

*Alfredo De Palchi's Anarchic Paradigm A New Translation and Commentary from Una vita scommessa in poesia A Life Gambled in Poetry Omaggio a Alfredo De Palchi* *Homage to Alfredo De Palchi*, Special volume of *Gradiiva*, edited by Luigi Fontanella, 2011: 48-57.

Many critics including Luigi Fontanella, Daniela Gioseffi, Michael Palma, Burton Raffel, Silvio Ramat, John Taylor, Alessandro Vettori, and myself among others, have written about De Palchi's distinct erotic poetry. From *Le viziose avversioni* to the poems of *Essenza carnale*, the intense focus on this carnal and metaphoric dimension has been explored, studied, and translated. The starkly depicted executioners and torturers of the 13 poems from *Un ricordo del '45* have also been at the center of many introductions and prefaces to De Palchi's books. Less attention has been devoted to poems in which congenial male subjects are present. The first example we could cite would be the second poem of the section titled *L'assenza* in De Palchi's most recent comprehensive volume of poetry, *Paradigma Tutte le poesie*, (2006): *Non li scrive i versi sul quaderno*. Here the image of the poet's *nonno* (grandfather) is drawn through detailed sensory impressions that describe his physical person and, at the end, his agony caused by cancer.<sup>1</sup> This particular poem stands out in De Palchi's overall work for many reasons. Not only because there is a benevolent depiction of a paternal figure, but also because of its length. This text is one of his longest single compositions (over 60 lines).

Like the other poems composing *L'assenza* this one rotates around one central character and depicts the way of life in a small rural town during the 1930's in Legnano and environs.<sup>2</sup> De Palchi's text resuscitates a society that no longer exists along with its old timers, customs, landscape, and adolescent point of view. It even incorporates samplings of Veronese dialect: *carreghe* (or *carega* in the singular) for straw chairs, *goti* for glasses. Although not a word of Veronese dialect, the poet uses *rapa*, turnip for head or dummy. Turnips and turnip celery were largely cultivated in the area of Verona from the 1930's on.<sup>3</sup> The powerful physical presence of the grandfather, with his smell of wine and cigars, is forcefully conveyed through tragicomic details regarding his various

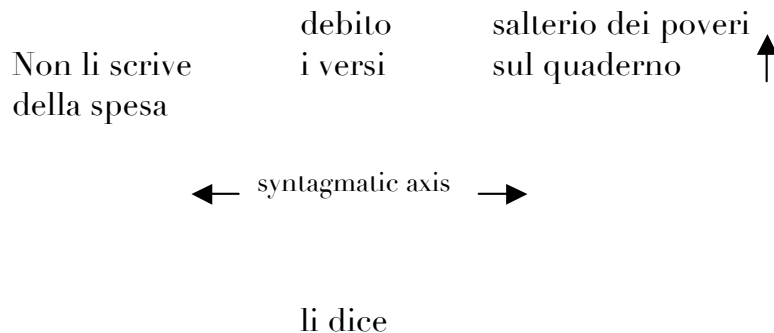
<sup>1</sup> The original title of this poem in *Sessioni con l'analista*, Mondadori, 1967, was *Il cancro*.

<sup>2</sup> *L'assenza* is the first subheading of the section eponymously titled *Paradigma*. This subsection consists of seven poems. The first two *Dall'oltresuolo/viene mio nonno, il grande assente* and *Non li scrive i versi sul quaderno* are followed by five numbered texts that evoke the themes and places of the first two in shorter and more compact poems.

<sup>3</sup> A famous example of referring to the head metaphorically with vegetables exists in Dante's *Divine Comedy: Ed elli allor battendosi la zucca. Inferno XVIII*, 124.

quirks and wardrobe. He wears patched up shoes with cotton wool inside, rides a bicycle with clothpins to hold up his pants, slams his fist on the table when he loses at cards and sings *Il barbiere di Siviglia* down his grandson's neck while pedaling back home late at night through the Veronese countryside.

Perhaps the most important information regarding this fatherly protagonist may be found at the very beginning of the poem. We learn that he is anarchist and poet, inventor and imaginary traveler. The first three lines establish an antithesis between literacy and orality which frames a paratactic couple of analogies between *lines of poetry and debt, a household ledger and the book of psalms*. The elements within the initial syntagmatic axis [ $\leftarrow$   $\rightarrow$ ] are paradigmatically [ $\wedge$ ] substituted through these analogies which create contiguity of comparisons between unlikely terms.<sup>4</sup>



In the dismal socioeconomic context of the 1930's a household ledger (*quaderno della spesa*) that lists more debts than earnings documents a harsh reality. Calling it a book of psalms would ironically and profanely suggest that it serves no pragmatic purpose; chronicling one's poverty becomes a sort of religion of hopelessness. The protagonist shows contempt for such religion through his refusal to write down poems like *debts in a household ledger, /book of psalms for poor people*. Instead, he declaims them to his attentive grandson.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I am assuming the principles of Roman Jakobson: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." *Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics in Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* Edited with introductions by Robert E. Innis, Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 155.

<sup>5</sup> I.L. Salomon, who first translated this text into English, commented its opening lines in his Introduction to the unexpurgated American edition of *Session with my Analyst*: "With superb economy of language, not without

Thus the essence is given through the quadruple negative analogy: *lines*→*household ledger*→*debt*→*book of psalms*. His lines (poems) are not debts but the household ledger is like a book of psalms. The grandfather, being anarchist and anti-ecclesiastical, rejects the latter. He favors the concrete down to earth oral tradition (*li dice terragni[...] non fregi[...] crudi*) against the abstract remoteness of the sacred scripts. Yet the idea of the origins of writing are also contained in these extraordinary lines, if we remember that writing began in association with accounts and bookkeeping on stone tablets.<sup>6</sup>

These lines are typical of De Palchi's vision and style, which consists of intricate syntax, compact use of language to achieve analogies and metaphors, along with a sarcastic or provocative tone. Although the use of rhyme is almost completely lacking, De Palchi's poems possess their distinct musicality and cadences. Instances of assonance and alliteration are frequent as in the following lines where the assonance between *perdere* and *sberle* is highlighted by the placement of these words at the end of the lines as is the case between *goti* and *ginocchi*. The alliteration is notable in *scuotendo un suono* (in *s* and *uo* and then again in *t* and *o*) while the presence of the *nonno* is syllabically echoed: ***nonno*** *scuotendo suono*.

Le ripeto quando mio **nonno** sul perdere  
molla pugni e sberle  
all'aria o picchia il tavolo **scuotendo un suono**  
di **goti**

A sera i ginocchi  
non **rotano**<sup>7</sup>

Clearly the bond that links De Palchi to his grandfather is more than consanguine. It is strongly built up throughout the course of this powerful poetic tribute to an individual, an ideology, and a way of life. At the end the

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cynicism, De Palchi tells us the poor cannot square their debts with grocer or butcher. The Great Depression of the thirties made life bleak for the impoverished, whose Book of Psalms was this notebook." *Sessions with my Analyst*, New York, October House, 1970, Introduction, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> "It has been suggested that the cuneiform script of the Sumerians, the first of all known scripts (c. 3500 BC), grew at least in part out of a system of recording economic transactions [...]." Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York, Routledge, 2002(1982), pp 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> Bold and underlining are mine.

divergency between the written word and oral one is again affirmed: *inventing lines that no one writes*. The grandfather's poetry remains anarchically free, never to be contained on the margins of any institutional or formal page. The poetics of "no flourishes" is also reinforced in the poem's closure. We are reminded just how messy and repugnant death can be in verses that could belong to Dante's *Inferno*. De Palchi's poem shares affinities with Campana (the visionary qualities, the paratactic analogies), Pavese (the neorealist elements) and the much-cited François Villon. Yet his language remains unique and original, never nostalgic nor long-winded, it is always concise and evocative. Although the final word of the poem is *morto*, the figure of this anarchic and paradigmatic *nonno* is vividly prolonged well beyond the threshold of death.

Barbara Carle

Non li scrive i versi sul quaderno  
della spesa a debito  
il salterio dei poveri

li dice terragni  
con inventiva anarchica, non fregi,  
crudi che puzzano di letame nell'orto, di sigaro  
monco, di corrosione. . .

Niente

ti nausea quanto la scodella  
di cioccolata alla prima  
comunione; il prete mangia carne cotta  
. . nell'acqua

commenta sardonico e alla domenica con l'afa  
mi carica sulla bicicletta  
da corsa. In camicia senza colletto  
e le mollette per la biancheria ai calzoni  
dice la città: Roma Parigi . . .  
e pedala

steso sulla mia schiena (il suo cappello  
alto e largo mi fa ombra alla rapa oltre  
il manubrio)

i piedi rattappiti  
in riparo tra fette di bambagia  
nelle scarpe di pezza sforbiciate. Lo vedi  
da ogni direzione il campanile  
carnivoro; ha le poiane nei buchi .

A tre chilometri il borgo  
solito, un altro campanile, due file di case  
la pula; alle bocce  
i braccianti in bretelle e l'elastico sulle maniche  
della camicia che odora di lavanda  
e cotogna d'armadio;  
ecco Roma . Le inventa  
le città, viaggia per immaginazione  
tra casa orto magazzino di cereali  
e osteria.

Carreghe di paglia attorno  
i tavoli con i mezzi litri  
le carte, festoni moschicida ronzanti

perpendicoli dalle travi, la concimaia bollente  
sotto la finestra, al biroccio  
i cavalli si ammusano in un cesto di fieno.  
I vecchi succhiano la gota gonfia  
di tabacco, sputano bevono  
sulla briscola e biascicano bestemmie.  
Le ripeto quando mio nonno sul perdere  
molla pugni e sberle  
all'aria o picchia il tavolo scuotendo un suono  
di goti.

A sera i ginocchi  
non rotano, sente il diabete nelle gambe;  
la bicicletta scansa i fossi  
della provinciale e io curvo,  
metà oltre il manubrio, annuso il fanale  
a carburo; lui sbuffa  
e mi canta con raucedine sulla nuca la puzza  
di vino e il barbiere di Siviglia.

Chi è stato chiede, quando in mezzo ai pomodori  
e la lattuga s'apre il crisantemo (intanto  
dalla damigiana travasa nei fiaschi  
succhiando a lunghe sgorgate il tubo di gomma)  
rovina l'orto, non è cimitero e qui nessuno muore .

E nello stesso letto, inventando  
versi che nessuno scrive  
e mi dice, mi protegge  
all'ascella che sa di pelo e sigaro; se lo mangia  
vivo nelle mie braccia smilze  
e smerdate il cancro, e in pena schifosa  
si sfiata e ha il tagliente sorriso  
d'un gatto  
morto.

(1954)

He doesn't write his lines  
like debts in a household ledger  
book of psalms for poor people

he recites them earthy  
with anarchic flair, without flourishes,  
crude they reek of garden manure, of his cigar  
stump, of corrosion...

Nothing  
as sickening as that bowl  
of chocolate at a first communion;  
the priest eats meat boiled  
. . . in water  
he comments sardonically      and on a muggy Sunday  
he loads me on his racing  
bicycle.  
In a shirt without a collar  
and clothespins clipping up his pants  
he names the city:      Rome Paris. . .  
and he keeps pedaling

spread out on my back (his hat  
high and wide casts a shadow on me the turnip  
over the handlebars)

his numb feet  
protected by snippings of cotton wool  
stuffed into his patched up shoes    You can see it  
from every direction, the carnivorous  
bell tower; with buzzards in its holes

At three kilometers the usual  
village, another bell tower, two rows of houses  
the chaff, at their bocce game  
the field workers in suspenders  
bands on their sleeves, shirts that smell of lavender  
and closet quince;  
    here's Rome     . He invents  
the cities, makes fantastical trips  
between house, garden, granary,  
and tavern.

Straw chairs around  
tables with jugs of wine  
the cards, flypaper festoons buzzing  
perpendicular from rafters, the boiling  
dung heap below the window, at the cart  
horses muzzle in a basket of hay.  
The old-timers suck their cheeks  
full of tobacco, they spit drink  
at the trump card, chomp out curses.  
I repeat them when grandfather loses  
punches and smacks  
the air or slams the table clinking glasses.

At night his knees  
won't turn, he feels diabetes in his legs  
the bicycle avoids the potholes  
of the country road and I'm bent  
over the handlebars, sniffing the carbide  
lamp; he huffs  
stinks of wine sings raucously  
down my neck the Barber of Seville.

Who did it he asks, when among the tomatoes  
and lettuce the chrysanthemum appears (meanwhile  
from the wicker bottle he siphons into the flasks  
sucking at length on the rubber tube)  
it ruins the garden, it's not a cemetery and no one dies here .



And in the same bed, inventing  
lines that no one writes  
he talks to me, protects me  
with his armpit that smells of hair and cigars, cancer is eating him  
alive in my lanky arms  
soiled with shit, and in loathsome pain  
he wheezes            and he has the sharp smile  
of a cat

dead.

Translated into English by Barbara Carle