MEMORY, HISTORY AND A MOTHER'S RESISTANT MOURNING IN
GIUSEPPE DESSÌ'S *IL DISERTORE*

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Summary: This essay proposes a re-reading of Giuseppe Dessì's *Il disertore* (1961) in the context of collective memory theory and postmodern concerns with mourning and melancholia. Through an examination of the way Dessì represents the interaction between individual memories and official memorialization in the post-WWI period, I argue that Dessì anticipates postmodern perspectives on commemoration. In particular, I look at the protagonist, Mariangela, both as a recuperation of the private and public anti-war activities of many Italian women, and as a melancholic mother whose refusal to obey normative modes of mourning results in a form of resistant mourning. Furthermore, it is precisely through Mariangela's oppositional gaze that Dessì exposes the inadequacies of her town's official receptacle of war memories, the *monumento ai caduti*, in order to interrogate the way collective—but also individual—memory is constructed.

Giuseppe Dessì (1909-1977) wrote *Il disertore* (1961) at a time when Italian critics and intellectuals—particularly on the left—were faced with re-examining realism and its relationship to the goals of literature. Just a few years earlier, in 1958, Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo* had received scathing reviews from Marxist critics for its pessimism, detachment and non-objective approach to the facts of the Risorgimento.¹ Yet, despite his public political affiliation with the Communist Party, in *Il disertore* Dessì rejects the possibility of an objective truth and asserts the importance of subjectivity as opposed to historical facts in literature.² In this light, the novel, which recounts the story of Mariangela Eca, a Sardinian woman who loses two sons during the course of World War I, and whose grief is set against the turbulent post-war years in which Socialists and Fascists struggled for political supremacy, can be read as a historical novel that anticipates post-

¹ See Della Coletta, *Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction*, 72-84.

² Although he did not enroll in the PCI until 1974, Dessì shared many beliefs with the Communist Party and was elected to the Consiglio comunale of Grosseto by running with them in 1960.

modern concerns with memory and commemoration. In it, Dessì explores the construction of historical, collective and individual memory, and the value that they carry in the present.

Dessì's first novel, *San Silvano* (1939), had already inspired Gianfranco Contini to compare him to Proust in his "rintracciamento del passato (sulla scorta di ricordi frammentari, 'come spore o semi di una pianta morta di cui si fosse perduta la memoria')." ³ Likewise, Giacomo Debenedetti, commenting on Dessì's pre-1958 works, including *I passeri* (1955) and *Isola dell'Angelo* (1957), had identified Dessì's interest in psychoanalysis and in the themes of guilt, secrecy, and memory, as well as the masterful way in which he blends his characters' internal lives with exterior realities. ⁴ In *Il disertore*, which won the 1962 Premio Bagutta, Dessì continues to represent his characters' memories, with a special focus on communicating the "relatività della conoscenza" and the "mille possibili taciuti punti di vista" that come to bear on a story, while also maintaining his political engagement. ⁵ In fact, *Il disertore* represents a moment in Dessì's career when "il suo narrare comincia a farsi più realistico e contrastato," and while "[i]l lungo sonno del fascismo aveva consentito la fuga in una poetica 'proustiana' della durata del tempo nella memoria, il dopoguerra, riaprendo piaghe storiche del Mezzogiorno, riportò alla luce realtà sociali troppo a lungo sopite, a cui il Dessì—uomo di Sardegna—non poteva rimanere indifferente." ⁶ One particular way in which Dessì's political commitment comes across is through his use of free indirect discourse to create a sympathetic relationship between his characters and his narrator who, indeed, often employs an ironic and indignant tone when retelling historical events in which the powerful exploit the powerless. ⁷ At the same time, the novel's non-linear narrative structure consisting of flashbacks to both major historical events and to the smaller private stories that lead to the protagonist's atemporal state of melancholy in the novel's current time, reflects his con-

³ Contini, *Esercizi di letteratura*, 179.

⁴ Debenedetti, *Intermezzo*, 190-200.

⁵ Maxia, "Prefazione," *Il disertore*, by Giuseppe Dessì, 35.

⁶ Pellegrino, "Giuseppe Dessì," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* Vol. 39, 422.

⁷ For instance, at a certain point Dessì's narrator dispassionately yet ironically describes the nepotism and uneven access to power involved in local politics: "Era al Circolo che si decidevano le più importanti questioni cittadine, erano loro, i soci, che pesavano, vagliavano, esaminavano preventivamente anche le deliberazioni che il Consiglio comunale avrebbe preso in seguito. Infatti, il Consiglio era formato da loro stessi, dai loro figli, nipoti o amici" (67).

cern with memory work. These narrative strategies permit Dessì to simultaneously maintain a left-wing, pacifist political position while also exploring how both historiography and the symbols and rituals used to solidify collective memory influence, suppress and conflict with individual memory. In doing so, he anticipates the postmodern concept that 'memory has a history and that history is itself a form of memory'.⁸ Dessì's work gives a literary voice to what scholars have recently begun to call mnemohistory, or rather, the study of how the past is remembered. Aleida Assman describes the goals of mnemohistory as the following:

To investigate and analyze the symbolic practices of [...] contemporary culture, asking questions such as What is known of the past in the present? Which events from the past are selected and how are they represented? Which images have survived? What kind of commemoration acts are devised?⁹

In *Il disertore*, Dessì focuses on the official and unofficial ways in which World War I was commemorated in its immediate aftermath and he implicitly poses questions about how those constructed memories influenced the course of history. In connecting memory and history, he asserts what Jan Assman would later call the truth of memory in that it shapes national and individual identities.¹⁰ Furthermore, Dessì affirms that a) the eventual Fascist dictatorship that followed World War I can be in part traced to the way the war was remembered, and b) the state of contemporary society can be in part traced to the way the post-war period is remembered, in addition to the influence of actual historical events. Dessì analyzes the way the state used grieving mothers as vehicles with which to commemorate and justify total war. This type of "hegemonic memorializing" is often effective because it is accompanied by a willingness to forget details that might contradict those in power. The antidote to forgetting, however, comes in the form of a counter memory which aims to provoke "active remembering."¹¹ Assman defines counter memory as a memory "that explicitly contradicts another memory. 'You remember it this way, but I remember it differently because

⁸ Aleida Assman, "Transformations between History and Memory," 62.

⁹ Aleida Assman, "Transformations between History and Memory," 62.

¹⁰ Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, 14.

¹¹ Bold, Knowles, and Leach, "Feminist Memorializing and Cultural Counter-memory: The Case of Marianne's Park," 7.

I remember what you have forgotten.”¹²

In *Il disertore*, Dessì creates several counter memories that challenge official memory. He approaches history and memory in two central and related ways. First, I argue, through the narration of Mariangela's experience of melancholy and unresolved grief, including her problematic relationship with the town's *monumento ai caduti*, and second, through a reconstruction of the official decisions leading up to the war memorial's inauguration. Dessì then uses the memorial's construction as a metaphor for the selective nature of memory itself. The mother and the memorial become the images around which concepts of resistant mourning, counter memory and counter history revolve.

Il disertore takes place in Cuadu, a fictional Sardinian mountain village. With the name Cuadu, which means “hidden” in Sardinian, Dessì alerts his readers that he intends to address something buried or forgotten. The novel opens in 1921 as the town government begins the process of erecting a *monumento ai caduti*. While town leaders debate the details of the war memorial, Mariangela refuses to find closure after the death of her two sons, one who died at the front, and the other, Saverio, who deserted his regiment, found his way back to the hills above Cuadu, and succumbed to illness while hiding out. Mariangela's co-protagonist is Padre Coi. He is the only non-family member who knows about Saverio's actions. Early in the novel it becomes clear that Padre Coi's attempts to help Mariangela understand her suffering as universal and to convince her that she should find comfort in accepting her fate, have proved futile. Her stubborn resistance to any kind of consolation regarding the loss of her sons, even as she donates her meager life savings to the fund to build the war memorial, comprises the narrative's fundamental tension. Dessì recounts Saverio's plight in flashback, and his use of free indirect discourse allows the flashback to incorporate the perspectives and memories of Mariangela, Saverio and Padre Coi. During this segment of the novel, Saverio confesses to Padre Coi that he deserted because, after being denied an exemption for his brother's death, he killed his regiment's captain during a battle. Padre Coi never reveals this information to the authorities or to Mariangela, and convinces himself that the murder was not really a murder given the chaotic circumstances of war. Meanwhile, the official military report states that Saverio is “disperso,” and he is included on the list of Cuadu's fallen on the war memorial. Thus, Dessì is able to contrast the ways in which Padre Coi,

¹² Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, 12.

Mariangela, and the government authorities choose to remember the same events. Additionally, Dessì merges archival historical information that supports the counter history he proposes in the novel together with his literary inventions.

Describing the reaction of Cuadu's residents to the 1820 *Legge delle Chiudende*, *Il disertore*'s narrator remembers:

Il popolo intero si era ribellato, era insorto, e i capi della rivolta erano stati impiccati proprio dietro la chiesa del Carmelo. Ma non c'erano stati nè inni, nè simboli, nè bandiere, nè frasi fatte da sbandierare.¹³

He resentfully reminds readers that these rebellions did not enter into the illustrious history of the Risorgimento. He also implies that the only way events do become important at the level of national memory is through self-conscious symbols and commemorative practices like anthems, flags and speeches. Historian John Bodnar's work on the terms "official" and "vernacular" memory is helpful here. According to Bodnar, official memory is driven by "the concerns of cultural leaders or authorities at all levels of society" who "share a common interest in social unity, the continuity of existing institutions, and loyalty to the status quo" while vernacular memory is created by "an array of specialized groups."¹⁴ Bodnar conceives of the two kinds of memory in opposition to each other and attributes a positive value to vernacular memory in the face of silencing by official memory. Dessì seems to want to bring vernacular memory to bear on the historical record, but he also problematizes the simple opposition of vernacular memory and official memory. He conceives of them more as intersecting forces in which the seat of power is constantly changing depending on one's point of view. He challenges the notion that vernacular memory always holds the moral high ground (and ultimately, he will conclude that all collective memory does violence to the individual). For example, after describing the 1820 riots, the narrator compares them to the rebellions during World War I:

E così anche quando le donne, coricandosi con i loro bambini attraverso la strada ferrata, avevano impedito, durante l'ultima guerra, di portare via da Cuadu il grano requisito. Nè inno, ne fusciasche rosse, nè luce che viene dall'Oriente, e roba del genere.¹⁵

¹³ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 74.

¹⁴ Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration in the Twentieth Century*, 13-14.

¹⁵ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 74.

A striking feature of this passage is Dessì's concern with women's history as it has been doubly silenced. Among his list of non-reactions to the anti-war protests of the village women, are the missing "fusciacche rosse," which, he noted a few pages earlier, were a symbol of socialist resistance to the wealthy mine owners. In mentioning this particular symbol, Dessì acknowledges the lack of attention to women's activities and contributions to the history of anti-militarism even among left-wing activists. Thus, even vernacular memory, as opposed to the official record, proves incomplete and exclusive. Dessì, then, draws a parallel between the lost history of women's anti-war activism and Mariangela's unintentional anti-war stance.

Women's Resistance to World War I: Adding to the Historical Record

The fact that peasant and working class women were active organizers of anti-war protests was largely ignored by historians until the advent of feminist historiography in the 1980s. One reason for this omission was the suppression of documentation of these protests by the Fascists in an attempt to halt the progress of the women's movement which not only ran counter to the Fascist "sposa e madre esemplare," but also had close ties to Socialist activism. Yet, archival work over the past two decades has revealed that during the war, the *prefetti* of various cities and towns consistently documented that protests demanding the return of soldiers and better financial support were led by women.¹⁶

In feminist and Socialist periodicals of the era many women voiced strong and nuanced anti-war opinions. In an article entitled "La nostra commemorazione dei morti" in *La Difesa delle lavoratrici* dated November 1, 1914, Abigail Zannetta declares,

Quest'anno è cimitero anche il campo e il giardino e l'orto, già buoni amici della vita; è cimitero la casa, non più rifugio sicuro delle genti operose e pacifiche. E l'epidemia sterminatrice di viventi si chiama Guerra e il virus mortale che la produce si chiama patria [...] Purifichiamoci noi socialisti, noi proletari, perché noi soli abbiamo qualche diritto di fare la solenne commemorazione dei morti in Europa! Noi che sognammo la morte delle patrie gonfie d'odio e la vita degli uomini, la morte del privilegio che è difeso dal militarismo omicida, la vita del diritto universale, dell'operosità fraterna, pacifica, solidale dei popoli. E sia degna commemorazione degli invendicati che hanno spenti i loro odi nella com-

¹⁶ Ortaggi, "Italian Women During the Great War," 216.

memorazione comune — il rinnovato patto di solidarietà cogli sfruttati del mondo, la nostra esecrazione della guerra, il nostro schifo invincibile per la delinquenza borghese di tutte le patrie che marcia cinicamente verso il suo sogno di usura e sopra l'ecatombe di un mondo, per mari di sangue umano!¹⁷

The author, in this declaration of mourning, refuses to abdicate responsibility for the losses and openly critiques the consoling tone of nationalist rhetoric. She reclaims the act of commemoration for the everyday human being, for those forgotten by the patriotic rhetoric of official memory. This passage, representative of many articles that appeared before and during the war, is a more sophisticated and politicized version of how Mariangela reacts to what she thinks of as “le parole sulla Patria” and the “sciocchezze che si ripetevano sui giovani morti.”¹⁸

Because the mother became such an important symbol used to rally support for the war, among women anti-war activists motherhood was also a privileged place from which to speak against war. Many showed an acute awareness of how the figure of the mother had been manipulated by the State:

Le madri che, chiuse nel loro dolore, nel loro tragico silenzio, soffocano i loro singhiozzi dinanzi all'avvenuto sacrificio dei propri figli sull'altare della patria, possono apparire circonfuse d'un'eroica grandezza, al cui confronto però sembrano viepiù contrari all'animo femminile e poco riguardosi alla serietà di tale immenso lutto, i battaglieri manifestini delle moderne Amazzoni a parole, che incitano alla guerra immediata gli uomini, come se a costoro non mancasse altro che aspettare la parola d'ordine del sesso debole per decidersi ad impugnare le armi.¹⁹

Almost 50 years later, Dessì references this trend of pacifism and political activism led by women, both directly and indirectly. He pays tribute to the women who blocked roads so supplies could not pass, but he also focuses more closely on the actions of Mariangela, a seemingly apolitical mother who nonetheless opposes herself to official commemorative practices. Thus, Dessì works on two levels to retrieve women's voices from the past by combining documented historical events with the fictional reconstruction of one woman's interior life and responses to wartime loss. He

¹⁷ Scriboni, *Abbasso la guerra: voci di donna da Adua al primo conflitto mondiale* (1896-1915), 134.

¹⁸ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 57.

¹⁹ Genoni, “Le donne contro la guerra,” *Avanti*, 18 January 1915

inserts moments of active rebellion into Mariangela's mostly silent and isolated experience of grief, and weaves together a powerful condemnation of how women, as the counterparts of the male conscripts in illegitimate wars, are cynically used by the State in the service of promoting a culture of nationalism and violence.

A Mother's Grief: Melancholy as Resistant Mourning

Il disertore begins with the following description of Mariangela's mental state:

Quando si parlò e si discusse per la prima volta del monumento, Mariangela Eca non ne ebbe nemmeno sentore. I suoi due ragazzi erano morti da più di quattro anni, ma per lei era come se quel tempo non fosse passato. Per tutti gli altri, a Cuadu, compresi coloro che avevano perduto un figlio, un nipote o il marito, la fine della guerra era già lontana: tanti e così profondi erano stati i mutamenti che anche in quella piccola città la guerra e il dopoguerra avevano portato. Mariangela no. Lei non si era accorta e non si accorgeva di ciò che avveniva nel mondo circostante, anzi le pareva che tutto fosse rimasto come quando i suoi figli si facevano uomini pascolando i loro branchi di capre nel bosco di Baddimanna e lavoravano il formaggio e la ricotta nel vecchio ovile.²⁰

Mariangela has refused to move on, to relinquish her attachment to her sons and to form new relationships, or to seek closure in a way sanctioned by state and society. She has isolated herself, almost never speaking and barely acknowledging attempts others make at communicating with her. Freud, whom Dessì studied, defined this behavior as melancholia, as opposed to successful mourning in which the emotional tie to the lost object is severed and the mourner can be consoled by a substitute for what has been lost.²¹ More recently, theorists and critics have tried to rework the characterization of melancholia, attempting to find within Freud's concept the potential for resistance, rebellion and political activism. Derrida, for instance, wrote extensively on the ethical value of melancholia. In a passage that resonates profoundly with Mariangela's melancholic position, he writes:

According to Freud, mourning consists in carrying the other in oneself. There is no world any more, it is the end of the world for the other when

²⁰ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 45.

²¹ On Dessì and Freud see Maxia, "Prefazione," 27.

the other dies, and I take into myself this end of the world, I must carry the other and the other's world, the world in me: introjection, interiorization of memory (Erinneurng), idealization. Melancholia is supposed to be the failure and pathology of this mourning. But if I must (this is ethics itself) carry the other in myself in order to be faithful to that other, to respect its singular alterity, a certain melancholia must still protest against normal mourning. It must never resign itself to idealizing introjection. It must rail against what Freud says about it with such calm certainty, as though to confirm the norm of normality. It allows us to forget that keeping the other inside oneself, as oneself, is already to forget the other. Forgetting begins right there. So melancholy is necessary.²²

Building on Derrida's depathologization of melancholia, Ramazani developed the term "melancholic mourning," which leads to "an experience of grief that resists neutralization in redemptive fictions...scorns recovery and transcendence," and renders mourning more aggressive, and seems most applicable to Mariangela's situation.²³ Additionally, the general expansion of melancholia's political potential by postmodern theorists has been alternately named "militant sadness," "activist melancholia" and "resistant mourning." I prefer this last term because, as Patricia Rae notes, it permits unresolved mourning and allows the "social determinants for troublesome amnesia" to be exposed, while also avoiding the problematic issues surrounding Freud's conclusions that the melancholic is both unaware of his or her own behavior and is often suicidal.²⁴ The term also allows for the possibility that from unresolved grief will spring a counter memory, a way of remembering that resists the official narrative and its mandate to forget in order to heal. In this case, not healing is the ethical choice.

Relating the way in which Mariangela's mourning differs from the norm, Dessi's narrator states the following:

Certo, per tutti gli altri, comprese le madri, la vita, anche se squallida, la vita presente contava più del ricordo, benchè, a parole, nessuno fosse disposto ad ammetterlo. La vita presente, che giorno per giorno si deve vivere. E ognuno aveva trovato, in qualche modo, una consolazione, arrivando a ordinare quei ricordi del passato, a confinarli entro limiti ben

²² Qtd. In Bennington, *Not Half No End: Militantly Melancholic Essays in Memory of Jacques Derrida*, 39. Original in Derrida, *Béliers: Le dialogue interrompu entre deux infinis, le poème*, 74.

²³ Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud's Psychoanalysis of Loss," 54-55.

²⁴ Rae, "Introduction: Modernist Mourning," 22.

precisi, dai quali non dovevano uscire. Questo era nella logica dei fatti, che coincide con l'imperscrutabile mistero della volontà divina, diceva il prete. Per quanto profondo fosse il dolore di quelle madri, per quanto ognuna, in un primo momento, si fosse ribellata al pensiero che la sua vita continuava oltre quella del figlio perduto, in seguito, a distanza di anni, anche questa loro ribellione cominciava ad essere, nella maggior parte dei casi, se non vinta, domata, regolata, con ordine e discriminazione di pensieri: per cui il ricordo, i sospiri trovavano pace nelle preghiere, in ore del giorno ben precise, e in giorni speciali ricorrenti ogni anno, unanimamente riconosciuti. E così il dolore custodito nel segreto diventava un fatto pubblico, anzi nazionale, in definitiva addirittura utile alla Patria.²⁵

Here Dessì describes how individual memory, through a process of ordering and domesticating, becomes official memory, often without the conscious participation of the individual. He juxtaposes Mariangela's actions, through which she refuses to let her past be subsumed by state-imposed memories, with those who, at least on the surface, allow the memorial to substitute for their lost sons.

Mariangela, with her immersion in the loss of her sons and her rejection of the normative process of mourning, in short, her "resistant mourning," offers a model of behavior to counteract the patriarchal and patriotic cooption of a mother's grief. At one of the numerous local ceremonies commemorating Cuadu's fallen soldiers and their "madri eroiche," Mariangela acts up:

E una volta che il sindaco di Cuadu, in occasione di una di queste pubbliche celebrazioni (le prime volte lei c'era andata, non sapendo di che si trattava), stava esaltando con eloquenza il sentimento sublime che aveva spinto tante madri a offrire alla Patria i loro figli, Mariangela, che si trovava in prima fila, come madre di due caduti, con le due croci di guerra che le avevano appena appuntato sullo scialle nero, aveva pronunciato a voce alta una parola che lasciò il primo cittadino letteralmente paralizzato. La parola era stata udita chiaramente da tutti quelli che le stavano vicino, ma nessuno tuttavia ebbe la certezza che fosse stata lei a pronunciarla.²⁶

This episode illustrates the potential for disruption of a mother who refuses to perform her state-dictated role. Pfaff and Yang have proposed the "double-edged nature" of political ritual in which the display of power can

²⁵ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 47.

²⁶ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 47.

cut two ways.²⁷ Under the right circumstances, it may confirm the state's authority. However, the fact that it is on display also creates a certain vulnerability. The public support and participation required to sustain official memory become evident during these rituals and leave space for sites of weakness. Just one word like Mariangela's can instill doubt about the state's authority. In this case, Dessì emphasizes the mayor's profound fear when he recognizes the fragility of his position of power. He seems to suggest that every official ritual or commemoration could potentially be disrupted, at which point collective memory could be altered.

This passage also speaks to the concerns of mnemohistory in that the readers are the only ones who know that Mariangela uttered the unsettling word. This detail reminds contemporary readers that the way history has been remembered is what affects their lives in the present more than the actual events that took place. Dessì, then, highlights the importance of bringing to light forgotten or omitted events that only contemporary readers may be able to discern in the form of counter memories and counter history.

An important aspect of Dessì's characterization of Mariangela is that, despite her melancholic state, she is not mentally ill, or even temporarily insane. He portrays her as methodical, persistent, stubborn, and, most importantly, strong: "Benchè piccola, era forte, resistente, ostinata, con gli occhi vivi e ironici nel silenzio e una piega sottile del labbro che le dava un'espressione di appartata furbizia. Piccola e forte era."²⁸ Dessì affords her the capacity to question male authority figures including the town mayor, Padre Coi, and her husband, Gregorio. This questioning comes in various forms, ranging from sheltering her deserter son to an outburst during the mayor's inaugural speech for the town's *monumento ai caduti*, from her silent refusals to heed Padre Coi's advice, to her donation of her life savings to the monument's construction without consulting her husband.²⁹ She is aloof, set apart, astute and cynical:

²⁷ Pfaff and Yang, "Double-Edged Rituals and the Symbolic Resources of Collective Action: Political Commemorations and the Mobilization of Protest in 1989," 540.

²⁸ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 59.

²⁹ For instance, Dessì describes Mariangela's defiant and remorseless behavior as Padre Coi attempts to reason with her as follows: "Si voltò a guardarla. Lei stava lì, a testa china, senza rispondere. — Niente! — disse ancora. Si accorse che stava quasi gridando. Per un attimo gli occhi di lei brillarono maliziosi mentre si aggiustava i capelli sotto il fazzoletto. [...] Lei allungava il collo, senza nulla rispondere, come sempre quando la rimproverava. Aveva un odore di fumo, di capanna piena di fumo, lui pensò; e provò un senso di fastidio e di pietà. — E tuo marito? Tuo marito non ti ha detto niente? Lei mosse appena la spalla, come una scolara." (60)

in short, a non-conformist.

In the preface to the 2004 Feltrinelli edition, Sandro Maxia maintains that *Il disertore* contains the most mature elaboration of Dessì's pacifist ideology.³⁰ If this is so, then Dessì positions Mariangela as what psychoanalyst Sue Grand calls the "omniscient maternal eye" which opposes itself to "the instrumentalities of technocratic power" and rejects "amoral statecraft" while affirming human dignity.³¹ Its gaze, which confers shame on those who would ignore the real losses in war "is conjured in art forms, in media; it is activated in women's protest movements."³² The state used mothers of soldiers in rituals to incite support for war and nationalist endeavors. However, the state's manipulation of the sacrificial mother's role, similar to state authority itself, can become vulnerable during public rituals, and constructed images can be challenged precisely because they are on public display. Disputing the state's cooption of motherhood opens the door to a mother figure whose grief refers to all mothers of lost children, a more universal position like that expressed by the anti-war activist Abigail Zanna. Grand maintains that "when war resistance mobilizes the omniscient maternal eye, it creates a formidable counterforce."³³ Mariangela, with her active and passive resistance, conjures that maternal eye. She may be representative of the Sardinian tradition of matrilineality, a personification of "sardità taciturna," keeper of the mysteries of life and death, "prima di tutto, madre,"³⁴ but she is also a potentially radical political being and reflects the quotidian types of resistance many women silently, or even more vocally took part in. Her character reclaims the real anti-war stance many women took—public activists as well as solitary mothers—in opposition to the roles that the state had prescribed for them.

Mariangela and the Memorial

In an essay on women's historical fiction, Giovanna Miceli Jeffries comments on the usefulness of Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday practices through which "marginal groups bring to the fore a series of unofficial, second level actions superimposed on the dominant, recorded systems."³⁵ She

³⁰ Maxia, "Prefazione," 9.

³¹ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 81.

³² Grand, "Maternal Surveillance: Disrupting the Thetoric of War," 309.

³³ Grand, "Maternal Surveillance: Disrupting the Thetoric of War," 308.

³⁴ Rudas, *L'isola dei coralli: itinerari dell'identità*, 255.

³⁵ Miceli Jeffries, "Unsigned Histories: Silent Micro-'Technologies of Gender' in the Narratives of the Quotidian," 75.

identifies a number of contemporary history-based narratives by Italian women writers that explore “silent technologies involving the uses of spaces, goods, and rituals” that may initially seem to reinforce institutional structures but which also contain a clandestine element of “antidiscipline” or “alternative culture.”³⁶ While Dessì is, clearly, not a woman writer, his interest in depicting the point of view of female characters, in *Il disertore* and other works like *Eleonora d'Arborea* (1964) and *La scelta* (1978), as well as the plight of marginalized people in general, makes the idea of these silent technologies of resistance relevant to his historical fiction. From the outside it might seem that Mariangela conforms to her role as grieving mother of two heroes of the *Patria*. But her behavior can also be read as a clandestine opposition to the patriotic duty demanded of her and a tactical appropriation of state resources and symbols.³⁷ First, she financially contributes to the memorial being constructed in the center of town, while simultaneously visiting the private grave she created for Saverio in the mountains outside Cuadu. She also conceals the fact that Saverio deserted his regiment and allows him to be remembered as a patriot, which permits his widow to collect a pension from the government. Furthermore, Mariangela makes appearances at solemn state-sponsored commemorative events, but once there anonymously utters disruptive remarks aimed at town authorities. Each of these actions constitutes an act of resistance while appearing to conform to social norms.

Mariangela's relationship to the *monumento ai caduti* exemplifies her anti-discipline, and it is precisely this anti-disciplinary behavior that allows a counter memory to be created. When the novel begins Mariangela cannot imagine the meaning of the memorial, but as time passes she becomes intrigued by it. She finds temporary comfort in what she thinks it will be:

[L]e pareva che il monumento fosse proprio l'opposto di quello che erano le parole sulla Patria e l'olocausto, che odiava. Sapeva che i nomi sarebbero stati scritti sull'arca, non altro: il monumento era silenzio. Era la fine di tutti i discorsi, di tutte le sciocchezze che si ripetevano sui giovani morti...Così l'idea del monumento si era formata nella sua mente, e per la prima volta, grazie a questo simbolo, il suo dolor e trovava conforto nel dolore degli altri, un conforto che mai nessuna parola aveva potuto darle³⁸.

³⁶ Miceli Jeffries, “Unsigned Histories: Silent Micro-‘Technologies of Gender’ in the Narratives of the Quotidian,” 75.

³⁷ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xvii.

³⁸ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 57.

Mariangela hopes that the structure will serve as a site without links to the political future of the nation and, while she continues her almost daily secret journeys back and forth to Saverio's hidden grave at the family's mountain hut, she also donates formidable sums of saved money to the fund for the monument. Yet, in the end, Mariangela cannot resign herself to the creation commissioned by Fascist-leaning town governors. Consequently, when Dessì describes the assembling of the monument through Mariangela's eyes, he uses the technique of estrangement to emphasize the grotesque exploitation of the soldier's body in the literal construction of memory:

[V]ide i gradini, le lastre di marmo scuro dell'arca, con i nomi scritti, in lettere dorate, tutt'intorno; e finalmente, portati con un enorme camion, il povero Soldato ferito e l'Angelo con le grandi ali spiegate furono issati sull'arca.³⁹

Everything about the structure seems false, constructed like a stage set, the opposite of Saverio's unadorned resting place in the mountains. Mariangela asks a child to point out her sons' names on the arch, and he reads to her: "Eca Giovanni, Sergente e Eca Saverio, Soldato." For the first time in the novel, Mariangela cries: "Dopo tanto tempo, pianse, come tutte le altre madri, non per altro, ma per il modo come quei nomi erano scritti, prima il cognome e poi il nome, stravolti come nei registri del Comune."⁴⁰ The description of Mariangela's reaction, however, is consistent with the way Dessì describes all of her actions after she decides to support the memorial's erection: She seems to agree to play her role, yet she rebels at the same time. She attends the memorial's inaugural ceremony, but she disappears because she cannot tolerate the patriotic anthems and speeches. She returns to the monument only when everyone else has gone home, to gaze at it in silence.

While the theme of silence runs through *Il disertore*, and has been read by some, particularly Nereide Rudas, as a nostalgic return to a pre-linguistic, matriarchal space which stands in opposition to patriarchal civilization, here Mariangela breaks her silence and enters into the realm of language, publicly challenging the official record. Her action, which echoes those of other women activists, did not have an immediate impact. However, the author implies that once the written historical record is revised to include them, such actions may shape public memory and thus determine the future. This type of correction of the historical record, which Assman has

³⁹ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 133.

⁴⁰ Dessì, *Il disertore*, 133.

called counter history, dovetails with counter memory—Dessi's narrator supplies the counter history while Mariangela provides the counter memory, and both contribute to the way women's anti-war activism will be remembered by his readers.

The episode in which Mariangela watches the construction of the war memorial also provokes questions about the interaction of individual and collective memory, and history. Mariangela's memory is non-linear, cyclical, and attached to the ritual tending of Saverio's grave, all of which prevent her from living completely in the present. Dessì presents this position as an ethical response to national collective memory, which is informed by and informs official history. Mariangela observes as the past is reconstructed in order to create the present. She watches as the workers "scavavano le fondamenta" and "muravano il basamento di granito," and as the figure of the soldier is delivered on a truck and then hoisted into place next to the stone angel.⁴¹ The workers, doing the bidding of the government, assemble memory, giving order and political meaning to a multitude of chaotic and conflicting stories. However, just as Mariangela struggles to make sense of the memorial's different pieces coming together, the reader is also charged with making sense of Mariangela's personal recollections and memories. Dessì imparts her thoughts to us in fragments, and we struggle to organize them into a cohesive story. The work we must do as readers, then, makes us aware of the fact that memory—both personal and collective—functions through the active work of arranging, remembering and forgetting of external events. The gaps in Mariangela's memory and the omissions evident in the memorial's presentation of history point to similar problems in the search for objective truth.

By making the memorial the catalyst of the novel's dramatic action as well as the subject of fictional historical documentation, Dessì can complicate the relationship between memory and history as well as explore how official and unofficial commemoration interacted with the solidification of the Fascist regime as well as the Republic. The novel, then, is not necessarily meant to expose the ways in which a lamentable historical period can be compared to contemporary society, but rather how the memories created in that period affect the present. Additionally, in Dessì's powerful use of Mariangela as a mother who resists official forms of commemoration, the author treats a similar theme found in the work of women writers who also foreground the opposition between motherhood and war. For example, Ada Negri highlights the unbridgeable gap between a mother's private grief and an official war memorial in her short story "La madre" (1926). Commenting on this text, Laura Benedetti notes Negri's attempt to point

out the “obvious contradiction between the ideology of motherhood that Fascism had inherited and tried to foster and the regime’s need for soldiers to use and sacrifice in battle.”⁴² Benedetti also cites another of Negri’s short stories, “Tuo figlio sta bene” (1923), as an illustration of the way Negri distinguishes between a mother’s “visceral opposition” to “everything that war represents,” and asserts that the mother’s interior monolog condemning the war contains “a germ of rebellion, albeit one confined to the consciousness of the reader.”⁴³ Yet in *Il disertore*, Mariangela’s rebellious thoughts evolve into actions, however small or hidden. Mariangela is not immobilized by grief, but rather it becomes a form of resistance. While Dessì does reproduce in Mariangela a number of traits of the Marian model of the desexualized, self-sacrificing mother consumed by her all-important relationship with her sons, he also affords her an identity of her own by depicting her conscious decisions to occupy a disruptive position in public spaces and her melancholic forms of commemoration that rely on her identity as a subject who grieves.⁴⁴ Through these moments of resistance, she actively rejects her role as reproducer of the culture of war and the conduit by which state values get instilled into her sons.

Thus, just as Mariangela continues to make daily visits to Saverio’s hidden grave, never allowing the official memorial to obscure or replace the loss she refuses to leave behind, with this novel Dessì creates both a counter memory, a counter history, and finally a literary counter monument that deconstructs the closure and resolution that celebratory monuments offer. Dessì proposes the ethical nature of resistant mourning that guards against historical amnesia which in turn can potentially lead to continued oppression within the nation-state, even in post-Fascist Italy, and in this way he reconciles his political stance with his commitment to the importance of subjective memory in reconstructing the past.

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³⁴² Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 53.

⁴³ Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 55.

⁴⁴ Benedetti makes a convincing connection between the renewed interest in and promotion of the cult of the Virgin in the second half of the nineteenth century and the models of the “self-sacrificing and yet powerful mother” reproduced in literature by both men and women in the time period surrounding World War I as well as in the post-World War II era (see Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow*, 32-39 and 52-60). For a discussion of how melancholia and resistant mourning presuppose subjectivity, see Tettenborn, “Melancholia as Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature,” 107.

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