

Alda Merini: Stigma and the Struggle for Authority as a Woman Writer

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Abstract: In her unpublished letters, author Alda Merini reflects on the limitations of being both a woman poet and a former psychiatric patient in a society dominated by misogyny and discrimination. In this chapter, I will analyze Merini's later writings, and in particular her letters, to explore the challenges that she faced as a woman writer in twentieth-century Italy. I will focus on Merini's (re)construction of her authorial self after nearly twenty years of poetic silence, and on her relationship with her literary editors and mentors, Maria Corti and Giacinto Spagnoletti – relationships in which Merini struggled to assert her authority. I will argue that Merini used her writing as a tool to negotiate her agency in both the publishing industry and society. Her reappropriation of the figure of the “madwoman” and her refusal to take an interest in the economic side of publishing are only some examples of her fight for self-determination as an author. This study is particularly timely as 2019 saw the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of Merini's death, which demonstrated that a full re-evaluation of her legacy is still overdue in more formal cultural environments, including academia. This essay will ultimately show that Merini's writing remains salient today, especially when it comes to exploring the position of lower-class women writers in Italy during the years of the so-called “second-wave” of the feminist movement.

Alda Merini was 34 years old and a mother of two when she was admitted to the Paolo Pini Psychiatric Hospital of Affori, in the outskirts of Milan. It was 1965, and from that night she would spend over ten years as a psychiatric patient, going home at regular intervals only to be readmitted after a few weeks (O'Brien 1996, p. 177). Twenty years after her first hospitalization, she collected her traumatic memories of the asylum in two works: the poetry collection *La Terra Santa* (The Holy Land, Scheiwiller 1984) and the memoir *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa* (The Other Truth. Diary of an Other, Scheiwiller 1986).¹ Merini records that before her hospitalization all she wanted to do was writing but that, for financial reasons, she would spend her time between tending for her daughters and offering private lessons to schoolchildren (Merini 2013, p. 13).² Born to a lower-middle-class Milanese family in 1931, in 1953 she had married Ettore Carniti, a Milanese baker who did not share her same passion for poetry. At the time she was already a published poet with a promising career ahead, although she was struggling to assert her credibility due to both her gender and her class. The intellectual elites amongst which she moved since she was an adolescent and that had supported her in the initial phases of her career did not seem to understand her choice to start a

¹ While *La Terra Santa* has been translated into English (by Stephanie Jed and Pasquale Verdicchio, Guernica 2002), *Diario di una diversa* has never been translated. All translation from Italian in this chapter are mine, unless otherwise specified.

² The version of *Diario* used in this chapter is a re-edition, the book was originally published in 1986.

family and her need to work. As Ambrogio Borsani writes, ‘the literary environment looks down on that odd couple’ (Borsani 2018, p. xxii), mainly due to Carniti’s working class status. In a letter to her editor, the journalist and critic Vanni Scheiwiller – conserved at the Centre for the Manuscript Tradition of Modern and Contemporary Authors at the University of Pavia – Merini informs him that she is aware of the fact that many intellectuals in Milan have been laughing at her choice to marry a man of humble origins (Merini Archive, p. 1141).

In this essay, I will explore Merini’s construction of her poetic subjectivity and her struggle to assert it after her long hospitalization focusing in particular on the relationship with her editors Maria Corti and Giorgio Spagnoletti. I will argue that Merini’s working class extraction, together with her gender and the stigma attached to her mental health issues, contributed to her isolation from cultural environments. I will also show how, thanks to poetry and through the construction of a literary and celebrity persona that refused to conform to society’s rules and expectations, Merini managed to renegotiate her authority and eventually fulfil her dreams to become one of Italy’s most loved poets.

Between Dream and Reality: The Early Period

It was Merini’s ‘poetic precocity’ (Pasolini 1954, p. 82), as intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini defined it, that caught the attention of the Milanese literary scene in the late 1940s. She was the youngest amongst these intellectuals, and, as she remembers, the ‘least educated’ (Redaelli 2013, p. 27). Spagnoletti’s friends saw her as a sort of *enfant prodige*, almost a Bretonian *femme enfant*. Since she was so young, in that period her lack of cultural references was not only condoned, but it was even praised as a sign of her purity and as a unique selling point. In 1954, commenting on Merini’s first collection, *La presenza di Orfeo* (The Presence of Orpheus, Schwarz 1952), Pasolini wrote:

Surely when we look at the Merini girl we cannot speak about cultural references: we declare ourselves astonished by this inexplicable precocity [...] Merini lives in a state of shapelessness, of almost spontaneous deformity – passive, in the sense that is proper to her sex – stagnant, archaic: this is awakened by a nervous agitation, of unhappy feelings, and defined by a monstrous masculine voice. (Pasolini 1954, p. 82-83)

In this passage Pasolini, who believed in the messianic qualities of the uncorrupted minds of children, perfectly captures the ‘shapelessness’, or even ‘deformity’, of Merini’s earlier poetry. At this stage, her work is mainly concerned with the exploration of dreamlike states, and it is characterized by intense lyricism and mystical language, accompanied by a sense of being lost and alone in the world –

something that reflects her point of view as an adolescent. Pasolini was not the only critic who, in addition to her lack of cultural references, noted Merini's gender.³

By Merini's own admission, her mental breakdown was not only connected to her status, but also to her gender: 'Women are pushed to do a lot', she explained during an interview, 'they are more anxious, more emotional. If they manage to channel [these emotions], then art can be created, otherwise this is how mental disorders are born' (Merini 1994, p. 154). Although Merini does not seem to be critical of the gender bias that, in her statement, clearly links women to the sphere of emotions and even neurosis, she still presents an important point on her experience: it was the role that society assigned to her gender that triggered her mental illness and changed the course of her life. The tension between her image of herself and society's expectations on her (especially when referred to her femininity) is explored by Merini through the use of paradoxes and dualisms – such as masculine and feminine, sacred and profane, corporeal and ethereal – which are at the core of her literary production. The idea of being split in two is simultaneously a hindrance and a strength for her, as she manages to use it productively in her work (Stewart 2009; Zinnari 2020).

Her diagnosis in the Paolo Pini reflected the theme of having a split identity. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia, a term deriving from the Ancient Greek verb *skhizein* 'to split' and the noun *phrēn* 'mind'. The sense of being split, of constantly struggling between opposite identities and forces is traceable in one of her first poems, 'Il Gobbo' (The Hunchback), written in 1948. In this poem, the poetic I is powerfully constructed as the predestined bearer of a gift that can heal and give meaning:

From the usual shore of the morning
I earn, inch by inch, my day
the day with its grey waters,
void of expression.

I earn the day with toil
between the two shores that never meet,
a waverer myself in life...
And no one helps me.

But sometimes an idle hunchback comes along,
a symbolic omen of gaiety
that has the gift of a strange prophecy.
And so that I can see the promise fulfilled,
he ferries me across on his own shoulders.⁴

³ Giancarlo Vigorelli, for example, writes that 'all that [Merini] touches becomes poetry: becomes, because it is not already there: within her, a woman, there is no trace of any poetically feminine mania' (Vigorelli 1955), showing that for him pure poetic inspiration cannot be originally present in Merini because of her gender.

⁴ Translated by Roberta L. Payne (2004, p. 183).

Merini was only seventeen when she wrote this poem, in which her awareness of being an unprivileged poet is expressed with elegance and confidence. In the first stanza, she paints a vivid picture of herself gloomily staring at the banks of the Naviglio River in Milan. The Naviglio is a place that she strongly attached to her identity (her house was only a few meters from the river, and her most famous photographic portraits often show it in the background), and it becomes a metaphor for the flowing of life. For the young Merini the days are grey and dull, and they do not come and go easily, but they must be earned – both metaphorically and materially. When asked to comment on this poem, she explained: ‘When I was sixteen I cried because, instead of studying, I had to earn my living working for an accountant. As I saw a deformed person passing by, I thought that my life was also losing shape, and that I, too, would get a hump because of how much I worked’ (Merini 1994, p. 153). Here we see that the ‘deformity’ first mentioned by Pasolini could be attributed not only to Merini’s poetics, but also to her social status, which prevents her from shaping her life as she pleased. As Kathi Weeks reminds us, under capitalism ‘it is not the police or the threat of violence that force us to work, but rather a social system that ensures that working is the only way that most of us can meet our basic needs’ (Weeks 2011, p. 7). The poet is therefore split in two, and these two extremities of her being, like the banks of the river, do not intersect, but run parallel and forever ‘unresolvable’ (‘che non si risolvono’), as Merini writes in the original Italian version. However, in the final stanza, the sense of hopelessness and ‘passivity’, as Pasolini would put it, is overturned by an ‘omen of gaiety’. The hunchback is, in the Italian tradition, a figure imbued with magical meanings. Here he comes to represent poetry that, as Catherine O’Brien aptly observes, is to Merini ‘a sacred gift that allows her to express the indefinable’, as the poet is seen as ‘a sort of unconscious ascetic who is capable of escaping from the obsessive rhythm of daily life’ (O’Brien 1996, p. 179). The struggle for coherency and identity is therefore overcome by Merini’s confident authorial self. Crucially, she chooses the hunchback, a figure characterized by deformity and alterity, to represent her inspiration. This choice has almost prophetic connotations considering that she would later become nationally known as ‘the poet who sang the pain of the marginalized’ (*La Repubblica* 2009).

‘From inside the tomb I, too, woke up again’: The Post-Asylum Period

It is in her post-asylum works that Merini’s exploration of her fragmented identity reaches its maximum expression. However, even if the writings from this period (1980s and early 90s) provided a gateway to access experiences that had rarely been represented before in Italian literature, no one seemed to be interested in what Merini had to say. As Elisa Biagini notes, ‘[i]t is precisely because of the therapeutic nature of Merini’s works produced after her hospitalization [...] that almost all the critics judged this work inferior [...] when compared to her works produced in the fifties and sixties’ (Biagini 2000, p. 13). This negative response from the critics shows us how it was impossible for Merini to gain credibility: when she took inspiration from important cultural references, she would be

accused of plagiarizing, while if she decided to use her own life experience as a starting point, her work would be dismissed as ‘confessional’. For these reasons, she had to struggle for many years to re-establish herself as a poet, which caused her to suffer greatly, but that also made her feel even more legitimized in her battle against discrimination. Merini donated the material produced in the post-asylum period to the University of Pavia, where her editor Corti worked. It is difficult to understand how much the author was paid for this important contribution, but what we can gather from her letters is that it was ‘just enough to keep [her] from starving’ (Merini Archive, p. 1142).

Merini’s letters to her editors reveal her extremely vulnerable state at the start of the 1980s and show how the confidence in her literary authority had deteriorated after the long reclusion in the asylum. Once she returned home, Merini had to take care of her terminally ill husband, who died in 1983. After his death, she (aged 53) remarried the poet Michele Pierri (more than 30 years her senior) and moved to Taranto. Most of the letters from this period are addressed to Corti, but there are also correspondences with Scheiwiller, Spagnoletti, and other literary figures such as Giorgio Manganelli and Giovanni Raboni. At this point, Merini is ‘in desperate need for money’, and makes clear that she will not settle for anything less than ‘literary glory’, which she wants to claim while she is ‘still alive’ (Merini Archive, pp. 1139, 1135). Her tone in these letters reveals her fragile mental state, as it often shifts from being amiable and calm, to confident and angry, at times reaching peaks of desperation in which she begs her friends to help her and threatens to end her life, only to then apologize for being overdramatic. Her frustration at having been rejected by the cultural circles in which she moved because of her health issues is revealed in the opening of a letter addressed to Corti, in which she exclaims: ‘For Heaven’s sake, you introduced me to a certain literary environment and now how do I make up for the ten years that I have lost [in the asylum]?’ (Merini Archive, p. 1142). Merini mentions that Pierri is very ill, which helps us to date this letter to the mid-1980s. A few years earlier, in 1981, she had written to writer Carlo Betocchi, saying that ‘the important names of the literary world refuse me as I have experienced the humiliation of the psychiatric hospital’ (Merini Archive, p. 1197), showing how the judgement of the intellectual elites simultaneously crushed and enraged her. This time, the novelty of her age had dissipated, and the mark of the mental asylum weighed too heavily on her name, making it impossible to receive the same support from the important figures who had first introduced her to the public. Her social isolation and financial difficulties contributed to strengthen Merini’s belief that, although she had survived the ‘hell’ of the asylum, ‘the real hell [was] outside’ (Merini 2013, pp. 120-121).

Despite her fragile state, Merini demonstrates a certain perspicacity in understanding the intentions of her editors. In a distressed letter to Spagnoletti she mentions Amelia Rosselli, another prominent female poet who also experienced mental illness and whom Corti and Spagnoletti supported. She explains having noticed that ‘no one ever mentions Rosselli’s madness, while mine has become

almost theatrical' (Merini Archive, p. 1142). Concerned that her struggle with mental illness is being spectacularized for commercial purposes, Merini expresses her reservations to her friends, who proceed to reassure her that this is not the case. In a letter conserved in the same folder, written by Spagnoletti to Corti and dated 11 May 1982, the former talks about building the 'Merini case' to relaunch her to the public. He mentions touching 'delicately' upon Merini's clinical issues, as 'this cannot be omitted to the reader, as it happened with Rosselli' (Merini Archive, p. 1205). This confirms that Merini's intuitions were correct and demonstrates that – precisely as it had happened when she was first introduced to the public as a child prodigy – her editors wanted to use her exceptional circumstances as a selling point. I argue that this failure to recognize Merini's talent in its own right reveals ableist, classist and sexist bias on the part of the publishing industry. The fact that the editors were more careful not to expose Rosselli to the public eye also shows that there were considerable differences in the ways in which an author's personal information was handled.

If, on the one hand, Merini's editors placed too much emphasis on the sensational aspects of her life experience rather than on the value her work, on the other it is true that, without their support, she would have probably never achieved the success she finally reached in the 1990s and 2000s. As Corti explains, a characteristic of Merini's production is her torrential and chaotic writing process (Corti 1982-83;1998).⁵ In line with her refusal to conform to society's rules, including publishing conventions, Merini proudly claimed that she never 'retouched a verse' (Merini 1999, p. 13). Her editors, on the contrary, often spent months on end selecting, organizing, and editing her material to then present it to various publishers. In a letter addressed to Corti and dated November 1981, for example, Spagnoletti explains that he is trying to select publishable material from 'about a hundred poems by Merini. All obviously belonging to the 1980-81 flux', and that Pierri is also helping him 'choosing and retyping' the material (Merini Archive, p. 1210). This is yet another reason why the power relationship between Merini and the publishing industry was unbalanced, as she was dependent on her editors to regain her position and to support herself financially.

In a letter from the same period (May 1982), Spagnoletti sends Merini a warning: 'Now I beg you to please do absolutely nothing on your own (if you hadn't published that book with Lalli⁶, now [...] you could have published it with Mondadori⁷). You should let your friends "work". Would you promise this to me?' (Merini Archive, p. 1204). Here Spagnoletti is referring to the fact that Merini, probably frustrated with the publication timing, had started sending her work to minor publishers – as was the

⁵ Commenting on Merini's contribution to the Centro Manoscritti, Corti writes: 'If compared to the well-organised manuscripts of the other artists, Merini's papers are like a horde of orphans, badly dressed and derelict, waiting for someone to give them first aid' (Corti 1986, p. 87).

⁶ Lalli Editore is a minor publishing house in Italy, mainly specializing in non-fiction.

⁷ Mondadori is one of the oldest and most established publishing houses in Italy. It was founded in 1907 by Arnoldo Mondadori.

case with Lalli, who published *Destinati a morire* (Destined to Die) in 1981. This correspondence shows that, in Merini's work, the editor had more agency than the author in determining the finished product. This phenomenon was not uncommon in twentieth-century Italian publishing, although in Merini's case it acquires particular emphasis.⁸ It is difficult to gain a clear picture of her effective input on the various editions of her works, and it could be argued that by refusing to engage with the editing process Merini also refuses the rules of a world that had never valued her for who she was. While conducting research on her PhD, Ambra Zorat asked Merini about her authorial will, referring specifically to the two different editions of *La Terra Santa* (both dated 1984), edited respectively by Corti and Spagnoletti. Zorat observed a total 'lack of self-awareness in the critical organization of her oeuvre' (Zorat 2008, p. 151), noting that Merini did not seem to be aware that the two editions included different material. These dynamics, which undoubtedly merit further investigation, attest to the complex nature of the relationship between Merini and her editors. Significantly, it is Corti herself who attributes the poet's erratic creative processes to her schizophrenia in her article aimed at reintroducing Merini to the literary scene (Corti 1982-83, p. 80), further pathologizing and consequently disempowering her.

The correspondences conserved in Pavia perfectly capture the extent of the discrimination that Merini suffered at the hands of her own friends and editors and show the role that poetry played in giving her the strength to face these injustices. In a heart-breaking letter to Corti, dated November 1982, she describes having met Spagnoletti with his wife on a Sunday, and having received 'cruel words' from the former, who had commented on her 'choice to abandon the Milanese cultural scene' for a lifestyle that was 'lacking any aesthetic value' (Merini Archive, p. 1169). This shows Spagnoletti's insensitivity to class and mental health issues, which is also evident in other letters. In another instance, he asks Merini – who had just sent him some poems – to send him something 'written in the asylum' (Merini Archive, p. 1204), demonstrating a lack of understanding of the conditions in which patients were kept in these institutions. Merini confesses that she felt so mortified by these words that she spent the rest of her Sunday crying.

The poet also adds that Spagnoletti had accused her of lacking real culture, and of just having a 'stereotypical' one (Merini Archive, p. 1169). Visibly shaken by the memories of that Sunday, in the postscript of the letter she tells Corti that she received similar abuse from another woman at a poetry reading. This woman, called Antonietta dell'Arte – as Merini points out, 'someone who used to work at the post office and who now gets published by no less than Guanda'⁹ –, had allegedly told her that the only reason Merini had been published was due to the backing of her 'influential friends' (Merini

⁸ To read more on this topic, see: Paola Italia, *Editing Novecento*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2013.

⁹ Guanda, which specializes in poetry and contemporary literature, is one of the most prestigious publishing houses in Italy. It was founded in 1932 by editor and writer Ugo Guandalini.

Archive, p. 1169). These episodes demonstrate that Merini's lifestyle and work were strongly criticized by her fellow poets, who essentially judged her for not belonging to their social class. Yet, what clearly transpires from these documents is, as Manganelli put it, the 'salvific vocation of the poetic word' (Merini 2013, p. 11)¹⁰, which has the power to allow Merini to overcome her past and present humiliations. She crucially writes that 'poetry is the only thing I've got left', and that it 'helped me to uncover the [otherwise] ungraspable drama of life' (Merini Archive, pp. 1166, 1156). As seen in 'Il Gobbo', poetry is to her a shield that protects her from danger and, at the same time, it becomes an opening towards the other. Poetry is, for Merini, simultaneously pure inspiration and a refined instrument of research and interpretation.

Reclaiming the Right to Live and Create: The Final Years

By the early 1990s, Merini was living in her flat in Milan 'like a homeless person' (Briganti 2019, p. 64), as her daughter Barbara testifies in an interview with Annarita Briganti. Borsani describes Merini's apartment as a 'deposit of various objects [...] on the floor lie cigarette stubs, all sorts of papers, empty cans [...]' (Borsani 2018, p. xlvi). What would capture the attention of her visitors were the walls of her room, which Merini used like a notebook. With a marker or, more often, with the tip of her red lipstick, she would take note of the phone numbers of her friends, whom she famously phoned at any time of the day (Stewart 2009, pp. 10-11). Walking into this bizarre environment might give the impression that Merini never left the asylum.¹¹ Alberto Casiraghi, who collaborated closely with her from that period until her death, clarified that her chaotic lifestyle was not only due to her lack of money, or to her mental illness, but it was the result of Merini's deliberate refusal to assume once again the role of the housewife.¹² After Pierri's death, once she moved back to her apartment in Milan, Merini had realized that, in spite of the difficulties she had to endure, she was now finally free. She was not a wife anymore, as both her husbands were dead; she did not have to work, as she was managing to survive with her poetry and various types of benefits (Briganti 2019, p. 55), and she did not have maternal duties, as her daughters were old enough to be mothers themselves. During this period, she welcomed a homeless man who she renamed Titano into her flat, to whom she dedicated many of her poems. It is in these years that she finally managed to achieve national fame. She published two important poetry anthologies edited by Corti: *Vuoto d'amore* (Emptiness of Love, Einaudi 1991) and *Fiore di poesia* (Flower of Poetry, Einaudi 1998). With the former, in 1993 she won the first of a long list of prizes: the Librex Montale Prize, amounting to 35 million lire (about 15000 pounds), which – as a testament to her eccentricity – she famously spent in a very short period

¹⁰ Originally published in the culture magazine *Alfabeta*, 52(5), September 1983.

¹¹ Her bedroom, often captured by the pictures of photographer Giuliano Grittini, has now been reconstructed in the cultural centre dedicated to her, the Spazio Merini in via Magolfà (Milan), where original parts of the walls have been preserved.

¹² I interviewed Casiraghi in his home in Osnago (Lecco) in April 2018.

of time, mainly on telephone calls and to pay for a room for herself in the Hotel Certosa, a rundown two-star hotel not far from her flat, into which she moved for a few months. Interviewed by Luisella Veroli, she stated: ‘People expect I will use this money to pay my bills on time, to buy some furniture...giving me money, they’d like to turn me into someone who knows how to administer it. But I am and will remain a poet’ (Merini 1994, p. 8).

Merini’s rejection of societal conventions is also mirrored by her refusal to take an interest in the economic side of publishing. Although she had known poverty, as the correspondences from the 1980s demonstrate, she was renowned for her generosity. Once her work had started to sell, she would spend the profits buying presents for her loved ones, including her numerous homeless friends who lived next to her flat, and she would continue to gift them her poetry through dedications and even writing it on the spot for them using her typewriter, or the back of a napkin (Merini 1994, p. 8; Cotto 2017). In an astonishing turn of events, by the early 2000s Merini was one of the most famous living poets in Italy; constantly invited onto national talk shows and selling thousands of copies of her books with publishers of the caliber of Einaudi and Mondadori. As Borsani remembers, ‘many other giants of the publishing industry try to contend her. It was impossible, however, to ask her to sign an exclusive’ as ‘she had a human, rather than instrumental approach to poetry. For her it was more important to spend an afternoon with someone who appreciated her, rather than worrying about profiting from each word she wrote’ (Borsani 2018, pp. LIX, XLIX). Because of her age and health issues, Merini started to dictate poems over the phone, which ‘made it even easier to take advantage of her [...] she was like a godsend for improvised publishers’ (Borsani 2018, p. XLIX), who would ask her to dictate some poems for them to then sell for the highest possible price. For Merini, however, the poetic word is not a source of economic, but spiritual value because, as Laura Wittman writes, for her ‘prayer and poetry coexist’ (Wittman 2014, p. 520). Interpreting her poetic talent as a divine gift that should be gifted back to others, and especially to the most unfortunate, is in line with her Catholic faith and with the spiritual and human qualities of her work. Crucially, she often compares herself to Saint Therese of Lisieux, ‘a woman who did not do anything special in her life. Someone who was simply charitable. [...] I am one of these people’ (Merini 2007, p. 89). Importantly, her art becomes a pillar of this lifestyle, as she declares that ‘poetry is something that belongs to my body. What I want is to make it known myself, be the one who distributes my books’ (Merini 1994, p. 156). In this way, Merini is able to escape the social contract that makes work a site of production not only of goods, but also of subjectivities (Weeks 2011), by forging her own, subversive subjectivity beyond the heteropatriarchal capitalist system. Connecting her poetry to her body, a theme that is central to feminist practice, Merini also claims agency over her production and explains why she is not interested in complying with capitalist mechanisms that indicate that accumulation of wealth is the only way to assert one’s subjectivity.

Even if acclaimed by the public, at the apex of her success Merini was still looked upon with suspicion by the Italian intellectual elite. Her appearances on TV, in which she adorned herself with cheap jewelry, ostentatious makeup and fur coats, were seen as further evidence that she was not a sophisticated poet, but a pop phenomenon for the masses.¹³ What escaped her critics was that Merini, after so many years of struggle to survive, might have been playing a role to amuse herself at the expenses of those who took her too seriously. As she wrote: ‘I can change whenever I want [...] like a schizophrenic [...] it is easy for me to fool people this way’ (Merini 2007, p. 138). While in the period that followed her discharge from the hospital she feared the judgment of those who knew about her illness, in this later stage she reappropriated the term ‘madwoman’ and used it freely in her works, as she does in *La pazza della porta accanto* (The Madwoman Next Door, Bompiani 1995), where she played with concepts of normality and marginality, constantly subverting them to reveal how they are socially constructed. Now that her days revolved around her poetic activity, Merini was able to find unity, coherency, and agency within her work. To the young woman who, in her early career, struggled to reconcile her two opposite selves, she substituted a new, mature self; an image of unified chaos and utter nonconformism, in which she unapologetically embodied the subversive Other and fully embraced life’s mysteries and contradictions:

One thing that you will never know [about this woman] is that she has a penis and is ambidextrous. This woman is colored with all the nocturnal emissions of Satan. She bathes in your waters, like a nymph, yet she is old. She should be discreet regarding her feelings, but she does not know candor. (Merini 1994, p. 45)

With these words, Merini was re-reading the concept of monstrosity that others, like Pasolini, had used to describe her poetry, and that she attributed to her femininity during the difficult years of her illness (Merini 2013, pp. 44-45). As Hélène Cixous does in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, she invites her readers to take a closer look at this monstrous woman, to realize that ‘she’s not deadly [but] she’s beautiful and she’s laughing’ (Cixous 1976, p. 885). Playing with the ‘refusal to separate the sacred and the profane’ (Wittman 2014, p. 500) that characterizes her work, Merini presents a sort of antichrist in the shape of the phallic woman, a crone that she submerges in water and semen, and who is not afraid of society’s judgement. As a result, she reinterprets her split identity in terms of plurality and eccentricity, and she does so in a way that is equally disturbing and empowering for both the

¹³ In an article that appears on the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*, journalist Gian Paolo Serino quotes writer Federico Roncoroni, who defines Merini’s pre-hospitalisation production, ‘a bit cynically [...] as the only good years before the poet’s fervent creativity was swallowed up by her despair.’ This judgment is shared by the subtitle Serino chooses for the article: ‘When [Merini] was still “pure” and not too pop...’ (Serino 2014).

writer and the reader. Depicting a hybrid and grotesque body, Merini defines her subjectivity as fluid and dynamic, as Mikhail Bakhtin posits:

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world. (Bakhtin 1968, p. 317)

The ‘passivity’ identified by Pasolini as a characteristic of Merini’s early work, which he connected to her sex, is replaced by a dynamism that transforms her ‘shapelessness’ and ‘deformity’ into a clearly defined creative energy. This self-awareness allows her to reject society’s expectations without fearing the consequences; as a woman, and especially as an older woman, she is aware that she should be discreet, yet she prides herself of knowing no candor. By identifying with this androgynous figure, Merini claimed her right not to be labelled. While society, starting from her family and the publishing industry, was for her a site of discrimination in which she felt misunderstood and oppressed, poetry offered her the space to free herself from limiting categorizations and accept herself for what she was. It was through poetry, which she defined as ‘dear to me as my own life’ (Merini 1987, pp. 7-8)¹⁴, that Merini claimed the space that she had seen denied throughout her life, and especially during the years of her hospitalization. As she wrote:

Space, give me space
so that I can utter an inhuman cry
that cry of silence in the years
that I have touched with my hand. (Merini 1991: 8)¹⁵

This ‘inhuman cry’ was skillfully transformed into voice and song, with which the poet ‘invade[s] the earth’ (Merini 1991, p. 7)¹⁶, to finally meet the poetic destiny that she had promised to her sixteen-year-old self.

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¹⁴ Translated by O’Brien (1996, p. 179).

¹⁵ Translated by O’Brien (1996, p. 183).

¹⁶ Translated by O’Brien (1996, p. 182).

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