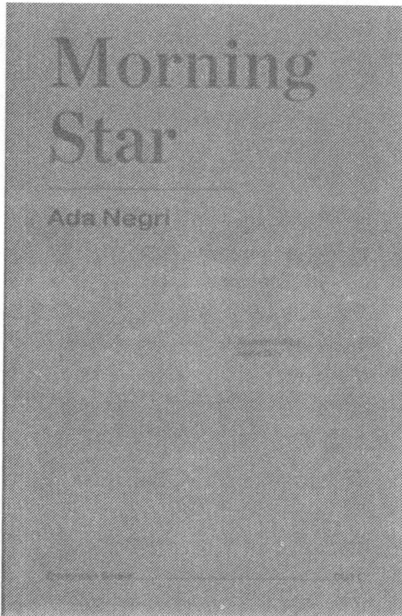
MORNING STAR

Ada Negri
Translated by Anne Day
Sublunary Editions ($12)



The poet Ada Negri (1870–1945), a garment factory worker's daughter and a schoolteacher by profession, married a captain of industry, then left him to travel up and down the Italian peninsula on a lifelong journey during which she stopped off at Laglio on Lake Como and wrote an autobiographical novella called *Stella matutina*, published in Italy in 1921. This new edition resets a 1930 translation by Anne Day, and—along with recent English versions of Negri's poetry and journalism—signals a renewal of interest among Anglophone readers in a writer who embodies the contradictions of her time and place.

Negri's Italy is not a prison but a garden. Dinin, the child protagonist, gets her earliest intimations of the cosmos from a garden at the lodge kept by her maternal grandmother, becoming known (ironically) as "Princess of Poverty in the Garden of Time." When she leaves home for a teacher training course, her favorite teacher, a man with "the face of an ancient leader, outlined on stone with blows of an ax," bids her farewell in his garden. The importance of the garden is prevalent in Negri's works. In the poem "In the Gardens of Silence" from 1919's *The Book of Mara* (translated by Maria A. Costantini and published by Italica Press in 2010), Negri turns Dinin's teacher into an image of the Savior: "In the gardens of silence / where you are, calm and alone, apart, / I shall deliver to you one night / my poor faithful soul." In the 1923 article "A Castle Made of Roses" from *Le Strade*, a 1926 collection translated and self-published in 2013 by Erica I. Walch, Negri writes:

> The architecture of the garden, like that of the castle, showed the same obsession with lines. Not a withered stem, dead leaf, or crooked shoot could be found. Everything obeyed the same rhythm, everything was neat, clean, healthy, perfect.

For Dinin, as for Negri, the garden, the poem, is a sanctuary.

As the story develops, Dinin undergoes a spiritual and ethical awakening. She loves her teacher because of his daily classroom ritual known as Dante Hour. She also loves the "vast intrigues" of Dumas *père* and the "fouler odors" of Zola, but "the unshaken and prodigious serenity of Leopardi" affects her the most. In an illustrative passage, Negri depicts the fleeting sympathy of mother and daughter by harmonizing their voices in an imaginary duet:

> To the songs of Vittoria the artisan, breathed out when the looms rested, down at the factory, there answered from the small rooms over the palace gardens on Via Roma the songs of Homer.

Newly conscious of beauty, Dinin becomes "sick with a painful malady of the soul, which will make her different from the girls of her own age." She writes a poem that romanticizes an industrial accident that injured her mother, then rereads it and sees that "in her fury she has allowed herself to be led astray into a disfigurement of the truth and it humiliates her." Dinin discovers in herself "the sense of eternity, birth abolished, death abolished," and asks "whether, at a certain degree of intensity, suffering and joy may not be the same thing." She later wonders, "Does she perhaps love things better than people?" This generalized summation of Dinin's progress lends the story its brisk pace, but its paucity of detail and incident keeps the reader from getting to know her better, and from traveling closer by her side.

The most affecting passages in *Morning Star* describe Dinin's relationships with family members. The young woman can't separate her feelings from the knowledge that the bosses are exploiting her mother; "They are robbing her," Dinin thinks. The child begins to gain independence from the parent, asking, "Have you not perhaps given me too much of yourself, mother?" When her mother rebuffs a suitor, "the girl gazes at the little woman beside her with profound astonishment, and she no longer seems to be her mother. Simply a woman." Yet it is Dinin's account of her older brother, a boy "of a girlish beauty," which provides the central drama of *Morning Star*. Given up to an orphanage after his father's death by a mother who "did not think that in this way she was forsaking her son," Nani enters Dinin's life at fifteen, when "the delicacy of his features is almost excessive." As his marriage fails, he slowly destroys himself, and Dinin's portrait is devastating:

> Not gifted enough to become an artist, not dull enough to stay on the tracks of some wretched employment at ninety lire a month, not enough of a wandering cur to abandon himself entirely to the nightlife of the slums.
>
> Uneasy everywhere. Always unsatisfied. Without an enemy because too inoffensive in his unprotected vacuity. Without a friend, for the weak have no friends.
>
> Incapable of living but afraid of death.

When Nani falls ill with pleurisy, then consumption, and dies alone at thirty-three, Dinin says, "It is no one's fault, brother." It is the end of her innocence.

In this book we have the Künstlerroman of an Italian poet, translated into a British prose idiom of the second decade of the twentieth century. Biographically speaking, one might say that Negri, born into the industrial urban working classes of Roman Catholic Northern

Italy as the only child of a single mother, has more in common with the collier's son D.H. Lawrence, raised in the Protestant Midlands of England, than she has in common with, say, a female aristocrat *manqué* like Virginia Woolf. Yet her lines are measured, as theirs are not, and in this sense, Negri's technique arguably comes closer to that of early Isherwood than to the Modernists. At times the prose of translator Anne Day waxes circumlocutory and aphoristic, as Isherwood's novels do, albeit for distinct reasons, and to different effect.

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Although Negri's work was remarked upon at the time—in *The North American Review* in 1919, critic Ruth Shepard Phelps noted Negri "has broken through the literary woman's frequent reticence, and has been frank where she might have dressed her emotions prettily in plumes borrowed from man's view of her"—Negri's work faded from notice after World War II. With the reissue of *Morning Star*, the publication of the poetry collections *The Book of Mara* and *Songs of the Island*, and the newspaper columns collected in *Le Strade*, a reappraisal is taking effect. It may be difficult to say how the Fascist loyalty oath Negri was obliged to sign in 1940 as a member of the Academy—she was the first woman to be admitted—should affect our reading of *Morning Star*. But no matter how one might respond, it would be even harder to deny that this little book has, as Negri says of fairy tales, not only "the unequaled charm of truth" but also the "charm of mystical dreaminess"—unlike certain recent global bestsellers that depict working-class Italian life, about which no one asks the question of *complicity* at all.

—Erik Noonan