POETS IN THE CEMETERY:
Amelia Rosselli

A growing number of critics of 20th-century Italian poetry agree that few writers have been as important and original as Amelia Rosselli (1930-1996). She was born in Paris to Marion Cave, an English Labour Party activist, and Carlo Rosselli, leader and founder with his brother Nello of the anti-Fascist movement Giustizia e Libertà. Already familiar with exile, Amelia was soon introduced to tragedy when, in 1937, her father and uncle were murdered by La Cagoule, a French, fascist-leaning, revolutionary group. Moving to England and then to the United States, Rosselli did not live in Italy until 1948. She settled in Rome where, in addition to studies in music, she began to work as a translator.

As often noted, it is precisely this unique, if traumatic, cultural and linguistic inheritance that gives her poetry its charge, complexity, and singularity. It is, says one of her most recent English-language translators, Jennifer Scappettone, “arguably the poetry most vital to evolving understandings of global modernism and postmodernism to have emerged from postwar Italy”. Rosselli’s book and journal publications in the 1960s and 1970s won the respect of writers such as Andrea Zanzotto and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Yet, in the following decades up until her death, with the exception of anthologies and earlier writings that she had not published, her poetic output effectively ceased. Plagued throughout her adult life by greater and lesser episodes of mental illness and hospitalization, at the age of only 66, Amelia Rosselli sadly ended her life. Her grave lies at Zona 2.8.8.

In Via del Corallo, near the Chiesa Nuova in central Rome, a memorial plaque gives the closing lines of her last poem Impromptu (translated here by Giuseppe Liborace and Deborah Woodard, with their permission):

And if limping fellow countrymen are these lines it’s because we are ready for another story that we know quite well and which we will promptly forget when the time comes, lost the knack for instantaneous rhyme for when the time was right the rhythm had already winked at you.

Contributed by Alexander Booth, a writer and translator, formerly in Rome and now in Berlin, whose work can be found at Wordkunst.