

Franco Buffoni

On Poetry. A Quotation from Laforgue's Hamlet

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Whenever I have to define what *poetry* means to me, I am often reminded of a quotation from Jules Laforgue's *Hamlet*. Hamlet turns to Horatio, his incomparable friend, and asks that Horatio precede him and that he pronounce in his stead, upon entering, those words which he himself is no longer able to utter. Poetry as life-saver, therefore, especially for its creator. Poetry which never tires of repeating, even to the younger ones not yet present, two or three essential things concerning ethics or esthetics which one no longer has the courage, the strength, or the desire to continue pronouncing aloud. Poetry as spokesman for the different stages of the soul in its evolution through the years.

Poetry as privilege. I do not at all believe in the commonplace which portrays poetry as a spontaneous expression brought about by an «inspiration». At most, this could be true for the first line. (As Valéry used to say, the gods can certainly give the first verse; the rest is the work of the burin.) Poetry requires time, patience, skill, and techniques that must be improved and exercised continually. The privilege which I enjoy is being able to dedicate myself to the art of poetry, both as a writer of verse myself and as a professor and translator as well. By profession, therefore, thus maintaining the fundamental faculties of the *poiein* in constant practice.

«It was a matter of rain, of lakes, and of talk in a great, intensely green park», writes Anceschi in relation to the genesis of the so-called «Lombard line» of poetry in the early 1950s. Although bearing in mind the inevitable differences of taste and culture, I acknowledge that vein as an important point of reference for my own formation. Another is the great tradition, of wider geographic scope, which links Pascoli to Gozzano. A third is the comparative study – fundamentally philological and therefore firsthand – of the Romance and Germanic literatures.

My latest book, published by Guanda in 1996, is titled *Suora carmelitana e altri racconti in versi* (Carmelite Sister and Other Tales in Verse), composed of seven tales in verse. My objective in writing it was to use, with the greatest amount of clarity possible, the poetic *language* which I have crafted for myself through the years in order to narrate *tales* in verse. All this without wanting, however, to reject the elegiac component – which is fundamental in

the Lombard line of poetics – or any reconsideration of what, in my opinion, should be the role of myth in contemporary poetry. This is the reason why I shall attempt here to reflect briefly on elegy and myth.

If we ponder the term *elegy*, we realize how we always refer to it in its Latin and subsequently modern sense and not in the Greek sense – therefore not according to the original signification. The exclusive association of the elegy with melancholy and nostalgia is a distortion which, in order to exist, requires the deliberate coining of a modern word like *nostalgia*. Originally, with the Greeks, we know that the autobiographical feature was not at all preeminent (just as there was not an almost synonymous link between the autobiographical and the elegiac or melancholic). The tone and content could vary a great deal; only the prosodic element was essential. I propose, therefore, an elegy with a strong content, even to the point of being dramatic, perhaps autobiographical, but harsh, sarcastic – an elegy capable of absorbing and supporting even my craving for enlightenment.

As far as the term *myth* is concerned, much of what I think about its unconstrained use today in poetry is satisfactorily enclosed in Auden's well-known quatrain: «Lucky the poets of old, for half their work was done for them: / All would applaud when they named places or heroes or gods. / Proper names are *an-sich* poetic, but now there is hardly / One that a poet will dare pen without adding a gloss». Or, if we wish to use the words of a young critic and poet, here is Guido Mazzoni: «It is a phenomenon that, in the manner in which it has manifested itself in Italian culture and poetry over the last fifteen-to-twenty years, has not even reached, in many cases, the level of a false awareness, halting at positions which are situated prior to any possible dialectics: naïve and infantile regressions, rejection of adulthood».¹

But even here, if I consider the matter radically, my instinctive aversion is allayed. Of course, philosophically speaking, between *logos* and *mythos* I have always sided with the former, and from a poetic point of view as well. In the few cases in which it has befallen me, in poetry, to anchor myself openly to the mythological element, I have always felt the need to give justifications, as in the case of «The Pergusa Circuit», a 1987 text not yet included in any of my published collections but which did appear in issue number 53 of the magazine «Tam Tam».

¹ In «Pelagus», 1994, no. 3.

The Pergusa Circuit

Martini acts as brake for the adversaries
And Moreno's advantage is increasing,
In the hour of the sweet motors
Beringed young men of tin
Sound out like daffodils
In the red
The Brazilian has his car well-balanced,
Proserpina like Moreno
Brazilian driver of the sun
Pluto Pluto
Ascends.'²

The «external moment» does not necessarily have to be particular, to the extent of being part of the collective awareness and subsequently of the collective memory; it can also be a detail which usually escapes attention. In the poem «The Pergusa Circuit», for example, a coincidence occurred between the study I was conducting at the time on «The Merchant's Tale» in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (in which Pluto and Proserpina appear, among other characters) and the telecast of a «Formula 3» automobile race (hence the actual names of the drivers Moreno and Martini, who, I believe, have now moved on to «Formula 1» racing). The fact remains that the den from which – according to legend – Pluto emerged to abduct Proserpina is located in Sicily, near Lake Pergusa, a particular lake (particular enough just for the fact that it is a lake in Sicily) that often assumes a red color because of the reflections from its bottom. Exactly like the race drivers' car. *Because the racetrack was built precisely around that lake.* The newscaster said, «... here from Lake Pergusa». I did not immediately understand that the name I had left on the books in my study had followed me into the kitchen between the mineral water and the boiled rice. I continue, therefore, to be suspicious of any thought lacking a logical-scientific basis, whether it be directed toward transubstantiation or toward the mesas of Toledo. I even continue to experience a strong intellectual embarrassment before «believers» (of any kind), and I continue to sustain the need for razors and truisms; and I remain, in any event, on the side of reasonableness versus any offer of

² The original, «Il circuito di Pergusa», reads: «Martini fa da freno agli avversari / E il distacco di Moreno sta aumentando, / Nell'ora dei dolci motori / Inanellati giovanotti di latta / Risuonano come narcisi / Nel rosso / Il brasiliano ha la macchina ben bilanciata, / Proserpina come Moreno / Brasiliano pilota del sole / Plutone Plutone / Sale».

palingenesis (but also versus any rationalism, be it understood), in the conviction – not at all playful – that a couple of calculus courses would do everyone good, above all poets.

However, if I think of the *Edda* and of Saxo Grammaticus, of the Bible as an epic work, of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, of Homer; if I think of myth in its unsubstitutable function as symbolic explanation of the origins of a people, of discoveries, even of the world, then I do not see any contradiction with what I have just stated. On the contrary, I feel that I gain new energy for thinking and creating. *Mythos* as word, discourse, narration, in the sense of Horkheimer and Adorno. So much more earthly and ironlike the closer it is to the stone – and afterward metallic – tool with which the story was chiseled upon a mica schist of the Upper Verbano:

Piero is a town without inhabitants.
The houses leaning against each other
Crumble among mirrored incisions
Of constellations: the Big Bear
As in the age of iron,
Cupel after cupel of fixed stars.
Then upon the sacred boulder sprang up the church
But the edges of the canal of sacrifice remain,
And a nearby cliff
Portrays a tangle of signs,
A sun with its rays
Or a deep sunflower
Turned by the heart at night
Toward the inclined cupels
Filled with wax. Signals of different colors
From one shore to the other
Responding from Ascona to Taino on one flank
To the Cusio and the Ceresio.
And then some sign possession presence
The footprint with the smaller foot inscribed
An oath of the father with his son
In a town with the name today of a man.
And at the first house an omen
The votive sign of a hundred true cupels
Upon a boulder at the entrance.
For the chickens' feed, for the rainwater
The chicks. It seems convinced of it

But do not misunderstand me: nothing is more foreign to me than the Hegelian dimension; so two thousand years are an enormous temporal distance. I cringe at the thought that for Marx the Greeks were a young people. Amid the squalor of the literate and literary eighteenth century, only Leopardi had the intellectual cruelty to penetrate (when he mentions the peoples of Asia – «the Eastern Empires» – and the vastness of their history) within the dimension of the abyss of the scores of millennia of social life that Homo sapiens had behind him before becoming Greek, demonstrating that he had «understood» that it is not the history of a people which is young, but only that of literature, at least as we consider it from the point of view of its appearance on paper. True, it only goes back four thousand years, more or less. The first millennium was very rich, thanks particularly to that youthful tribe of people who were able to liberate themselves from prayer and magic; the second, with its millenarism, with Justinian and his closing of the Academy, was, on the contrary, very poor; the third, from which we derive, has gradually redeemed itself. We can now ask ourselves how the fourth will be. I should greatly desire that it be born under the sign (the logo!) of the first:

Two Greeks are conversing; perhaps Socrates and Parmenides. It is best that one never learns their names; history will thus be more mysterious and more tranquil. The subject of their conversation is abstract. At times they allude to myths in which neither believes. [...] They do not argue. And they desire neither to persuade nor to be persuaded, they think neither to win nor to lose. [...] Free from myth and metaphor, they think or try to think. We shall never know their names. This conversation between two strangers in some unknown place in Greece is the capital event of History. They have forgotten prayer and magic.⁴

³ «Piero è un paese senza abitanti. / Le case appoggiate una sull'altra / Si disfano tra incisioni a specchio / Di costellazioni: la grande orsa / Come all'età del ferro, / Coppella dopo coppella di stelle fisse. / Sul masso sacro poi sorse la chiesa / Ma restano i bordi del canale del sacrificio, / E una rupe vicina / Mostra un intrico di segni, / Un sole coi raggi / O un girasole profondo / Dal cuore rivolto la sera / Alle coppelle in pendenza / Riempite di cera. Segnali a diversi colori / Di sponda in sponda del lago / Da Ascona a Taino coi fianchi a rispondere / Al Cusio e al Ceresio. / E poi qualche segno possesso presenza / L'impronta del piede col piede piu piccolo inscritto / Un giuramento del padre col figlio / In un paese dal nome oggi di uomo. / E alla prima casa un auspicio / Il segno votivo di cento vere coppelle / Su un masso all'entrata. / Per il mangime dei polli, per l'acqua piovana / I pulcini. Ne pare convinto / Il vecchio solo di Piero». Not yet included in any published collection, though it has appeared in the magazine «Trame», 4:8 (1992).

⁴ From J.L. Borges, «Il principio», in *Atlante*. Included in the second volume of *Tutte le opere*, published by Meridiano.

FOUR POEMS

by Franco Buffoni

White, Red, All-in-a-Row

White, red, all-in-a-row,
The toy cars down the shaft...
Summers, my mind dallied
With them in the shade,
In secret, I drove them every day
In the display-windows too...
Finally for Christmas I got six,
three red, three white, all-in-a-row
To drive where I willed
On the balcony, but soon
I forgot them and next Noel
Gave them away
To a real child...

Now over Catania in the sun
Listing in descent to land...
It's as if I touch, toy with them
From up here
White and red amid
Flat roofs, some sycamores,
Two pines, display windows...
At the third pitch, suddenly
Soaring again...
I give these away too
Forgot them
I'm big, play no more –
If only I could wish...

What's the Sky Like?

What's the sky like?
It has six clouds, I think of the child
Today, in the State smoke shop

She was holding out a ten thou bill
For a pack of MS and an instant lottery ticket
Dead serious like at her first communion
With that patience little women
Of refractory clay bear for
The Father. Right where you don't want it
Her fingerprint will be immortalized:
White Carrara backdrop sky cloud in six strokes
Sign of the albatross around the neck.

Arsago Moors

The chestnuts in the Arsago moors
At the edge of the gravestone woods
200 meters from the cemetery boulevard
Smell of cats. He got lost there,
He was 20, it was early afternoon
But in winter, dark faster,
He wound on and off that path
The show was obliterating, sure
It was snowing, that's why he went
To scrape some moss
For the manger scene...

Track after track
Traced every nowhere
Under chestnuts and dark white snow...

At home they figured he was playing pool
In his tennis shoes and green tee-shirt –
Their golden boy.

To the English Language

Chanting in the syncopated loops
Of the conjugated languages
To oppose the inane hollow thuds

Of the ex-tongue of Chaucer
Still perplexed in the palate
As the «u» escapes and doubles
And you can't hear the «r» any more...

One should know more about
The destiny of verb endings –
How splendid, that «en» of the plural!
Limpid lichens under ice,
Bulletin board lamps,
museum schedules.

Translated by Justin Vitiello