

DOI: 10.26881/jk.2021.13.08

e-ISSN: 2353-2334

s. 89-98

NOSTALGIA, DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE AS THE CONSEQUENCE OF ACQUIRED AND INHERITED TRAUMA IN AMELIA ROSSELLI'S POETRY

Olga Zasada

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

ORCID: 0000-0002-8789-809X

In one of her many descriptions of poetic motivation included in her literary works and comments, Amelia Rosselli points to difficult life experiences as a factor influencing her artistic creativity. This Italian twentieth-century poetess emphasizes repeatedly the direct impact of her mental well-being as the driving force of her writing process. For this reason, the subject of this article is the minor overtone of her multilingual literary output motivated by difficult experiences in her personal and family life. In terms of interdisciplinarity, I would like to show how the experience of melancholy and nostalgia in Amelia Rosselli's artistic creativity touches upon the psychological, social, historical, cultural, political, and artistic areas. Before providing a more detailed analysis of the most severe trials that form the melancholic expression of Amelia Rosselli's poetry, it is worth introducing the poetess herself.

Amelia Rosselli was an expatriate.⁵² This statement portrays the woman precisely because, as she confessed, she did not feel like belonging to any country and had no motherland with which she could identify. She was born in Paris in 1930, where she lived for her first seven years. Then, she was forced to move first to Switzerland, then the United States, Great Britain, and finally to Italy. All these changes of countries, environments, and the necessity to abandon her current lifestyle and start a new one influence the nature of her poetry. The poetess writes in Italian, French, English, as well as in music notation and also uses Yiddish. A motif of statelessness and repatriation is present in her multilingual literary output, which made Italian literary critics divide her works into thematic categories. Amelia Rosselli's poems are categorized as follows: *Variazioni belliche* (1964)—war, *Serie ospedaliera* (1969)—exile,

⁵² G. Marano, „Ecco che è tempo di risplendere,” <https://criticaitalianablog.wordpress.com/2018/02/19/ecco-che-e-tempo-di-risplendere-la-patria-meridionale-di-amelia-rosselli/> [access: 27.03.2021].

Documento (1966–1973)—repatriation. Amelia Rosselli is mentioned by Vincenzo Mengaldo in the anthology *Poeti italiani del Novecento* as the only woman among the most eminent Italian authors of the 1930s.⁵³ Above all, a melancholy character emanates from her lyric poetry which is closely related to her difficult life experiences. The poetess herself reveals that gloomy flashbacks—together with concepts, experiences and fantasies—influence her artistic expression and structure her literary space:

Interrompevo il poema quando era esaurita la forza psichica e significativa che mi spingeva a scrivere; cioè l'idea o l'esperienza o il ricordo o la fantasia che smuovevano il senso e lo spazio. La realtà è così pesante che la mano si stanca, e nessuna forma la può contenere.⁵⁴

(I interrupted the poem when the psychic and semantic force that drove me to write was exhausted; that is, the concept or experience or memory or fantasy that moved meaning and space. Reality is so heavy that the hand gets tired, and no form can embrace it.)⁵⁵

Factors that had a noticeable impact on her poems and gave them a minor tone include the painful reality of fascist Italy, related to the contract killing of family members, the sudden and untimely death of her beloved and her brother, mental illness in the context of DNA memory, and finally the promise of suicide.

In order to commence a structural analysis of her poetry, it is worth reaching to the very beginning of Amelia Rosselli's life that is closely connected to the relationship with her mother. In the poem “Diario in tre lingue” that makes part of *Primi Scritti*, she uses the epithet “empty mother” which is not related to the subject matter of the entire fragment in which it appears. The few existing biographies of Amelia Rosselli, biographies of her mother Marion Cave, and historical references to the Rosselli family, known for its political activities in Italy, show that Amelia suffered from psychological problems and emotional blindness, according to a definition proposed by Alice Miller who in the study *Saving Your Life* admits:

The reality of childhood will never go away. Even if these parents were suddenly all transformed into angels, the memories of their cruelties, their hatred, their rejection remain as knowledge stored in the bodies of their children. The task devolving on the adult children is to free themselves of those memories, not by forgiving and forgetting, but by accepting the logical response to torture, the experience of rage they have denied themselves for so long. Medication can do nothing to reveal this truth. All it can do is to camouflage it, often for decades, without bringing any genuine relief.⁵⁶

By tracing Marion Cave's history of mental disorders, we can draw some conclusions about the quality of the mother–child relationship at the earliest stage of Amelia's life. On the basis of scientific studies developed and successively published by psychiatrists, it is possible to formulate a hypothesis about the influence of Amelia's mother's depression which began already in infancy and even earlier in the perinatal period, on her later functioning in society. It is known that not only her father was in prison, but also her mother, Marion Cave, who was pregnant with Amelia. This circumstance becomes at the same time a reason motivating

⁵³ P.V. Mengaldo, *Poeti italiani del Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1978), pp. 993–1004.

⁵⁴ G. Spagnoletti (ed.), *Antologia poetica* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), p. 63.

⁵⁵ All translations in this article are made by the author.

⁵⁶ A. Miller, *Saving Your Life* (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), p. 35.

the poet's creative process, especially the choice of specific linguistic means and mournful overtones.

In this case, I would like to refer to an experiment named *Still Face* in which the author of the project, Ed Tronick, demonstrated how a negative reaction is triggered in a several-month-old infant by the mother's lack of interest which is a repercussion of postpartum depression. Postpartum depression occurs as a result of a high concentration of hormones, and, as opposed to standard baby blues, a syndrome called by scientists 'postpartum sadness,' considered a common phenomenon, lasting up to six weeks after parturition—it results in a lack of emotional bonding with the baby. This condition lasts longer than the usual six weeks of baby blues and is characterized by chronic sadness without finding any joy in the new life role. Research also shows that such dysfunction in the baby's relationship with the first person in its life often has serious consequences not only for its later relationship with the mother but also for its relationships with other people. In postwar hospitals, orphaned newborns, whose only contact with another human being was limited to ensuring their nutritional and hygienic needs, died without any medical cause. So far, there have been many scientific studies conducted both on human and animal offspring of various species that confirmed the significant role of eye contact and touch in stimulating oxytocin production. Fascinating results were also achieved by Harry Harlow in an experiment with rhesus monkeys carried out in China and the *Goose Mama* study performed by Konrad Lorenz. Both studies show that the first experiences with mother's help build a child's emotional maturity. Already in the Renaissance, the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro and the Spanish educator Juan Louis Vives emphasized the importance of the mother's behavior through which the child acquires knowledge of the world. Based on these studies and opinions, it can be concluded that Marion Cave's traumatic experiences during her pregnancy with Amelia and her postpartum depression had considerable influence on her daughter's sensitivity. The early childhood events could have affected her later relationship with her mother. The consequence of these circumstances was Amelia's emotional state, which was the driving force behind the mechanism of her melancholic poetic creation.

The reflection of the problems in Rosselli's initial mother-daughter relationship is not only the expression "empty mother" but also the phrase "difetto di gioventù e di femminilità" that means "defect of youth and femininity"—both used in the same work. This phrase directs our attention to the impact of the relationship with her mother on Amelia's perception of herself as a woman. Adrienne Rich, American poetess and radical feminist, despite her strong criticism of institutionalized motherhood, emphasizes that the relationship with the mother is a fundamental element in shaping beliefs and attitudes. Both the phrase in which the poetess attributes negative qualities to her youth and womanhood, and the previously quoted epithet, like keywords, lead us through her poetry to the story of a woman who bears the lasting imprint of the imperfections of maternal intimacy during her life.

In the analysis of the poetess's morose temper, it is worth considering the impact of experiences that occurred before conception, in the context of DNA generation memory, and during Amelia's prenatal life. As previously mentioned, there are historical reports according to which Marion Cave was pregnant in prison. During this period, she was separated from her husband, who was also imprisoned. In these circumstances, it is worth reflecting not only on the physical discomfort, but more importantly on the dual stresses of her own situation and fear for the fate of her politically repressed husband. The results of American tests conducted using specialized equipment wired to pregnant women confirm that the mother transmits her thoughts to her unborn child. Nikki Bradford, in his book *The Miraculous World of Your Un-*

born Baby, cites evidence of telepathic communication between mother and child during the prenatal period⁵⁷. It turns out that not only stress is passed on to the child, but also the events preceding the child's birth, even those that the family did not mention. This hypothesis was reinforced by the results of psychoanalytic sessions during which patients' family stories were analyzed. The phenomenon of gene memory, known also as post-memory, going far beyond the memory of an individual, also called inherited memory or memory of the second generation, is a term proposed by Marianna Hirsch. The case of the so-called witnesses-heirs can be found in the stories of children from traumatized families. So far, it has been argued that the concept of post-memory can only be associated with collective trauma such as the Holocaust. The research cited by Mark Wolynn in the work titled *It didn't Start with You* shows, however, that gene memory can pass on individual trauma to generations. In both cases, children from families experiencing a severe, unspeakable event demonstrated psychosomatic anxiety symptoms such as dyspnea, numbness, and the desire to get out of the chimney depending on the type of misfortune suffered by the previous generation. Both the above study and the experiences described by Anna Janko in the book *A Little Annihilation* allow us to analyze the expressions used by Amelia Rosselli in her poetry in the context of transmission of family trauma. An example that is worth studying is the epithet "inherited family trauma" from the poem "Diario in tre lingue" in the context of Amelia Rosselli's Jewish origins.

Moreover, assessing the melancholic creativity of Amelia Rosselli, it can be noticed that it serves as a process of auto-therapy. In the study *Free from Lies: Discovering Your True Needs* published by the previously mentioned Alice Miller, the author emphasizes the need to free herself from trauma.⁵⁸ Looking at some of the expressions used by the poetess, it can be assumed that Amelia Rosselli attempts to work her psychological problems through writing. The fragments written in four languages (Italian, French, English, and musical notation) offer hints that can be used in the poetess's psycho-emotional analysis. The starting point for such thesis is, for example, the phrases referring to the murder of her father and uncle, Carlo and Nello Rosselli: ZioNel, preceding the fragment: "La terrible légende / descoupés-à mort en 17 pièces" written in "Diario in tre lingue" that in the very form of the diary constitutes an attempt of self-therapy.

Melancholy is fairly a general term expressing a state of permanent sadness. This state is wonderfully depicted in the engraving of the same name by the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. According to reports, Dürer created his work under the influence of his mother's death. The encrypted date of her death was read from the numbers in the magic square.⁵⁹ The concept of nostalgia, on the other hand, is even narrower and refers to a longing for something or someone. It can be a person, place, or period. The term itself comes from Greek and includes the word ἄλγος (*alyos*) meaning pain, suffering, torment, but also sorrow. Constantine Sedikides, the head of the team of psychologists at the University of Southampton working on the phenomenon of nostalgia, admits that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nostalgia was classified as a disease. This condition was accompanied by symptoms such as sobbing, irregular heartbeat, and anorexia. In the twentieth century, it was confirmed that nostalgia is a mental illness accompanied by insomnia, anxiety, and depression. In recent years, scientists have started to address the positive and even therapeutic aspects of this phenomenon. The term nostalgia has therefore acquired a new meaning.

⁵⁷ N. Bradford, *The Miraculous World of Your Unborn Baby* (Surrey: Contemporary Books, 1998), p. 33.

⁵⁸ A. Miller, *Free from Lies: Discovering Your True Needs* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), p. 73.

⁵⁹ M. Bolaños Atienza, *Jak czytać sztukę* (Toruń: Buchmann, 2008), pp. 28–31.

The melancholic nature of Amelia Rosselli's work is enhanced by the element of nostalgia. The poetess's fragile soul was shattered by the loss of important people in her life. In her poems, nostalgia is expressed most by reference to the death of her beloved. Several poems were written in the memory of Rocco Scotellaro, an Italian writer, poet, and politician, struck down by a heart attack when he was only 30 years old. The poetess addresses the man directly in these poems without name, making part of *Primi Scritti*, trying to enter into a dialogue. It is also an attempt to evoke his presence. The fragment "ti presi fra le braccia, morto" ("I took you in the arms, dead") in a nostalgic style takes us to the moment of the man's death. The first part, "Dopo che la luna fu immediatamente calata" ("When the moon immediately fell down"), is a subtle introduction to the event. It shows a tragedy, a breakdown of the previous order in the life of a woman in love. We can find other traces of nostalgia in the poem "Tutto il mondo è vedovo..." ("The whole world is widowed") which belongs to the collection *Variazioni Belliche*. Rocco Scotellaro died in 1953 and the collection was written by Amelia Rosselli in 1960 and 1961 and published in 1964. Evident is the fact that the poetess uses an apostrophe when addressing her beloved:

Tutto il mondo è vedovo se è vero che tu cammini ancora
 tutto il mondo è vedovo se è vero! Tutto il mondo
 è vero se è vero che tu cammini ancora, tutto il
 mondo è vedovo se tu non muori! Tutto il mondo
 è mio se è vero che tu non sei vivo ma solo
 una lanterna per i miei occhi obliqui. Cieca rimasi
 dalla tua nascita e l'importanza del nuovo giorno
 non è che notte per la tua distanza. Cieca sono
 chè tu cammini ancora! Cieca sono che tu cammini
 e il mondo è vedovo e il mondo è cieco se tu cammini
 ancora aggrappato ai mei occhi celestiali.⁶⁰

(The whole world is widowed if it is true that you are still walking
 the whole world is widowed if it's true. The whole world
 is true if it's true that you are still walking, the whole
 world is widowed if you don't die! The whole world
 is mine if it's true that you aren't alive but only
 a lantern for my slanting eyes. I have been blind
 since the day you were born, and the meaning of a new day
 is nothing but night through your distance. I'm blind
 if you are still walking! I'm blind if you are still walking
 and the world is widowed and the world is blind if you are still walking
 attached to my heavenly eyes.)

Although the two artists (Rocco Scotellaro also composed poems) were not married, the woman in love identifies herself with the word *widow*. In this way, she describes in a nostalgic tone the world as seen through her eyes. According to British researchers, nostalgia plays the biggest role in the lives of older people who have lost their life partners. Longing becomes the mechanism used against loneliness. This thesis fits perfectly with the poet's life story of losing her partner, which resulted in the poems we can read today. "Nostalgia is an affliction with a long past, but also with an intriguing future" say the authors of the study carried out at the University of Southampton. They also emphasize a broader understanding of the phenomenon of nostalgia in order to look at the issues of memory, emotionality, and

⁶⁰ P.V. Mengaldo, op. cit., p. 1000.

social relations from a different perspective.

The influence of difficult, unworked life and generational experiences is the *spiritus movens* of Rosselli's use of intimate language. It is described by Italian critics as "lingua del privato"⁶¹ and is characterized by a poem titled "Diario in tre lingue." This poetry results from psychological hesitation and immersion in life and everyday events—maintains Tatiana Bisanti, referring Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo's opinions. Further, the concept of "lingua del privato" is described as a stream of consciousness—an intensely informal narrative style characterized by extremely private themes and linguistic informality. The issue of informal writing was already touched upon by Benedetto Croce, another Italian literary critic of the twentieth century. Then, this feature was assigned to feminine literature. Writing the way someone speaks, talking about feelings, being spontaneous and natural—the critic reserved these attributes for female artists who, in his opinion, are more predisposed to externalize emotions.⁶² The personal literary space, as Amelia Rosselli points out, is also noticeable through the form of the diary in which the piece was composed. The poetess's confession seems to be an invitation to a deeper analysis of the private code:

Moi c'est le monde, les choses qui se passent –
le pouvoir de m'exprimer dans mon langage
inventé. Pas seulement la forme du journal mais
en premier lieu le lexique privés ont les
tentatives d'étendre le propre moi.⁶³

(Me is the world, the things that happen –
the ability to express myself in my invented language
Not just the form of the diary but
in the first place the private vocabulary make
the attempt to express myself.)

If we consider the childhood years that Amelia spent discovering different linguistic codes, we see that in "Diario in tre lingue" she pursues the project of expressing herself in a more natural way, that is, through the freedom of thought. Consequently, Rosselli's linguistic code becomes the characteristic feature of her poetic style. "Diario in tre lingue" which means a diary in three languages, could be defined as a general exercise based on automation, and presented entirely through the use of space on paper. The arrangement of sentences or individual words, their logical connections, continuous returns, punctuation, and rhetorical issues are visible in the untranslatable poem written in three languages at each step:

.....
Generalmente pratico la Ritirata. La Serietà.
les araignées sensibles

ha il tatto di una tartaruga

Esthétique pour le Futur réalisée par des Moyens que trop bien
trop modernes

⁶¹ Ibidem, pp. 993–1004.

⁶² T. Bisanti, *Opera plurilingue di Amelia Rosselli* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2007), pp. 24–26.

⁶³ G. Spagnoletti, op. cit., p. 63.

imparar. Oroscopia
 storia lingue
 German (Grk. Latin texts): problem quantitative rhythm in
 modern languages: Why not?

anche '600
 see piedi term. irraz
 study complexity construction of phrases (Latin, Proust,
 Dante, Lautréamont; also

beginning of) l'heure Chinoise (se forcer d'aller au lit)
⁶⁴

All these elements emphasize the fact that the reader enters an extremely private zone. Within it, the narrator reveals a challenge to organize the mixture of different languages. Indeed, "Diario in tre lingue" takes on the role of a notebook full of notes, forming the foundation of the concepts used in the creation of subsequent works. The work appears as a variation on a word (just like music-related variations, as in the compositions of Frédéric Chopin) and at the same time a daily mental exercise. The lexical variation applied to the field of languages results in a certain action: it starts from a node to later develop the concept and create new variants, where one language explores another. Rosselli admitted: "... why not twist phrases as you wish, why not invent words?"⁶⁵ The author, in fact, in "Diario in tre lingue" makes us note the rules for creating new untranslatable words:

(il n'est pas sorti il n'y a
 pas de sang (fang) dans
 la maison pourpre
 poupine
 poupénue

(the com plete nonsense
 con pleat non sense
 con pleat 9° cence)⁶⁶

In that way, Rosselli's creating process becomes very dynamic and closely psychological and instinctive. The continuous flow of the mind includes motives that return and build her poetic world, as well as enrich and modify her poetic language.⁶⁷ When we analyze Rosselli's other poems composed in the convention of multilingualism, we realize that each of these poems has been expressed through a single linguistic code. We see that the textual structure of "Diario in tre lingue" is an intertwining of French, Italian, and English which are constantly mixed. Being a mixture of many forms of communication, the work cannot be subjected to the process of translation. "Le Chinois à Rome" is a poem composed entirely in French and is one of the ten parts of the collection entitled *Primi Scritti*. In this work, Rosselli offers us a motif characteristic of her poems, in which fragments must coexist, excluding changes also on the linguistic level: "The creative process is a fusion of many not distinguished, not

⁶⁴ A. Rosselli, "Diario in tre lingue", in: *Primi scritti 1952–1963* (Milan: Guanda, 1980), p. 72.

⁶⁵ La Penna 2013: 90).

⁶⁶ A. Rosselli, op. cit., p. 80.

⁶⁷ T. Bisanti, op. cit., p. 10.

separable elements: do not let your imagination go astray.”⁶⁸ The expression “many elements” suggests the use of numerous communication systems, which, even if Rosselli’s writing is characterized by automaticity, are practiced intentionally and depend on her mental state.

Summing up, Amelia Rosselli’s relationship with Sylvia Plath and an inspiration with the American poetess along with her inclination towards confessional poetry should be mentioned. Given the literary elements linking the two women and the suicides in their own homes, Sylvia Plath may have been an inspiration to Rosselli in her writing and her decision of auto-destruction. Apart from the suicide in severe depression, the dates are also significant. The American poetess committed suicide by gas poisoning on February 11, 1963. Inspired by her work, Amelia jumped from the window of her Roman apartment on February 11, 1996 – the exact thirty-third anniversary of Plath’s death.

⁶⁸ A. Rosselli, “Le Chinois à Rome”, in: *Primi scritti 1952–1963* (Milan: Guanda, 1980), p. 49.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bolaños Atienza María. 2008. *Jak czytać sztukę*. Toruń: Buchmann.
- Bisanti Tatiana. 2007. *Opera plurilingue di Amelia Rosselli*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- Bradford Nikki. 1998. *The Miraculous World of Your Unborn Baby*. Surrey: Contemporary Books.
- Marano Giampiero. 2018. „Ecco che è tempo di risplendere.” Online: <https://criticaitalianablog.wordpress.com/2018/02/19/ecco-che-e-tempo-di-risplendere-la-patria-meridionale-di-amelia-rosselli/>. Accessed March 27, 2021.
- La Penna Daniela. 2013. *La promessa di un semplice linguaggio. Lingua e stile nella poesia di Amelia Rosselli*. Rome: Carocci.
- Mengaldo Pier Vincenzo, ed. 1978. *Poeti italiani del Novecento*. Milan: Mondadori.
- Miller Alice. 2007. *Saving Your Life*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Miller Alice. 2009. *Free from Lies: Discovering Your True Needs*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Rosselli Amelia. 1980. *Diario in tre lingue*. In: *Primi scritti 1952–1963*, 69–115. Milan: Guanda.
- Rosselli Amelia. 1980. *Le Chinois à Rome*. In: *Primi scritti 1952–1963*, 47–54. Milan: Guanda.
- Rosselli Amelia. 1987. *Spazi metrici*. In: Spagnoletti Giacinto, ed. *Antologia poetica*, 75–89. Milan: Garzanti.
- Wolynn Mark. 2016. *It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*. London: Penguin.

SUMMARY

In one of her many poetic motivation descriptions included in her literary works and comments, Amelia Rosselli points to tough-life experience as a factor influencing her artistic creativity. The Italian twentieth-century poet repeatedly emphasizes a direct impact of mental well-being as the driving force of her writing process. A gloomy flashback, hand in hand with a concept, experience, and fantasy, influence the expression of her pieces and structures the literary space. A minor overtone reference to the grievous reality of Fascist Italy connected with the murder-for-hire of family members, sudden and premature death of her sweetheart and brother, mental illness in the context of the DNA memory, and, finally, the promise of suicide had all impacted noticeably upon the verses of her poems. Another thing worth mentioning is the issue of stress and hardships lived through by Amelia Rosselli's mother and her immediate relatives just prior to the poet's birth. According to the latest developments in medicine and cognitive sciences, any psychical damage influences bodily and mental functioning of persons not only directly affected by them, but also their descendants. The linguistic terms applied in the pieces of the Italian poet provoke a discussion of the phenomenon of post-memory. The term, which was proposed by Marianne Hirsch to refer to collective trauma inheritance, has been recently broadened by psychologists to encompass individual memory as well. The fragments written in four language codes (Italian, French, English, and music notation) offer hints to be used in the psycho-emotional analysis of the poet. Additionally, scrutinizing Amelia Rosselli's nostalgic lyrical pieces, we can discern, by referring to psychological sciences, how the composition-making can constitute an auto-psychotherapy procedure. In terms of interdisciplinarity, the experience of melancholy and nostalgia in Amelia Rosselli's artistic creativity covers the psychological, social, historical, cultural, political, and artistic areas.

KEYWORDS

nostalgia, depression, suicide, trauma, Amelia Rosselli