

# Lalla Romano

As if just one life was not enough for you. And in fact you lived two lives, Lalla. Both of them lavish. You were Occitan, from Demonte. Your father was a municipal geometer with the soul of an artist. He was a skilled painter and photographer. Your maternal uncle was Giuseppe Peano, the great mathematical logician. Life, since childhood, provided you with all the people who would always know how to guide your passions, over the years. But it is not enough to meet the right people. You also had a talent for recognizing them.

Lionello Venturi was your mentor of taste in the university years, in Turin. He sent you to Felice Casorati, master of art. You became an engaged painter, under his watchful eye. This was your first life, made of art, painting, exhibitions, events. And trips to Paris, to update your pictorial language, where you met Venturi, defector from the regime, one of the 12 in the entire national academic world (1200 in its ranks) who refused to swear allegiance to the Fascist Party, opting for exile. With such examples of dignity, it came naturally to you to enter the Resistance, in the movement Giustizia e Libertà.

You knew how to recognize the human qualities of those who crossed your path. You loved Innocenzo Monti, a simple bank clerk, and married him in 1932. In those years Raffaele Mattioli, “the humanist banker,” decided to cultivate his intelligence and his abilities. Cenzo, as you called him, made great strides, even becoming President of Banca Commerciale Italiana.

You designed the furnishings for your home (Casorati wanted his students to be artisans as well as artists), while Cenzo saw to finding the carpenter to make them. Piero, your only son, was born, and Turin became your city.

Writing was still a private, almost secret activity for you. Ardengo Soffici invited you to Forte dei Marmi, where you went to paint. It was there, amidst the table of a cafe, that you met Eugenio Montale. He was intrigued by the fact that he'd been recognized. He certainly didn't feel like a celebrity. He asked you to read him your poems. You brought them, longhand, the fair copies, in a circumstantial envelope, but the door to the hotel room was opened by Alberto Moravia. You were always much amused, recalling that episode in later years.

Montale penciled notes on your papers, and he liked your verses. He may have been your first official reader. He remained attached to you throughout his life. You thus began to write about art exhibitions in Turin for him. As a painter, though perhaps you were already a writer. A poet, to be precise. Who in 1941 published her first anthology, *Fiore*, with Frassinelli. You gave a copy to Giulio Einaudi, with a prickly dedication: “to he who did not want to print this book.” That was how your friendship began, Lalla. Einaudi was your publisher, for a lifetime.

You were always very direct. A strong, forceful character. “Since I am not powerful, I am aggressive.” You had to defend yourself. You knew that being a woman – and a beautiful one as well – could be an obstacle in the little world of Italian culture. But you had writer friends like Cesare Pavese, your classmate in Turin, who asked you to translate the *Trois contes* of Gustave Flaubert for Einaudi in 1944. This too is a way of becoming a writer. By chance. Working as a translator removed your last doubts about the novel format,



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which you had seen as a kind of entertainment for young bourgeois ladies. Who were so different from you. You were an artist. “I was indebted to Flaubert – you remarked years later – for my passage from painting to fiction. For me, *A Simple Heart* was decisive, the end of my prejudice against the novel.”

There was Flaubert, and there was the war. They bombed your house in Turin. You stayed in Cuneo. Your first life was packed away in dozens and dozens of trunks. You opened them up again in Milan, in 1947, when with Piero you were reunited with Cenzo. Montale reached the city the next year, settling on Via Bigli. You would never move away from Milan, after that.

Your second life began. Cenzo found the home best suited to your lives: in the heart of the city, the artists’ quarter, but secluded. It was Brera and at the same time it wasn’t. The building, hidden in a courtyard, could not even be glimpsed from the street. It was built with the rubble from the bombing, new, like your relationship with the city. You were Milanese in your own way. As Savoyards.

Elio Vittorini acted as a bridge between Turin and your new city. He had just begun a publishing series, *I gettoni*, for Einaudi. The first book was by Franco Lucentini. The second was your *Metamorfosi*. You began to weave a new world of relationships. But no whirl of society. Just places in the city in which to meet, to swap ideas and enthusiasms.

When you went out, you walked to Piazza della Scala where you waited for Cenzo to emerge from Comit, perhaps with Sergio Solmi, director of the legal division at the time. Then you headed for Piazza Meda, at the Blue Bar, for coffee. You would often run into Enzo Paci, an acquaintance from your university years, or Vittorio Sereni. Gillo Dorfles or Eugenio Montale. With Montale, who had become the music critic for *Il Corriere della Sera*, you often went arm in arm to opening nights at La Scala. If it wasn’t the Blue Bar, it was the Einaudi bookshop on Via Manzoni, where Vando Androvandi played host to you or to Vittorini, with whom he had founded the Casa della Cultura, or Leonardo Sciascia, when he dropped by the city for a visit. Later in life, you often went to see Ernesto Treccani, in his “Casa delle rondini” on Via Carlo Porta. You shared a love of art and memories of the partisan struggle.

You had a childish name. You were Lalla for friends, but Graziella Monti for your students at the Arconati middle school, until your retirement from teaching in 1959. After arriving in Milan you never gripped a paintbrush again, never touched a canvas. But you wrote tirelessly, year after year, with painstaking rigor. You laid bare your existence, with perseverance, without excuses. You lived in order to tell about it. Writing was simply your way of being.

You despised the “tedious” conflict between the “I who writes” and the “I who lives.” What was the difference? You narrated your life, but you never wrote an autobiography. Memory was a tool of art; your writings were not diaries. After all, Marcel Proust had made you understand that. Discovering him was an epiphany, a frustration, almost. “I devoured *Combray* with the anguishing sensation that Proust had already written my book.”

*Maria*, or *La penombra che abbiamo attraversato*, were not neo-realist novels, but Proustian. For you, memory was creative freedom. Life, in the end, was unreachable, impossible to narrate. It was neces-



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sary to know how to choose, to select. To seek the universal in the particular, where everyone could see themselves. “For me, writing has always meant gathering some image from the dense, complex fabric of life, some note from the noise of the world, to then surround it with silence.” This was the meaning of the white spaces on the pages: like frames that enclosed the images of your narrations.

You always had a physical relationship with writing. A legacy of your past as a painter. You always wrote every first draft by hand: the pen was the brush, the page the canvas. The table in the living room was heaped with papers until the last day of your life. Dining at home implied constant movement and re-ordering of papers.

Cenzo’s patience was his way of loving you. Your home was never a place of official dinners, as might have been expected due to his managerial position. For working lunches, you preferred to meet publishers and colleagues at the Rigolo restaurant on Largo Treves. You would appear there with your particular, understated elegance. The only affectation was the hat. You had a remarkable collection of headwear. It might have seemed like an artist’s mannerism, though for you the hats were just practical objects, since you got headaches at the slightest puff of wind.

The Strega prize in 1969 for *Le parole tra noi leggere* (a line stolen from your friend Montale) brought joy and sadness. Piero wasn’t pleased to be the central focus of your story. Yet how many women, how many readers, came to see you, to ask for advice! You thought of yourself as a failed mother, you didn’t understand how you could help those unfamiliar friends. But you never refused a meeting, an appointment, on equal ground.

You felt lonely, after Cenzo passed, with Piero far away, in your “burrow” on Via Brera. In those years you met Antonio Ria. A meeting of solitudes. Can we say it was a new life, Lalla? The third one. The last. His devotion and his curiosity have allowed us to rediscover your past. He was the one who found all your paintings, piled under the bed or shut away in dusty steamer trunks. You were reborn, again, as a painter. The walls of your home displayed the paintings of your youth. The students at the art academy, right across the street, began to pay you visits. Sometimes just stopping for a cigarette by the gate of your house, near that little garden you loved so much for its blossoming cherry trees, which the city of Milan named for you after your death.

You lived a lot, Lalla. You knew it. You were grateful for Antonio’s attentions, but you suffered for your eyesight, which was gradually fading. To live without being able to draw or to write was like death for you. Antonio gave you enormous white sheets of paper, on which to note down, by hand, in the absolute whiteness of your blindness, your last thoughts. You were not worried about being forgotten; you were more concerned that your works should go on living, after you. Today your work table, the one you designed in your first life, together with your library, your papers and your paintings, adorn a room at the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense. The “Lalla Romano” room. Savoyard Milanese. Painter of silences.

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