

Anna Maria Ortese

**EVENING
DESCENDS UPON
THE HILLS**

Stories from Naples

Translated by Ann
Goldstein and Jenny
McPhee

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Outlook poor

VILMA DE GASPERIN

“Cara Anna Maria” – wrote Italo Calvino on May 21, 1953 – “in a few days you’ll receive the proofs of your book. Be happy: you have written a wonderful book, you should laugh and sing all day long, for a whole year at least!” Calvino’s verdict was right, of course. *Evening Descends Upon the Hills* (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, 1953; published in the US as *Neapolitan Chronicles*) is one of the most startling depictions of human suffering in the extreme conditions of shattered post-war Naples: a masterpiece of documentary realism coupled with vertiginous psychological exploration.

Calvino's fellow novelist Elio Vittorini had invited Anna Maria Ortese (1914–98) to publish her Neapolitan stories with Einaudi after reading her prize-winning articles in the magazine *Il Mondo*. Set in a specific time and place (Naples 1945–53), *Evening Descends Upon the Hills* resonates with the Neapolitan stories of Matilde Serao (1856–1927), the social and psychological paralysis that envelops Joyce's *Dubliners*, and has inspired Elena Ferrante, who declared: "As for Naples, today I feel drawn above all to Anna Maria Ortese".

The ability, inability and unwillingness to see is the unifying leitmotif of the collection, heralded by the celebrated opening story "A Pair of Eyeglasses" (frequently anthologized, made into a theatrical monologue, and turned into a short film by Carlo Damasco in 2001). The name of the protagonist, Eugenia Quaglia, recalls Eugénie Lalande in "The Spectacles" by Edgar Allan Poe, who was an influential model for Ortese's short fiction, alongside Herman Melville and Katherine Mansfield. Eugenia is an almost blind schoolgirl, living with her family in a damp *basso*, a street-level "cave" with no windows, covered in cobwebs and crawling with cockroaches. Like her older sisters who "were with the nuns, and

would soon take the veil, having been persuaded that this life is a punishment”, Eugenia “had long been unconsciously prepared for a life without joy”. Yet, in the midst of misery, she briefly experiences uncontainable joy at the prospect of receiving a new pair of glasses, misguidedly believing that “the world outside was beautiful”. But as her Aunt gloomily forewarns her, “it’s better not to see the world than to see it”, anticipating her appalling reality.

The sight/blindness motif runs throughout the book. Thirty-nine-year-old Anastasia in “Family Interior” is “like someone who for the first time sees a wretched and silent town, and is told that she has been living there, thinking that she has been seeing palaces and gardens”, whereas in “The Silence of Reason” the once progressive writer Luigi Compagnone is “repulsed by the sight of people who appeared while he was sitting at his desk . . . filthy faces from nearby Mergellina”. The literary reportages “Oro a Forcella” and “The Involuntary City” force readers to open their eyes, in a cinematic narrative style that zooms in on poverty-stricken individuals with disconcerting detail. Through the stark metaphor of sight and vision in Naples, these self-contained pieces merge into a lyrical whole about the trauma and moral duty of

seeing, and the dire consequences of refusing to acknowledge the suffering of the marginalized.

Ortese herself was marginalized. From a financially straitened background, she received little formal education, and as an uncompromising self-taught writer whose work was ahead of her time, she was not fully appreciated until late and was never a mainstream author. But the breadth of the literary background that seeps into her work is astounding: English literature (Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens), American literature (Dickinson, Hawthorne), Spanish literature (she quotes *Cantar de mio Cid*, Góngora, Unamuno, Quevedo, Manrique, Villalón), as well as Dante, Leopardi and Manzoni from the Italian tradition. She experimented with a variety of genres, from autobiographical fiction to realism, from journalism to fantasy. Her translated work in English comprises *The Bay is Not Naples* (1955, a selection of her Neapolitan stories including those in *Il mare non bagna Napoli*); the novels *The Iguana* (1987; *L'Iguana*, 1965) and the bestseller *The Lament of the Linnet* (1997; *Il cardillo addolorato*, 1993); and *A Music Behind the Wall* (1998), a selection of short stories published between 1937 and 1998. Abroad, Ortese is now taught at universities in the UK and

other European countries. In spite of her considerable literary production (six novels, several volumes of short stories, and poetry), and being awarded prestigious literary prizes, she spent a lifetime in poverty and loneliness, gaining public acclaim only towards the end of her career.

Ortese's writing is challenging. Not in terms of her vocabulary, with its rich imagery and startling similes and metaphors, or her complex syntax, sinuously delving into human nature, or her seamless shifting from visible reality to memories and imagined scenes. Her writing is challenging on account of its density, its capacity to surprise and bewilder the imagination. In spite of such complexity, *Evening Descends Upon the Hills* brilliantly captures her powerful visions of Naples in exquisite English.

This translation is a “profoundly collaborative act” between Ann Goldstein (the acclaimed translator of Giacomo Leopardi, Primo Levi, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Elena Ferrante) and the writer-translator Jenny McPhee. Based on the fifth edition by Adelphi (1994), *Evening Descends Upon the Hills* includes the illuminating preface and afterword in which

Ortese views her book retrospectively, wondering whether “*Evening* really was ‘anti-Naples’”; this was the Neapolitan intellectual elite’s accusation, and it caused her to leave her city permanently. The text provides the reader with a fine “Translators’ Introduction” and useful footnotes, particularly in the chapter that portrays real-life characters. It might help to clarify one obscure reference. GUF (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, translated as Fascist University Group and Fascist Student Centre), was a cultural youth organization set up by the regime, in which clandestine anti-fascism cells developed from the late 1930s onwards. This explains the otherwise baffling fact that communist writers such as Luigi Compagnone and Antonio Ghirelli began their work as journalists and political activists within a Fascist organization.

From childhood deprivation to adult apathy, *Evening Descends Upon the Hills* is a literary gem that reaches beyond post-war Naples to explore timeless human struggles and the ethical responsibility of opening one’s eyes.