined by Eric Hobsbawm: the “urgency” we said inevitably becomes a *conditio sine qua non* for writing on the columns of a newspaper. It is guarantee of narrative brevity and, consequently, of swift reading. So, this writing activity is bound to the request, from the newspaper’s management, of any type of short stories or tales: and it was certainly a rule, rather than an exception, from the starting in the second half of 1800s, when Italian publishing market is ever-expanding, with an increase of diffusion of newspapers and magazines.

Such heterogeneous nature of writing activity was well understood by Deledda. Her significant writing work in newspapers has in the extremes the ethnographic chronicles written for «Rivista delle tradizioni popolari» (directed by Angelo de Gubernatis) on the one hand; on the other, the short stories written for «Corriere della Sera», the «great daily newspaper» (as she herself defined it) to which she collaborated more assiduously and for a long time.

The fundamental difference, available exclusively by contrast, between chronicle and literary fiction (*facta* and *ficta*), was so much dear to Luigi Albertini, the newspaper's director (also because of his Anglo-Saxon professional background). Report and news stories are guarantees of authenticity: just think of the novels *Frammento di cronaca di Marco Leccio* by Luigi Pirandello, or *Cronaca familiare* and *Cronache di poveri amanti* by Vasco Pratolini, in which the word "chronicle" is used as a trustworthy witness, sealing the paratext.

Within the narrative production for «Corriere della Sera», Deledda's native language and Sardinian culture, so ethnographically marked, are not considered as a matter of the past, unattainable and outside of time. They're not crystallized in an ancient aura, as mythical as remote, or like coming from an *île oubliée*. Vice versa, Sardinian culture is alive, vibrant, both in the signified and in the signifier, wherever Deledda's mediation between Sardinian-speaking cultural background and Italian is not disjunctive but, on the contrary, combined. In Grazia's narrative universe are contained, perfectly in tune, the components of both cultures and languages: Sardinian and Italian.

Determining factor, in 1907, was the Colombo's edition of the novel *L'edera*, as well documented by Dino Manca in his critical edition of Deledda's literary work: «within a fortnight, a circulation of seven thousand copies (nine thousand after a few months)». It is scarcely credible that Albertini could ignore these numbers. They undoubtedly played a vital role in meeting an important goal: two years later Deledda entered among regular contributors of «Corriere», writing in the page dedicated to cultural debate in Italian newspapers: the so called "Third Page" ('Terza pagina').

A large portion of the 166 letters which are part of the epistolary correspondence between Deledda and «Corriere» – filed in the Historical Archives of the newspaper in Milan – are addressed to Luigi Albertini. He was the director, together with his brother Alberto, from 1900 to 1925. The press group, under their leadership, became one of the most widespread and influential in Europe (and also the main opposition constitutional force to government policies during fascist Italian dictatorship).

During the "Third Page" glory years, the 'elzeviro' was the very genuine symbol of compromise between literature and print media journalism: the hallmark of Italian culture during the *entre-deux-guerres*. The word 'elzeviro' could be translated in two ways: 'light and fun article of variety' (also 'fluff piece') or 'short story'. This second one was the kind of writing most congenial to join journalistic practice, according to a general guideline culminating, outside the Italian borders, in the journalistic novel. This fact is confirmed by the nature of Deledda's literary production, almost exclusively of short fiction, intended for «Corriere della Sera» and «La Lettura»: the richly illustrated monthly magazine by «Corriere», thanks to which Deledda quite rightly formed the front row of an "endless supply of novelists" (as written by Antonia Arslan). Their escalation – not only in Italy – was coincident with the exploit of daily newspapers and magazines; and this all-female exploit caused stutters and attracted widespread in most of the 'intelligentsia' at that time.

After 1923, following a nine years interruption because of the suppression of the newspaper's cultural page during the First World War, Deledda returned to her writing in «Corriere»: in that period it was directed by Alberto Albertini, until his removing (1925) ordained by Fascist regime.

The setting of «Corriere» in cultural pages was always different, from one time to the next, because of new shifts in newspaper's direction. The correspondence Deledda-«Corriere», in addition to her biographical events, shall document topic and stylistic choices concerning the short stories intended for publication. These various options were inevitably influenced by the editorial destination and affected by continuous changes, with a special focus on language and topics covered. These changes resulted from specific demands and punctual suggestion from newspaper's direction, always experimenting the author's capabilities.

The publication of writings in the newspaper necessarily laid down a standard length of the text, whatever were their nature and narrative appeal. All of these were more or less appropriate to brevity, and many authors complained about it. By way of example it's enough to mention the absolutely spot-on similarity, graciously and efficiently scatological, coined by Carlo Emilio Gadda: the author of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* defined the work of writing in a newspaper

as the wasted effort of «a horse invited to urinate into a shot glass» (from the correspondence between Gadda and Gianfranco Contini). An objectively laborious attempt, doomed to failure. And many authors writing for «Corriere» – as can be seen in the correspondence Deledda-Albertini – stated that they could not combine optimally developments of the plot and limited number of fonts. Vice versa, about the requirement of brevity we have touched upon, there isn't any catalogue of complaints into the correspondence Deledda-«Corriere». So we're wondering: for what reason?

We think a reasonable answer lies, once again, in the one-to-one relation between Italian culture (urban culture) and Sardinian cultural bedrock (agropastoral, sardophone, of the oral tradition). Deledda opts for a translation work, for a revision in Italian language of Sardinian '*contos*' ('stories' or 'short stories' in Sardinian language). Starting with Sardinian oral tradition, Deledda establishes a relentless *solve et coagula* of a lot of narrative material, provided by '*contos*': recent studies by Anne Defrance and Jean-François Perrin about orality in literacy show exactly how the first (orality) might be called one of the ways in which the second (literacy) expresses itself.

This fact will allow the author to answer the readership and also the newspaper's concern: a "light reading" it was to be preferred, and it was necessary to alleviate the effects of any discontinuity, suspension or non-fulfilment which are inherent risks in journalistic writing activity. The narrative material provided by tales (*contos*), even if they have not fixed rules and standards to be strictly complied, has an inherent potential: the brevity, which from the "once upon a time" formula has to ferry the listener to the 'happy end' (or *heureux dénouement* whatever it may be called). And if it isn't happy, in any case it expresses and conveys, by means of similar allegorical wording, the ritual motto of a moralistic-pedagogical-paidetic nature.

The compliance with standards of the *elzeviro*'s literary form ensured the author a regular presence in the cultural pages of the newspaper: this had major implications in regards to the conception of literature as profession we've mentioned. Certainly it was not lost, on Deledda's mind, how functional the collaboration with a leading daily newspaper was to target the general public (and not only the specialized audiences of the magazine «Nuova Antologia»). Under the direction of Luigi Albertini the newspaper grew into the eight hundred thousand of copies; and «eight hundred thousand readers are a political party themselves». This was in fact the clear equation determined by Antonio Gramsci, contained in the speech of one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, pronounced in 1925 in the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

Consequently, Deledda had to deal with the inescapable iron law of any daily newspapers: the will of the director to get the exclusive of the author's signature. The break from this *foedus*, during the directorate of Ugo Ojetti, step Deledda away from «Corriere» for a time. However, the tone of the correspondence, first with Maffio Maffii and then with Aldo Borelli, is destined to change drastically when the author will win the Nobel Prize and the directorate will do anything to get his hands on Deledda's signature and to have her back into the newspaper. This fact shows that Deledda, in her *entrèe en scène* in the newspaper (in common with other female writers), is forced to use a range of approaches which are not related to writing activity *tout court*, but also to writing as an occupation, a business, with a continuous operational presence in the publishing market. She has to know how to master multiple kinds of writing (the '*elzeviro*' is one of those), having sufficiently ductility to adapt to a changing, in order to involve readers of differing cultural and social standards.

The "Third Page" of «Corriere» will allow Deledda to let a general public know Sardinian world and imagination. For Deledda, Sardinia is not only an island to be studied to collect ethnological data, but an island to dream, to fantasize about: as Nicola Tanda wrote, an island of the myth.

About the literary transposition of this concept – in the context of the newspapers – are worth the same considerations expressed by the anthropologist Alberto Mario Cirese on the author Cesare Pavese, with the words "Fantasy" and "Style": two variables firmly distinguished also in Deledda's prose, and highly dependent on ethnoantropological substrate.

In the context of the cooperation with «Corriere», Deledda had always – it is the current practice in newspapers – to comply requests, demands and wishes of the newspaper's Directorate (related to form and stile of her writings), building upon different suggestions (sometimes

reluctantly). In some cases, remarks made by editors concerned topics and themes chosen and covered by the author. Unequivocally appears in the correspondence the great availability and receptivity of the writer to suggestions presented by Albertini (always setting her author's 'ego' aside). The clear differences observable in the letters addressed to «Corriere» and written by another author, Tommaso Landolfi, clearly show how much Deledda's elementary school diploma – together with the teachings of the educational society represented by the microcosm of Nuoro – was enough to make her realize that literary communication codes had to be unavoidably appropriate to the different means of transmission of messages (the daily newspaper, in our case).

«Were you really hoping that during my journalistic apprenticeship with «Corriere» I would make myself something that's not me?». This just mentioned was the very uptight rhetorical questions put by Tommaso Landolfi, asking the director of the newspaper. It looks really nothing like the following Deledda's statement, not in any way bitter: «All I want is exactly to write for the pleasure of the readership of «Corriere»: a readership you know better than me». Surely, it couldn't be flattery: in fact Deledda landed on «Corriere»'s pages already with a multiannual experience gained writing for journals and periodicals. So she never had to deal with the nonchalant textual deletions or erasures made by editors in the texts written by Landolfi, behind his back. On the other hand Deledda's writings fared better: these were thoroughly put on 'stand by', as long as the author's wish coincided – with her knowledge – with directorate's expectations.

By further letters belonging to the correspondence it can be seen clearly how much the newspaper would give evidently preference to an approach based on complicity with readership instead of cool distance. The director Aldo Borelli in the correspondence with Deledda expressed concern at the risk of a drift in that direction, completely avoiding turning the cultural page of «Corriere» into a nook of philosophers and academics *entre nous*.

The writing skills acquired in the summary – “tailor made” according to newspaper's need – were built on by Deledda also and above all in her novels: a tight, synchronic *ménage* between short stories, novels and other writings published in periodic editions. Not always her storytelling methods and choices – especially in the early phase of the working relationship with «Corriere» – meet with the approval of the director, often worried about implications and effects that an article written for the “Third Page” could have on the readers, duly taking into account the historical context, social and political difficulties that Italy was experiencing. We've to bear very much in mind the real calling of «Corriere» since it started, thanks to the determination of Luigi Torelli Viollier: the willingness to provide to Lombardy middle-class a national identification model, emphasizing industrialization and deruralization, full of hopes and expectations: ethical and political.

Nevertheless, in the pages of the newspaper most representative of Italian middle class, Deledda brings the fairy-tale Sardinian bestiary. In this regard, although on rare occasions, the editors (they were very stickler) sometimes seem to want to have a say in issues where no one like Deledda would be able to report with full knowledge of the facts. The director Aldo Borelli said in a letter addressed to the writer: «The fox hardly ever attack flocks of sheep. Instead, whether you are perfectly aware of what you're talking about, send your paper back and I'm going to publish it of course». However, Deledda very cheerfully accepts comments and observations, and amends the text of her fairy tale, well aware of mechanisms and rules that govern the relations between authors and newspaper's editors, avoiding fuelling counter-productive polemics with diplomacy (an art at which Deledda excels like few others).

Under the leadership of the director Aldo Borelli, a quartet of journalists – all culturally active – was, for the will of the director himself, in charge of examining the manuscripts of Deledda and other authors. They were Emilio Radius (journalist and writer), Raul Radice (drama critic), Bruno Fallaci (the uncle of the more famous writer Oriana), Guido Piovene (journalist and writer). The reading of Deledda's fairy-tales, featuring anthropomorphized pets that enlivened much of her writing published by «Corriere», proved to be very helpful to this team of journalists, and also to the other authors. Deledda clearly paved the way for the fairy-tale bestiary which permeates also the writings by Dino Buzzati and, to some extent, by Landolfi (already mentioned). Her bestiary carried away

from oral tradition to writing – and from the boundless Sardinian nature to the close columns of the newspaper – a semiotic universe once again far behind: a different universe, in comparison with the belief system symbolized by the newspaper. Deledda let inside the presses of the newspaper a fairy-tale bestiary, which implied semantics combining on the one hand ethnological assumptions, on the other literary purposes. Metamorphism and zoomorphism present in Deledda's tales followed an age-old and continuing tradition: from Aesop to the humanism of Leon Battista Alberti, the renaissance of Leonardo da Vinci, until we reach La Fontaine; and then, later on, Italian authors as Tozzi, Trilussa, finally in order to find Rodari and Malerba.

It is extremely significant that Carlo Ossola has included in his anthology *Libri d'Italia (1861-2011)*, recently published by Treccani, Deledda's tales that came out in «Corriere dei piccoli» (the illustrated children's magazine supplement of «Corriere della Sera»). If the illustrated magazines – as Pierre Albert wrote – are the only written sign representing the society of which they are expression, Grazia Deledda made her mark in those too and on the pattern 'text-image' (ever present element in the works of Roland Barthes).

Just on the columns of «Corriere» (on September 26th, 1971) the Italian literary critic Geno Pampaloni wrote that «in the graph paper of the Twentieth Century, Grazia Deledda is never in line». A sentence that really expresses Deledda's proclivities to place herself always 'outside the lines': a regular feature, from which her presence in the pages of the newspaper couldn't be free. The *reverie*, never exhausted, of the anthropological structures founding Sardinian popular imagination, becomes the inexhaustible source of fanciful news, written by Deledda through a child's eyes, earning a way of excellence in the largest Italian daily newspaper.

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