**Elsa Morante (1912-1985)**

This month’s essay is about an Italian novelist, short story writer, and poet who was especially known for the epic and mythical qualities of her works. Her writings usually centered upon the struggles of young persons in coming to terms with the world of adulthood. Many critics agree that she is one of the most underestimated writers of the 20th century, and certainly one of Italy’s most distinguished writers during the middle decades of that century. She used the techniques of “magic realism” (a literary movement associated with a style of writing or technique that incorporates magical or supernatural events into realistic narrative without questioning the improbability of those events) to explore the way in which individuals have been shaped by the pains and traumas of childhood. Her most famous work, *La Storia* (History, 1974), a penetrating study of the impact of WW II on European culture, was called at the time of its publication one of the major novels of the century. (The *Bokklubben World Library* names it in its List of 100 Best Books of All Time).

Elsa Morante was born in Rome on August 18, 1912. Legally, her father was Augusto Morante, a Sicilian who was a teacher in a reformatory and whose surname Elsa took. Her mother was Irma Poggibonsi Morante, a schoolteacher descended from a Jewish family that came from Emilia (near Modena) in northern Italy. Since Augusto was impotent, Irma had five offspring, including Elsa, using a Sicilian family friend, Francesco Lo Monaco, to aid her in conceiving. (When she was a teenager, Elsa Morante discovered that Lo Monaco was her biological father. Nevertheless, in defense of her mother’s unconventional choice, Morante shortly before her own death, described her mother as “the chastest of women.”) She grew up in the Testaccio neighborhood of Rome with her parents and her four siblings: Aldo, Marcello, and Maria. Another brother, Mario, died young and his death greatly influenced Morante’s life and her writing.

Morante’s childhood was not an easy one because she was anemic and sickly, thus she was unable to attend regular school with other children in her early years. Her mother educated her at home for most of those years. Not much is known of her childhood years, although she apparently lived in poverty in the slums of Rome until she was six years old. In 1918, she was sent to live with her wealthy godmother, the noblewoman Maria Guerrieri di Gonzaga, who resided in a villa situated in the Roman upscale quarter of Nomentano. When the Morante family was able to move to the Roman neighborhood of Monteverde Nuovo in 1922, Elsa joined them. She enrolled in the Virgilio gymnasium, and completed her education.
there eight years later, in 1930, at the age of eighteen. (By this time, she had learned the secret of her parentage). She then left her family’s home and went to live on her own. She began university studies in literature at the University of Rome, but left for financial reasons and earned her living by editing doctoral theses and giving private lessons in Latin. Although she never completed her university education, a more important formative development was a taste for literature that she had developed at an early age. She continued to pursue a vigorous program of self-education in literature during her teenage years; her particular literary mentors were the great novelists of the 19th century.

Morante began writing short stories in the mid-1930s. Some were published in various publications and journals, including two periodicals for children, Il Corriere dei Piccoli (The Courier of the Little Ones) and I Diritti della Scuola (The Privileges of the School), in which she also published her novel Qualcuno Bussa alla Porta (Someone is Knocking on the Door) in installments. One notable short story, Le Bellissime Avventure di Caterì dalla Trecciolina (The Most Beautiful Adventures of Cateri with a Pigtail), was completed when she was 14. This was republished in 1959 as a children’s book Le Straordinarie Avventure di Caterina (The Extraordinary Adventures of Catherine). These first stories appeared at their publication in the 1930s with no particular critical response. However, this work and many others received a degree of literary acclaim only in the decade prior to her death. Critics find in these early stories, many of which were published in the collection Il Gioco Segreto (The Secret Game), themes that would continue to appear in her later, more polished work. Among these were the difficult relations between parents and their children, and the various dangers that sprang from love between the sexes. (She continued throughout her writing career to use children and adolescents as main characters in her works).

In 1936, when she was living with an older man, she met fellow novelist and film critic Alberto Moravia (1907–1990), whom she married in Rome on April 14, 1941. (See my essay about Moravia.) They spent the next two years living and writing on the island of Capri. The marriage brought her into contact with leading Italian writers and intellectuals of the day, especially Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), Umberto Saba (1883–1957), and Sandro Penna (1906–1977).

In 1943, during the German occupation of Italy, Alberto Moravia was accused of anti-fascist activities. The couple, also fearing for their lives because of their Jewish heritage, fled to Fondi, a village in Southern Lazio in the coastal mountains between Rome and Naples, where they remained for nine months in hiding from the Fascists. During her time in Fondi, she began translating the work of Katherine Mansfield. She also decided to return briefly to war-torn Rome, at great personal risk, to retrieve the manuscript of what would become her first published novel, Menzogna e Sortilegio [Lies
and Sorcery, published in English as *House of Liars*, and formerly titled *Vita di mia Nonna* (Life of my Grandmother), and to get some winter clothes.

With the liberation in 1944, the couple left Fondi and returned to Rome. However, the south, which she loved so very much, constituted the background of most of her narrative work, which often dealt with persecution and injustice and which is modeled to a large extent on French and Russian novelists of the 19th century she had read as a teenager and young adult.

In 1947, at the advice of the Italian novelist Natalia Ginzburg, she sent the manuscript of her novel *Menzogna e Sortilegio* to the Italian publishing house, Einaudi, which published it the following year. Despite its failure to sell many copies, it won the prestigious Viareggio Prize for the year 1948. The story is set in Sicily at the turn of the 20th century. Typically, like most of Morante’s works, the book shows no concern with the political background of events. A central character and the narrator of much of the book is the girl Elisa. With her unhappy childhood and her insight into the psychological pain it has caused her, Elisa is, at least in part, a figure that draws many of her characteristics from the author herself. Like many of Morante’s narrators, Elisa admits that what she remembers may well be false or distorted. As critic Michael Caesar writes: “Half-remembered, half-imagined … like ghosts, the actors in the family drama move in a space occupied pre-eminently by insomnia, fantasy, and day-dream.”

Centering on the lives of members of two Italian families, the novel explores the consequences of falsehoods that people tell their intimate relations in an effort to win their affection. The book is marked by unhappy human relations as several of the main characters find their love for one another rejected.

By the late 1940s, the couple’s financial situation had improved and they were able to purchase a larger apartment in the center of Rome, near Piazza del Popolo. Morante developed a particular way of writing and, with few exceptions, she worked in her own studio. She wrote longhand on one side of the page, using a consistent type of notebook for a work, and using a different notebook for each work. Once finished, she would usually go back and, on the reverse side of the page, make notes, drawings, and basically develop more fully characters, plot lines, and ideas that often would be incorporated into the final story.

The first time that Morante enjoyed both wide critical success and a large popular audience came almost a decade later when the firm of Einaudi published *L’Isola di Arturo* (Arturo’s Island, 1957), a novel that combined fantasy with Freudian themes. The novel won the Strega Prize, the most prestigious Italian literary award, in 1957. The royalties Morante received from the book provided her, for the first time, with an adequate income and the means to travel. The novel’s main character and narrator is a boy, Arturo, who looks back at his life on the island of Procida in the Bay of Naples. His adolescence is marked by the arrival of a stepmother, a girl from Naples not much older than himself, with whom he quickly becomes infatuated. Arturo’s father, whom Arturo worships at first, is cold to his son and to his new wife. But Arturo’s early teenage years are disturbed as well by painful revelations about his father, who abandons his family to pursue a homosexual relationship with a
disreputable male lover in the island’s prison. To face the bitter reality, Arturo leaves his Procida home with a friend and enlists in the army.

Upon the completion of L’Isola di Arturo, she began writing Senza i Conforti della Religione (Without the Comforts of Religion), in which she examined the relationship between cinema and poetry. She never finished that novel, however it did provide material for her other fiction writings and her essays.

During these years, Morante also devoted much of her energy to poetry. Her verse was sometimes the product of her effort to take a respite from writing novels. Alibi (Alibi), was a set of 16 poems that appeared in 1958 and which contained works she had produced over the prior two decades. It also delved deeply into the nature of childhood experiences. The title of the revealing poem Sheherazade in Alibi not only indicates how Morante saw her role as a writer, but it also provides an insight into her techniques. The line “It is not my merit, but the heaven’s/ that made me so fanciful” provides critic Rocco Capozzi with evidence that she saw her “magic realism” not as a choice of styles but as one she was destined to follow. Of course, by this time, the themes and techniques of her writing had become evident. She tended to present her ideas through various narrator-protagonists who, notes Capozzi, “both hide and reveal the author’s intimate desires, fears, delusions, and personal experiences related to love and rejection.” He went on to note that her autobiographical narrator “like a modern Sheherazade” used the narration to “seek cathartic relief, self-therapy, and hope.”

Morante’s marriage to Moravia wasn’t easy at all, and it began rapidly to deteriorate during the late 1950s. Moravia had been having extra-marital affairs, and she was well aware of these. Also, she often stayed in the shadow of her husband successes trying to gain her own position and credibility in a world that was most inclined toward men. As she succeeded in her novels and poetry, the tensions in their relationship became even more unbearable. She needed both autonomy and profound affection, which Moravia became less-inclined to give her. She also contemplated having a child, but both decided against it; later she regretted the lost opportunity. Although she was childless, she often wrote about mothers and their children… and she also transferred some of her love to her cats.

Morante, however, was not immune from having her own affairs as well. During this period, she had an affair with the film director Luchino Visconti; they fell in love in 1955 while Moravia was away on a trip to America. (However, both the director Bernardo Bertolucci and the actress Adriana Asti, who knew Visconti very well, have claimed that they did not have a “real” affair). But whether their claims are true or not, there was a definite attraction between the two and they met for several years. Most likely, Morante’s poem Alibi (1958) was inspired by Visconti, as was her L’Isola di Arturo (1957), which was described by some critics as written “under the sign of Visconti.”

In September 1959, while traveling in the US, she met Bill Morrow, a young painter from New York, and they developed a deep romantic friendship. Later, when Morrow moved to Rome, Morante did not leave her marital residence but took an apartment of her own for trysts she and Morrow had over the next several years.
Finally, in 1961, after years of fights, she finally separated from Alberto Moravia. However, because she was a practicing Catholic, she never divorced him. Morante’s literary writing became more sporadic after this separation. This event was like a rebirth for her, the beginning of a period of travel and journalistic reporting. After the separation, she also experienced an inner conflict resulting, on the one hand, from her need to be involved and to commit herself to participating in the movement for a democratic renewal of Italian society, and on the other, her own reticent nature to shun public political activism.

She destroyed much of the work written during this period, although she did publish a novella, Lo Scialle Andaluso (The Andalusian Shawl, 1963), and a poem, L’Avventura (The Adventure) which appeared in the American review Wake. In 1963, in a departure from her usual work, Pier Paolo Pasolini (see my essay about Pasolini) invited Morante to select the music, mostly from Mozart’s oeuvre, for his film Il vangelo secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to Matthew). She also collaborated in casting the actors for the movie.

Her next major published work was her second book of poetry, Il Mondo Salvato dai Ragazzini (The World Saved by Children, 1968), a collection of poems in various styles and popular songs dedicated to her lover, Bill Morrow.

La Storia: Importance and Criticism

In the years that followed her split with Moravia, Morante lived a deliberately isolated existence. She was a writer famous for the slow, deliberate way that she produced her books, and she used this period of solitude to great advantage. The result was what many consider her literary masterpiece La Storia (History; published in English as History: A Novel), published in 1974 by the firm of Einaudi. It became a bestseller both in Italy and abroad, with over one million copies sold in the first year. The book is distinguished from her other novels by the presence of a third-person narrator who stands above the often-horrible events being recounted. The narrator is identifiably female, and her comments, often cutting, are directed at both major events and the European leaders who played crucial roles in those events. In an interview she granted shortly after the book appeared, Morante described her reason for turning her work into such a new direction. “Now, almost an old woman, I felt I couldn’t depart from this life without leaving the others a testimonial memory of the crucial epoch in which I was born.” She saw her book, moreover, as a call for “communal awakening” and as “an accusation of all the fascisms of the world.”

The book marked a major stylistic departure for Morante, since each of its nine chapters begins with a date, accompanied by the major historical events of both Italian and world history that marked it. The main content of the book, however, is the story of obscure, helpless individuals whose lives are being shaped, even destroyed by these grand happenings. The book starts, for example, with the rape of an Italian schoolteacher by a German soldier. But the soldier too is painted as someone deprived of an independent will: “He knew precisely four words of Italian and of the world he knew little or nothing.”
Thus, he too is presumably a victim of larger events he cannot shape. He will, in fact, shortly die during the fighting in North Africa.

With the city of Rome during World War II as the background for events, the book examines the experiences of a variety of characters, principally members of a single, partly Jewish family. As usual, Morante focuses much of her attention on the character of a child. Useppe Raimundo is the son of the Italian-Jewish schoolteacher who had been forcibly impregnated by the German soldier. The product of this rape, Useppe, is both handicapped and destined for an early death. Thus, Useppe is unique among Morante’s other major characters; throughout her writing, her central figures are invariably disillusioned and embittered adults who have, nonetheless, survived their tragic childhoods.

The novel presents the message that history is a mere cavalcade of suffering, much of it inflicted on innocent youngsters like Useppe. Morante personalizes that suffering by telling the story of individual victims. Despite its popular and critical success, the book also put the author at the center of a bitter literary controversy led by Marxist critics who displayed their distaste for the work. In the view of Gregory Lucente, the book had a particular impact on intellectuals of a Marxist persuasion because it appeared at a time when the Italian Left seemed to be moving toward power. Thus, they were “less than comfortable with a book as pessimistic, depressing, and insistently prodding as Morante’s novel.” The factory workers in the book, for example, have no political consciousness let alone an attraction for Marxism, and the book as a whole was marked by a profound lack of faith in the prospects for the human condition. Morante thus rejected Marxist concepts, which she had claimed to accept earlier in her career, of the dominant and hopeful role of the class struggle in human affairs. Moreover, her sympathy for the tiny victims of the workings of the world now stood above any political consideration. As Lucente stated it, “Morante sees that all History is nothing but a story of sickness, oppression, and death … no one escapes alive.”

Some critics have found that the book’s success came from its ability to evoke, in nostalgic fashion, the wartime years and the efforts of the anti-Fascist resistance movement. Others insisted that the book was too far removed from any identification with Italian heroism to be praised. Another source of criticism came from members of the literary avant-garde who attacked the book for its relatively conventional style and structure. Pier Paolo Pasolini, who had earlier reviewed L’Isola di Arturo favorably, criticized La Storia in the Italian news magazine Tempo (Time) for “mannerism.” He also made fun of Morante’s celebration of vitality and joie de vivre. In addition, he also suspected that one of the characters, Davide Segre, was in part a fictional caricature of himself. (After his stinging criticisms, Morante broke off her friendship with him).

Morante’s last work was a notably gloomy novel, Aracoeli, which appeared in Italy in 1982. The novel centers on a mixture of private dreams, fantasies, imaginary encounters, and flashbacks, which are the recollections of childhood present in the mind of the narrator, Manuele, a guilt-ridden neurotic homosexual in his early 40s, who recounts a trip taken to Spain, where he attempts to recapture his lost childhood and uncover the past of his mother, Aracoeli. She had married an Italian naval officer and after a happy relationship with her husband and her young son, she had suddenly undergone a terrible
change: she had suffered a malignant brain tumor that had caused her to become a nymphomaniac, and ultimately led to her death. Like L’Isola di Arturo, which was written 25 years earlier, the novel explores the mind of a central male figure whose life has been dominated by rejection that he had experienced when he was a child. Notes Michael Caesar, the book is distinguished by its “wonderful evocation of the unhappiness of childhood, of the anxiety of a child who senses … that he is in some way being left out, uncherished.” Critics, who believed that Morante saw her writing as a kind of therapy, found ample evidence for their position in this final novel. At one point, the hero Manuele speaks of taking a final journey through memory to recapture his deceased mother and thus “attempting a last, absurd therapy to be cured of her.”

Like La Storia, Aracoeli was not universally acclaimed by critics; however, it did earn Morante the Prix Medicis Etranger in 1984. It serves as a summation of many currents in her work. This last novel is a result of how Morante felt, alone and unappreciated with so much left to say but no way to say it. Morante was a great loner; she knew how to put all her frustration, anger and sadness into words and this makes her one of the most important writers of Italy.

Last Years and Death

Morante’s later years were increasingly characterized by existential worries and by frustration resulting from the continued iniquitous oppression of the poor and the innocent.

In 1980 she fell and broke her leg. She recovered in a Swiss clinic, but was obliged to remain bed-ridden. She also suffered from the debilitating disease of hydrocephalus. The accumulation of fluid around her brain that characterizes the disease led to a deterioration of her mental powers to which she responded with an unsuccessful suicide attempt by swallowing three different kinds of sleeping pills and turning on the gas in April, 1983. Following this attempt, she lived for another two and a half years in a nursing home in Rome as an invalid, paralyzed from the waist down because of the disease. She spent a good deal of her time reading and re-reading Dante’s Inferno.

Elsa Morante died of a heart attack in Rome on November 25, 1985 at the age of 73. She had suggested in an interview soon before she died, that, perhaps whimsically, the mourners at her funeral should have the pleasure of listening to music by Bach, Mozart, and Bob Dylan. Her wishes were carried out as she had requested. All the leading newspapers in Italy wrote long obituaries devoted to her and her work. Her ashes were scattered in the Bay of Naples near Procida Island, the place near where she was with Alberto Moravia in their period of hiding during World War II, one of the happiest periods of her life.

Conclusion

Elsa Morante cultivated a love for music, books and cats. Her favorite books included The Iliad, Don Quixote, and Hamlet. She was also interested in Freudian psychology, Plato, and Simone Weil. Most of Morante’s greatest works are shaped by her own choices and experiences in life and are reflected in her protagonists. She used Southern Italy as the backdrop for much of her work. Her primary tool of storytelling was the use of narration. One of the central themes in her work is Narcissism. Most of her
leading characters use a narrative autobiography as a way to seek self-therapy and hope for a better future life for themselves. Her writing is an essential method for her to form a positive consciousness about her own personal memories.

Another important aspect of Morante’s work is the metaphor of love. According to her, love can be passion and obsession, and can lead to either despair or destruction. Both Narcissism and Love are themes well-connected to each other. Most of her characters seek love, not because they have true feelings for the person they fell in love with, but because they need to cover the feelings of emptiness from their own childhood. It is through love and narcissism that Morante introduces other themes, such as the role of motherhood and the meaning of childhood experiences in her oeuvre.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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