

PAOLA LEVI-MONTALCINI

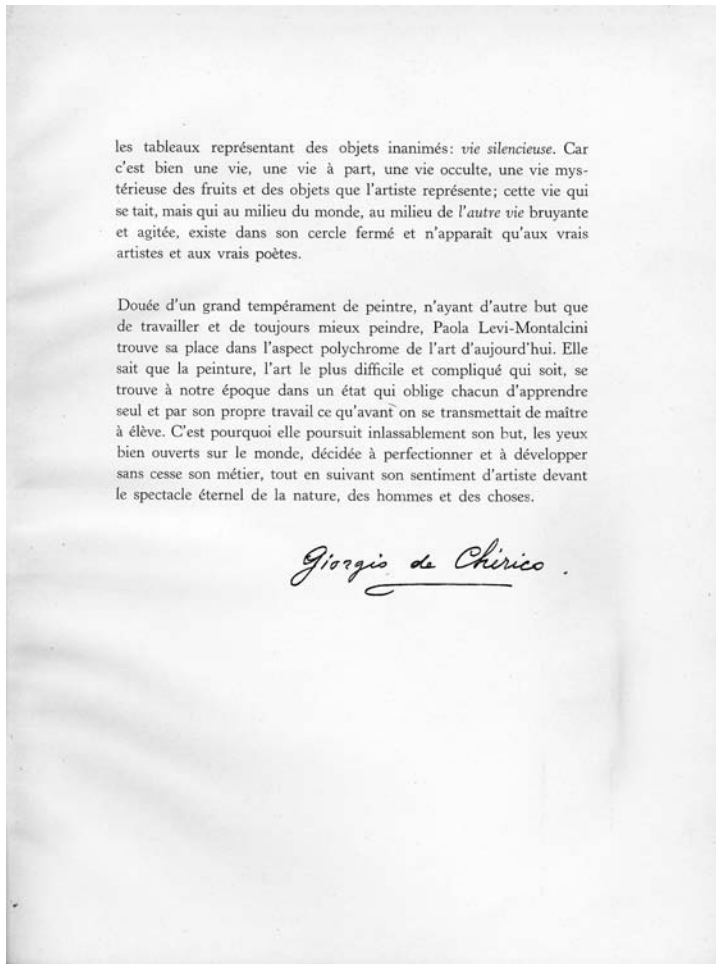
*Giorgio de Chirico**

Paola Levi-Montalcini is from Turin. It is in this monarchic city, abundant and consistent, that she has lived and worked in until today. Turin is a very curious city which international aestheticism has yet to list amongst the wonders of *beautiful Italy*. The foreigner, who is head-over-heels in love with the aesthetic culture for a short while, and who is all set to visit the country where the orange blossoms via road, rail or sea, has other destinations: Venice, Florence and those little towns of Umbria and Tuscany, meccas for lovers of primitivism, purity and spirituality. And yet Turin is the most profound, most enigmatic, most disquieting city not only in Italy but in the entire world. The man who was the first to discover Turin's hermetic beauty was the German poet-philosopher of Polish origin: Friedrich Nietzsche. He was the first to feel the infinite poetry which emanates from this peaceful and ordered city, built on a plain adorned by gentle hills, romantic parks, castles and solemn buildings. It extends along the two banks of a river that flows slowly, now grey, now blue, as the life of the world and men flows. It was Nietzsche who was the first to discover the enigma of those straight roads, placed side by side upright houses with porticoes underneath them. Even with rainy weather, one can walk peacefully with one's friends, discussing art, philosophy and poetry, sheltered as much from the water of the sky as from the blazing sun rays during the summer. Turin is the city of street-walking friendships. It is there that those very pure kinds of friendship hide, those platonic friendships, which fill the heart with an immaculate joy. They give us a premise of eternity of which one can find an echo of in the melodies of Chopin and the painting of Paolo Veronese. The beauty of Turin is difficult to catch sight of; so difficult in fact that beyond Nietzsche and myself, I do not know anyone who has worried about it so far. I suspect Count Gobineau would have foreseen something in this mysterious affair, but

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unfortunately I do not possess sufficient evidence in order to affirm it. The beauty of Turin shows itself only a little at a time, like a good and honest Gorgon who knows how much it costs to those who have the misfortune to see its face entirely and suddenly. It is, in fact, a beauty that can be fatal in some cases. It is this which happened to Friedrich Nietzsche. Already weakened by a life of violent emotions caused from his metaphysical discoveries and his intellectual adventures as a thinker, he could not resist the total contemplation of Turinese beauty for long and plunged into insanity during one of the autumns in which the long shadows, the tranquillity of the sky, all that atmosphere of happiness and convalescence given off from nature after the criminal forces of spring and the tiring fevers of summer, carry the hidden beauty of Turin to its highest level of expression. At that moment, the whole population of statues in marble or bronze, the great men, who are immobile throughout the year above their low plinths in the middle of the continual coming and going of vehicles and pedestrians, anxiously descend from their pedestals. After having stretched their limbs, they prudently walk towards that famous Castle piazza square (Piazza Castello) where their mysterious secret meetings take place. They gather there in order to sing in chorus, under the very pure autumn sky, the ineffable hymn of eternal loyalty and eternal friendship. One sees Lagrange there, the pensive scientist who leans against the robust arm of Colonel Missori, with the *grogna* moustaches, and who, during a battle against the Austrians, saved Garibaldi's life, shielding him with his body and killing three enemy cavalymen with his long protruding-capped pistol, loaded with cartridges. One sees the same Garibaldi there, the fearless soldier, the bearded lion with the eyes of a sentimental young girl, listening to Giuseppe Verdi who tells him with a low voice cracked with emotion, how he composed that famous romance in which the baritone sings ...*the flash of your smile*...in the second act of *Troubadour* (Trovatore). One sees King Vittorio Emanuele II there, all in bronze, covered in ribbons, cords, crosses and decorations, even in bronze, discussing strategies with Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy, leaning upon the hilt of his long sword. And everywhere around, in all the city, is silence, happiness and meditation. The Wallace fountains, in the public piazza squares, let fresh and clear water run. On the station facades, the hands of the clocks mark the two afternoons. The locomotives rest and above the roofs of the public buildings and great bazaars, flags of soft and blazing colours, sweetly flap to fresh breaths (of air) which come from down below, from the bottom of the plain, from those Alps which, far beyond the line of the clear horizon, they are seen with

their forever snow-capped peaks. Turin lives under the sign of the Bull (Toro). The first inhabitants had a bull as their emblem. They were known as the *Taurini*, the Little Bulls (*Taurinorum Gens*), hence Turin. Now, everyone knows that the Bull is one of the four most enigmatic animals of creation. The other three are the donkey, the cock and the hen. All four of these animals are profoundly anthropomorphic. It is not for nothing that in Greek mythology a man with the head of a bull is placed to guard the most mysterious construction found within the mythical world.



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Belonging to this solid and ineffably poetic environment, the painting of Paola Levi-Montalcini appears like this, bare of every feminine weakness, every ability and every superficiality.

Having entered into Felice Casorati's school, her talent developed under

the guidance of this painter who revealed many things about the vast and complicated world of painting to her. The monumental aspect haunts her in every painting; she constructs her work from the foundations, which she wants to be solid and resistant to telluric jolts. She then raises the walls, leaving the necessary space for the openings in which the air can circulate and for which one can catch sight of the blue sky and white clouds. She finally finishes the work with the roof. One can see this pre-occupation of *covering the performance* which it represents with forms and colours, both in the figure (painting) and still-lives and landscapes. Look at that beautiful piece of nude (painting) which is entitled: *Fallen asleep* (Addormentata). All of the mystery of the room, the closed place, where the lying-down woman rests, gravitates in the light and shadows; one does not see the ceiling but *it is present*. The body's volume is rendered with force by means of the light which falls from up high. It is also like this with the landscape: *Trees* (Alberi), the terrain and the sky make up the part of the floor and ceiling of a room. This gives the trees a ghost-like appearance and creates the *performance*. In fact, every painting must give the sense of a performance. This way in which Paola Levi-Montalcini sets up the figures, objects, trees, the houses like actors, accessories, scenery-sets on a theatre stage, increases the realistic and poetic aspect of that which she paints enormously. In the landscape *Trees* (Alberi), the impression which one gets is not decorative but constructive. In the foreground, on the right, the wavy trunks rise up like Caryatids and climb up with their leafy branches towards the ceiling of the sky. This places the quality of the performance at the right place and makes it stand out, which present the other trees further away on the left, and those which rise in the background present. In the landscape *Hill* (Collina), dated 1936, the steady and correct brushstrokes powerfully model the terrain which rises until the line which touches the sky, that sky which is not caught sight of as a reduced strip but instead lends much poetry to the painting. (This occurs) since the imagination of the spectator works and makes it think of that which might be behind it, that which one would see from the top of that hill (which perhaps conceals plains and valleys where one finds towns full of towers and buildings), factories with smoking chimney tops, ports where slow sailing ships and big steamships arrive which have travelled the oceans from faraway lands. This landscape, one of the young artist's most suggestive, recalls *Pyrenees Landscape* (Eaux-Bonnes) by Eugenio Delacroix, which belongs to the Duke of Treviso's collection, for its poetic aspect as well as for the energy of its execution.

At times, as with the landscape *Small Wood* (Piccolo Bosco) (1934), it is the mystery of the tree trunks that Paola Levi-Montalcini has wanted to express; the labyrinth of the woods, all that aspect concerning the *inside of free nature*. The trunk, the origin of the column and the origin of every type of human architecture, is rendered in a simple, strong and improved way with cast shadows which the trunks light up from right to left, and project onto the ground. In the lower right-hand corner, on the ground, the shadow of the trees which is found outside the depicted performance, intensifies the metaphysical appearance of the painting. In other landscapes such as *The Olive Trees* (Gli Ulivi), dated 1936, it is the movement of ascent which creates the poetic motif of the painting; the wavy trunks, the leafy branches, everything rises up like heavy rivers, like those elongated figures and tormented lands of Greco.

The colour of the landscapes is also very characteristic. The browns predominate but they are full of infinite shading which give a profound sense and highly suggestive appearance to the painting; they are reddish browns, blue browns, grey browns, and purple browns. It is the dry nature of the Tuscan Coasts which have something of terracotta. They are those maritime pine trees (with leafy branches that are of a more brown than green colour), those warm terrains which make one think of the wisdom and sobriety of very ancient populations. In fact, life emigrates towards the more humid, greener and fertile regions: Lombardy, Piedmonte, Normandy, the island of France; but there, where the sun is implacable, the earth speaks of more ancient things and a solemn and religious soil passes over nature. The same browns, the same cooked and soothing colours are found in immortal Greece and Provence, the cradles of narrators and poets.

When Paola Levi-Montalcini depicts a human figure, especially in portraits, it is always the ghost-like appearance that she attempts for; perhaps she does not search for it, perhaps she does not even think about it, but she ends up expressing it the same, without her knowledge. It is this ghost-like appearance which one finds in old photographs, in the first daguerreotypes, which today's photographers, with their aesthetic complications, have, alas, completely destroyed.

Look at *Portrait of a Painter* (Ritratto d'una pittrice), which recalls certain paintings by Corot depicting Italian women, with the chiaroscuro and the way in which the figure is placed on the canvas. The same ghost-like appearance can be seen in *Portrait of Girl* (Ritratto di ragazza), dated 1938; but there the brushstroke is more agile and the light is more diffused, as is also a certain elegance of modelling, recall the Spanish masters.

In *Head of Old Woman* (Testa di vecchia) (1934), apart from the highly pictorial quality, one is struck by the way with which that sad and resigned aspect which the old woman gives off to other human beings is rendered, forcing them to bend their body to the ground and think beyond memories.

When one looks at the still-lives of Paola Levi-Montalcini, one thinks of that other word which in German and English defines paintings that depict inanimate objects: *still-lives* (vita silente). After all it is a life, a separate life, a secret life, a mysterious life of the fruits and objects, that the artist depicts - that life which touches, but that which in the middle of the world, in the middle of the *other life*, that noisy and agitated life, *exists* within its closed circle, appearing only to true artists and true poets.

Endowed with a great pictorial temperament, not having any other goal than to always work and paint better, Paola Levi-Montalcini finds her place in the polychrome appearance of today's art. She knows that painting, the most difficult and complicated art form that there is, finds itself, in our day and age, in a state which forces each one to learn on their own and with his own work, which once passed on from master to pupil.

It is for this that she tirelessly follows her goal, with eyes opened wide to the world, determined to ceaselessly perfect and develop her craft whilst following, at the same time, her artistic sentiment before the eternal performance of nature, men and things.

Translated by Victoria Noel-Johnson