

Title: Paola Masino

Italian ( 1908 - 1989 )

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WORKS:

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

### BOOKS

- *Decadenza della morte* (Rome: A. Stock, 1931).
- *Monte Ignoso* (Milan: Bompiani, 1931).
- *Periferia* (Milan: Bompiani, 1933).
- *Racconto grosso e altri* (Milan: Bompiani, 1941).
- *Memoria d'Irene* (Milan: Bompiani, 1945).
- *Nascita e morte della massaia* (Milan: Bompiani, 1945).
- *Poesie* (Milan: Bompiani, 1947).
- *Vivi: Dramma lirico in 3 atti e 6 quadri*, by Franco Mannino, with a libretto by Masino and Bindo Missiroli (Rome: De Santis, 1956).
- *Colloquio di notte* (Palermo: La Luna, 1994).
- *Io, Massimo e gli altri: Autobiografia di una figlia del secolo* (Milan: Rusconi, 1995).

### PLAY PRODUCTION

- *Luisella*, Palermo, Teatro Massimo, 28 February 1969.

### PRODUCED SCRIPT

- *Viaggio d'Europa*, radio, RAI, 3 April 1955.

### OTHER

- Massimo Bontempelli, *Racconti e romanzi*, edited by Masino (Milan: Mondadori, 1961).

- *Luisella: Dramma in 4 quadri dall'omonimo racconto di Thomas Mann: Prima rappresentazione: Palermo, Teatro Massimo, 28 febbraio 1969*, words by Masino, music by Franco Mannino (Milan: Ricordi, 1969).

## TRANSLATIONS

- Honore de Balzac, *La ragazza dagli occhi d'oro* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).
- Hector Malot, *Senza famiglia* (Florence: Marzocco, 1979).
- Marie Madeleine La Fayette, *L'amore geloso*, translated by Masino and Gesualdo Bufalino (Palermo: Sellerio, 1980).
- Valery Larbaud, *A.O. Barnabooth* (Trento: L'editore, 1990).

## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

In the summer of 1935, Paola Masino wrote in her diary words that testify to her volcanic personality, her passion for unconventionality, her commitment to writing, and her disconcerting modernity:

Io sono nata l'anno del terremoto di Messina--1908. Il terremoto è avvenuto in gennaio, io sono nata in maggio. La differenza di quei pochi mesi mi dà, nella violenza delle passioni contrastanti, qualche equilibrio, per quanto faticoso; equilibrio che si scorge soltanto dopo molto che l'ho vissuto, voltandosi a fare i calcoli. Sono grata al mio demone di avermi espressa in quell'anno di convulsione naturale; convulsione di elementi, e non di uomini. Nascere durante una guerra mi sarebbe spiaciuto.

(I was born in the year of the earthquake in Messina--1908. The earthquake happened in January, I was born in May. That few months' difference gave me, even though in the violence of contrasting passions, some equilibrium, no matter how arduous; an equilibrium that can be perceived only long after I experienced it, when turning back and assessing the situation. I am grateful to my demon to have expressed me in that year of natural convulsion; a commotion of elements, and not of men. I would have regretted to be born during a war.)

At twenty-seven, Masino was indeed an unrestrained and extremely bright young woman who had already challenged numerous commonplaces of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century middle-class propriety. From her youth to her adulthood she had an enthralling, uninhibited nature. Though awarded the 1931 Viareggio Book Prize, one of the most prestigious literary accolades in Italy, for her novel *Monte Igroso* (1931), she remained a marginal figure in Italian literary history. In her preface to *Colloquio di notte* (Nocturnal Colloquy, 1994), a collection of Masino's short stories, Maria Vittoria Vittori rightly laments the fact that, while contemporary studies of the most significant twentieth-century Italian women writers mention Masino, they do not often fully acknowledge her contribution to contemporary Italian literature.

Masino was born on 20 May 1908 in Pisa but grew up in Rome, where her Tuscan parents had moved soon after their marriage. While extremely close to her father, Enrico Alfredo Masino, who combined a career in the Ministry of Agriculture with his passion for dramatic and narrative writing, she also enjoyed a profound attachment to her mother, Luisa's, family, the Sforzas of Monteignoso. Throughout her entire life, the house of Monteignoso engendered great affection in

Masino. Surrounded by a wild garden and its walls hung with biblical paintings, the house inspired her on numerous occasions but most obviously and importantly in the writing of the novel *Monte Ignoso*.

From an early age she grew increasingly close to Enrico, who cultivated her passion for writing. Her father also introduced Masino to one of the most important influences in her life, Luigi Pirandello, whom she met at the Teatro Argentina in Rome on a bright afternoon in the spring of 1924 to talk about, and eventually give him, her play *Le tre Marie* (The Three Maries). As Masino recalled years later, Pirandello was impressed by that ardent young woman with braids and knee-length socks, and stated,

Se tu avessi saputo scrivere quello che mi hai raccontato, saresti un genio. Ma son sicuro che non hai saputo scriverlo. È già molto che tu l'abbia pensato. E io voglio dimostrarti di essere coraggioso almeno quanto te. Lo leggo e, se non ci sono troppi errori teatrali, te lo faccio rappresentare.

(If you had been able to write that which you told me, you would be a genius. But I am sure you did not know how to write it. It is already most impressive that you conceived it. And I want to show you that I can be as courageous as you are. I shall read it, and if there aren't too many theatrical mistakes, I shall let you stage it.)

This first meeting with Pirandello developed into a close friendship that ended only upon the playwright's death in 1936.

Early on, Masino's life intertwined with the lives of many artists and intellectuals. In the late 1920s, after she met and fell in love with the much older Massimo Bontempelli, considered the founder of both the literary journal *Novecento* and the so-called *realismo magico* (magic realism), her life took a decisive turn. Unquestionably, through his presence Bontempelli aided Masino in finding a voice of her own and in widening her horizons, as their life unfolded in largely nonconformist ways in Italy and France; he certainly had an enormous impact on her development as a writer. On the other hand, Bontempelli's presence might have prevented her from achieving complete artistic independence, thus depriving Masino of lasting recognition for her own individual and personal contribution to modern literary history in Italy.

Masino's love for Bontempelli, who was thirty years her senior, was hardly conceivable in 1930s Italian middle-class society. As she turned of age, her family sent her to Paris, where she lived from 1929 through 1930. There, she worked for the political journal *L'Europe nouvelle* and then for the "Bureau International de Cooperation Intellectuelle." Bontempelli joined her in Paris, and they lived together thereafter. Yet, Masino soon found her own niche in Parisian intellectual society, attaining renown for her wit and finesse. In Paris she was seen frequently in the company of Nino Frank and Arturo Loria, as well as André Maurois and Benjamin Crémieux, both of whom read her work with interest. She counted André Gide, Colette, Jean Cocteau, and James Joyce among her favorite authors, and she soon developed a passion for avant-garde cinema. In the meantime, she reorganized short stories that had either appeared earlier in *Novecento* or never been published, collecting them in a volume titled *Decadenza della morte* (1931, Decadence of Death). Extremely daring for an early work, the book featured personifications of abstract ideas, such as Love, Life, and Beauty, and characters such as Adam,

Eve, and God. *Decadenza della morte* shows that from the start of her writing career Masino did not hesitate to employ features of Surrealism and metaphysics in her work.

During her years in Paris, Masino made many friends who influenced her, including artists such as Filippo De Pisis, and, perhaps most importantly, Giorgio De Chirico. Perhaps too modern and imaginative for her times, particularly in her strident avoidance of literary clichés, she experimented with narrative forms and allowed different genres to overlap in her writing--a strategy that became quite popular in the works of later authors. De Chirico's metaphysical painting especially inspired her literary surrealism, as exemplified by *Monte Ignoso*:

Non distruggermi, Dio onnipotente: io sono quello che tu non potrai mai essere: madre. Che tu non sia madre, questa è la tua forza. Per questo gli uomini ti implorano e tu puoi esaudirli. E perchè non sei madre hai creato gli uomini liberi di gioire e soffrire e a ognuno hai messo nelle mani la sua propria vita. . . . Se tu fossi una madre, io lo so, non avresti concepita l'intelligenza umana.

(Don't destroy me, God Almighty: I am that which you can never be: a mother. In that you are not a mother, that is your strength. This is why men implore you and you can answer them. And because you are not a mother, you created men who are free to rejoice and to suffer, and each one you made master of his or her life. . . . If you were a mother, this I know, you wouldn't have conceived human intelligence.)

Here, Emma, the protagonist of *Monte Ignoso*, declares her tragic condition of motherhood. Maternity is the focus of this intense, complex, and at times disquieting tale set within surroundings that Masino based on those of the Sforza family home in Montesignoso, near Carrara. For Masino, as seen in the novel, to be a mother entails a sacrifice of one's intelligence and vitality. She shows a mother who not only cares for the new life that developed within her body but also prevents it from developing an intelligence of its own and denies it freedom of choice. In this nocturnal fairy tale of metaphysical and surrealist overtones, everything that happens is extreme and tragic. Maternity in more realistic portrayals recurs as a theme in Masino's later works, such as her short stories, articles, and novels. In *Periferia* (Suburbs, 1933), the novel that followed *Monte Ignoso*, the reader encounters a mother who is a "bambina fra i bambini" ("child among children"). Maternity regains an exemplary yet paradoxical function in *Nascita e morte della massaja* (Birth and Death of the Housewife, 1945).

Although *Monte Ignoso* won the Viareggio Book Prize for Masino, the novel received mixed reviews, and Carlo Emilio Gadda's negative reaction is particularly notorious. Gadda could not tolerate the abstract characters and "la maniera . . . ai limiti d'un futurismo deterioro, tutto notazione dell'immediato percepire e niente espressione del proprio apprendere" (the form . . . bordering on an inferior kind of futurism, characterized by a mere recording of the immediate perception and not by the expression of one's coming to knowledge). He did not react negatively to the female subject matter of the novel but, rather, to Masino's writing style. Gadda's criticism is governed by a specific literary taste; in his review of *Monte Ignoso*, he attempted once again to set the rules of verisimilitude and realism, formal order, discipline, and rigor against any form of excess and spectacularization, or "fuochi d'artificio gratuiti" (gratuitous fireworks).

There are indeed fireworks in Masino's novel, but they do not constitute an end in themselves. She expresses the morbidity of her subject matter through wide-ranging techniques, from an extreme visualization to a symbolic obsession for colors--and from a proliferation of metaphors, which anthropomorphize objects and sensations, to the disappearance of humans in "atmospheres." One also finds a constant shift in verbal tenses, from past to present to future, which creates a continuous dissociation of the point of view within the same sequence: "Ora arrivava al cipresso in fondo alle scale e odorava le rose. Le trova così belle che vuole dipingerle. Prese un foglio di carta e piano piano disegnava. Ne farà una sola." (Now she was reaching the cypress at the bottom of the stairs, and smelling the roses. She finds them so beautiful that she wants to paint them. She took a sheet of paper, and little by little she was drawing. She will make only one). In *Monte Ignoso* Masino tried to synthesize thoughts and sensations into dramatic forms, with the clear intention of merging avant-garde narrative with the classical tradition of tragic theater. As already noted, while she no doubt found a model in Pirandello's "mythic" plays, such as *La nuova colonia* (The New Colony, 1928) and *Lazzaro* (1930; translated as *Lazzaro*, 1959), Masino also invoked the tenets of realism repeatedly, blending them with mythic and supernatural features, and created a thoroughly new, expressive narrative form.

In 1931 Masino and Bontempelli returned to Italy and ultimately settled down in Rome in a house that she never came to like, "una delle prime case in cemento armato, tipo grande casellario d'uomini" (one of the first houses in cement, a kind of enormous filing cabinet for humans). The 1930s were a time of extensive travel in Europe and South America for the couple. In 1933 they accompanied Pirandello to Argentina for the premiere of *Quando si è qualcuno* (1933; translated as *When One is Somebody*, 1956) and in the same year Masino published *Periferia*, a novel inspired by recollections of her childhood in Piazza Caprera. In *Periferia* she explores two of her favorite themes, maternity and paternity, from the children's point of view. The novel received positive responses from the critics and suspicion from the Fascist regime, which found Masino's representation of the Italian family unorthodox.

Three years later, while they were away from Rome, Masino and Bontempelli learned of Pirandello's death in December 1936. They felt pain and guilt about leaving him alone in the third consecutive winter he was spending without his companion Marta Abba, who was in the United States to be in *Tovarich*, a play by Jacques Deval. In 1938, because of sanctions by the regime against Bontempelli, the couple moved to Venice and settled in Palazzo Contarini delle Figure--a splendid yet imposing mansion in Masino's eyes. Adapting to her new role in such a place proved quite hard for the nomadic and rebellious Masino, and the experience eventually culminated in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, the tale of a surreal "massaia" (housewife). The incipit of the novel, "Da bambina la massaia era polverosa e sonnolenta" (As a child, the housewife was dusty and sleepy), accurately describes a world and a life unfolding inside of a trunk. She is covered with cobwebs and eats bread crusts yet is happy in the company of books and her own imaginary universe. As the mother invites her to leave the trunk and clean up, her instinctive wisdom makes her reluctant to leave; she subconsciously knows there is no life outside the trunk. She does clean up, however, and prepare herself to enter the world. The girl's departure from the trunk is the beginning of a long journey in her life, marked by stops at the wrong places and by strange love affairs with flowers and objects. *Nascita e morte della massaia* embodies Masino's strenuous attempt to revive the squalid reality of a life with a boring and old husband in a large and opulent mansion. In this surreal and allegorical construction, existence in

the trunk stands for not only a fantasy life but also for the formative process of the future housewife.

il suo corpo portava nascosti un pensiero e un sesso che erano la sua ragione. Ma la bambina ignorava il pensiero, vi stava dentro . . . stava quatta, ignara di se medesima, un vero grumo di pensiero, senza la minima intelligenza.

(her body carried, concealed, a thought and a sex that constituted its own purpose. But the little girl ignored thought, she was simply immersed in it . . . she would stand quiet, unaware of herself, a true clot of thought, without any intelligence.)

After the girl exits the trunk, thought remains the only instrument she has for accepting reality, as she always experiences difficulty in adapting to her new role. Her submerged and internalized thought is retrieved and transferred in those diaries that she composed in moments of discomfort and rebellion in order to "narrarmi e rappresentarmi sempre a me stessa" (narrate myself and represent myself constantly to myself). Situated at the center of the story, the diaries soon acquire a vital relevance as "la voce della massaia furono nove pagine di quaderno, scritte in grafia allucinata a parola a parola, una parola forse ogni due giorni . . . Pagine senza riferimento con la sua vita presente. . ." (the voice of the housewife substantiated nine pages of a notebook, written word for word in an hallucinated handwriting, a word every other day perhaps . . . Pages with no connection to her present life . . .). The progressive and definitive abandonment of thought enables the "massaia" to pursue her role to perfection; losing herself in the process, however, she eventually dies.

Although *Nascita e morte della massaia* was Masino's last and most successful novel, it soon faded into oblivion until its republication by La Tartaruga in 1982. In 1994 the short stories written by Masino--between 1933 and 1948 and first published in newspapers and journals--were finally collected, along with three unpublished pieces, in a single volume. *Colloquio di notte* consists of stories written mostly in the 1940s--a decade of utmost importance in Italian national history and in Masino's own personal history, since dramatic and often violent changes to reality occurred during that period. Some of the tales, such as "Anicia" and "Nozze di sangue" (Blood Wedding), closely resemble the surreal world of the housewife from *Nascita e morte della massaia*; others, such as "Visita allo zoo" (Visit to the Zoo), are characterized by Masino's ironic recounting of a personal and subjective experience, translated into the adventures of a brilliant, progressive woman of the Left. Perhaps the most gripping narrative of the collection is "Fame" ("Hunger"), a tender and terrible tale of a thoroughly different nature about fathers and children and love and death; the story received harsh criticism for its morbid content. In all the pieces that make up *Colloquio di notte*, one finds themes most dear to Masino's heart--including death, maternity, and female destiny.

In 1947, with the publication of *Poesie*, her collection of lyrics haunted by a sense of anguish and death, Paola Masino's creative life virtually ended. In 1950, free of fascist threats and sanctions, she and Bontempelli moved back to Rome, where she busied herself by collecting his works and contributing occasionally to journals and newspapers. In the meantime, Bontempelli's physical condition deteriorated, and on 21 July 1960 he died. After his death Masino engaged in few activities that did not involve the reorganization of his archival material and the supervision of the reprints of his works. Surviving Bontempelli by almost thirty years, she died on 27 July

1989. Because she had lived in virtual oblivion for the last forty years of her life, her death brought to a rather secretive conclusion her passionate and nonconformist life as a woman and a writer. Yet, in 1982, seven years before Masino's death, the feminist publisher La Tartaruga put out a new edition of *Nascita e morte della massaia* as part of a rediscovery of her life and career, and the praise for the writer was significant. Her works essentially affirm that she intelligently anticipated the mixture of genres that writers today employ so typically. A new generation of readers has thus learned how Masino made generous use in her fiction of the surreal, one of the least remembered "keys" of Italian literary history.

FURTHER READINGS:

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Laura Fortini, "Il Lucifero della massaia," *DWF / BIZZARRE E BIRBONE*, 1, no. 33 (1997): 15-27.
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