



Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968)



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Italian poet, critic, and translator, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959. Salvatore Quasimodo's works fall roughly into two periods, divided by World War II. His early poems were difficult with their metaphysical and complex imagery. In later works in his humanistic period he was more concerned with the contemporary history, social conditions, horrors of war, and the problems of human suffering.

"Pietà, ch'io non sia / senza voci e figure
nella memoria un giorno."
(from 'Airone morto')

Salvatore Quasimodo was born in Modica, a small town near Syracuse, Sicily, as the son of a railway officer. He started to write in his childhood. When his parents felt that technical training would be more practical, Quasimodo moved in his teens to Rome, where he studied engineering at the Polytechnical Institute. Because of financial problems, he left the school in 1923 and then held a number of jobs. In 1926 he was appointed to the government Civil Engineering Department. Quasimodo's brother-in-law, Elio Vittorini, who became a novelist, introduced him to the literary circles. Among his friends were [Eugenio Montale](#), Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Alessandro Bonsati.

Quasimodo's earliest poems appeared in magazines. His first collection, *ACQUE E TERRE* (Water and Land), was published in 1930, but it included poems written when he was eighteen. Two of the most famous works in the collection are 'Vento a Tindari' and the three-line 'Ed è subito sera': "Everyone stands alone on the heart of the earth / Transfixed by a sun-ray: / And it is suddenly night." *Water and Land* contained nostalgic poems about Sicily, and reveal moods of loneliness and melancholy. It was followed by *OBOE SOMMERSO* (1932), *ERATO E APOLLION* (1936), and *POESIE*

(1938), in which Quasimodo expression showed influence of symbolism. In 1938 he resigned from his work, and became an assistant to Cesare Zavattini, who was editor of several periodicals. Quasimodo was named in 1941 professor of Italian literature at Milan's Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory.

During WW II Quasimodo was a member of an anti-Fascist group, and was briefly imprisoned. His most widely read book, *ED È SUBITO SERA*, appeared in 1942. After the war in 1945 he joined the Italian Communist party, but resigned in protest, when the party insisted that he should write political poems. *GIORNO DOPO GIORNO* (1947) reflected his country's hardships and his horror at Italy's role in the war. It has been characterized perhaps the best volume of poetry to come out of World War II in any country. With the following collection, *LA VITA NON È SOGNO* (1949), Quasimodo became "rifare l'uomo" (remake man), a poet of engagement – at moments his *poesie sociale* bitterly attacked failures of Christians in front of the hopes given by Communists.

Quasimodo's first wife Bice Donetti died in 1948, and he married the dancer Maria Cumani. They separated permanently in 1960. His daughter Orietta was born out of wedlock in 1935 to Amelia Specialetti. Quasimodo's last four volumes of verse show a continuing concern for social justice, but there are also fond memories of past friends and past loves. His last book of verse was *DARE E AVERE* (1966, To Give and to Have). Quasimodo died suddenly. While presiding over a poetry competition in Amalfi, he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died in Naples, on June 14, 1968.

Recurrent themes in Quasimodo's works are memories of childhood and the life and culture Sicily. He connects his impressions of the landscape to literary associations, and the cultural heritage from Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and other invaders. In the 1930s he became a leader of the 'hermetic' poet with Eugenio Montale (1896–1981) and Giuseppe

Ungaretti (1888–1970), abandoning realism. Hermetic poets were accused of obscurity. They were guided by listening to their own inner voice, and they often used difficult private symbolism. "Poetry, even lyrical poetry, is always 'speech,'" Quasimodo said once. "The listener may be the physical or metaphysical interior of the poet, or a man, or a thousand men." After WW II his poetry dealt largely with social issues, reflecting deep concern of the fate of Italy. In 'Discourse on Poetry' he wrote: "... a poet is a poet when he does not renounce his existence in a given country, at a particular time, defined politically. And poetry is the liberty and truth of that time, and not abstract modulations of sentiment." A modernist but acutely conscious of the tension between tradition and innovation, he wrote many essays on literature and translated classical writers and drama, among them such writers as [William Shakespeare](#), [Molière](#) (Tartuffe), Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, [Virgil](#), Catullus. Quasimodo's light-hearted prose translation of *Romeo and Juliet* from 1949 was performed in Verona. His translations from European and American contemporaries include [e. e. cummings](#) and [Pablo Neruda](#).

For further reading: *Quasimodo* by G. Cambon (1960, in Chelsea 6, pp. 60–67); *Quasimodo* by N. Tedesco (1959); *The Poem Itself*, ed. by S. Burnshaw (1960); *Dialogue With and Audience* by J. Ciardi (1963); *Poetry of This Age* by J.M. Cohen (1966); 'Salvatore Quasimodo' by D. Dutschke, in *Italian Quaterly* 12, 91–103 (1969); *Quasimodo e la critica*, ed. by G. Finzi (1969); *L'isola impareggiabile* by C.M. Bowra (1977); *Concordanza delle poesie di Salvatore Quasimodo* by Giuseppe Savoca (1994); *Quasimodo: Biografia per immagini* by Rosalma Salina Borello (1995); *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, vol. 3, ed. by Steven R. Serafin (1999) – **Huom!:** Quasimodolta on julkaistu suomeksi valikoima *Ja äkkiä on ilta* (1962), suomennoksia on myös mm. antologioissa *Tuhat laulujen vuotta*, toim. Aale Tynni (1973), *Runon suku*, toim. Jarkko Laine (1991) sekä *Maailman runosydän*, toim. Hannu Tarmio, Janne Tarmio (1998)

Forse è segno vero della vita:
intorno a me fanciulli con leggeri
moti del capo danzano in un gionco
di cadenze e di voci lungo il prato
della chiesa. Pietà della sera, ombre
riaccese sopra l'erba così verde,
hellissime nel fuoco della luna!
Memoria vi concede breve sonno;
ora, destatevi. Ecco, scroscia il pozzo
per la prima marea. Questa è l'ora:
non più mia, arsi, remoti simulacri.
(from 'Ride la gazza, nera sugli araci')

Selected works:

- ACQUE E TERRE, 1930
- OBOE SOMMERSO, 1932
- ODORE DI EUCALYPTUS, 1933
- ERATO E APOLLION, 1936
- POESIE, 1938
- LIRICI GRECI, 1940 (a presentation of ancient Greek poetry)
- ED É SUBITO SERA, 1942 - Ja 誌ki?on ilta (suomennos Elli-Kaija K鯁g鏘)
- CON IL PIEDE STRANIERO SOPRA IL CUORE, 1946
- GIORNO DOPO GIORNO, 1947
- LA VITA NON È SOGNO, 1949
- IL FALSO E VERO VERDE, 1956
- LA TERRA IMPAREGGIABILE, 1958
- IL POETA E IL POLITICO, E ALTRI SAGGI, 1960 - The Poet and the Politician, and Other Essays (translated by Thomas G. Bergin and Sergio Pacifici)
- TUTTE LE POESIE, 1960
- The Selected Writings of Salvatore Quasimodo, 1960 (edited and translated by Allen Mandelbaum)
- SCRITTI SUL TEATRO, 1961
- Quasimodo: Selected Poems, 1965 (tr. by Jack Bevan)
- DARE E AVERE, 1966 - To Give and To Have and Other Poems (translated by Edith Farnsworth) / Debit and Credit (translated with an introduction by Jack Bevan)
- POESIE E DISCORSI SULLA POESIA, 1971
- Complete Poems, 1984 (introduced and translated by Jack Bevan)

- TUTTE LE POESIE, 1995
- The Night Fountain: Selected Early Poems, 2008 (tr. by Marco Sonzogni, Gerald Dawe)



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