

Sardinian Fiction at End of the Twentieth and Beginning of the Twenty-first Century

An overview and first assessment

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The literary image of Sardinia in the Twentieth Century

In the second half of the twentieth century, Carlo Dionisotti's invitation to study the geography together with the history of Italian literature¹ has encouraged new readings of national literary production. The acceptance of polycentrism as an intrinsic aspect of Italian culture, and the consequent new readings of national literary production shifting of the point of observation from the centre to the peripheries – e.g. from Florence, Rome, Turin, Milan, and Naples to the South, the borders of Italy, or the islands – has inspired a more nuanced and varied appreciation of Italian literature. In this context, Sardinian narrative fiction can be defined as a recognizable 'family group' with two unifying elements: the biography and formation of the authors, who are either Sardinian or belonging to Sardinian culture, and the presence of the island as one of the texts' main themes and symbols.² Sardinian writers appear to share an obsession with a kind of self-depiction which, by reversing the habitual relationship between figure and background, places the island as the protagonist of the tale: Sardinia is not *a* place, but *the* place.³ The centrality of self-representation, undertaken for the benefit of local as well as for external readers, and often in response to the foreign gaze,⁴ was already clear in the first analyses of this literary production. Egidio Pilia, in 1926, underlined a transparent will on the part of the island authors to tell and describe Sardinia in its historical, geographical, ethnographical and cultural characteristics. In his interpretation, Sardinian writers were

grandi riproduttori, [...] fotografi dei costumi e dei sentimenti della loro epoca. Per ciò esaminare le loro opere vuol dire, più che conoscere il loro io individuale, stabilire lo stato psicologico, intellettuale e morale della Sardegna dell'epoca in cui essi vissero.⁵

¹ C. Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1967.

² G. Contini, 'La letteratura in italiano del Novecento', in: M. Brigaglia (ed.) *La Sardegna*, 3 vols, Cagliari, Della Torre, 1982, vol. I, pp. 43-54, p. 43. For overviews of Sardinian literature, see G. Pirodda, 'La Sardegna', in: A. Asor Rosa (ed.), *Letteratura italiana. Storia e geografia*, 3 vols, vol. III. *L'età contemporanea*, Torino, Einaudi, 1989, pp. 918-66, Id., 'L'attività letteraria tra Otto e Novecento', in: L. Berlinguer, A. Mattone (eds.), *La Sardegna* (in the series *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni dall'unità a oggi*), Torino, Einaudi, 1998, pp. 1083-122, and G. Marci, *In presenza di tutte le lingue del mondo. Letteratura sarda*, Cagliari, CUEC / Centro Studi Filologici Sardi, 2005.

³ See N. Rudas, *L'isola dei coralli. Itinerari dell'identità*, Roma, Carocci, 2004, pp. 82-83.

⁴ Although Sardinia was not part of the educational *grand tour* prescribed to the offspring of the European aristocracy and high bourgeoisie, there is a tradition of foreign travelogues focused on the island. The most famous is probably D.H. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, New York, Thomas Seltzer, 1921. See also the collection by S. Pineider, A. Gallus (eds.), *Viaggiatori di Sardegna*, 3 vols, Cagliari, Demos, 1997.

⁵ E. Pilia, *La letteratura narrativa in Sardegna*. Cagliari, Edizioni Il Nuraghe, 1926, p. 4 (now in Id., *Opere*

Pilia's study established several characteristics of Sardinian fiction that can be found also in the works of later writers and have been confirmed by more recent literary criticism. These include: the majority of the novels' interest in documenting life on the island from an ethnographic or socio-historical perspective; the delay in interacting with and re-elaborating the main coeval literary models – mainly Iberian in the past, and Italian from the eighteenth century onwards –; the scarce formal mastery of the written language (gradually superseded throughout the twentieth century); the multilingualism of the different epochs, alternating between Spanish and Italian, and at times mixing them with the local language (with few exceptions, writing in Sardinian is limited to genres contiguous to orality, such as poetry and theatre).⁶

Since its inception and then throughout the twentieth century, Sardinian fiction also contributed to the dissemination of a fixed image of the island: archaic, rural, closer to nature than to culture, resistant to change and almost out of history. These elements, for example, were foregrounded in the motivations given by the Academy of Stockholm when presenting Grazia Deledda (1871-1936) with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927: the writer was praised for the representation of life in her 'appartata isola natale', an island characterised by the 'grandiosità della natura sarda', in which 'uomini e natura formano come un tutto', and where characters have 'l'impronta di figure monumentali del Vecchio Testamento'.⁷ On her part, when introducing herself in a letter to the Milanese publisher Treves, a 19-year old Deledda had stated clearly that it was her only dream and aim as a writer to 'illustrare un paese sconosciuto che amo molto intensamente, la Sardegna'.⁸

Beside the dimension of 'Sardinianness' that can be traced in the works of two intellectuals and politicians such as Emilio Lussu (1890-1975) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) (the latter being the Sardinian author most widely read at a global level), the image of the island is confirmed by the few narrative texts that, out of a rich local production, have attracted the interest of national readers and, through translations and filmic adaptations, have in some cases made their way to the international public.⁹

edite, 2 vols., Cagliari, Cuccu / Centro Studi Filologici Sardi, 2013, vol. I, pp. 425-582).

⁶ On literature written in the Sardinian language, see S. Tola (ed.), *La letteratura in lingua sarda. Testi, autori, vicende*, Cagliari, Cuccu, 2006. An example of the vitality of the theatre tradition in Sardinian is a recent production by Sardegna Teatro in Cagliari: *Macbettu*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* directed by Alessandro Serra, winner of the Italian Ubu prize for best theatre piece of 2017 (Sardinian transl. by A. Carroni, *Macbettu*, Nuoro, Ilisso, 2017). In the year 2000s, a new impetus was given to the translation of classics of international literature into Sardinian, also thanks to the funding granted for these projects by the regional law n.26 (15th October 1997) for the *Promozione e valorizzazione della cultura e della lingua della Sardegna*.

⁷ Cf. R. Dedola, *Grazia Deledda. I luoghi, gli amori, le opere*, Roma, Avagliano, 2016, pp. 327-329. On Deledda, see also M. King, *Grazia Deledda. A legendary life*, Leicester, Troubador, 2005, S. Wood (ed.), *The Challenge of Modernity. Essays on Grazia Deledda*, Leicester, Troubador, 2007, and M. Heyer-Caput, *Grazia Deledda's Dance of Modernity*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008.

⁸ G. Deledda, 'Lettere', in *Versi e prose giovanili*, Milano, Treves, 1938, pp. 233-270, p. 236. Within the author's production available in English, see at least G. Deledda, *Canne al vento*, Milan, Treves, 1913 (Eng. transl. by M. King, *Reeds in the Wind*, New York, Italica Press, 1999), and *La madre*, Milano, Treves, 1920 (Eng. transl. by M.G. Steegman, *The Mother*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1928, with an authoritative foreword by D.H. Lawrence); other translated texts include *Cosima*, *Dopo il divorzio* (*After the Divorce*), *Elias Portolu*, *La Chiesa della solitudine* (*The Church of Solitude*), *Cenere* (*Ashes*), *Marianna Sirca*, and the short stories *Il Chiaroscuro* (for bibliographic details, see R. Healey (ed.), *Twentieth-century Italian Literature in English Translation. An annotated bibliography (1929-1997)*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998, *ad vocem*).

⁹ English translations and reviews are mentioned in this article not only as an invitation to Anglophone readers to approach this area of Italian literature, but also as evidence of international recognition: on the one hand, in fact, the Anglo-Saxon publishing market is the least receptive of writers who don't use English (as evidenced, among others, in: L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation* (1994¹), London - New York, Routledge, 2007²), and on the other it works as a powerful 'visibility platform' that enhances the chances for translated texts to be further disseminated internationally and enter the

From the debut story *La sposa in città* (1939) to *Paese d'ombre* (1972), consecrated by the awarding of the Premio Strega, the Sardinian novels and short stories by Giuseppe Dessì (1909-1977) had full recognition in Italy and some visibility abroad.¹⁰ Dessì's poetics is influenced by European modernism and philosophical thinking (from Proust to Bergson); in his writing, research on language and literary structures is matched with a strong ethical and civic commitment.¹¹ Of local interest are also the Sardinian writers of the post-war period and up to the 1960s, who can be seen as epigones of Italian neorealism. Their works are mainly expressions of a realism focused on social commentary, but are often caught in a difficult balance between clear ethical stances and not always refined aesthetic results.¹²

Yet, one has to wait until the 1970s for the island to recapture the attention of international readers, thanks to two novels that reflect the predilection of the times for narrative which mixes diary, documentary and essayism. The first is *Padre padrone. L'educazione di un pastore* (1975) by Gavino Ledda (born 1938),¹³ the autobiographical *Bildungsroman* of a young man who breaks away from a destiny of isolation, exploitation and patriarchal violence, at first by leaving his village to do the military service, and then by resuming the studies he was forced to interrupt as a child in order to work as a shepherd. The text, which inaugurated the series of experimental testimonial novels 'I franchi narratori' from Feltrinelli, had wide-reaching appreciation also thanks to the film made by the Taviani Brothers, which was awarded the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1977. In the same year, an unfinished philosophical *memoir* set in Nuoro, *Il giorno del giudizio*, written by the jurist Salvatore Satta (1902-1975), was published posthumously and soon elevated to the status of a contemporary classic.¹⁴

Ten years later, in occasion of the English translation, George Steiner devoted a long and passionate review of this novel in the pages of *The New Yorker*. He framed it via comparisons with Edgard Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien años de soledad*: another indicator of the persistent fascination for Sardinia as an out-of-time literary place.¹⁵

field of world literature (see D. Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, Woodstock, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 6: 'A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin').

¹⁰ G. Dessì, *Paese d'ombre*, Milano, Mondadori, 1972 (Eng. transl. by F. Frenaye, *The Forest of Norbio*, New York - London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975). See also: J. Barnes, 'Giuseppe Dessì (1909-1977): A bibliography', in: *Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies*, 15 (1982), pp. 26-36.

¹¹ See at least *Il disertore*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1961, awarded the Premio Bagutta in 1962 (Eng. transl. by V. Hathaway Moriconi, *The Deserter*, New York - London, Harcourt Brace & 1962, and also, with Eng. transl. by D. Origo, London, Harvill Press, 1962). Some of Dessì's stories were translated while he was living, in the 1960s and 1970s, but over time they have ceased to be available in English (in addition to *Paese d'ombre* and *Il disertore*, see *San Silvano*, in: Healey (ed.), *Twentieth-century Italian Literature in English Translation*, cit., *ad vocem*).

¹² Among them: Salvatore Cambosu (esp. his Sardinian *zibaldone*: *Miele amaro*, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1954), Michele Columbu, Giuseppe Fiori and Francesco Masala, as well as Maria Giacobbe and Giuseppe Zuri (pen name of Salvatore Mannuzzu) who are still active nowadays and whose profiles are traced *infra*.

¹³ G. Ledda, *Padre Padrone. L'educazione di un pastore*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1975 (Eng. transl. by G. Salmanazar, *Padre Padrone: The Education of a Shepherd*, London, Allen Lane, 1979).

¹⁴ S. Satta, *Il giorno del giudizio* (1977), Milano, Adelphi, 1979 (Eng. transl. by P. Creagh, *The Day of Judgement*, London, Collins Harvill, 1987); cf. also the recent reading of the novel by one of the most iconic Italian actors of our times: 'Il giorno del giudizio' di Salvatore Satta letto da Toni Servillo, broadcasted in 30 episodes as part of *Ad alta voce*, RAI Radio 3, between the 18th January and the 26th February 2016, and now available at www.raiplayradio.it.

¹⁵ G. Steiner, 'One Thousand Years of Solitude', *The New Yorker*, 19th October 1987, now in *George Steiner at the New Yorker*, ed. R. Boyers, New York, New Directions, 2008, pp. 86-94.

A phase of transition: the 1980s and the 1990s

Less visible from afar is the Sardinian production of the 1980s and 1990s, although it is precisely in these decades that the seeds are sewn for the emergence of the latest wave of Sardinian writers in the new millennium. These are the years of the short literary career of Sergio Atzeni (1952-1995), whose work becomes a common patrimony to writers, artists and intellectuals immediately after his premature death. Atzeni's stories, articulated in postmodern, experimental literary forms and presented in a hyper-worked and progressively more mixtilingual Italian, present either mythical-epic reinterpretations of Sardinian history or glimpses into contemporary urban settings, with a preference for the peripheries.¹⁶ His writing – rooted in the cultural and social climate of the 1970s and in the debates on the island's autonomy, identity, and language – marks an ideological turning point and serves as a bridge towards the different points of view, themes and languages that will become dominant during the new millennium.

Atzeni contributes significantly to overthrowing the customary identity paradigm that, throughout the twentieth century, had seen in Nuoro and the central region of Barbagia the depositaries of traditional Sardinian culture and language. This interpretation of 'Sardinianness', which restricts the literary geography of the island to only its most internal and conservative part, is still widespread in common thinking as well as in politics and the broader cultural field. One can only briefly mention here the focus on archaic varieties of Sardinian in the most authoritative linguistic studies of the twentieth century, such as those by Max Leopold Wagner, and the influential theorisations on the 'costante resistenziale sarda' proposed by the archaeologist, intellectual and politician Giovanni Lilliu, who identified a continuous opposition of the Sardinian populations living in the heart of the island against external powers, from the prehistoric era of the *nuraghi* civilisation to the twentieth century.¹⁷ In literature, this image is indebted to the successful model created by Grazia Deledda, as we are effectively reminded by her younger fellow countryman, Marcello Fois:

Quei panni che Don Lisander aveva lavato in Arno per tutti gli italiani dopo di lui, la Deledda li ha lavati a Istiritta [*Nuoro*] per tutti i sardi, e non solo, dopo di lei.

[...]

Ai sardi diventa chiaro che la Sardegna letteraria è diventata più piccola della Sardegna geografica. C'è la Sardegna-Sardegna, il resto è abitato da turisti, sardi senza pedigree.¹⁸

In Atzeni's novels and short stories, on the other hand, 'Sardinianness' is the expression of a composite, multi-layered and dynamic identity, that does not exclude the history (or myth) of the 'sardi resistenti' in Barbagia, but is also inclusive of a plurality of geographies (the South, the mines, the coasts), and their histories, all worthy of literary representation. The island is now portrayed as an internally diversified continent, exposed to external influxes that can be both positive or negative, but in any case cannot be avoided: 'Comprendevamo d'essere al centro di un mare che si faceva di giorno in giorno più popolato' – states Antonio Setzu, one of the narrators in

¹⁶ On the historical side, see *Apologo del giudice bandito*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1986, and *Passavamo sulla terra leggeri*, Milano, Mondadori, 1995; set in the first half of the twentieth century is *Il figlio di Bakunin*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1991 (Eng. transl. by J. Rugman, *Bakunin's son*, New York, Italica Press, 1996), and on the contemporary side are *Il quinto passo è l'addio* (Milano, Mondadori, 1996) and *Bellas mariposas* (Palermo, Sellerio, 1996). The most recent critical work on the author is G. Ledda, G. Sulis (eds.), *Sergio Atzeni e le voci della Sardegna*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2017.

¹⁷ Cf. M.L. Wagner, *La lingua sarda. Storia, spirito e forma*, Bern, Francke, 1951, and *Dizionario etimologico sardo*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1960-64, and G. Lilliu, *Costante resistenziale sarda*, Cagliari, Fossataro, 1971.

¹⁸ M. Fois, *Prefazione*, in: G. Deledda, *L'edera*, Nuoro, Ilisso, 2005, pp. 7-16, p. 9, p. 11.

Passavamo sulla terra leggeri – ‘Non potevamo fermare il ciclo dell’uomo, nessuno può fermarlo. Dovevamo incontrare gli altri uomini, per crescere. L’incontro ha un costo, pagarlo è inevitabile.’¹⁹ In this new ideological context, the port city of Cagliari, the Sardinian capital, almost absent in previous Sardinian literature, acquires new relevance as the symbol of these stratified encounters. This is evidenced in an often-quoted passage taken from *Il quinto passo è l’addio*:

La nave bianca si allontana e dietro un dente alto e bianco di calcare sparisce l’antica fortezza vedetta dei Fenici, l’avamposto d’Europa al respiro dell’Africa e d’Oriente alle porte d’Occidente, popolato da una scura genia parente di Annibale, adocchiato da predoni scalzi, battuto da tutti i venti, abitato da tutti i profumi e i fetori e da ogni genere d’ingegno e vizio e da qualche virtù, come ovunque siano uomini.²⁰

Other key figures between the 1980s and 1990s are Salvatore Mannuzzu (born 1930), an ex-magistrate and member of parliament, and the anthropologist Giulio Angioni (1939-1917), who were active in previous years and continued to be protagonists of the Sardinian and Italian literary scene up to the year 2010s. Their novels *Procedura* and *L’oro di Fraus*, released simultaneously in 1988, were designated by the Italian critic Oreste del Buono (the ‘godfather’ of Italian *gialli*) as possible heralds of a new Sardinian ‘romanzo d’inchiesta’.²¹ They signal an important discontinuity in the type of stories proposed in the island, and anticipate the fortune of crime fiction in the years to come, in Sardinia as well as in Italy. Mannuzzu’s novels have a preference for high-class contemporary settings and philosophical-existential themes; set in an anonymous, decadent provincial town inspired by the writer’s own birthplace, Sassari,²² they have a dense intertextual presence of the classics as well as an essential and rarefied language, and a style influenced by the model of grand European poetry as much as by the author’s practice of judicial Italian and Latin.²³ Giulio Angioni enriches Sardinian storytelling with the point of view of an anthropologist. He focuses on the rapid processes of social and cultural change taking place in Sardinia in the second half the twentieth century, and particularly on the forms of work, family roles, the phenomena of emigration, and on the figure of the intellectual that lives and testifies to these changes after having abandoned (and thus betrayed) the place of his birth. Linguistically, he attempts a literary rendition of regional orality, and he explores different genres – from testimonial fiction to the *noir* and to the historical novel. His stories explore diverse epochs, and the geography of reference includes the literary village of Fraus,²⁴ based on his native Guasila in South Sardinia, the rural

¹⁹ S. Atzeni, *Passavamo sulla terra leggeri*, cit., p.55.

²⁰ S. Atzeni, *Il quinto passo è l’addio*, cit., p. 62. For its focus on the complex relationships between the subaltern island and the hegemonic ‘other’ (the ancient Romans, the Catalans and the Spanish rulers, up to the Savoy and the national unification), Atzeni’s novels have been often linked to those of coeval postcolonial writers. On Sardinia within the context of 20th-century Italian regionalism, see M. Clark, ‘Sardinia: Cheese and Modernization’, in: C. Levy (ed.), *Italian Regionalism: History, Identity, and Politics*, Oxford, Berg, 1996, pp. 81-106.

²¹ O. Del Buono, ‘L’isola del mistero’, in: *Panorama*, 17th July 1988. See G. Angioni, *L’oro di Fraus*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1988, and S. Mannuzzu, *Procedura*, Torino, Einaudi, 1988 (Eng. transl. by J. Shepley, New York, Villard Books, 1993).

²² The urban setting devoid of any typical Sardinian characteristic distinguishes Mannuzzu’s stories from the others, in which explicit and insisted references to Sardinian places are common even when, following the model set by Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s ‘Macondo’, toponyms are invented (e.g. ‘Fraus’ for Giulio Angioni, ‘Nuraiò’ for Flavio Soriga, ‘Abacrasta’ for Salvatore Niffoi, ‘Soreni’ for Michela Murgia). As an introduction to the author, see A. Cadoni, *Il fantasma e il seduttore. Ritratto di Salvatore Mannuzzu*, Roma, Donzelli, 2017.

²³ In addition to *Procedura*, cit., see at least S. Mannuzzu, *Un morso di formica* (1989), *Le ceneri del Montiferro* (1994) and *Le fate d’inverno* (2004), all published in Torino by Einaudi.

²⁴ In G. Angioni, *L’oro di Fraus*, cit., and *Il sale sulla ferita*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1990.

countryside, and Cagliari, above all in its medieval and modern past.²⁵ They are, however, non-exclusive settings, inserted in the international networks of relations and travels to which characters, especially narrators and/or protagonists, belong.²⁶

Similar to Mannuzzu and Angioni for the long-period spanning of her literary career is the matriarch of contemporary Sardinian narrative, Maria Giacobbe (b. 1928), who has sixty years of creative writing behind her. After her debut with the autobiographical *Diario di una maestrina*, a testimony-inquiry on the working and living conditions of a young school teacher and her students in a small Sardinian village in the 1950s,²⁷ she turned towards the novel of invention, without however discarding the focus on the historical and social specificity of Sardinian reality.²⁸

Multiplicity and variety of voices in the 2000s

In 1998, Giovanni Pirodda closed his contribution on 'L'attività letteraria tra Otto e Novecento' with the following statement:

Gli autori più rappresentativi possono essere indicati in Salvatore Satta, Salvatore Mannuzzu, Giulio Angioni, Sergio Atzeni, cui si può aggiungere Marcello Fois, come rappresentante di una nuova generazione, con esperimenti interessanti che mettono a frutto la lezione degli autori più recenti (a partire da Salvatore Satta).²⁹

After twenty years, this assessment is still valid, although in need of an update.³⁰ We add now the already mentioned Marcello Fois (b. 1960), included in this section because he belongs to a younger generation than the novelists previously analysed. Fois has established himself as the most authoritative voice among the writers who debuted in the 1990s and in the new millennium,³¹ both for the intensity of a prose inspired by forms of Sardinian oral storytelling yet not exempt from lyrical tones, and for the coherence of a vast literary project, summarised in an interview in the idea of 'raccontare un posto dentro un secolo'.³² The place is Nuoro, and the stories cover the entirety of post-unification Italian history, the end of the nineteenth and through the

²⁵ In G. Angioni, *Le fiamme di Toledo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2006, and *Sulla faccia della terra*, Nuoro - Milano, Il Maestrone - Frassinelli, 2015.

²⁶ See in particular *Un'ignota compagnia*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1992 (set in a factory in Milan, and having as protagonists a Sardinian and an African migrant), and *Gabbiani sul Carso*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2010 (at the border with ex Yugoslavia). On Angioni's creative writing up to 2005, see F. Manai, *Cosa succede a Frau? Sardegna e mondo nel racconto di Giulio Angioni*, Cagliari, Cuccu, 2006.

²⁷ M. Giacobbe, *Diario di una maestrina*, Bari, Laterza, 1957.

²⁸ See at least M. Giacobbe, *Gli arcipelaghi*, Roma, Biblioteca del Vascello, 1995, and *Pòju Luàdu*, Nuoro, Il Maestrone, 2005. Deledda, Lussu, Dessì, Giacobbe, Mannuzzu, and Atzeni are the Sardinian writers included in the canon-making anthology *Racconti del Novecento*, ed. E. Siciliano, 3 vols, Milan, Mondadori, 2001: a signal of the vitality of the region's narrative fiction in different moments of the national literary production.

²⁹ G. Pirodda, 'L'attività letteraria tra Otto e Novecento', cit. pp. 1120-1121.

³⁰ On the the history, culture and society of contemporary Sardinia, see F. Bachis, V. Deplano, L. Marrocu (eds.), *La Sardegna Contemporanea. Idee, luoghi, processi culturali*, Roma, Donzelli, 2015, and specifically on narrative fiction, in the same collection, G. Sulis, 'Anche noi possiamo raccontare le nostre storie'. *Narrativa in Sardegna, 1984-2015*, pp. 533-558.

³¹ To date, Fois's production includes 14 novels plus collections of short stories, poems, and texts for theatre and TV. The following novels are available also in English: transl. by P. Creagh for Harvill Press in London are *The Advocate. A Sardinian mystery*, 2003 (*Sempre caro*, Nuoro, Il Maestrone, 1998), *Blood from the Sky*, 2006 (*Sangue dal cielo*, Nuoro - Milano, Il Maestrone - Feltrinelli, 1999), and *Memory of the Abyss*, 2012 (*Memoria del vuoto*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006); transl. by S. Mazzarella for McLehose Press in London: *Bloodlines*, 2014 (*Stirpe*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009) and *The Time in Between*, 2018 (*Nel tempo di mezzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2012). Although now dated, see as introduction to the author M. Marras, *Marcello Fois*, Firenze, Cadmo, 2009.

³² Interview to Fois in M.A. Amendola, *L'isola che sorprende: la narrativa sarda in italiano (1974-2006)*, Cagliari, Cuccu, 2006, p. 215.

twentieth century. They tend to be articulated in trilogies, inspired initially by crime fiction - as in his first series, set at the end of the twentieth century (*Ferro recente*, *Meglio morti* and *Dura madre*), and in the second one, which has as protagonist and investigator Bustianu, a character based on the figure of the lawyer, intellectual and poet from Nuoro, Sebastiano Satta (1867-1914) (*Sempre caro*, *Sangue dal cielo* and *L'altro mondo*).³³ Lately, Fois moved to the family saga, with an original revival of the nineteenth-century literary model (*Stirpe*, *Nel tempo di mezzo*, *Luce perfetta*).

It is more difficult to take a close look at the Sardinian literary production of the last two decades, not only because of one's vicinity to the object of study, but also for the impressive quantity of new authors and books.³⁴ Furthermore, the vivacity of the literary scene, for which cultural journalists have coined the emphatic labels of 'Sardinian nouvelle vague' and 'Rinascimento sardo',³⁵ expands also to Sardinian cinema, often inspired by recent Sardinian narrative texts.³⁶ Many of the debuts are in the area of crime or *noir* fiction, in consonance with contemporary Italian production, and many are released by the same publisher, Il Maestrone, founded in Nuoro in 1992, which had a pivotal role as both an attractor and a forge of middlebrow Sardinian storytellers. Among the debuts with Il Maestrone feature Flavio Soriga and Luciano Marrocu in 2000, Giorgio Todde and Aldo Tanchis in 2001, Alessandro De Roma in 2007, Savina Dolores Massa in 2008.³⁷ Collaborations with Il Maestrone for at least a phase of their careers are significant also for Fois, Salvatore Niffoi, Alberto Capitta and Francesco Abate (debuting in 1997, 1998 and 1999 respectively), in addition to Giacobbe and Angioni, who published new texts and re-released previous books for Il Maestrone. In parallel with another publisher in Nuoro, Ilisso, Il Maestrone has also produced new editions of Sardinian classics, thus guaranteeing new readers for the

³³ On Fois as a crime fiction writer see: L. Rinaldi, 'Location and Identity in Contemporary Italian Crime Narrative: The Case of Marcello Fois's Novels', in: A. Saunders, L. Rorato (eds.), *The Essence and the Margin. National Identities and Collective Memoires in Contemporary European Culture*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2009, pp. 151-164, M. Chu, 'Crime and the South', in: G. Pieri (ed.), *Italian Crime Fiction*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2011, pp. 89-114, and B. Pezzotti, 'Sardinia, the motherland', in: Ead. *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction. A bloody journey*, Madison, N.J., Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012, pp. 147-160.

³⁴ Amendola, *L'isola che sorprende*, cit., lists 155 Sardinian writers who are active between 1974 and 2005. Given the vastness of the phenomenon, full references will be given only for the main works mentioned. General bio-bibliographical details can be found in the *Catalogo storico ragionato degli scrittori sardi dal IV al XXI secolo*, in *Centro Studi Filologici* <www.filologiasarda.eu>; some of the older texts are also available online from the portal *Sardegna DigitalLibrary. La memoria digitale della Sardegna*, <http://www.sardegna.digitallibrary.it> (last accessed on 11th December 2017).

³⁵ See G. Fofi, 'Sardegna, che Nouvelle Vague!', in: *Panorama*, 13th November 2003, and Id. (ed.), 'Dossier Sardegna', in: *Lo straniero*, X, 74-75 (2006), pp. 15-86.

³⁶ *Il figlio di Bakunin* and *Bellas mariposas* by Atzeni have been adapted into films, respectively by Gianfranco Cabiddu (1997) and Salvatore Mereu (2012); the life of Atzeni is also the subject of a docu-film, *Madre acqua. Frammenti di vita di Sergio Atzeni*, directed by Daniele Atzeni (2015). Mannuzzu's *Procedura* has inspired *Un delitto impossibile* by Antonello Grimaldi (2000), *Arcipelaghi* by Giacobbe has become a feature film directed by Giovanni Columbu (2001), *Jimmy della collina*, a children's tale by Massimo Carlotto, Sardinian resident for an important phase of his life, was made into a film by Enrico Pau (2006), and the short-story *Disegno di sangue* by Fois has been adapted by Cabiddu into a television film within the RAI series *Crimini* (2007). Outside Sardinia, *Il mondo deve sapere* by Michela Murgia has inspired *Tutta la vita davanti* directed by P. Virzi, with Isabella Ragonese in the leading role (2008), and Milena Agus's *Mal di pietre* was turned into a film by Nicole Garcia, with Marion Cotillard (2017). For interdisciplinary studies on representations of the island and Sardinian identity between literature and cinema, see B. Wagner, *Sardinien, Insel im Dialogue. Texte, Diskurse, Filme*, Tübingen, Francke Verlag, 2008, and M.B. Urban, *Sardinia on Screen. The Construction of the Sardinian Character in Italian Cinema*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2013.

³⁷ As is often the case with small, quality publishers, there is a high turnover of writers, who, once their position is consolidated, tend to move to Frassinelli (with whom Il Maestrone also collaborates), Adelphi, or Einaudi. The latter is today the editorial group with the highest concentration of Sardinian writers: Salvatore Mannuzzu, Marcello Fois, Francesco Abate, Alessandro De Roma and Paola Soriga.

masterpieces of Deledda, Dessì, Cambosu, Masala, Satta, Ledda, Pintor, up to Atzeni, before diversifying their production with the inclusion of non-Sardinian writers. To complete the panorama of contemporary Sardinian narrators one must recall still Nicola Lecca (debut: 1999), the only writer not to set his stories on the island, and three female voices: Milena Agus, whose success in Italy followed from the foreign interest secured with the French translation of her second novel, *Mal di pietre* (2006), Michela Murgia, first blogger and then writer since 2006, and Paola Soriga, who debuted in 2012.

United by the focus on the island in at least some of their works, the writers briefly listed above continue the tradition of Sardinian fiction as a 'family group', mentioned at the beginning of this article. At the same time, Sardinian fiction in the 2000s and 2010s, with its internal variety of voices, themes, narrative forms – from *noir* and crime to historical novels (often in an allegorical or denunciatory key), and including also youth literature, ethnic writing, women's writing, *reportage*, travel literature, the dystopian novel, comical and parodic texts, up to children's literature, fantasy, and graphic novels – appears perfectly inserted in the multiple, simultaneous trends of contemporary Italian literature;³⁸ it seems therefore overcome the chronical lateness of a peripheral Sardinia with respect to the cultural centres of production, something that critics had highlighted in all previous phases of the island's history.³⁹

The uncertainties noted in the past in the written usage of the Italian language by Sardinian writers have also now disappeared. The national language no longer considered a goal to be conquered, thanks to its widespread diffusion throughout Italy in the second half of the twentieth century, the conquest is, by far, the recovery of Sardinian for artistic purposes: the presence of local or foreign borrowings becomes a tool to emphasise the geo-ethnic rootedness of the stories, from a maximum of Sardinian-Italian mixing in Niffoi (and increasingly intense with the passing of years) to a minimum in Todde's metaphysical *noir* or in the novels of Capitta, as well as in Mannuzzu.⁴⁰ These are conscious choices of style, poetics and ideology, in line with the variety of tendencies available in contemporary Italian fiction, Camilleri's Italo-Sicilian idiolect being a case in point. At the same time, multilingualism reflects the linguistic situation of the island, and is faithful to the range of expressive and communicative possibilities available to speakers.

Moreover, it is worth pointing out the relevance of generational belonging in relation to the plurality of points of view that characterises contemporary Sardinian fiction, especially if we look at the overcoming of the wound caused by modernity and post-modernity. It has often been observed that the Sardinian novel of the twentieth century has testified the trauma of the rapid transition, in the island, from a pre-modern state to a forced modernity. Clear examples are provided by Salvatore Mannuzzu and Giulio Angioni, both born in the 1930s, in Fascist times: the former, in a consideration on the mourning of the ancient roots elaborated by Satta in *Il giorno del giudizio*, affirms both the harrowing magnitude of that 'mondo perduto' and the need to accept 'la disfatta del mondo che ci appartiene e delle nostre vite',⁴¹ while the latter writes of having had 'un'infanzia più simile all'infanzia dell'età dei nuraghi

³⁸ For an overview of the main trends in contemporary Italian fiction, see A. Cortellessa (ed.), *La terra della prosa. Narratori italiani degli anni zero (1999-2014)*, Roma, L'Orma, 2014, and R. Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014.

³⁹ See G. Petronio, 'Ritardi della cultura letteraria in Sardegna', in G. Grana (ed.), *Novecento. I contemporanei*, Marzorati, Milano, 1979, vol. III, pp. 2601-2607, and G. Pirodda, 'La Sardegna', cit.

⁴⁰ On the language(s) of contemporary Sardinian fiction, see C. Lavinio, *Sardegna narrata e varietà subregionali dell'italiano*, in M. A. Dettori (ed.), *Dalla Sardegna all'Europa. Lingue e letterature regionali*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2014, pp. 177-200.

⁴¹ S. Mannuzzu, 'Finis Sardiniae (o la patria possibile)', in: L. Berlinguer, A. Mattone (eds.), *La Sardegna*, cit., pp. 1225-1244, p. 1228, p. 1244.

che all'infanzia di oggi'.⁴²

Different is the attitude of younger writers, who grew up in a 'glocal' Sardinia, both local *and* global, connected to the world digitally by the internet and physically via low-cost flights, visited by high numbers of both Italians and foreigners (tourists, workers, migrants, Erasmus students). Often travellers or migrants themselves, studying or working elsewhere, these writers, now in their thirties and forties, no longer weep, mourning their roots or the end of a millennial civilization; showing awareness of a historical change that has already happened, they write a different chapter of that same civilization. While remaining a central presence in their works, Sardinia is a point in a wider, global network, in which characters move naturally. This new phase of 'Sardinianess' is well represented by the young protagonists of an 'on the road' novel such as *Sardinia blues* by Flavio Soriga (b. 1975) – commuters between their island and London, one of the main migration destinations of young Sardinians in the 2000s –,⁴³ by Ludovico Lauter's cosmopolitan wanderings in the novel of Alessandro De Roma (b. 1970),⁴⁴ as well as by the girls moving to pre-war Rome in *Dove finisce Roma* or living in Italian and European university cities in *La Stagione che verrà*, both by Paola Soriga (b. 1979)⁴⁵ – young women who do not lose their Sardinian roots but accept being also 'grafted' onto other places.⁴⁶ One last example is provided by Michela Murgia (b. 1972). In her first novel, *Il mondo deve sapere*, she is comfortable describing with a sharp irony and fast pace the work experience in a call center in a small province town.⁴⁷ The story, initially written online as a personal blog, is set in Oristano, but the toponym does not appear, indicating that Sardinia today is also the site of an exploited global precariat, without marks of a particular identity. Yet, with her second novel, Murgia moves to a recent but undefined past, rich in popular myths like the *accabadora* of the title (i.e. the woman who gives a 'good death' to those who are terminally ill), and in specific social institutions, like the informal adoption of the so-called *fillus de anima* ('soul-children', i.e. 'bambini generati due volte, dalla povertà di una donna e dalla sterilità di un'altra').⁴⁸ Here, Sardinia's diversity and archaism work as an allegory, if not utopia, for our times. The traditional island, stereotypically, carries an alternative and fierce civil code, but through this archaic screen are filtered social themes of strict actuality, like the question of civic rights still debated in contemporary Italy: euthanasia and one's right to die, on the one hand, and the forms of non-biological maternity, on the other.

Overall, a change has occurred in the models of representation of the island. Traditionally (self-)perceived as a 'prison-island' or 'fortress-island', resistant and refractory to what comes from the sea, in opposition to the 'crossroad-island' represented by Sicily, where different civilizations have sedimented over the

⁴² G. Angioni, 'Un paese, ci vuole', in: S. Ligios, V. Ligios (eds.), *Gli atlanti. Tracce di identità*, Arzachena (SS), Soter, 2013, pp. 14-21, p. 14.

⁴³ F. Soriga, *Sardinia Blues*, Milano, Bompiani, 2008.

⁴⁴ A. De Roma, *Vita e morte di Ludovico Lauter*, Nuoro, Il Maestrale, 2007.

⁴⁵ P. Soriga, *Dove finisce Roma*, Einaudi, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, and *La stagione che verrà*, Torino, Einaudi, 2015.

⁴⁶ I borrow the idea of 'identitarian grafting' from the writer Joyce Lussu who, born in the Marche region, grown up in Florence and then become an anti-fascist expatriate and a global traveler, voluntarily 'grafted' onto Sardinia after marrying Emilio Lussu, as she recounts in *L'olivastro e l'innesto*, Cagliari, Della Torre, 1982.

⁴⁷ M. Murgia, *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria*, Milano, Isbn, 2006. On the novel as part of the contemporary Italian fiction devoted to the precarity of work in the twenty-first century, see P. Chirumbolo, *Letteratura e lavoro. Conversazioni critiche*, Soveria Mannelli (CS), Rubbettino, 2013.

⁴⁸ M. Murgia, *Accabadora*, Einaudi, Torino, 2009, p. 3 (Eng transl. by S. Mazzarella, London, McLehose Press, 2011).

centuries,⁴⁹ at the beginning of the twenty-first century the literary self-representations of Sardinia contemplate both the prison-island and the crossroad-island model. While successful authors like Fois and Niffoi continue the line of locations and traditions *barbaricine*, now they coexist with a multiplicity of other places, especially urban and suburban settings like Cagliari and its surrounding areas. As pointed out by Milena Agus, each of the writers tells his or her own version of a multifaceted Sardinia:

Mi sono fatta l'idea che rimproverare la Deledda, Niffoi, la Giacobbe di presentare la solita Sardegna delle vendette, delle faide, delle uccisioni, banditi e cose del genere, non ha senso. Quella non è la solita Sardegna, è la loro Sardegna, il loro mondo, e di questo mondo hanno scritto e scrivono. Noi di quest'altra Sardegna, con il mare e il vento e la nostra spiritosaggine e allegria levantina, non possiamo capirlo, quel loro mondo, lontanissimo anche se a due passi.⁵⁰

What is interesting to note is the limited attention shown by the publishing market and the cultural industries for the representations of Sardinia in terms of plurality and (post-)modernity. At national and international level, higher visibility tends to be achieved by stories that confirm the traditional image of intrinsic diversity, separateness, and archaism, thus confirming the average reader's received images of the island and reassuring his or her expectations; strategically, all the traditional elements are systematically highlighted in peritexts (e.g. presentations, back covers) and epitexts (reviews, interviews). It is not by chance that, after *Paese d'ombre* by Dessì, the only two novels to be awarded a prestigious national prize, the Super Campiello, are *Accabadora* by Michela Murgia and *La vedova scalza* by Salvatore Niffoi (presented in the Adelphi back cover as a story set in 'un mondo arcaico e feroce, quello della Barbagia tra le due guerre').⁵¹ In conclusion, still valid nowadays is the judgment expressed in 1982 by Gabriella Contini, according to which 'una Sardegna gravata dall'ambiguo fascino dell'astoricità viene riproposta dai mass media al pubblico italiano', and the most successful novels, also thanks to editorial strategies that go beyond the authors' intentions, can be read as a 'tributo che il libro di autore sardo deve pagare alle regole di circolazione dell'industria culturale'.⁵²

⁴⁹ For the opposition between *île-prison* and *île-carrefour*, see the work of the French historian L. Febvre, *La terre et l'évolution humaine. Introduction géographique à l'histoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1922.

⁵⁰ M. Agus, 'Scrivere è una tana, la Sardegna pure', in: G. Angioni (ed.), *Cartas de logu. Scrittori sardi allo specchio*, Cagliari, Cuccu, 2007, pp. 22-28., p. 27. See also M. Agus, *Mentre dorme il pesceccane* (2005) *Mal di pietre* (2006), *La contessa di ricotta* (2009), and *Ali di babbo* (2008), published in Rome by Nottetempo, and translated by B. Maher respectively as *While the Shark is Sleeping* (2014) *The House in via Manno* (2009), *The Countesses of Castello* (2010), and *Daddy's Wings* (2011), all in Melbourne, Scribe, apart from the first (London, Telegram). *Mal di pietre* was retranslated in the U.S. by A. Goldstein, with the title *From the Land of the Moon* (London-New York, Europa Editions, 2010). For a testimony on the process of translating these texts in the Australian context, more receptive than the US and UK in relation to representation of linguistic and cultural otherness, see B. Maher, 'Sardinia comes to Australia: Finding spaces for Mediterranean writing in translation', in: *Journal of Australian studies*, 38, 3 (2014), pp. 304-313.

⁵¹ S. Niffoi, *La vedova scalza*, Milano, Adelphi, 2005. See also idem, *La leggenda di Redenta Tiria*, Milano, Adelphi, 2005 (Eng. transl. by S. Whiteside, *The Legend of Redenta Tiria*, London, William Heinemann, 2008).

⁵² G. Contini, 'La letteratura in italiano del Novecento', cit., p. 52.

Keywords

Sardinia, narrative fiction, twentieth-century, twenty-first century, regional identity, island literature

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RIASSUNTO

Narrativa sarda alla fine del ventesimo e inizio del ventunesimo secolo

Una panoramica e prima valutazione

L'articolo presenta una panoramica e una prima valutazione della narrativa sarda in italiano – ossia testi scritti da autori sardi per nascita o per formazione e accomunati dalla presenza dell'isola tra i temi o simboli principali – tra la fine del ventesimo e l'inizio del ventunesimo secolo. Nella prima parte sono delineate le caratteristiche principali della narrativa sarda, quali l'urgenza documentaria e autorappresentativa, la scelta delle ambientazioni, l'immagine dell'isola proposta, e la tendenza al plurilinguismo. Sono poi tracciate le varianti e invarianti nello sviluppo di tali elementi, e vengono sottolineate in particolare le ragioni di poetica e ideologia che sorreggono le scelte linguistiche, l'espansione della tradizionale geografia letteraria oltre il centro dell'isola, con l'inclusione delle coste e delle aree urbane, la coesistenza di diversi modelli autorappresentativi, e da ultimo l'apertura a scenari (post-)moderni e globalizzati. La fase contemporanea della narrativa sarda risulta quindi caratterizzata dalla molteplicità e varietà delle storie, delle voci e dei punti di vista, come si dimostra con riferimento alle figure di Maria Giacobbe, Salvatore Mannuzzu, Giulio Angioni, Sergio Atzeni, Marcello Fois, Salvatore Niffoi, Milena Agus, Alessandro De Roma, Michela Murgia, Flavio Soriga e Paola Soriga.