

"THE LOVING RE-EDUCATION OF A SOUL":
LEARNING FROM FAIRY TALES
THROUGH GRAZIA DELEDDA AND CRISTINA CAMPO

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Summary: Grazia Deledda's "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" (1899) is a literary fairy tale incorporating ethnographic and Christian elements. It may usefully be read through the lens of Cristina Campo's essays on fairy tales ("Della fiaba," "Una rosa," and "In medio coeli"), because this critic continuously compares fairy tales with the discourse of Christian scriptures and mysticism. In addition to a traditional moral, the tale provides an example of what Campo terms "the loving re-education of a soul": by practicing attention, Deledda's protagonist acquires hope and the ability to see beyond the visible, and she learns to understand identity, including gender identity, through the careful interpretation of names and symbols.

Dark woods and royal castles; persecuted, innocent girls and evil, incestuous relatives; magical objects, deceptive disguises, happy endings ... When does a story with all these elements cease being an anonymous oral folktale and when does it become a literary fairy tale instead, the product of a professional writer? Although critics and teachers emphasize the differences between the two genres, in practice this distinction is often hard to demarcate. Literary fairy tales come from the pen of specific authors, but they are always influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by orally transmitted and anonymous folktales. The latter, on the other hand, although of oral origin, can only be known by most people today through their written version; in Italy, traditional folktales are available primarily through Italo Calvino's literary rewriting.¹ For example, although it is sometimes said

¹ Calvino's *Fiabe italiane* do not come from oral storytellers, but from ethnographic written collections of ethnographers; although we do not know what changes these ethnographers introduced, Calvino's own modifications have been carefully examined: shortened, bowdlerized, and rationalized, with greater literary closure and decreased retributive justice and religious references, their details often mixed to emphasize a greater unity among them, these folktales have become, in his transcription, Calvino's own. See Beckwith, "Italo Calvino and the Nature of Italian Folktales."

that literary fairy tales communicate a clear moral while folktales usually do not, the pedagogical dimension of individual examples of each genre is not always so easily labelled. Literary fairy tales may have a more obvious message than their anonymous folk equivalent, but they often share with the latter an emphasis on communication itself as their central message; this self-reflective stance sometimes destabilizes the other, more patent and conformist moral.

A complex relationship with the moral of the story is central to "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" (1899), a fairy tale by an Italian writer who turned to the literary retelling of regional folktales decades before Calvino himself: Grazia Deledda (1871-1936). Deledda's short story is an especially productive place to reflect on the teachings implicit in fairy tales: there are no pedantic morals in this tale, or insistent pedagogy, but rather a more subtle, poetic reflection on the significance of listening and attention to the Other for the subject's very identity—a reflection on the importance, as well, of literature itself. This aspect of "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" may be best understood when the tale is read from a gendered perspective, and in light of Cristina Campo's (1923-1977) original, evocative writings on the genre of the fairy tale. These consist of her essays "Della fiaba," "Una rosa," and "In medio coeli," first published in the nineteen sixties and seventies, and collected posthumously in the volume *Gli imperdonabili* (1987).

LEARNING TO READ

While most of Deledda's oeuvre is set in her native Sardinia, and much of it is imbued with a sense of place, history, and local tradition, Deledda has also written specifically ethnographic articles and a book about her home region.² The ethnographic material Deledda so painstakingly collected inevitably influenced her works of fiction, sometimes as local background colour, other times becoming more tightly integrated into the narrative. It has even been said that, "uno schema fiabesco è soggiacente alla

² Deledda's most important work of folklore, *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro*, was published in instalments between 1893 and 1895; it contained a collection of curses and proverbs, songs and nicknames, riddles and superstitions, customs and practices, "Ma il volume di leggende che la giovane desiderava non fu pubblicato" (Turchi, "Introduzione," 38). On Deledda's work as a folklorist, limited almost exclusively to the period 1890-1895, see Delitala, "Grazia Deledda e la 'Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane.'"

costruzione dei romanzi della Deledda.”³ If this regional focus gave Deledda the authority to participate in a cultural life for which she had little literary or formal preparation, it also led to her being labelled a regionalist writer and dismissed without a more thorough investigation into the significance of her work.⁴

Several Sardinian folk narratives retold by Grazia Deledda have been collected in 1999 and published as *Leggende sarde*.⁵ Most of these are legends, as the title suggests, rather than fairy tales proper. Two of the stories in this collection, however, closely follow the generic conventions of the fairy tale. “I tre fratelli” features three orphaned, impoverished young men who receive from three fairies three magical objects that turn their fate around. The story’s teaching is as vague as that of the numerous fairy tales in which the narrative privileges the youngest brother, the humblest detail, the weakest tool; it is nevertheless clear to the reader that, in this story, the last shall be first. The other fairy tale in this collection, “Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio,” calls attention to itself by being two and a half times longer than the second longest text contained in *Leggende sarde*, and several times longer than most. Like other literary fairy tales of the late nineteenth century, this one is a literary reworking of the basic structure and characters of traditional fairy tales with Christian additions and regional elements.

³ Lavinio, “Primi appunti per una revisione critica dei giudizi sulla lingua di Grazia Deledda,” 76; Lavinio is paraphrasing Giorgio Barberi Squarotti. On the presence of ethnographic materials in Deledda’s fiction, see Gunzberg, “Ruralism, Folklore, and Grazia Deledda’s Novels,” 113-115.

⁴ Gunzberg describes Gramsci’s criticism of Deledda’s “lyrical, oneiric, fable-like and therefore, in the end, unreal picture of Sardinian life” (“Ruralism, Folklore, and Grazia Deledda’s Novels,” 121). Briziarelli prefaces her feminist reading of Deledda with the dangers of labelling her oeuvre as regionalist (“Woman as Outlaw,” 20). Emilio Cecchi wrote about Deledda’s work in 1941: “l’influsso della regione e del dialetto si limita a un apporto non tanto di forme sintattiche e di vocaboli, quanto di temi, costumi, leggende, proverbi ... Tanto i motivi e gli intrecci, quanto la struttura linguistica, in lei presero qualcosa di lirico e di fiabesco” (quoted in Massaiu, *La Sardegna di Grazia Deledda*, 26). Heyer Caput notes that, “paradoxically, while Deledda’s major novels have often been targeted for their restricted and folkloric identity, her less Sardinian novels have been criticized for the opposite reason, as duller expressions of the archaic culture that nurtured Deledda’s narrative” (*Grazia Deledda’s Dance of Modernity*, 154).

⁵ It is to this 1999 edition of “Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio” in *Leggende sarde* that all page numbers will refer, as it is the most complete among the editions easily available.

The protagonist is beautiful fifteen-year-old *Mariedda*, a good, pious girl living in a remote Sardinian village with her evil uncle. When she refuses to marry, her uncle threatens *Mariedda* to marry her himself. Our Lady of Good Counsel answers the girl's prayer by giving her a miracle-working rosary, with which *Mariedda* heals the king's dying son. The prince marries her and *Mariedda* quickly forgets Our Lady. While her husband is at war, *Mariedda* gives birth to a beautiful baby boy. But her uncle infiltrates the court in disguise; he kidnaps and starves *Mariedda's* baby to death, leaving in his place a mangy dog. Humiliated and mocked for producing such offspring, the prince expels his wife and her dog from court. Having realized the cause of her misfortune, *Mariedda* prays to Our Lady, who forgives her for her neglect and turns the dog into a beautiful baby boy. Mother and son spend five years isolated in a house in the woods, where one day the prince and the disguised uncle arrive. The men do not recognize *Mariedda*, who is moved by the prince's torment over having sent his wife away. Through one of the little boy's games, everyone's identity is revealed, the uncle is forgiven, and *Mariedda*, her husband, and the little boy return to court, where they live happily ever after.

Fairy tales have attracted the attention of a variety of critical interpretations: philological and ethnographic, Marxist and feminist, structuralist, post-structuralist, psychological and psychoanalytic. We could read "*Nostra Signora del Rosario*" for evidence of Sardinian beliefs and customs or in order to identify the syncretic elements of the cult of the Great Mother;⁶ we could see in it the story of the middle class's ascent to power, "the empowerment of a young woman who shrewdly learns to exploit her marketability,"⁷ or "the construction of a certain kind of fairy tale protagonist, the Innocent Persecuted Heroine, as quasi-natural;"⁸ we can perform a Proppian analysis of the narrative or, post-structurally, investigate the cultural and political elements shaping and organizing agency within the text. Alternately, we could seek out the text's own deconstruction through repetition and contradictions. *Deledda's* story can also be viewed, from a psychoanalytic perspective, as a symbolic expression of adolescent sexual anxiety and repressed desires, eventually overcome through maturation and marriage.

A variety of critical approaches may be useful in the analysis of

⁶ More on the connections between Mary and the Great Mother may be found in Carolan, "Icon, Intercession and Insight," 106-107.

⁷ Knoepflmacher, "Introduction," 17.

⁸ Bacchilega, "An Introduction to the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale," 3.

Deledda's tale, and I presume to draw from some of these in my own reading of "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio." Given the tale's overtly Catholic elements, however, and its close connection to women's literature, it is useful at this point to turn to the analysis of fairy tales performed by Cristina Campo. Poet and essayist, translator and assiduous letter writer, Campo examined the discourse of fairy tales on various occasions in her oeuvre. Campo's spiritual bent and the roots of this modern mystic's interest in fairy tales are clear when she compares fairy tales to the gospels.⁹ The constant connections Campo draws between fairy tales and Scriptures, as well as between fairy tales and mystical texts, allows us to read more, and to read deeper, into Deledda's "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio": this fairy tale self-consciously calls for a comparable connection between fairies and Madonnas, folktale dreams and Christian visions, magical objects and miraculous rosaries.

LEARNING TO HOPE

On the surface, Cristina Campo's spiritual interpretation of fairy tales appears contrary to other, better-known readings. Foremost among these is the Marxist, materialist reading proposed by Jack Zipes, whose approach is evident in his politically based distinction between fairy tales and folk tales: "The folktale is part of a *pre-capitalist people's oral tradition* which expresses their wish to attain better living conditions through a depiction of their struggles and contradictions. The term fairy tale is of *bourgeois coinage* and indicates the advent of a new literary form which appropriates elements of folklore to address and criticize the aspirations and needs of an emerging bourgeois audience."¹⁰ Deledda's tale can certainly be read from this perspective, though clearly such a reading does not exhaust the meanings communicated to its audience.

Still, Zipes's re-evaluation of the folktale leads him to a conclusion that, in its extreme materialism, strangely meets Campo's equally radical spiritualism. The "reason for our continual return and attraction to folk and fairy tales," writes Zipes at the very end of his essay, is because, "breaking the magic spell in fairy realms means breaking the magic hold which oppressors and machines seem to hold over us in our everyday reality."¹¹ Of course what Zipes would call the logic of capitalism and its technolog-

⁹ "In medio coeli," 15; see also De Turris, "Il senso della fiaba," 110.

¹⁰ Zipes, "Breaking the Magic Spell," 122.

¹¹ Zipes, "Breaking the Magic Spell," 135.

ical supports, Campo might refer to instead as the powers of evil and sin. Both agree, however, that fairy tales illustrate the actual perils and potential success inherent in our human struggle to extricate ourselves from external as well as internal domination, and to achieve a life-giving, world-expanding freedom.

How can the hold be broken? To this question, Cristina Campo answers, paradoxically, that impossible objectives may only be reached through impossible means: How to escape from an inescapable prison, distance oneself from an incestuous uncle, how to enter an impassable castle and bring a dying prince back to life, how to turn a dog into a child, how to unmask, without a single word, a perfect disguise? These are the impossible tasks Mariedda must accomplish to break the magic spell of an unjust world, and, as the tale's heroine, Mariedda "dovrà dimenticare tutti i suoi limiti nel misurarsi con l'impossibile, vigilare senza riposo su quei limiti nell'attuarlo" (Campo, "Della fiaba," 32).

Although Campo notes that all virtues, both cardinal and theological, are necessary for the heroine's liberation, it is on the theological virtue of hope that she dwells most, because at the beginning of a fairy tale all hope in earthly solutions is lost, and the successful hero is the one who "senza speranza si affida all'insperabile" ("Della fiaba," 41). Not just any form of hope will do: it is not on fortune that the hero must rely. Hope is a virtue wholly different from the conviction that the casual wheel of fortune might someday spin in our favour: true hope is the belief and trust in an overarching meaning, rather than in a meaningless turn of events.

An active, virtuous hope is indeed required of Deledda's protagonist, and words such as "speranzosa," "disperare," "disperazione," and "sperare" appear at crucial times in the tale. When she is first given the rosary, Mariedda kisses it "speranzosa ed estasiata" (28): she no longer believes, to use Campo's words, "nella onnipotenza del visibile" ("Della fiaba," 32); when she finds no work in Oristano at the end of three days of seeking, Mariedda "non disperava; e pregava, pregava sempre la bella Signora del Buon Consiglio" (28); when she forgets the Lady and, with the dog, is banished from her royal abode, she experiences "quell'ora tremenda di disperazione," relieved only when "ella ricordò finalmente il suo passato, ricordò Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" (30). Memory is essential to the survival of hope, and, as she waits for her destiny to unfold in the little green house in the woods—the phrase "casetta verde" is repeated four times: green is the colour of hope, *verde speranza*, the hue of new vegetation after the death of winter—Mariedda "era felice: pregava sempre, e aspettava il giorno promesso, nel quale sperava rivedere lo sposo diletto"

(31).¹²

Materialist analyses such as Zipes' describe the fairy tale heroine's victory over the forces of social oppression: a patriarchal world, for example, where male relatives determine a woman's fate, where classes are meant to remain separate and social status unchangeable, where the sly rule over the pure. Campo, on the other hand, would analogously describe *Mariedda's* a triumphant victory of the invisible (hope, for example) over the law of necessity, the law of worldly powers. It is significant that Zipes too uses the concept of hope in his description of the nature of fairy tales—even though the hope he describes is not supernatural but is instead based on "improving conditions of life" (124).

Still, who's to say what, of this life so needing to be improved, belongs to the physical and what, instead, to the spiritual realm? Fairy tales don't tell, hovering instead between the two worlds, and Zipes' and Campo's analyses are both helpful in discerning the wealth of meanings inherent in the best examples of this genre.

LEARNING TO PERCEIVE

Every perfect fairy tale, Campo believes, lets us share in the "*amorosa rieducazione di un'anima—di un'attenzione—affinché dalla vista si sollevi alla percezione. Percepire è riconoscere ciò che soltanto ha valore, ciò che soltanto esiste veramente. E che altro veramente esiste in questo mondo se non ciò che non è di questo mondo?*" ("*Una rosa*," 10). So it is with *Mariedda*, whose innocence allows her to see Our Lady, that is someone not of this world; but once the visions end, she can no longer see. In order to learn how to perceive, how to pay attention, *Mariedda* must experience loss and displacement.¹³ She must lose what belongs to this world—her rank and money, her husband and child—and journey towards an unknown world, so that what truly exists may become known to her.

She must, as well, learn to remember: "*Mariedda, Mariedda*," Our Lady scolds her upon her third and final apparition, "*tu ti sei dimenticata*

¹² On the symbolic importance of colours for *Deledda*, and particularly on green as the icon of purity, see Sole, "*I colori di Grazia*," 151-153.

¹³ Campo uses this term in the sense developed by Simone Weil: an internal, ascetic road to perfection through an undistracted focus on reality. "*L'eroe della fiaba è colui che ha prestato la necessaria attenzione, colui che è riuscito a leggere quell'ordine segreto che c'è dietro ogni cosa*" (Corradi, "*Cristina Campo e la fiaba*," 236).

di me, e per ciò sventura t'incolse" (30). Once Mariedda does learn to wait, and to remember, and to recognize—once she has lived in isolation for five years, trusting in Our Lady's ability to provide for her—she is given back her husband and her rank. But this reward, ironically, is now superfluous, unnecessary, and therefore a true gift. The real transformation had to take place inside of Mariedda, and not in the world around her.

In this transformation, in this education, the intervention of Our Lady is essential; but Mariedda's consent is needed, as is her humility: she keeps following the Lady even after her dog turns back into a beautiful baby, and she could have instead gone back to the castle. Above all, her attention is indispensable. Mariedda has faith, and this faith is transforming her and those around her.

LEARNING ONE'S NAME

Scholars of fairy tales have emphasized the importance of naming in this genre. Naming people and things is a way of expressing their very essence, and in fairy tales this essence is a privileged means of accessing truth.¹⁴ Cinderella's name speaks of her plight among the ashes and Snow White's of her mother's desires for a fair-skinned child, while knowledge of Rumpelstiltskin's secret name is the key to another fairy tale heroine's freedom.

The evil uncle has a Spanish name, don Juanne Perrez, witness of previous Spanish invasions of Sardinia and foreshadowing the one that will make the prince leave Mariedda behind. The ugly villager selected to marry Mariedda is called Predu Concaepreda, a Sardinian name that, to be understood, must be translated in parentheses within the text as Pietro Testadipietra—a head of stone. The small fisherman who helps Mariedda understand her whereabouts refers to the nearest city as Othoca; a footnote is needed to explain this to be the ancient name of Oristano. And when the evil uncle exposes Mariedda's baby son and leaves him to starve to death, the narrator tells us that this is the reason why, "ancor oggi, in molti punti della Sardegna, la fame vien chiamata *Monsiù Juanne*, in memoria di questo fatto" (30).

The supernatural woman of the title bears the name of a particular incarnation of the mother of Jesus that has for centuries drawn the faithful for her generous miracles. Our Lady of Good Counsel, *Mater boni consilii*, is named after a painting miraculously transported to Genazzano, near Rome, in 1467, from its original location in an Albanian church. The

¹⁴ Markman, "The Fairy Tale," 32. Deledda devoted a section of her *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro* precisely to "Nomi e nomignoli" (33-34).

image proved miraculous, with one hundred sixty one healings recorded within four months of its arrival in Genazzano.¹⁵ More likely a fourteenth-century Umbrian work, the Genazzano image is a fresco showing the bust of a blonde, blue-eyed young woman whose face touches that of a bald baby; both wear halos, and one of the baby's hands tenderly embraces Mary's neck right under her ear, while the other tugs at her collar, as if seeking his mother's breast. The "Madonna del Buon Consiglio" depicts, one might say, Mary and Consiglio.

The protagonist of Deledda's story is named *Mariedda*, "little Mary." Her only child, a boy, is named *Consiglio*, Counsel. The parallels between Deledda's fictional mother-son couple and the one depicted in the image of Our Lady of Good Counsel, *Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio*, could hardly be more obvious. The Lady in the tale is Mary of Nazareth, of course, but she looks like a fairy and acts like a fairy.¹⁶ She is never actually called a fairy, but *Mariedda*, "little Maria," is: the prince calls her that, when she first heals him and he opens his eye, realizing at once her beauty and her thaumaturgic powers: "*Tu devi essere una fata*" (29). You must be, that is, the one who knows my fate, the one who speaks the future: the English word "fairy" and the Italian equivalent "*fata*" both come from the Latin verb *fari*, to speak, and it is from this same root that the words "*fato*" and "*fate*" also originate.

The prince's own name, not coincidentally, also derives from Mary's: he is *don Mariano*, a lord who is Mary's own. And although not much else is said of *Mariedda's* husband in Deledda's story, *Mariano IV of Arboréa* (1317-1375) is a historical figure, generally considered to be the greatest sovereign of Arboréa, because of his role in the struggle for Sardinian independence.¹⁷ When *Mariedda* marries him, she becomes "*Giudicessa*

¹⁵ Ferdinand Gregorovius, in his 1863 *Latian Summers*, notes the syncretic nature of this belief when he writes that the "goddess of Genazzano enjoys as widespread a reputation for sanctity as did the ancient heathen oracle once residing here," and that, "countless are the gifts in money and valuables which believers bring" (95).

¹⁶ In an essay that I discovered only after writing my own, Carolan rightly notes, "The short story 'Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio' portrays Mary as the fairy godmother of the classic tales," after writing, more generally about Deledda's works, that "the Virgin Mary symbolizes the coexistence of pagan customs ... and Christian beliefs ... that characterizes Deledda's work" ("Icon, Intercession and Insight," 104).

¹⁷ The Kingdom of Arboréa was a sovereign state occupying the valley of the Tirso River, on the central-western part of Sardinia, between 900 and 1420.

d'Arboréa" at the "corte degli Arboréa;" it is "il regno di Arboréa" that the Spaniards invade (28-29). This historical and geographical precision through names goes against the indeterminacy of space and time typical of fairy tales; but to most of her readers outside of Sardinia, Arboréa and Mariano might as well be fictional, so unfamiliar is the history of this island to the rest of the country.

LEARNING ONE'S GENDER

Like many fairy tales, "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" too tells of a woman's quest for her mother: a mother who appears as if in a dream, a mother who, once found, does not wish to be forgotten. This mother reveals herself in a tradition—she is the mother "of Good Counsel"—and in a landscape that is uniquely hers: a cozy little home in the woods, protective as a womb, but also open to the Other.¹⁸ At the beginning of the tale, Mariedda is motherless, her family made up of an uncle who functions as an abusive and incestuous father figure. But another mother appears immediately in her hour of need; as her name suggests, Mariedda is not, then, truly motherless. As has been said about Cinderella, "while apparently motherless, she is in fact well-mothered. In spite of death, the mother/daughter dyad has kept its bond intact. At its most basic level, the story is about this mother/daughter relationship. It is about the daughter's loyalty to the (good) mother's words and the mother's continuing, magical influence in the (good) daughter's life."¹⁹ Deledda's tale likewise stages the mother's memory and vision-like dream, the mother's landscape, the mother's tradition.

The gendering of the fairy tale genre is underlined by the presence of a female protagonist and a thematic emphasis on the mother-daughter bond. There are also, in "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio," a woman author and a probable female narrator: in the next tale of the 1931 edition, the narrator concludes with the words, "Per oggi sono stanca e vi saluto," indicating, by the ending of the adjective "stanca," that she is female (*Giaffa*, 92). Perrault's famed Mother Goose was an archetypal female storyteller, and Cristina Campo was neither the first nor the last critic to note that "sempre la raccontatrice di fiabe ... fu la nonna: la decana di casa, la donna di buon consiglio, dama che fosse o contadina" ("In medio coeli,"

¹⁸ Woods and forests, in fairy tales, are represented as the "antithesis of courtly urban society" (Messerli, "Spatial Representation in European Popular Fairy Tales," 275).

¹⁹ Panttaja, "Going Up in the World," 90.

15).²⁰ Coincidentally, Campo's words allow us to draw another gendered connection between the traditional storyteller and the eponymous Lady of Deledda's story: both are women of "good counsel," tellers of good things, speakers of truth. "Fairies," then, for what they do is speak of people's fate.

It is no coincidence that Cristina Campo should find parallels between the discourse of fairy tales and the discourse of Christian mysticism, since women have dominated this mystical tradition as well as that of the literary fairy tale.²¹ Mystical texts, like fairy tales, present us the transcendent as sensuous, and divine life as carnal. In this awareness of the body, the text pays close attention to physical manifestations; Deledda's Lady, for example, is clothed differently each time she appears to Mariadda: "vestita di raso e di velo bianco, con un mantello azzurro e un diadema d'oro simile a quello della regina di Spagna," the first time; "un vestito di broccato d'oro e un diadema di perle come quello della Regina di Francia," the second time; "col vestito bianco e il manto azzurro e il diadema simile a quello della Regina di Spagna," the third. The help Our Lady gives is not invisible, but takes the material form of a rosary. And the villain of the story is unmasked through the physical presence, within his embroidered, Morocco-leather slipper, of Mariadda's precious gold spoon, playfully placed there by little Consiglio, and understood by the other characters as a theft.

The fact that Campo's own writing presents some of the traits of mystical discourse, that her texts blend in with her life, it has been written, "ha a che fare col fatto che è una donna e che, come molte donne, è consapevole dell'assoluta imprescindibilità nella sua vita dell'esperienza corporea."²² This is no simplistic interpretation, for as influential as gender, in Cristina Campo's oeuvre, was the fact that heart disease and fragile health conditioned, and eventually cut short, the course of this author's reclusive life. Her own writings aspire to imitate fairy tales and mystical texts as narratives able to overcome the flattening discourses of history and science; for fairy tales, rather than being limited to escapist formulas, are capable of revealing that which cannot be said, but is nevertheless present and must be recognized if one's destiny is to be understood and fulfilled.

²⁰ On female storytellers, see Warner, "Mother Goose Tales," 7. On this topic, see also Bernardini Napoletano, "Scritture femminile per l'infanzia tra Ottocento e Novecento," and Maclean, "Oppositional Practices in Women's Traditional Narrative."

²¹ Campo mentions, with some intimacy, "Lella da Foligno, Caterina, Teresa" ("Sensi soprannaturali," 234).

²² Corradi, "Cristina Campo e la fiaba," 234.

LEARNING ONE'S SYMBOLS

A privileged means of penetrating the meaning of fairy tales, their mysteries and their secrets, is through the symbols they contain: symbols are learning tools, but they are also tools to be learned. Children can learn of their power even before they are able to decode their meaning ("In medio coeli," 21). From this spiritual perspective, the symbols in Grazia Deledda's "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" can hardly be reduced to a list, in which each symbolic item corresponds to a well-defined meaning. Still we may identify several of Deledda's symbolic choices as characteristic of the fairy tale genre, and as significant expressions of another reality beyond that which can be seen and touched.

The evil uncle's house is "immense, but black and mysterious," its "one hundred and one rooms" representative of their owner's dark powers. The "black" house contrasts with the Lady's bright light, white veil, and gold diadem—the colours of heaven.²³ After being magically transported in her sleep, Mariadda wakes up under a thorn bush near a swamp, the power of water emphasized by the fact that it is a fisherman who directs Mariadda to the king's city. For three days and three nights Mariadda wanders around Oristano, and three times the Lady appears to her: three is a holy and magical number, as well as a marker of the fairy tale's oral character and its poeticity. The mangy dog she is believed to have given birth to accuses Mariadda, incorrectly, of having consorted with the devil; her own love for this animal, despite the misfortune it brought her, reveals the dog's other meanings: loyalty even in the hardest of times, and the wisdom to distinguish between the perpetrators of evil and their innocent victims.

Then of course there are the journeys, which mark the space of fairy tales as "discontinuous," and "erratic, not homogeneous."²⁴ There is Mariadda's journey away from the uncle's toxic home, then away from the royal court, and finally back to it; the prince's journey to war, and then his providential journey and loss in the woods (traditionally symbolic of the feminine principle), which lead him and his group to Mariadda's and Consiglio's little house.

Campo notes that there are no roads in fairy tales. There may be no roads, but there is plenty of walking. The protagonist of fairy tales "always

²³ Throughout Deledda's oeuvre, a critic has pointed out, "la luminosità e la presenza dell'oro, dell'argento, delle pietre preziose ... [dà] chiare connotazioni paradisiache" (Sole, "I colori di Grazia," 164).

²⁴ Messerli, "Spatial Representation in European Popular Fairy Tales," 277.

goes unerringly straight on (whether up or down or horizontally). Accordingly, space in a fairy tale is a narratively built accretion and strung along as if on a straight line.”²⁵ When *Mariedda* is magically removed from her uncle’s home, the narrator repeats twice the already doubled verb, “*Cammina, cammina*” (38). And after her downfall as mother to a mangy dog, *Mariedda* walks ahead for hours and hours, trusting the Lady who had ordered, “*Cammina, cammina...*” (30). The Lady mentioned a house awaiting her at the end of her walk, but that is all *Mariedda* is given to know about her future: that her child is once again with her, having taken the place of the dog; that they will have a home; that they will lack for nothing. She has to keep walking for “*lunghe ore*,” and the injunction is now triple: “*Cammina, cammina, cammina*” (30). When her walking is done, all she has to do is wait, and remember: “*Vivi là finché sia giunto il tuo giorno e non dimenticarti più di me*” (30). With memory, and with the acceptance of family loss, for this as for other protagonists in *Deledda’s* oeuvre, come financial independence and “a room of one’s own.”²⁶

The two journeys meet in the house *Mariedda* reaches by trustingly walking towards the unknown, the same house the Prince reaches by getting lost. Here, *Mariedda* and *Mariano* achieve knowledge: knowledge of self and of other. As Campo says of symbolism in the landscape of fairy tales, “è soprattutto il paesaggio che schiude a tali stati spirituali le sue pieghe meglio sepolte” (“*In medio coeli*,” 23): the spirit is not indifferent to the effects of place, even though the role of consciousness and conscience is limited. “*La fiaba, allora*,” one of Campo’s critics has pointed out, “è come se fosse un metodo per acuire i sensi.”²⁷ A permanent sort of attention, of alertness, is required if one is to understand the meaning of the world, and the significance of its symbols: *Mariedda* learns to be mindful of the present, and to remember, in her present actions, her past promises. It is of this that the re-education of her soul consists, and it is through the constant application of faith and hope that, in the end, she will have love, and the freedom she seeks.

Like other fairy tales, “*Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio*” has a happy ending. The villain is cleverly discovered and punished, without anger and resentment on *Mariedda’s* part: “The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits,”

²⁵ Messerli, “Spatial Representation in European Popular Fairy Tales,” 278.

²⁶ Briziarelli, “Woman as Outlaw,” 23.

²⁷ De Turris, “Il senso della fiaba,” 111.

writes Walter Benjamin.²⁸ The heroine is reunited with her prince, and with their son—or, perhaps, his replacement; for the question remains: is the baby into which the black mangy dog is transformed Mariedda's original baby come back to life after being left to starve to death by his great-uncle, or is it another baby altogether?

LEARNING FROM FAIRY TALES

The publishing history of “Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio” underlines its hybrid genre and mixed audience. First published in 1899 by Remo Sandron, the same publisher reissued the tale in 1931, in a collection of Deledda's titled *Giaffa. Racconti per ragazzi*, and containing other stories clearly addressed to young people. In 1994 “Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio” was included in *Fiabe e Leggende* and in 1999 in *Leggende sarde*, both collections consist primarily of tales not addressed to children but rather to ethnographically inclined adults.

For both adults and children, however, this is a story meant to both teach and entertain. The narrative frame of the tale underlines its double intent. The narrator addresses the audience as “piccoli amici,” with the warning that, should they not be touched by the narrative, it will not be because of the story, but because of their own hardness of heart: “Oggi, miei piccoli amici, voglio raccontarvi una storia che vi commuoverà moltissimo, e che, se non vi commuoverà, non sarà certamente per colpa mia o delle cose che vi narro, ma perché avete il cuore di pietra” (27). At the same time as it is meant to entertain and move, the tale has a subtle didactic value—reinforced by the fact that it is addressed to children, the narrator's “piccoli amici”: stay away from evil intents, be steadfast in your pursuit of goodness, and remain loyal to those who help you. This is not the pushy didacticism typical of late-nineteenth-century literature addressed to children, but rather the sort of generic fairy tale teaching aimed at encouraging self-expression and liberation from internal and external constraints.²⁹

²⁸ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 11.

²⁹ “Aliena dal didascalismo e dal pedagogismo tipici della produzione dell'infanzia di fine Ottocento ... la giovane Grazia oppone ai limiti e alle convenzioni imposte dal mondo reale, il mondo della fantasia e della soggettività: come l'infanzia, la fiaba e la leggenda sono depositarie della potenzialità assoluta di realizzare liberamente la propria identità” (Bernardini Napoletano, “Scritture femminile per l'infanzia tra Ottocento e Novecento,” 15).

What is the moral of Deledda's "Nostra Signora del Rosario," then? On a more superficial level, the tale presents some predictable teachings about social advancement through marriage and happiness in the role of mother and wife, as well as confirmation of the importance of prayer and of the Virgin Mary's intercession. But, thanks to its appropriation of the fairy tale genre, Deledda's story goes beyond this pat bourgeois-Catholic understanding of what should be taught. Because this heroine violates orders, nor does she hesitate to use deception to further her ends: when she first approaches the castle, she pretends that she has a miraculous medicine and does not mention the rosary; and in the end, she does not tell the prince that the little boy he will raise as his own is not their son (who after all died of starvation), but the dog turned into a child.

The ultimate teaching of fairy tales may be implicit in their telling, in their listening. In Calvino's words, "forse la funzione morale che il raccontare fiabe ha nell'intendimento popolare, va cercata non nella direzione dei contenuti ma nell'istituzione stessa della fiaba, nel fatto di raccontarle e di udirle."³⁰ This is what folktales have to teach us, and I venture that Cristina Campo and Grazia Deledda would have agreed: attention and interaction, awareness of our need for one another, and for the other's words. It is in this materiality of the human voice as the privileged instrument of moral teachings that Campo's reading of fairy tales, however poetic and spiritual, resonates with Zipes' more overtly materialistic approach. For crucial to the transmission of fairy tales, and to the moral function they convey, is an oral exchange that a literary tale such as Grazia Deledda's must recreate through literary strategies: the text makes sure an oral storyteller is included at the beginning, and it establishes the presence of eager listeners, to whom the narrator is deeply attuned—she knows their hearts, it is implied. And throughout the tale, it is the protagonist's primary task to learn how to practice attention. Because knowledge, this tale suggests, relies on human contact. Self-discovery can only take place, for both the characters in the story and the story's listeners, in negotiating one's existence in relation to that of others. Mariadda provides an example, for the listeners and readers of Deledda's tale, of such openness, such receptivity to the other—and, especially, of attention to the otherness of the world.

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³⁰Calvino *Fiabe italiane*, xxxv.

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