

Dieter Hoffmann:

Italian Poetry 1885 – 1950

Ada Negri – Eugenio Montale – Giuseppe Ungaretti –
Salvatore Quasimodo – Mario Luzi – Antonia Pozzi – Cesare
Pavese – Elsa Morante



In the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Italian poetry experienced an extraordinary heyday. In eight chapters, the present volume provides exemplary insights into this period. English adaptations of selected poems are followed by literary-historical classifications and interpretations against the background of the life and work of the poets concerned.

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Cover picture: Georgios Margaritis (1814 – 1884): Euterpe (the Muse of music and lyric poetry); Wikimedia Commons

Impossible Life, Impossible Love

*Ada Negri's Poem **Va l'onda***

Ada Negri's poem about a love that ends in death raises questions about the reasons for the tragic event. Answers can be found in the poet's socially critical early work.



*Gustave Courbet (1819 – 1877): The Wave; Dallas Museum of Art
Wikimedia Commons*

The Weeping Wave

Between the high banks of the river,
blind in untamable sorrow,
the weeping wave rises and falls,
silently surrounded
by the leaden sky.

No smile lights up the silence,
no breath penetrates the pallid night.

On and on the weeping wave surges.
In her sheltering womb she carries
mournfully into the damp night
a sallow, barely blossomed body
that threw itself from life into her arms.

No smile lights up the silence,
no breath penetrates the pallid night.

On and on the weeping wave surges.
But from her lament resounds
the echo of a gloomy secret.
Her sobs are filled
with the silent cry
of a failed love.

No smile lights up the silence,
no breath penetrates the pallid night.

Ada Negri: [Va l'onda ...](#)
from: *Fatalità* (Fate/Doom, 1892)

A Dark Secret

Ada Negri's poem leaves us with a question: What happened? What kind of "dark secret" are we dealing with here? Why did this love lead to its absolute negation – death?

There are many reasons why love can lead to despair, from which those involved see no other way out than to escape into death: infidelity, quarrels, unrequited love ... Since the poem makes no allusions to the causes of the tragedy, there are no limits to the imagination here. It is up to the readers to fill this empty space in the poem with their own speculations.

However, if we read the verses in the context of Ada Negri's early work and of the volume of poetry in which they are included, a clear perspective for interpretation emerges. Then it can be assumed that the poet associated her gloomy image of a love that can only find comfort in the lullaby of a deadly wave with social conflicts and the resulting misery – for example, with money worries, insurmountable class barriers or an unwanted pregnancy.

Negri's Socially Committed Early Work

The very title of Ada Negri's first book of poems, *Fatalità* (Fate/Doom), published in 1892, suggests the hopelessness of a life on the margins of society or at the bottom of its hierarchy. This is indeed the predominant theme of her early poems.

The poem that follows the verses quoted above, for example, is about a street urchin whose fate seems already sealed in

view of the social circumstances in which he has to live. Spending his days on "muddy" roads, dressed "in a tattered jacket and broken shoes", his "mother in the factory, his home deserted, his father in prison", a resigned question arises with regard to his future life:

*"What will you do?
You, who, ragged and illiterate,
are without footing
and without destination on earth?" [1]*

In the poetry collection, Ada Negri also self-confidently refers to her own origins from poor social circumstances. Thus, in the immediate vicinity of the poem about a failed love, we find the programmatic verses about her roots in the life of ordinary people, to whom she, as she emphasises, owes the "flame" of her poetry:

*"A nameless poetess am I,
the uncouth daughter
of a mouldy shack.
The sad and damned people
are my family,
igniting in my heart
an indomitable flame." [2]*

Reference to the Poet's Own Origins from Poor Social Circumstances

Indeed, Ada Negri did not have an easy childhood. Born in Lodi, Lombardy, in 1870, the poet lost her father at an early age. As a result, her mother had to support the family alone.

So Negri spent much of her childhood with her grandmother, who worked as a caretaker for a famous opera singer. The hours of idle sitting in the porter's lodge of the palazzo, which the girl used for an intensive study of passers-by, were later taken up by Negri in her autobiographical novel *Stella Mattutina* (Morning Star; 1921).

Thus, the poet certainly came into contact with members of other social classes. Thanks to her mother's steady income, she was also able to attend a girls' school, which enabled her to obtain a diploma as an elementary school teacher. Accordingly, Negri worked as a teacher at a village school and a girls' secondary school from 1887.

The poems from the volume *Fatalità*, which Negri initially published in newspapers, are thus by no means an unfiltered mirror of life at the lower end of the social scale. Rather, the fact that they could be written and published testifies precisely to the social advancement that Negri could achieve thanks to her mother.

From Regarding Social Misery as Fate to Combating it

Right with her first book of poems, Ada Negri established herself as a recognised poet. Both professionally and privately, the poems paved the way for her to a prosperous life. She obtained a position at a higher teaching institute in Milan and entered into a marriage with a rich factory owner in 1896 (from whom she separated again in 1913).

The success of Negri's socially committed poems was also related to the perspective from which she addressed social misery. Regarding the latter as "fatalità" implied that class differences and social hardship were to a certain extent fated, i.e. inevitable.

Using poetic means to arouse sympathy for people in need thus serves here primarily to motivate wealthy people to act charitably towards the poor. A call for revolution cannot be derived from Negri's early poems.

In her later volumes of poetry, however, Negri did combine the issue of social misery with a demand for social change. Moreover, the socialist circles in which she moved in Milan led to a connection between poetic protest and concrete social commitment.

In the process, the author increasingly linked social misery with her commitment to the emancipation of women. Thus, she played a leading role in the founding of the *Unione femminile nazionale* (National Women's Union) in 1899 as well as five years later in the opening of the *Asilo Mariuccia*, which

was intended to offer girls from difficult social backgrounds educational prospects.

Negri's Path During the Fascist Era

With her collection of novellas *Le solitarie* (The Lonely Ones, 1917), which addresses the emancipation of women from various perspectives, Negri remained true to her socially committed literature even during the First World War. At the same time, however, she also published a collection of patriotic odes (*Orazioni/Prayers*, 1918).

This mixture of social commitment, socialist ideals and patriotic spirit might be one reason why the poet had difficulty distancing herself from the rising Italian fascism. Furthermore, she knew Benito Mussolini from her Milan days as a committed socialist, who had served as editor-in-chief of *Avanti!*, the newspaper of the Socialist Party, from 1912 to 1914.

This made it possible for the poet to be awarded the Mussolini Prize in 1931 for her literary achievements and in 1940 to be admitted as the first woman to the *Accademia d'Italia* (the fascist version of the Italian Academy of Arts and Sciences), which existed from 1926 to 1945.

However, Negri was not an active supporter of the fascist regime. Rather, she retreated into inner exile in the last years of her life and turned to religious themes before dying in Milan in January 1945.

References

- [1] Ada Negri: [Birichino di strada](#) (Street Urchin); from: *Fatalità* (Fate/Doom; 1892).
- [2] Ada Negri: [Senza nome](#) (Nameless); from: *Fatalità* (1892).



Ada Negri in the 1890s
Wikimedia Commons

The Limits of Paradise

A Midday Poem by Eugenio Montale

Eugenio Montale's poetry is characterised by a deep scepticism. However, this is based less on the experience of war and fascism than on a loss of orientation triggered by the radical changes at the turn of the century.



Edvard Munch (1863 - 1944): The Sun (1911)
University of Oslo, Art collection (Wikimedia Commons)

The Glowing Wall of Noon

Under the glowing wall of noon,
embraced by the daydream of summer,
you sink into the hissing snake bushes
and in the rustling sea of blackbirds and leaves.

In long rows, ants peek out
from cracks in the ground and from flower stalks,
tangling and intertwining
at the edge of their tiny holes.

Stroked by fronds of field bindweed,
you dream of the fish's scaly twitch,
while the trembling chirp of cicadas
soars up into the sky.

Walking in the blinding sun,
you feel with sad amazement
the border of the glowing wall,
where you rise as in a bottle
whose neck is rimmed with a sea of shards.

Eugenio Montale: [Meriggiare pallido e assorto](#)
Written around 1916; from: *Ossi di seppia* (1925)

Midday Slumber in a Southern Garden

The poem by Eugenio Montale (1896 – 1981) takes us to a southern garden. The sun beats down on you, making you sleepy. Leaning against a wall, the shimmering midday heat lulls you to sleep.

The haze of heat brings human life to a standstill. Nothing can be heard but the rustling and buzzing, chirping and twitching of snakes, lizards and insects, accompanied here and there by the scurrying of a blackbird in the undergrowth.

Slowly, consciousness fades, sensory perceptions blur with the daydreams that awaken behind the closed eyelids. The field bindweed growing along the wall, its fronds stroking the cheeks of the slumbering one, evokes associations with the scaly shoals of fish, the blue sea of the sky merges with the murmur of the ocean lapping against the nearby shore.

All things are suddenly connected to each other, you are a part of them, escaping from your own ego for a few moments outside of time. This makes the awakening all the more painful. Like after an intense drug high, you feel the hangover of disillusionment throbbing in your temples. The sun, just a moment ago a source of infinite life, has suddenly turned into a crown of thorns that presses painfully on the head of those blinded by its glow.

The Wreath of Broken Glass at the Bottleneck of Life

The four stanzas of Montale's poem congenially reflect this oscillation between daydream and awakening. In the third stanza, the pleasant midday dozing turns into daydreaming, before the last stanza evokes the awakening.

In the process, the meaning of the wall, the poem's central metaphor, also changes. In the first stanza, it appears as the border of a self-sufficient, peaceful garden, as a protective wall around paradise that shields it from the world. In the last stanza, by contrast, it is a boundary for the daydreams in which paradise acquires a momentary reality.

In this way, noon also takes on a metaphorical meaning. While at the beginning of the poem it simply refers to the middle of the day, a break in the routine of everyday life, it can be related to the middle of life at the end of the poem.

From this perspective, the wall no longer only denotes the confines of the refuge offered by dreams. Rather, it now also points to the awareness of an absolute limit to human life. This can be understood both in purely physical terms – i.e. as an awareness of the limit set by death – and in a figurative sense, i.e. as a limit beyond which the human spirit cannot think or – to put it in the language of the poem – at which all its striving disintegrates into shards.

Suffering from Existence Despite a Fulfilled Life

Montale's poem is thus an example of what the poet sees as the core not only of his own poetry, but of poetry in general. Its central "theme", he stated in 1951, is "the human condition itself" [1].

In Montale's work, however, this is linked to a decidedly pessimistic view of human existence. The poet explains this with the experiences he himself had gone through from early childhood:

"Since from birth I felt a total disharmony with the reality surrounding me, only this disharmony could be the source of my inspiration." [2]

This statement, though, is put into perspective when we look at the poet's biography. It is true that Montale suffered from respiratory diseases at an early age. However, he was lucky enough to spend his childhood on the Ligurian coast, where the mild Mediterranean climate had a healing effect on his lungs. His hometown was Genoa, and the family spent the summers in Ligurian seaside resorts.

Moreover, Montale grew up in prosperous circumstances. His father, co-owner of a chemical company, was able to provide his children with a comfortable home and pave their way to a successful professional life.

Montale completed an apprenticeship as an accountant in 1915. Apart from this, he had the freedom to pursue his artistic and intellectual interests in the city's libraries and to par-

ticipate in the philosophy studies of his sister, who was enrolled at the university. In addition, he could compensate for his lung weakness by training as a baritone.

Montale's later life, too, was by no means characterised by "disharmony", contrary to what his pessimistic reviews of his life might suggest. His very first book of poems, *Ossi di seppia* (Octopus Bones), published in 1925, established his status as a recognised poet and in 1929 helped him to be appointed director of one of the most renowned libraries in the country, the *Gabinetto scientifico letterario G. P. Vieusseux* in Florence. In 1975, as the crowning achievement of his poetic life, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Montale's private life was also anything but disharmonious. He had several blissful love affairs, suffered no material hardship and was firmly integrated into the artistic scene of his time.

Feelings of Alienation of a Turn-of-the-Century Child

The "total disharmony with the reality that surrounds me" which Montale describes as the basis of his poetic inspiration must therefore have other than purely biographical reasons.

War and fascism cannot be used as an explanation here either. Mussolini's March on Rome, for example, did not take place until 1922, six years after the verses reproduced above were written.

It is true that the First World War was already in full swing in 1916. Montale himself, however, only took part in the war

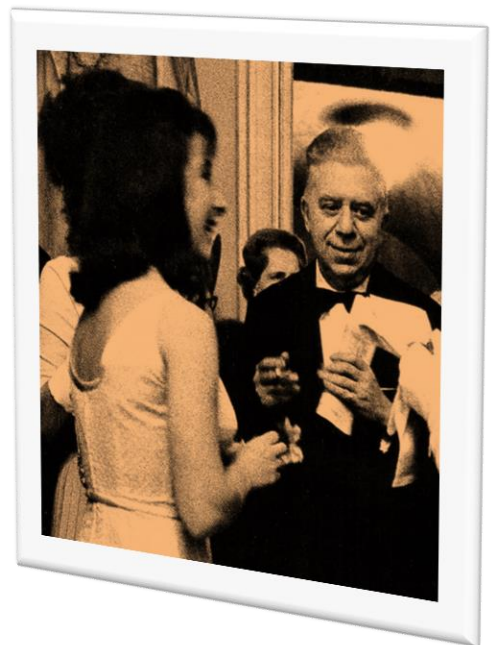
from 1917 onwards. Moreover, he was even sent to the front at his own request and returned from the war in 1920 with the rank of lieutenant – which suggests a generally affirmative, active participation in the combat.

Thus, the fundamental skepticism of the verses can probably best be related to the mindset of the *Décadence* – that is, the intellectual current which at the turn of the century reflected the suffering from the profound transformations that were taking place at the time. The resulting loss of traditional structures of order and patterns of meaning seems to be the breeding ground for the "disharmony" experienced by Montale and expressed in his poetry.

References

- [1] Eugenio Montale: Contribution to the series [*Confessioni di scrittori \(Intervista con se stessi\)*](#), 1951 (Confessions of Writers: Interviews with Themselves). In: E.M.: *Sulla Poesia*. Milan 1976: Mondadori (text also available as PDF).

- [2] Ibid.



Picture: Ugo Mulas: *Eugenio Montale at the Teatro alla Scala opera house in Milan (1950s)*; Wikimedia Commons

Dream Journey on a Dark Abyss

*Giuseppe Ungaretti's Poem **L'isola***

Giuseppe Ungaretti's poem *L'isola* (The Island) takes us into a dream world – in contrast to the fascist structures that were established in Italy, partly supported by Ungaretti, at the time the poem was written.



Guy Rose (1867 – 1925): Provincial Olive Grove (around 1910)
Wikimedia Commons

The Island

Stroked by a rustle of feathers,
snatched from the shrill heartbeat
of a flaming river,
he descended from his path
into a forest where the evening
had become entangled until all eternity.

Walking as if in a dream, he saw,
blossoming and extinguishing,
extinguishing and blossoming,
a shimmering larva.

Climbing upwards, he recognised,
in slumber
nestled against an ancient elm tree,
as a nymph the larva.

Wavering between deception and reflection,
between truth and delusion,
he wandered until his eyes
drank the virginal darkness
of an olive grove bathed in evening glow.

A languid spray of sparks
dripped through the labyrinth of branches
onto the shimmering shields of sheep

which, embraced by the evening's warming arm,
were spotted on the pasture.

And the hands of the shepherd
blossomed like a crystal chalice
in which the evening glow was caught,
metamorphosing into a pleasant fever.

Giuseppe Ungaretti: [L'isola](#) (created 1925)
from: *Sentimento del tempo* (Sense of Time; 1933)

A Poem in the Language of Dreams

The poem *L'isola* by Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888 – 1970) speaks to us in the language of dreams and fairy tales. It is reminiscent of the dream images familiar from psychological analysis and of fairy-tale journeys through perilous forests, the crossing of which promises redemption from a dark curse.

From a psychological perspective, the forest in the poem can be interpreted as an image of the collective unconscious. In C. G. Jung's psychology, this refers to the deeper layer of the human unconscious, in which the existential experiences of humanity are encoded in compact images – the so-called "archetypes" [1].

The nymph of the poem can thus be understood as a manifestation of the archetype of the "sister", which corresponds to

the fact that, according to C. G. Jung, the unconscious always appears in the gender opposite to that of the conscious ego. Her iridescent, changing appearance points to the lack of clarity, but also to the fullness of the unconscious, which constantly turns different faces towards us.

From this perspective, the shepherd whom the lyrical I encounters at the end could be seen as the equivalent of the archetype of the "old sage". The enlightenment symbolised by him finds a parallel in the poem in the crossing over from the delusions of the forest into the clarity of the olive grove.

Ungaretti as a Representative of a Symbolist Hermetism

The poem thus describes in compact form a life journey that leads the lyrical I to himself. In C. G. Jung's psychoanalysis, this destination is symbolised by a mythical divine child, in which the transcendent core of the inner self is reflected. In the poem, this fruit of the inner journey is indicated by the shepherd's hands extended as if for a gift.

The fact that Ungaretti's 1933 poetry collection *Sentimento del tempo* (Sense of Time), which includes the poem written in 1925, is attributed to Symbolism seems plausible against the background of this interpretation. Likewise, the characterisation of his poetry as "hermetic" is understandable in view of the fact that it eludes immediate comprehension.

Ungaretti and Italian Fascism

Ungaretti's poetic turning away from everyday life, though, was not only for theoretical reasons – in contrast to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé [2], for example. It was also a way for him to avoid coming to terms with his own involvement in war and fascism.

Thus, Ungaretti belonged to the interventionists in the First World War. This faction advocated Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente around France, England and Russia, expecting advantages from this for their country.

Even after the end of the war, Ungaretti did not distance himself from the use of violence to achieve political goals. Instead, in 1925 he was one of the signatories of the *Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti* (Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals), written by Giovanni Gentile, which explicitly welcomed the violent seizure of power by Mussolini and his followers.

In fascist Italy, Ungaretti worked in the press office of the Italian Foreign Ministry and was admitted to the Accademia d'Italia (the fascist version of the Italian Academy of Arts and Sciences) in 1942.

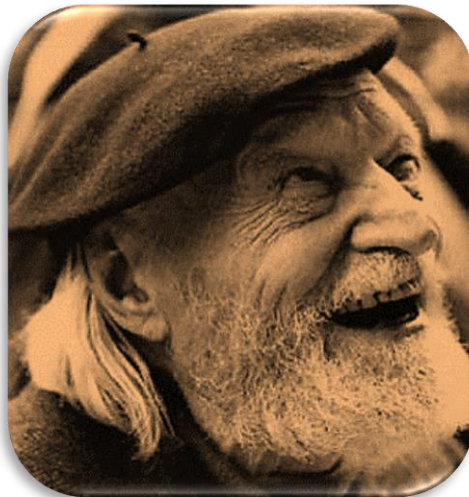
The only thing standing in the way of a stronger involvement in Italian fascism was Ungaretti's academic career, which took him away from his homeland from 1936 to 1942, as a professor in São Paulo, Brazil.

Ungaretti's "dark" poetry thus has a dark side in moral terms as well. It not only leads down or over to the dark side of ex-

istence – it was also a way for the poet to conceal his own dark sides, his involvement in war and fascism, from himself and others.

References

- [1] A good introduction to the work of C. G. Jung is offered by Jolande Jacobi (*Psychology of C. G. Jung*). The book was first published in 1940 (English version 1942) and has since been reprinted and expanded countless times.
- [2] Cf. in more detail: Rother Baron: *Revolt against Life. Stéphane Mallarmé's Hermetic Symbolism. With English adaptations of selected works by the poet*; literaturplanet.com, June 2022 (PDF).

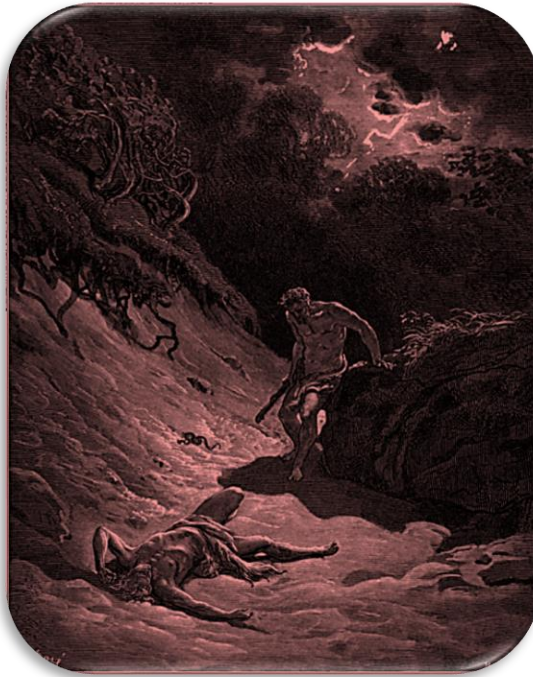


Giuseppe Ungaretti with beret
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The Eternal Slingshot Man

*Salvatore Quasimodo's Poem **Uomo del mio tempo***

Salvatore Quasimodo's poem *Uomo del mio tempo* (Man of My Time), written against the backdrop of the Second World War, pleads for a radical break with traditional patterns of thought and behaviour. Unfortunately, it is no less topical today than it was then.



Gustave Doré (1832 – 1883): Abel's Death (Cain kills Abel, 1866)

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*(With a quote from the Bible – "Come, let's go to the field" –, Quasimodo's poem **Uomo del mio tempo** alludes to the insidiousness with which Cain lures Abel outside to kill him).*

Man of the Modern Age

To this day, man of the modern age,
you are the slingshot man.

In all times you have flown ahead,
carried by your sinister wings
that turn day into night.

In your flaming chariot
I have seen you ride through the ages,
from torture wheel to torture wheel,
from gallows hill to gallows hill,
from mass grave to mass grave.

Without love, without God
you have drawn the fuse of death
through the ages, fuelled
by the throne of your technology,
the master of mindless murder.

Walking in the footsteps of your forefathers,
you answer with murder and slaughter
to the gaze of the animals and the gaze
of your brother, who once unsuspectingly followed
your murderous ruse: "Come, let's go to the field ..."

The cold breath of these words
still clouds your days.
Bloodily their poison flows through your veins

and makes you continue to follow your forefathers,
keeps you walking on the path of murder.

Forget, children, your forefathers!
Turn away from their graves,
from their poisonous breath and their fog of blood!
May the dark wings of the night
forever shroud their ashes!

Salvatore Quasimodo: [Uomo del mio tempo](#) (Man of My Time)
from: *Giorno dopo giorno* (Day after Day, 1947); first published
1946 under the title *Con il piede straniero sopra il cuore* (With
a Stranger's Foot on the Chest)

Stony Path to Poetry

That Salvatore Quasimodo (1901 – 1968) would become an acclaimed poet one day was in no way foreseeable at his birth. No one could have guessed at the time that he would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959.

Salvatore Quasimodo was born in 1901 in Modica in southeastern Sicily, where his father worked as a stationmaster. He spent his childhood and youth in Roccalumera, the family's hometown on the Strait of Messina.

In 1920 Quasimodo went to Rome to study mathematics and physics, but had to leave the university due to financial constraints. He worked as a clerk in a department store and as a

technical draftsman, while improving his knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek, before being hired by the Ministry of Construction in 1926.

The new job provided him with financial security and allowed him to marry his long-term girlfriend. At the same time, however, his work required frequent changes of location. After first being sent to Reggio Calabria as a surveyor, he was soon after transferred to Florence, then to Genoa, and finally to the civil engineering office of Cagliari.

The unsteady life reinforced in Quasimodo the sense of rootlessness and alienation that had afflicted him anyway since his departure from Sicily. At the same time, though, his travels to the cultural centers of the country helped him gain access to the literary circles of his time.

Thus he was able to publish his first poems in magazines and finally, in 1930, his first book of poems, which was followed shortly afterwards by two more volumes. In 1938 his position in the literary scene was so consolidated that he resigned from the Ministry of Construction and moved to a publishing house, where he acted as editor of a literary magazine and of the poetry anthology *Poesie*. In 1941 he was appointed professor of Italian literature at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory in Milan.

From the Nostalgic Lyricism of the Early Work to Committed Forms of Poetry

Quasimodo's early poetry is strongly influenced by his longing for his lost Sicilian homeland. The latter is transfigured in a nostalgic way and thus appears as an antithesis to the constantly self-overhauling life on the construction site of modernity, to which the poet had to adapt for the purpose of earning a living. The experience of war and fascism, however, convinced Quasimodo of the necessity of fundamental – social-political, but also linguistic-cultural – change.

On the level of poetry, this conviction was reflected in the new tone the author adopted in his first volume of poetry published after the end of the war. In this context, his programmatic poem *Alle fronde dei salici* (On the Branches of the Willows) is of crucial importance. In it, Quasimodo expresses the silencing that misery has imposed on poetry in the image of harps hanged on branches like enemy soldiers.

On the other hand, the poem itself is proof that lyrical speech is still possible after the war. The prerequisite for this, however, is a fundamental change in poetry: it must no longer mourn, backward-looking, a chimerical paradise, but must openly face reality.

In other words, the poet has to stop standing on the sidelines. Instead, he has to get involved and become socially engaged.

Uomo del mio tempo: an Appeal for a Radical Break with the Past

Uomo del mio tempo (Man of my Time) is an expression of a committed poetry understood in this way. As the concluding poem of the collection *Giorno dopo giorno* (Day after Day) – the title of the second edition of *Con il piede straniero sopra il cuore*, published in 1947 – it is a kind of summary of Quasimodo's new poetic position.

With the phrase "Come, let's go to the field!" the poem alludes to the insidiousness of Cain, who, according to the biblical narrative, lured his brother Abel outside with this invitation in order to kill him. It is precisely this murderous deceitfulness that the verses highlight as a recurring theme of human history.

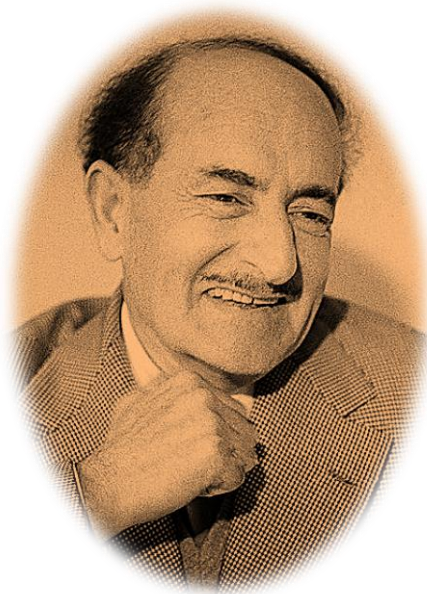
What has changed, therefore, are only the means of murder, which have been perfected more and more. The underlying destructive attitude of man towards his fellow men and other creatures, however, has remained unchanged.

This results in the appeal for a radical new beginning at the end of the poem. Such a restart, however, is considered possible only if the spiritual-emotional heritage of the ancestors is uncompromisingly put into question instead of being adopted unreflectively. Only the turning away from the reflexive use of violence can enable the change towards a more humane world.

The sad thing about the poem is that little has changed in the more than seven decades since it was written. Even today,

there is a deep gap between the ambitions associated with the word "humane" and the reality of being human, which today, just as in the past, includes the annihilation of others and the destruction of our own livelihood. Thus, the call for a radical departure from inherited patterns of thought and behaviour is no less topical today than it was during Salvatore Quasimodo's lifetime.

*Quotation from the poem **On the Branches of the Willows** taken from: [Alle fronde dei salici](#); in: *Giorno dopo giorno* (Day after Day, 1947); first published 1946 under the title **Con il piede straniero sopra il cuore** (With a Stranger's Foot on the Chest)*



Salvatore Quasimodo 1959
Wikimedia Commons

Poetry as "the Absolutely Real"

*Mario Luzi's Poem **Natura***

In his poetry, Mario Luzi wants to make tangible the deeper structures of reality buried beneath the everyday world. For this, he draws on the poetry theory of Novalis, but is also influenced by surrealism and by his religiosity.



Johannes Plenio: Milky Way over the ocean (Pixabay)

Nature

Over the earth and the sparkling sea
spreads, even more sparkling,
another sea,

a sea for the flitting flame
of the sparrows, a sea for the voyage
of the tranquil moon and the sleep
of the translucent bodies,
enraptured from the world,

a sea for those fleeting voices
that tumble out of hidden doors
into the maze of our dreams,

rejoicing like birds drunken with bliss
in hovering flight
to the beatific islands of the beginning,

singing a lullaby
of crimson-soft sanctuaries
for those spurned by sleep
on the hard rock of life
and the thorny bed of love.

Mario Luzi: [Natura](#)
from: *La barca* (The Boat; 1935)

A Poem with Roots in Romanticism

Mario Luzi, born near Florence in 1914, came into contact in his youth with a circle of young intellectuals who had a strong affinity with "ermetismo" (hermetism). This also inspired his early poetic work.

Beyond this, Luzi's theory of poetry is influenced by German Romanticism, notably by Novalis. Like the latter, Luzi not only wanted to depict the dynamic process of growth and decay in his poetry, but to make it directly tangible in the creative process. Thus for him

"the greatest imaginable creative power of poetry (...) is to enter fully into the inexhaustible process of creation by following the rhythm of birth and demise and making it its own breath."

[1]

Poetry as an Antidote to Alienation

For Mario Luzi, nature poetry thus does not only involve a poetic description of natural processes or the evocation of a meaning hidden behind them. Rather, he wants to experience "in the poetic moment (...) the forces guiding the universe" and make this tangible in his poetry [2].

Understood in this way, hermetic poetry loses its unworldly character. Instead, Luzi's poetry claims to confront the world, alienated from the reality of life, with "the real, the absolutely real" – the "real that rises from the depths of the world's re-

ality" to the surface and finds its adequate expression in poetry [3].

This is reminiscent of Schelling's philosophy of nature and of Romantic literary theory, which also saw in poetry the expression of the primordial truth of life. Consequently, Luzi explicitly refers to Novalis, whom he quotes with the words:

"Poetry is the real, the truly absolute real." [4]

Surrealist Elements in the Poem *Natura*

While in terms of content, Luzi refers to Romanticism in his poetology, his poems are more influenced by Surrealism in terms of form. The bridge to Romanticism here is the "surreality" proclaimed by André Breton, which, according to the latter, is supposed to merge "dream and reality into a kind of absolute reality" [5]. Thus, as in Romantic poetry, conventional patterns of perception and interpretation are to be overcome here.

In Luzi's poem *Natura*, the rootedness in such a "surreality" is evident in three respects:

- through the explicit reference to the states of dream, sleep and half-sleep and the altered perception of reality resulting from them;
- through the seamless intermingling of the various spheres: Earthly and heavenly sea, dream and reality, this world and the hereafter blur together, creating an in-between world in which everyday and dream perception interpenetrate;

- through a figurative structure in which metaphorical speech no longer merely connects two spheres, but merges them into a new reality (as in the image of the "flitting flame of the sparrows").

In this way, it also remains undecided whether the mysterious, comforting voices mentioned in the poem really exist or whether they only arise from the world of dreams and fantasy. However, in Mario Luzi's spiritual cosmos, rooted in the ideas Novalis, this does not matter, since the dream is no less real here than what we call "reality" in everyday life.

The Importance of Religion for Mario Luzi's Poetry

Another aspect that should be taken into account when studying the work of Mario Luzi is his Catholic faith. When the poem *Natura* speaks of the "sparkling sea" of the sky, this can therefore certainly be understood in a religious sense.

However, such an interpretation does not necessarily have to be associated with Christian thought patterns. Rather, the poem can be generally related to the experience of transcendence, especially since Luzi himself was open to other religions and in his later life also dealt with Far Eastern philosophy.

Moreover, the Catholic faith in fascist Italy by no means had to go hand in hand with traditionalism or even an affirmative attitude towards those in power. In Luzi's case, at least, it was rather the other way round. This is notably indicated by the

fact that he wrote his thesis at the University of Florence on the French writer François Mauriac.

Mauriac derived a consistently anti-fascist stance precisely from Catholic social doctrine, which made him publicly criticise both Spanish Francoism and Mussolini's regime. Furthermore, he left no doubt in his novels that a vibrant love is the opposite of what orthodox Catholicism brings about with its proscriptions and prohibitions – which suffocate all feelings in a partnership.

Thus, on the one hand, the abysses of human existence are quite present in Mario Luzi's poetry. On the other hand, however, his poetry is also permeated by the consolation that can arise from the experience of transcendence – regardless of whether we see it as a religious experience in the narrower sense or simply a moment that has fallen out of time, a moment in which, like a sudden flash, a sense of connection with the entire cosmos flows through our veins.

Biography of Mario Luzi



Born in 1914 as the son of a railway employee near Florence, Mario Luzi spent most of his life in this city. He graduated from school there and attended university, where he completed his French studies with a thesis on François Mauriac.

In Florence, Luzi also came into contact with the literary circles of his time and became an important representative of Florentine Hermetism. As a poet familiar with French literature, he was influenced by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898), who was likewise known for his hermetic poetry and on whom Luzi later published a separate study (*Studio su Mallarmé*, 1952).

Other factors influencing Luzi's poetry, which result from his involvement with French literature, are the social-ethically based Catholicism of François Mauriac and the poetry of French Surrealism.

In 1955, Luzi became a professor of French literature in Florence, after having worked as a secondary school teacher in various cities following his graduation. He published his first volume of poetry (*La barca / The Boat*) as early as 1935, followed by several more volumes from 1940 onwards. Since the late 1970s, he was considered a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature – which he never received, though.

Luzi, who died in 2005, also wrote plays and made a name for himself as a film critic. Furthermore, he was interested in Far Eastern philosophy and Asian meditation practices.

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Picture: *Mario Luzi in the 1970s* (Wikimedia Commons)

Nocturnal encounter with a mysterious child

*Antonia Pozzi's poem **Notturmo invernale***

Antonia Pozzi's poem *Notturmo invernale* (Wintry Nocturne) is about a nocturnal encounter with a mysterious child. It reflects Pozzi's attitude to her life and to her poetry.



Gustaf Fjæstad (1868 – 1948): Snow-covered trees in the moonlight (1910); Wikimedia Commons

Wintry Nocturne

The snow almost swallows up,
little child, your murmuring movements,
your silent wandering on the path
in my groping footsteps.

As the black robe of the pines
purifies itself under the snow-white fluff,
so the soul floats in a sea of purity
in the crimson light of heaven.

Silently, the veil of twinkling stars
sinks down onto the night-blue forest
and onto the sleeping world,
wrapped in a silky cloak of dreams.

Like the whisper of a river
amidst the cloak of ice,
the pulse of your soul embraces me
in the all-encompassing silence.

My heart, a wanderer, trembles,
stroked by the echo of the trembling
of another groping step
in the whisper of the wind.

The crown of your pure eyes,
little child, watches over my way

through a shadowless marsh
in this divine hour.

Like two homesick swallows,
lost in the infinity of the sky,
we meet in the virgin desert of winter
before our departure for distant realms.

Tomorrow the heart, alone
with its fate, will still feel
the distant trembling of sisterly wings
on its fearful flight.

Antonia Pozzi: [Notturmo invernale](#) (January 1931)

Mystical Experience of Closeness to God

A walk through a clear winter night, culminating in a mystical encounter with a mysterious child – such a constellation will probably provoke a Christian interpretation in some readers. This is all the more likely when taking into account the poet's origins in a Catholic country.

Indeed, an interpretation of the poem in a religious sense cannot be entirely ruled out. The mysterious child whom the lyrical I encounters in a "divine hour" would then point to a kind of epiphany experience, in the sense of a sudden closeness to God.

However, the interpretation in this case would not necessarily have to be limited to a Christian context, i.e. the divine child would not automatically have to be equated with the Child Jesus. A shimmering white winter landscape glittering in the moonlight is also a fitting image for the perfect emptiness, which is a synonym for the inconceivable, ineffable divine in non-Christian mystical beliefs as well.

The encounter with the divine child would thus be a symbol of immersion in another world untouched by the fleeting hustle and bustle of everyday life, a brief liberation from the "shadowless", i.e. completely dark "marsh" that otherwise dominates human existence.

A Poetic "Child's View"

According to Pozzi, poetry has a central function in enabling such experiences. Thus, in a letter written in 1933, she ascribes to poetry the task of "absorbing and soothing the pain that seethes and throbs in our soul" [1].

Poetry is for Pozzi "a catharsis of pain", a means of overcoming the suffering of existence by giving voice to the beauties of life buried under everyday things:

"For those who see their days only in the colour of the sunset and feel a deadly pallor rising in their sky, for those who still absorb with hallucinating eyes the magic of things but can no longer put it into words (...), it is like a reanimation to find a young soul who frees our unspoken song." [2]

Against this background, parallels arise with Giovanni Pascoli's theory of poetry, in which "il fanciullino" (the little child) is a symbol of the poet's undistorted view of the world. Without this view, says Pascoli,

"not only would we fail to see so many things that we usually ignore, but we would not even be able to think about them (...). He [the "fanciullino"] discovers the most ingenious similarities and relationships in things. (...) Moreover, his language is not as imperfect as that of a man who only half expresses a thing, but, on the contrary, as generous as that of a man who expresses two thoughts in one word." [3]

The mysterious child in Pozzi's *Notturmo invernale* could thus also be understood as an image for the poetic view of the world – a view that allows us to see the world again in its original paradisiacal state by enabling us to experience it in the delightful fullness of its richness of relationships. It would thus be a magical, but not an bewitching view – because it is characterised precisely by the fact that it lifts the veil of the evil spell that weighs on the world of our everyday life, at least for a few moments.

Fulfilled Moments, but not a Fulfilled Life: On Pozzi's Biography

Antonia Pozzi herself, however, did not have the fulfilled life her poetry evoked. Born in Milan in 1912, she attended grammar school there, where she fell in love with her Latin

and Greek teacher. The relationship, though, was thwarted by her parents and thus broke up in 1933.

Pozzi completed her philosophy and literature studies at the University of Milan in 1935 with a thesis on Gustave Flaubert. After her studies, she undertook shorter trips through Italy as well as to Austria, Germany, France and England, always endeavouring to learn the languages of the countries she visited.

Her favourite place to stay, though, was her family's country house in the mountains north of Milan. There she undertook extensive bicycle tours, practised photography, wrote in her diary and exchanged letters with friends. The Lombardy mountains were also the focus of her poetic activity. This was not, however, connected with publications: Her approximately 300 poems were all published only after her death.

In December 1938, Pozzi took her own life, two months before her 27th birthday. In a farewell letter to her parents, she explained her suicide with "mortal despair". The reasons for this were manifold. As her poem *Grido* (Cry) [4] shows, Pozzi felt herself like a kind of spiritual castaway in a world abandoned by God. Her family, from whose traditional Catholicism she had become estranged, was no support for her either. Added to this were the increasing repressions in fascist Italy – notably the racial laws passed in 1938, to which some of Pozzi's friends fell victim.

A particularly empathetic description of Pozzi's personality comes from the novelist and literary scholar Maria Corti, who had met Pozzi at university. She compares the poet to

"those mountain plants (...) that can only grow on the edges of steep slopes and crevices. She was highly sensitive, endowed with a delicate creative urge, but at the same time a woman of strong character and a remarkable philosophical intelligence. She was perhaps the innocent prey of a paranoid paternal censorship of life and poetry. Undoubtedly, her relationship with her family's restricted religious environment was strained. The beloved Lombard countryside, the world of plants and rivers certainly comforted her more than the presence of her fellow men." [5]



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Picture: Antonia Pozzi in the 1930s (Wikimedia Commons)

Death as a Protest against Life

Cesare Pavese's Fatal Flirt with Death

Reflections on death accompanied the Italian writer Cesare Pavese (1908 – 1950) throughout his life. This is also evident in his poetry.



Charles Allan Gilbert (1873 – 1929): All is vanity
Wikimedia Commons

Death Will Have Your Eyes

With your own eyes
death will face you, this deaf death
that never sleeps, that accompanies us
day after day like a ridiculous vice
and our most ancient remorse.

Your eyes will be but a hollow word,
a voiceless cry, a night-soaked silence,
a dark sparkle that even now
smoulders in your eyes as you stroke
your melting face in the mirror.

Ah, beloved hope, on that dark day
it will become certainty: that you weave life
and nothingness in a single thread.
Death looks at everyone in a different way,
with your own eyes it will face you.

And it will be
as if you were casting off a vice,
as if you were watching in the mirror
a dead creature resurrecting,
as if, with closed lips,
a stranger were talking to you.

Silently you will step
into the silent maelstrom.

Cesare Pavese: [Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi](#) (1950)
from the book of poems of the same name, published 1951.

Foreseeable Suicide



On 26 August 1950, Cesare Pavese rented a room in Turin's Hotel Roma, where, shortly before his 42nd birthday, he took his own life with an overdose of sleeping pills. Ten poems written in March and April of the same year were found in his estate, including the verses reproduced above.

Without knowledge of Pavese's fate, the poem could probably be generally related to the fact that death already takes root in the heart of every human being at birth. However, if we read the poem – against the background of Pavese's suicide – as a soliloquy, the verses point to the poet's lifelong inclination to take his own life.

Indeed, for Pavese, death was like a mirror image throughout his life, a dark shadow he perceived every time he looked in the mirror. The characterisation of death as a "vizio assurdo", an "absurd vice", also fits well with the author's recurring flirtations with death.

No Luck in Love

There were many reasons why Pavese saw the idea of suicide as a natural "protest against life" [1]. Death overshadowed his life right from his birth: Three of his four siblings died at an early age, his father, who worked as a court clerk in Turin, suc-

cumbed to a brain tumour as early as 1914, when Pavese was just five and a half years old.

Another reason for Pavese's deep melancholy are the numerous unhappy love affairs that shaped his life like a constantly reopening wound. One of these failed love affairs dates from 1950, the year of his death.

In this year, the American actress Constance Dowling, with whom Pavese had fallen in love, began an affair with another actor. The extent to which Pavese felt affected by this is shown by the fact that he dedicated the collection of poems with the verses reproduced above, unpublished during his lifetime, to Dowling – which directly links his later suicide to the grief over the failed love affair.

Feelings of Guilt for Lack of Participation in the *Resistenza*

In addition, Pavese reproached himself for his hesitant behaviour in the resistance struggle against fascism. While he had waited for the end of the war in the countryside, many former companions had lost their lives in the fight against the German occupation and for liberation from fascism.

Prima che il gallo canti (Before the Rooster Crows), the title of his collection of stories published in 1948, can even be understood as a kind of public self-accusation. Through the implicit reference to Judas, the title of the autobiographically shaped prose interprets his own behaviour as betrayal.

It is against this background that Pavese's entry into the Communist Party and his collaboration with the communist

daily newspaper *L'Unità* are to be understood. For Pavese, this was a kind of active repentance – an attempt to at least participate actively in building the structures for a more humane world, after failing to be at the forefront of the struggle against the destruction of the inhuman structures.

However, he remained a stranger in the Communist Party as well, since for the taste of his new comrades, his thinking was too little aligned with the party's dogmas. Bitterly, Pavese therefore noted in his diary on 15 February 1950:

"Pavese is not a good comrade ... There is talk of intrigues everywhere. (...) So this is what they look like, the speeches of those you care most about." [2]

An Inevitable Suicide?

The shadow of the strokes of fate from early childhood, love as a single chronology of failure, the grief for friends killed in the resistance struggle against fascism, the survivor's feelings of guilt, the feeling of not really belonging anywhere, human baseness – anyone looking for reasons for Cesare Pavese's suicide will find more than enough of them.

But was his suicide really inevitable?

Beside the dead poet was found a copy of his *Dialoghi con Leucò* (Dialogues with Leucò), published in 1947, in which Pavese approaches the eternal questions of humanity by means of ancient myths. Inside the book was a slip of paper on which the poet had noted a quotation from the *Dialoghi*:

"Mortal man (...) participates in immortality only through the memory he carries within him and the memory he leaves behind." [3]

Another sentence was taken from his diary:

"I have worked, I have given poetry to people, I have shared the sorrow of many." [4]

The Poison of Depression

Such sentences do not reflect the despair of a person who sees no other way out for himself than death. If you want yourself and your works to be remembered, you are looking for a bridge to life, for a lasting connection with others, for a permanent place in the world.

This bridge to life was emerging at the very time Pavese took his own life. His career as a writer had just taken off. Under the fascist regime, like other intellectuals who were not loyal to the regime, he had suffered from the limited opportunities to work and publish. He had to eke out a living by teaching English and was only able to get a permanent job thanks to the support of his friend Giulio Einaudi, who employed him as a translator in his newly founded publishing house.

After the collapse of fascist rule and the end of the war, Pavese had published several works and received two important literary prizes – one of them, the Premio Strega, shortly before his death.

Thus, one would like to call out to the poet retrospectively: "If only you had been a little more patient with your life! Only a short time more and you would have been a renowned author, someone who is known and appreciated beyond the borders of his country!"

Unfortunately, however, our words would probably have remained useless even then. For it is precisely a characteristic of pathological depression that it numbs its victims with the poison of its own logic – a logic that envelops the person concerned like a dense fog which no rational argument can penetrate.

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- [3] Cf. Malagrinò Mustica, Anita: [Ho cercato me stesso. Riflessioni sull'ultimo Cesare Pavese](#); classicult.it, April 5, 2020.
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Picture: *Cesare Pavese* (*Wikimedia Commons*)

The Utopia of a Post-Paradise Peace

*Elsa Morante's **Canto per il gatto Alvaro***

In a poem for her cat Alvaro, Elsa Morante creates a vision of a new quality of peace that surpasses the peace of the primordial paradisiacal state through the conscious decision to treat each other peaceably.



*Kazimierz Władysław Wasilkowski (1861 – 1934): Young woman with cat
(Wróżka, um 1920); Wikimedia Commons*

Canto for the Cat Alvaro

In the nest of my arms,
you, lazy, fiery creature,
my shimmering good-for-nothing,
have curled up with relish.

In the midday sun as in the deepest night
you are at home, turning from a dove
to an owl, from the graves
swinging like smoke towards the sky.

When all light is extinguished
you light the candelabra
of your luminous eyes
and watch over my drowsiness.

Fleeting torches then flit
through the fragile peace of the night,
a mosaic of thousands of tigers' eyes,
chasing each other in a childish frenzy.

The wandering lamps then come to rest,
your velvet-eyed twins
that flicker so proudly by day
around the flowers on my windowsills.

And yet I was once like you!
Among the darkly shining foliage,

amidst the faithless people
of paradise, we once lived together.

For me, it was an exile. But for you,
you playful pilgrim, it has remained the homeland,
of which you weave an inkling
around my fleeting walk on earth.

While your heavenly brothers and sisters
enjoy their morning idleness
in heartless wars and hunts,
you stay in the hollow of my arms.

How do I, my savage, deserve this honour?
In my book of fate, only death, captivity and sin
correspond to your eternal,
innocent independence.

Outside your gallant brothers
with the melodious names
chase the thorny crown of the moon
and the inebriating morning wand of the sun.

But you, my prince,
wisely content yourself
with my love.

Elsa Morante: [Canto per il gatto Alvaro](#)
from the novel *Menzogna e sortilegio* (Lies and Sorcery; 1948)

The Ambivalent Nature of the Cat and the Dream of Paradise

The *Canto per il gatto Alvaro* appears at the end of Elsa Morante's first novel *Menzogna e sortilegio* (Lies and Magic), published in 1948. In it, it is meant to thank the cat that accompanied the narrator in her writing.

In the poem, Morante, who was a great cat lover and also dedicated poems to other cats [1], plays with the ambivalent nature of cats, their oscillation between pussycat and predator. The contrasting characters of the cat are, however, split up into different individuals: While the lyrical self's confidant, the tomcat Alvaro, is apparently a pure cuddly kitten, his fellow cats live out their murderous ferocity uninhibitedly.

This artifice makes it possible to create an unbroken vision of a primordial paradisiacal state. Alvaro is thus more than a normal domestic cat. In the poem, he becomes a symbol of peaceful interaction between different creatures.

The poem's deliberately naïve tone indicates that Elsa Morante has also written stories for children. Furthermore, the implicit link to children's ways of feeling serves to support the message of the poem. Thus, the loss of paradise can also be related to the loss of childhood.

Taming the Inner Tiger

The poem, however, is not about a retrospective glorification of childhood. Rather, childhood appears here as the human equivalent of the ambivalent nature of cats.

Children, too, often live out their "wild" impulses unfiltered and can display a not inconsiderable cruelty. However, since they are not yet fully aware of the consequences of their actions, they live in a state of innocence – even by legal standards. The older they get, though, the more they approach the threshold beyond which innocent savagery becomes culpable behaviour.

Seen from this perspective, the utopia outlined by Elsa Morante's poem does not involve returning to the paradisiacal original state. Rather, it is precisely about shaking off the dark sides of this state and saving as much as possible of its bright sides for life beyond paradise.

Or, to put it in "kitty" terms: We must tame the tiger living in all of us at least to such an extent that it no longer poses a danger to us or others.

Biography of Elsa Morante

Elsa Morante, who was born in Rome in 1912 and died there in 1985, is best known for her time-sensitive novels. Together with her fellow writer Alberto Moravia, to whom she was married for twenty years, she was an integral part of the post-war Italian art scene.

Through her friendship with Pier Paolo Pasolini, Morante was also active in the world of film. She wrote screenplays and film reviews, took on smaller roles, worked as an assistant director and participated in the creation of film music. Some of her own novels were also adapted into films.

Her works were particularly suitable for this because, like the most important Italian films of the post-war period, they were based on the style of neorealism. Morante associated her critical realism with the claim to overcome in writing the impression of a disparate and disjointed world that besets modern man in the face of the complexity of reality. Thus she declared in a famous speech in 1965:

"Art is the opposite of disintegration. (...) The reason for art's existence, its justification, the cause of its presence and survival (...), is precisely this: that it is supposed to prevent the disintegration of human consciousness in its daily, tiring and alienating dealings with the world, to give it back again and again, in the unreal, used-up and fragmentary confusion of external relationships, an integral overall picture of the real – in a word: reality." [2]

As the daughter of a Jewish mother, Morante had to go into hiding with her husband – whose father was also of Jewish descent – during the German occupation of Italy. This experience also influenced her most successful novel, *La Storia* (The Story), published in 1974. It is about a woman with Jewish roots trying to survive the war in fascist Rome together with her two sons. In 1986, Luigi Comencini adapted the novel for television, with Claudia Cardinale in the leading role.

References

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Elsa Morante in her flat in Rome
Wikimedia Commons