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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Alda Merini's Memoir: Psychiatric Hospitalization, Institutional Violence And The Politicization Of Illness In 20th Century Italy

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ABSTRACT

In 1964, the Italian poet Alda Merini was hospitalized in a mental hospital in Milan as the result of a violent fight with her husband. Merini would spend ten years in and out of hospital, while her relationship with her family and with the literary circles in which she moved deteriorated. Merini's experience in the asylum is narrated in her memoir *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa* (1986). Through an analysis of some crucial passages in the memoir, this article seeks to demonstrate that *Diario* is a work charged with both literary and historical value that deserves more scholarly attention. Merini's memories shed new light on the situation of psychiatric patients, and especially of women, in Italy before and after Basaglia's reforms on mental institutions. Demonstrating how the abuse that she suffered in the hospital reflects society's attitudes toward mental illness, disability, and women, Merini shows that the type of trauma narrative that is produced under institutions of coercive control – such as the mental asylum – will often be one of resistance to oppression.

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Introduction

More than ten years after her death, the poet Alda Merini is still largely remembered in Italy as the poet who 'sang the pain of the marginalized' (La Repubblica, 2009).¹ Merini was born in Milan in 1931 into a lower middle-class family and started writing poems at a very young age, although her parents disapproved of her poetic inclination (Merini, 2007, p. 135). In one of her autobiographies, Merini writes that the lack of support and recognition from her parents triggered the 'first feelings of guilt' (Merini, 1994, p. 14) that would later accompany her during the years of psychiatric hospitalization. After witnessing the horrors of the war, Merini entered, almost by accident, one of Milan's most prestigious literary circles and started publishing her poems in important anthologies of poetry (Zorat, 2008, p. 148). Aged twenty-

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two, she got married to bakery owner Ettore Carniti. Her marriage and two subsequent pregnancies slowed down her poetic activity. In 1965, Merini found herself in serious mental distress and one night, after a heated fight with her husband, she was restrained and sent to a psychiatric hospital under circumstances that still remain unclear today (Merini, 1994, pp. 28–29). According to testimony provided by her daughters, Merini was a victim of domestic violence.² Merini would remain in the Paolo Pini Hospital for ten years, going home at regular intervals until when she was eventually discharged (Merini, 1994, p. 67, 2013, p. 15). According to different sources, Merini was given between 46 and 57 electric shock treatments during her hospitalization, and was sterilized aged thirty-nine (Piwowska, 2012, pp. 83–98; Zorat, 2008, p. 146).³ Twenty years after her first hospitalization, she interrupted her poetic silence collecting her memories of the asylum in two works: the collection of poems *La Terra Santa/The Holy Land* (1984), and the memoir *L'altra verità: Diario di una diversa/The Other Truth: Diary of an Other* (1986).

Merini's return to writing after her time in the asylum was not met with the same praise as her debut at fifteen. This time, the stigma of the psychiatric hospital would prevent her from resuming her old friendships and collaborations. Yet, important literary figures such as critic Maria Corti and editor Vanni Scheiwiller offered their help to select, edit and publish her new works. After the horrors of the mental asylum, it became clear that Merini had to overcome yet another ordeal – that of regaining her credibility as a poet. As Elisa Biagini notes, 'it is precisely because of the therapeutic nature of the works that Merini produced after her hospitalization [...] that almost all the critics judged them as inferior [...] if compared to the works she produced in the fifties and sixties' (Biagini, 2000, p. 13). In the 1990s the immediacy of Merini's poems and her participation as a guest in national TV shows made her a media sensation. The same cannot be said of more formal cultural environments, which interpreted this success as yet more proof of Merini's diminished cultural status. Yet, this by no means implies that it is impossible to find scholarly research on her work. Stefano Redaelli, for instance, argues on her value and explores the importance of the poetic word in Merini's *Diario*, echoing Francesca Parmeggiani's reflections on Merini's ability to convert her diagnosis into empowerment through the written word (Parmeggiani, 2002; Redaelli, 2013). Furthermore, Laura Wittman offers a compelling interpretation of the tension between sacred and profane, the corporeal and the spiritual

²Merini's daughters recount their memories of the night she was taken to the Paolo Pini hospital on the website that they created in commemoration of their mother's death in 2009. http://www.aldamerini.it/?page_id=8#1513804312488-4be084e7-f9a4

³The figure is 57 according to this interview: Paolo Di Stefano, 'Le mie prigionie: poesia e castigo. Intervista a Alda Merini,' *Corriere della sera* (10 December 1992). 46 according to this, more recent, article: Andrea Galli, 'Alda Merini: torturata 46 volte,' *Corriere della Sera* (15 February 2008). These sources are not available online and have been retrieved from Zorat and Piwowska.

in Merini's poetry (Wittman, 2014). These themes are also explored by Elisa Biagini and Carla Gubert (Biagini, 2001; Gubert, 1999). Also notable are Christine Ott's analysis of the use of the 'you' pronoun in Merini's poetry (Ott, 2015), and Ambra Zorat's PhD thesis, submitted in 2008, which contains a useful bibliography on Merini and a meticulous analysis of *La Terra Santa*.

While the above studies argue for a reevaluation of Merini's poetry in the panorama of 20th century European literature, and even if some of them explore Merini's re-reading of the asylum experience as one of breakthrough rather than breakdown (Redaelli, 2013), none of these studies concentrates specifically on Merini's construction of a political and subversive subjectivity in *Diario*.⁴ Furthermore, perhaps due to the ambiguity of her writing, none of these scholars has traced parallels between Merini and feminist thought, which is what I intend to do in this article. Reflecting on Merini's position as an outsider, Susan Stewart notes:

If you find yourself in a conversation with the Italian, mostly male, poets of her generation, a mention of Merini's name will quickly bring out somewhat sullen condemnations of her "sensationalism" and ostensibly undeserved recognition by "feminists" and others. And if you speak to feminists about her, you will find that they complain about her subservience to male mentors or her irrational imagery. [...] Yet in everything she has written, the terrible facts of the twentieth century, and her experience of them, loom; she is both learned in the tradition and schooled in suffering – to deny either aspect of her experience is not to read her at all. (Stewart, 2009, p. 13)

I will explore how Merini's more ambiguous position gave her the ability to capture some of the darkest events of the 20th century, and I will show how her ability to record and denounce these events makes of her a powerful voice that deserves more attention from scholars in all fields.

Reading Merini's memoir of illness as testimonial life-writing

As often happens with autobiographical writing, labeling Merini's *Diario* as a specific genre is not an easy task (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 141). The structure of the memoir is non-linear, non-chronological and fragmented; Merini mixes prose with a series of para-texts, including letters, postscripts and poetry, thus calling for a multivalent approach to its reading. The author uses the first person (either singular, to indicate herself, or plural, to refer to herself and her fellow inmates) and employs the past tense consistently throughout the memoir. In *Diario*, many are the instances of repetition of the same event, which often coincide with the most painful recollections. As Cathy Caruth observes, the tendency toward repetition is one of the most common characteristics of trauma writing, and it serves the purpose of

⁴It is also useful to note that no official scholarly biography of Merini has been published to date and no scholarly work has been dedicated exclusively to the analysis of *Diario di una diversa*, which has also never been translated into English.

‘repeatedly bringing [the traumatized person] back into the situation of the trauma’ (Caruth, 2016, p. 4) in order, as Rachael Spear notes, to ‘bring it into one’s consciousness’ (Spear, 2014, p. 62). The title *The Other Truth* suggests that Merini is presenting her version of the events that accompanied her hospitalization – a version that differs from the one told by the authoritarian figures that surrounded her, including her doctors and her husband. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, this type of life-writing can be categorized as both ‘narrative of illness and trauma’, in which autobiography is ‘used as a critique of the gendered and dehumanizing treatment accorded by institutions to vulnerable people’, and as ‘narrative of witness’ (Smith & Watson, 2010, pp. 146–147), in which, according to Judith Butler, giving an account of oneself corresponds to an act of community building, and ultimately ‘contributes to the human rights project of social justice’ (Butler, 2005, p. 135).⁵ This definition is particularly relevant to my reading of Merini, as I interpret her memoir as a politicized narrative of trauma.

In *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke brings together these two definitions of life-writing as testimony and as illness narrative, and frames these complex narratives as ‘testimonial life-writing’:

Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone and no-one – to a world that will judge personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or as thinly disguised fiction. No matter. It is through the very process of rehearsing and re-enacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis. (Henke, 2000, p. xix)

Henke argues that testimonial life-writing helps the subject in the process of ‘reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world’ (Henke, 2000, p. xix), a phenomenon that she observes particularly in women’s memoirs, and that I argue is also present in Merini. It is for this reason that, as also Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson observe, women’s autobiography ‘needs to be understood as political practice, but also as an effort to investigate one’s place in the world’ (Scarparo & Wilson, 2004, p. 2). In the following pages, I will show how Merini, a ‘shattered subject’, acquires – in the process of reinventing herself through writing – not only human agency as an individual, but also political agency as part of a group (of marginalized, mentally ill people).

In her article on disability autobiography, Margaret Price echoes Henke’s reading of the memoir as a form of resistance and reinvention of the self and interprets it as a response to medical violence – a strategy that she terms as ‘counter-diagnosis’ (Price, 2009). This strategy is activated through different

⁵Butler’s words echo Thomas Couser’s warning that every representation of self/other ‘is always at once a mimetic and a political act’ (Couser, 1997, p. 33).

techniques, including what she calls ‘creative incoherence’ (Price, 2009, p. 18), which consists of a disorganized narrative and a fragmentation of the narrating ‘I’. Price quotes Anne Wilson and Peter Beresford, who describe psychiatry as a ‘diagnostic empire’ and call for a social theory of madness and distress that ‘*vigorously contest[s]* the role of the psychiatric system and, in particular, of medical/psychiatric records and discourses’ (Wilson & Beresford, 2002, pp. 141, 155). As I will show, such contestation can be found in *Diario* as well, together with a structural and stylistic incoherence that Merini herself describes as ‘intentional’, revealing her subversive scope (Merini, 2013, p. 145).

For the reasons illustrated so far, I argue that *Diario* can therefore be located within a panorama of ‘testimonial life-writing’ written by women, and of literature of psychiatric disability that employs the ‘counter-diagnosis’ strategy. I will therefore illustrate how Merini is able to construct an empowered and subversive self, finding the energy to denounce the Italian psychiatric system and to expose its violation of human rights. As I will show, one of Merini’s main goals is to show how the (psychological and physical) violence that took place in the psychiatric institution reflects societal attitudes toward mental illness, disability and women. Interpreting Merini’s memoir as testimonial life-writing, and her authorial voice as one that is conscious of its political agency, I intend to offer a new approach to reading women’s first-person narratives of illness – one that sees their political and subversive intent as key to their process of self-recovery.

Critique of the asylum as a ‘false institution’

Merini was incarcerated between 1965 and 1975, a period during which psychiatry saw major changes on both a national and international level. These changes culminated with the closing of the asylums in Italy at the end of the 1970s, thanks to the campaigns lead by the influential radical psychiatrist Franco Basaglia (Scheper-Hughes & Lovell, 1986, p. 159). The law that closed the asylums was known as the Basaglia Reform, or Law 180, and it was the result of a period of intense ideological turmoil that started with the students’ and workers’ revolts of 1968 in the US and Europe (Foot, 2015, pp. 48–49). This period was accompanied by the refusal of any system of coercive control that in any way resembled the (still too vivid) memories of the war and of concentration camps (Babini, 2009, p. 139).⁶

Prior to the Basaglia Reform, the concept of therapy for Italian psychiatry meant custody and restraint. As Giulia Melani notes, ‘mental asylums did not represent in any way a service dedicated to the care of the patients, but they were instead institutions of discipline’ (Melani, 2015, pp. 64–65). Hence, there was almost no distinction between the treatment of psychiatric patients in

⁶To read more on the history of Italian asylums, see: Pillo (1998), Foot (2015), Canosa (1979), and Babini (2009).

mental hospitals and of criminals in prisons. In the majority of cases, being interned in an asylum would involve exclusion from society and, before the end of the 1970s, it also corresponded with a loss of the right to vote. Mentally ill patients in Italian asylums during most of the 19th and early 20th centuries were, therefore, deprived of their fundamental rights as citizens. This process of de-humanization was very rarely reversible and meant that the patient who was released would then face serious issues in finding employment and escaping social stigma after the internment.

The de-humanization of the patients within the asylum is a key theme in Merini's memoir. In her opening, Merini recalls the feelings of dread upon her arrival at the hospital, in the moment when she realized that she would not be able to return home:

I was therefore hospitalized against my will and at the time I didn't even know about the existence of mental asylums [...] but when I found myself in there, I think I went mad right away, as I realized I had entered a labyrinth that would be impossible to exit. (Merini, 2013, p. 14)

With these words, Merini emphasizes the violent nature of her incarceration and provides her readers with important details on the process of institutionalization. At that time, in fact, inmates could only be detained by order of a family member, and once hospitalized it would be very difficult for them to be discharged (Melani, 2015, p. 64; Pillo, 1998, p. 10). Merini remembers being taken to the asylum against her will, and the episode is described in terms that evoke an instance of kidnapping. She also reveals that she was completely unaware of the existence of these institutions. This is a plausible detail as a 'sane' citizen at the time would have no reasons to know about mental hospitals because, as Erving Goffman observes, these structures were hidden away from society and relegated to the margins (Goffman, 1961, p. 163). Finding herself suddenly transported into a dimension of unimaginable pain – a 'labyrinth' where at night inmates would produce 'an infernal chaos', a place that was 'saturated with smells' – Merini is presented with no other choice than to 'go mad right away' (Merini, 2013, pp. 15–16).

Throughout the memoir, Merini tries to recall her memories of the space of the asylum as faithfully as she can in order to convey the extent of the terrifying images she witnessed. She explains how it would be impossible, even for the healthiest of individuals, to leave this institution without being irreversibly transformed:

The hours, in that terribly sad place, never passed. They [the staff] would line us up on some long old benches, all of us, with our faces all the same, amorphous; and we would stare at the floor as if we were sentenced to death. They would never give us anything to do. The nurses never looked at us. (Merini, 2013, p. 62)

The patients in the asylum regress to the state of a subhuman or non-entity, a process that is expedited by the nurses' lack of empathy for their condition, which even manifests itself as repulsion or in acts of aggression toward their patients. Just as mental asylums are invisible to the rest of the world, so the inmates are invisible to the hospital staff. Time loses meaning within the walls of the asylum. As in concentration camps and prisons, where everyone looks the same, so the patients in the female ward of the Paolo Pini look 'like a coven of witches', dressed in the same uniforms, annihilated by the daily cycle of abuse and made 'amorphous' by the 'heavy pharmacological treatments' (Merini, 2013, pp. 32–33). These passages show that, by offering a testimony of the horrors witnessed in the asylum, Merini finds meaning and order, and is able to map her way out these traumatic recollections. This process demonstrates that, as Rachel Spear notes, '[trauma] stories arise not only in efforts to remember the past but also in hopes of creating meaning, putting together the fragments, and reestablishing a sense of order to this psychological disorder' (Spear, 2014, p. 64). The meaning that Merini creates out of her own experience also serves to reverse the process by which psychiatric patients are made invisible, as she represents both her own and their experiences and re-humanizes both them and her herself.

Merini describes the asylum as a paradoxical institution; one that is portrayed in society as a place of care, but that is in fact a place of sorrow, abandonment and violence. She expresses her disappointment at realizing, once back in her home in Milan, that the people who live 'outside' do not really understand the entity of the abuse that psychiatric inmates go through while hospitalized (Merini, 2013, p. 117). For this reason, at the midpoint in her narrative, Merini defines the psychiatric hospital as 'a false institution':

The asylum is most certainly a false institution, one of those that, having been created in the name of solidarity and of human understanding, have no other purpose than to satisfy men's sadistic instincts. And we were the innocent victims of these institutions. There were people who needed psychiatric care, this is true, but there were also people who were there because of the greediness and thirst for power of others, and I was well aware of this. This is why Basaglia did well to close them, creating – this is clear – other problems that still remain unresolved. (Merini, 2013, pp. 42–43)

This extract exemplifies the socio-political analysis that Merini performs in the *Diario* and is in line with Price's theory of 'counter-diagnosis' (Price, 2009). The author is seeking recognition and validation as a victim of institutional violence and aims to expose a type of discrimination – social stigma – that was not openly addressed by either the institutions, the press or the literary scene at the time she was writing. Feeling betrayed by the same society that has labeled her insane, Merini has the opportunity, through her memoir, to describe the extent of her abuse and to finally find a way to react to the injustice she has witnessed. She is also careful to warn her readers, and with

them the doctors and nurses who cared for her (or for people like her), that she was never defeated by the dark machinations of this ‘false institution’. This is because she ‘was well aware’ that the reason why many innocent people were locked in asylums was so that society could get rid of them (Merini, 2013, p. 123).

In her reflections, which at times are marked by an almost journalistic tone, Merini openly comments on the Basaglia Law, revealing how even this progressive approach to psychiatric care was not without its own problems. As John Foot points out, Law 180 was in equal measure praised and contested by the scientific community:

Contemporary debates around Basaglia’s reforms and ideas tend to concentrate in two areas. The first is linked to the closure of the asylums, and the alternative structures that were set up in various countries (as well as Italy) to ‘replace’ them. A considerable body of opinion claims that the ‘Basaglia Law’ was a mistake, which ‘abandoned’ patients and failed to create adequate alternative structures. (Foot, 2014, p. 249)

Merini’s memories offer a sharp analysis of these historical events. Her perspective is even more significant than most because of the fact that she speaks from the point of view of someone who has been *subjected to* (rather than who has *implemented*) these changes in care.⁷ Merini is not afraid to criticize the Basaglia Law, explaining that this led to ‘other problems that still remain unresolved’ (Merini, 2013, p. 43). By doing so, she is inviting both the scientific and the broader community to take action against discrimination in order to improve the conditions of psychiatric patients.

Denouncing the asylum as an institution of punishment and control, Merini is therefore speaking out not only for herself, but also for the other ‘innocent victims’, giving voice to those who, unlike her, never got another chance at life. In her memoir, Merini calls for an even more radical change than the one foreseen by Basaglia: a revolution that goes beyond the closing of the asylums and that demands collective compassion and acceptance of difference. In doing so, she demonstrates that trauma writing is strictly connected to history, and that, as Caruth states, ‘history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own’ but ‘is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s trauma’ (Caruth, 2016, p. 25).

Voicing women’s oppression

As discussed above, Merini’s testimony addresses both the psychiatric institution and society at large and gives voice to women’s oppression. Although she never aligned herself with the feminist movement, I argue that Merini ultimately delivers a feminist message through her memoir, showing that

⁷Merini writes: ‘who else could tell you, better than I can, what happened inside that hospital?’ (Merini, 2013, p. 119).

patriarchal oppression plays a fundamental role in women's mental health. Starting with the description of the night of her hospitalization, Merini offers an unapologetically grim picture of the condition of women in 20th century Italian society:

I was a happy mother and wife, even if sometimes I would get tired and my mind would not function. I tried to speak about this with my husband, but he pretended not to understand and so my breakdown got worse [...] [one night] I lost my temper, and my husband thought it was a good idea to call an ambulance without realizing that they would take me to the asylum. But at that time the law was strict: in 1965, women were subject to men and men could make decisions regarding their future. (Merini, 2013, p. 14)

Throughout the memoir, Merini reflects on the dynamics of power that characterize different types of institutions such as the family, society, and the mental hospital, and finds that these all share a similar hierarchy in relation to gender. To further stress the role that her husband played in her incarceration, Merini writes that once he went back to the hospital to take her home, she deliberately decided not to accompany him because '[she] had taught [her]self to see him as [her] enemy' (Merini, 2013, p. 15). At different points during her hospitalization, Merini would be allowed to leave the hospital, but she would only ever remain at home for a few weeks before asking to be readmitted (Merini, 2013, p. 22). I argue that Merini's voluntary hospitalization, which Redaelli aptly sees as an 'obligated choice' (Redaelli, 2013), can be read through a gendered lens. Merini's multiple hospitalizations can be interpreted as a form of self-exile and voluntary displacement in order to escape the pressure of her life as a mother and wife. As Doreen Massey notes, these experiences are not uncommon to women across different historical periods, since women have often been forced to choose self-displacement not only as a form of survival, but also as an act of resistance due to the ways in which patriarchal oppression functions (Massey, 1994, p. 10).

Committed to her intention to give voice to other patients, Merini draws upon the voices of other women in order to represent both their and her experience of oppression. For instance, she comments on reading a memoir of illness written by Adalgisa Conti, a woman hospitalized in the Arezzo asylum in 1914. Merini is clearly struck by the relevance of Conti's observations on the condition of women, which still resonate with her fifty years later. Giving new life to Conti's memoir, which received scarce attention from both the public and critics (while Conti died in the asylum), she transcribes some of its passages. She explains, using Conti's words, that 'the role of housewife-wife-mother is the only possible role that is understood as natural for women, and it represents the essence of feminine life' (Conti, 2000, as cited in Merini, 2013, p. 17). For this reason, a woman who – like Conti and Merini – did not conform to this standard, was destined to either madness or death.

Merini also draws upon the voices of her contemporaries. For instance, she records a testimony collected from a woman, who she renames Mrs. B to protect her identity, who went through the same traumatic experience as Merini when giving birth to her third daughter inside the asylum:

I had two pregnancies in the asylum. When the moment came to give birth, I was regularly sent to the seclusion room, as a preventive measure. Actually, it was the other people who were afraid of who knows what absurd reaction. In this way, I gave birth twice tied up, and I wasn't allowed to cry or scream. Because in asylums to scream or express your fears is strictly forbidden. This is the degree to which they repressed us and made us ever more frustrated. (Merini, 2013, p. 77)

As a result of collecting these testimonies, Merini's memoir becomes a sort of collective endeavor, through which Merini finds relief from her trauma by comparing her experiences to those of other women. Furthermore, transcribing these memories on paper and organizing them in a publication affords them a new status within the collective consciousness of Italian society.

It is worth noting that Merini's awareness of her status as a victim of a patriarchal system is a theme that she continues exploring in her later works, as the following extract taken from a later autobiography demonstrates:

Yes, women are educated to madness. They are instructed in the ways of fetishism from an early age: she has to love pots, venerate the objects of the house, keep them clean, take care of them. The house becomes the symbol of matriarchy. Not even feminism has managed to eradicate these symbols. Finally, you feel you are going crazy amongst these fetishes. The clothes you wear become heavy. This is why, when having a crisis, the first thing that a mad person does is to tear off their clothes. (Merini, 2007, pp. 145-146)

Although no scholarly publication to date has explicitly examined Merini's production through a feminist lens, and even if the author seems to reject feminism, as this passage shows, I argue that it is undeniable that Merini's work ultimately conveys a feminist message. Reflecting on her experience and observing the events that unfold around her, Merini exposes patriarchal oppression and denounces the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, condemning their objectification and fetishization by men and demonstrating that 'madness' can be reappropriated by those who were labeled as such.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that Alda Merini's *L'altra verità: Diario di una diversa* constitutes an important work from both a literary and a historical perspective. What I have suggested is a reevaluation of this memoir as a unique testimony of the situation in Italian asylums during the years of Basaglia's reforms, and as an example of the political implications of narrating personal trauma. Drawing from previous scholarship on trauma writing and women's autobiography, I have proposed a new reading of Merini's work, showing that

her politicization of illness can be read through a feminist lens. While many critics, scholarly and otherwise, have defined the *Diario* as a work that is mainly confessional, I have demonstrated that this memoir can be read as a sort of political manifesto through which the author is able to redefine herself as an empowered subject, which in turn helps her in her healing process. This, I argue, can become a blueprint through which to read other memoirs of illness authored by women.

As I have shown, the transition from shattered, traumatized subject to Merini's new, coherent self, is ultimately made possible through the construction of a politicized self that puts her personal experience in service of the community. As such, Merini's narrative is one that is conscious of its value:

Having lived in an asylum and having interpreted this lived experience is not something that everyone can do; not to mention having managed to get out of it [the asylum], which was extraordinarily difficult, as it is dangerous to abandon the depth of one's anguish in order to venture into society. (Merini, 2013, p. 35)

With her memoir, Merini takes her readers through a journey of self-discovery inside the asylum; a labyrinth that has no exit, a microworld that stigmatizes people and that reproduces the same mechanisms of power and patriarchal violence that exist in society more broadly. In the asylum, Merini learns about pain, fear and death, and once discharged she eventually manages to transform her traumatic experience into one of active resistance to oppression. It is thanks to her writing that the memory of those who were less fortunate than her lives on.

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