



# PATMOS

BY

RODOLFO DI BIASIO



*Edited by  
Barbara Carle*



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## Preface

Rodolfo Di Biasio's work strikes first by its overall coherence of vision and unity of style.<sup>1</sup> His poetry retains a "fresh voice [which] expresses an acute sense of time and the nothingness it brings."<sup>2</sup> The fact that his fourth book is entitled *I ritorni* is not without significance, for all his poetry could be described as an attempt to return to a lost unity or place, to retrieve a vanished harmony. Indeed the last poem of *I ritorni*, "I Nostoi" voices this endeavored retrieval, what the poet himself calls "l'ossessione dell'eterno ritorno/ in un navigare senza remo" ("the obsession of eternal return/ in oarless navigation"). Di Biasio experiences life as a sort of unhinged Ulysses or eternal Palinurus. He remains in permanent exile, on a perennial odyssey. An earlier poem from *Le sorti tentate* begins and ends with the movement of return. This short text is worth citing in its entirety:

Ritorna inverno alle colline  
stringe in opalescenze  
la gazzarra di luce per gli ulivi  
un cerchio grigio  
riduce a silenzio fra pareti  
solari pensieri

La pioggia sui gerani,  
ai crocicchi  
il vento sbandiera trofei di carta

E' riposo dell'anima  
questo scorrere di cose, di stagioni  
odissea degli uomini  
che nei giorni intravedono  
i gabbiani bianchi  
legno alla deriva  
i primi indizi, i più certi  
della terra dolceodiata del ritorno

Winter returns to the hills  
clasps with milky iridescence  
the clamor of light around olive trees  
a grey circle  
reduces solar thoughts  
to silence between walls

Rain on the geraniums,  
at crossroads  
the wind flutters paper trophies

This flow of things, seasons  
is rest for the soul  
odyssey of men  
who during the day glimpse  
white seagulls  
drifting wood  
the first signs, the most certain  
from the sweetthated land of return

Di Biasio's language possesses an austere grace and, at the same time, an incisive capacity of recreating the sensation of trauma. His poetics has been characterized as "classical" and there is little doubt that his literary soul has been well nourished by a Homeric and Latin chorus of "masters" whose notes set the tone for his own "laments."<sup>3</sup> It seems perfectly natural that a "mariner of the stars" would continuously seek to return to the island Patmos.<sup>4</sup>

Even though Patmos, one of the Dodecanese islands in the Aegean sea between Turkey and Crete corresponds to a geographical location, we may ask ourselves: what is Patmos? Does it truly exist? Has it ever truly existed? These questions are forced upon us with captivating immediacy. Does the book retrace a homonymic quest? It indeed attempts to retrieve an "originary" place of the same name.

Thus the "Nostoi" theme and movement of Di Biasio's previous work continues in this volume, which is composed of bits and pieces ("frammenti") of a vanished "isle." The title of the first poem, the longest with 108 lines, "Fragments for the Patmos Poem" ("Frammenti per il poemetto di Patmos,") evokes this place and its nine parts attempt to "recompose" the lost entity. The other six poems are all shorter and they all take up various thematic and stylistic threads present in the initial text. The impoverished condition of the poetic word is one of the pivotal elements of the first text which is taken up in "Poem of Wind and Silence." The second piece begins by equating "cries" with "silence:" "Dove il silenzio può essere anche/ nei molteplici gridi delle vie" ("Where silence can also be/ in the multiple cries of the streets"). The poet turns back to the sea. If not answers, at least it may offer him changes: "This latest sea bends/ ask for its variations." Each of the poems which follow may be read as divergence of the initial Patmos poem. "Desired reawakening poem" focuses on suspension (night) and reawakening through the sea. "Sleep poem" isolates the nocturnal motif and develops the paronomastic resemblance of "sonno" and "sogno" (sleep and dream). The Virgilian/Ungarettian Palinurus figure is visioned by Di Biasio as one who perhaps returned to the "matrix."

The formal link between "sogno" and "sonno" is echoed in the "Glass poem" which repeatedly plays on "vento" and "vetro:" "Sul vetro raschia un sordo vento" ("A deaf wind scrapes against glass").<sup>5</sup> Transparency is a desirable poetic aspiration but it is double-edged since it can easily become "emptiness," "vuoto:" "E questo mio/un gesto che rimane vuoto/ nella notte/Sul vetro s'infrange:" ("Mine is/ a gesture that remains empty/ in the night/shatters against glass"). In the sixth "Poem of the fledgling year" the wind bears not only the desolation of winter but renewal with the sea: "[...] mi chiedo/ se è miracolo



il giorno/nella sua rosa di luce" ("[...]I ask myself/ [...]if day is a miracle/ of rose light"). The seasonal revolution of the sixth piece ("E ancora inverno"/"Again Winter") is echoed in the second part of the final "Poem of the unattainable region:" "Ancora inverno:/ il puntuale inverno" ("Again Winter/punctual Winter").

Although these poems are rooted in the moods of nature (the seasons and moments of the day), they express the poet's ongoing spiritual quest and solitude. He seeks to become whole as the natural elements but suffers his own fragmented condition ("Al di qua dunque/ e mi sento frammentato/ dai troppi bisogni/schegge"/"From here therefore/I feel fragmented/by too many needs/pieces of events/..."). Yet, paradoxically, it may be said that the various fragments of *Patmos*, when considered together, make up a rather unified whole, in part because the sea is always present or suggested throughout and because of the deliberate technique of variation, elaboration, and return. The fact that all the poems are anchored in natural sensations suggests a Leopardian poetics of parole "vaghe." Indeed, in the second piece, we remark the coupling of "wind and silence" that is so forcefully evoked in "L'infinito:" "E come il vento/odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello/infinito silenzio a questa voce/vo comparando."<sup>6</sup> This, of course, makes one wonder, precisely what the rather Leopardian "sea" of *Patmos* is: a spatial expanse, a temporal entity, a vanishing remembrance, a lost roar, etc. By the end of the first poem, we understand that Di Biasio's "sea," besides being linked to the lost "isle," is also associated with "our word" ("La parola nostra").

The assessment of loss and the desolation expressed through the sound of the sea in the first piece acquire a dynamic mirage-like effect through the progression of the poem. It begins with "the roar" of the Greek sea (the Homeric place alive in the memory of the poet: "Nel suo rombo le traversie/che da Itaca distrassero Ulisse"/"In its roar the misfortunes/that diverted Ulysses from Ithaca"). This voice is present and yet the sea's roar eludes him since it demands "the silence of the soul [...] we no longer have." Nevertheless, he continues to listen to it in himself ("in interiore homine") and becomes painfully aware of his fragmented nature, too fragmented to land on *Patmos* as one whole entity: "I am here,/on *Patmos*/but much of me/hasn't yet landed" ("Sono qui a *Patmos*,/ma molto di me/non è ancora approdato:"). The unity of nature escapes him and he is ultimately deprived, absent from his own being. This fragmented non-being allows the word of the poet to preserve a sound, one capable of charming (being "malioso"), but not a persuasive one. There is no unified link between the eternal and the external. Thus, the word is no longer event, instead it is mere description:

"Now it merely describes/ and does not pierce/ It's no longer/ a roar/ that turns to light."<sup>7</sup> Yet, this extraordinary ending, which sends us back to the initial "roar," along with the spatial arrangement, suggest the very opposite of what the words mean. "It's no longer" occupies one line whereas "a roar that turns to light" takes up the last and final line.

1  
È un rombo  
un rombo solo  
stasera, qui a *Patmos*,  
questo mare greco  
Nel suo rombo le traversie  
che da Itaca distrassero Ulisse  
Sulla scogliera stasera pare  
che liberi il suo ansito  
il suo struggimento  
e che cancelli con rabbia  
la blandizia dei suoi colori

9  
La parola nostra ha sì un suo suono,  
malioso anche talvolta,  
ma persuasivo no  
non fa consuonare essa  
ciò che esterno a noi  
e ciò che è eterno in noi  
Essa descrive ormai  
e non trafigge  
Non è più  
rombo che si fa luce

1  
A roar  
It's a single roar  
tonight, here in *Patmos*,  
this Greek sea  
In its roar the misfortunes  
that diverted Ulysses from Ithaca  
On the reef tonight it seems  
to free a gasp  
its torment  
and to cancel with rage  
the blandishment of its colors

9  
Our word has its sound, yes  
one that even charms at times  
but is not persuasive  
It does not make consonant  
that which is external to us  
with that which is eternal in us  
Now it merely describes  
and does not pierce  
It's no longer  
a roar that turns to light

Since the last line begins with "roar" and ends with "light," and since it is spatially detached from the negation above, we are left with the impact that the poet's word is indeed, despite what he says, "roar that turns to light."

This impression is of course made stronger by the fact that the end of the poem sends us back to the beginning in a circular *Nostos* structure, which will be indefinitely prolonged. The first poem of the book is a "mise en abyme" of the entire collection; its circular structure is repeated in the movement of the *poemetti*. The last piece ("Poem of the unattainable region"), rephrases the



dilemma of the "roar-word" by expressing the poet's impossible attempt towards the "unattainable region of purity." What is the "pure" for Di Biasio? The poet hopes to find purity through the entire structure and movement of return or *Nostos*. This dance like movement should provoke the event in which the word "mankind's breath," coincides with the "flash" of the grass. It is the equation of "breath" and "flash" that parallels that of "roar" and "light." The last line also echoes the epigraph placed at the beginning of *Patmos* taken from Shelley: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!.../ O Wind,/ If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" It also implies that the longed for event of the "word-roar-light" is still attainable through the renewal of Spring, a season present in the penultimate "Poem of the Fledgling Year."

Thus the loss and mourning of the word that transpierces and becomes event is further offset by the "nostalgic" structure of the collection as a whole and by the future possibility of Spring. The circular arrangement also exists in the progression of the poems which begin at night ("Fragments for the Patmos poem"), go from night towards dawn ("Poem of wind and silence" and "Desired Reawakening poem"), back to night and sleep ("Sleep poem" and "Glass poem"), again towards dawn and Spring ("Poem of the Fledgling year"). The cycle ends with winter ("Poem of the unattainable region:" "Again Winter"), which, however, announces another Spring. As a whole, *Patmos* recreates the cycle of the seasons and the planetary revolutions, of temporal passages which shadow dawn but may not reverse it.

Di Biasio's language is classically restrained though intensely musical. The impression of restraint is derived from the selective unity of the lexical field which centers around words that denote the natural elements ("luce," "mare," "terra," "fuochi," "acqua," "vento," "voce," "inverno," "nubi," "notte," "giorno," "sera," "alba," etc.) or words that suggest the transformative (and destructive) force of nature ("franare," "scivola," "nate," "raspio," "dispersione," "scardinamento," "filamenta," "traslocano," "infrange," "spegne," etc.).<sup>8</sup> We find musical repetition and variation and abundant use of alliteration and assonance as in the following example:

Il silenzio—quello che scende ora  
per i saggi li lega alla terra  
e fa immobili tengri querreti  
ora non altro che il silenzio  
della terra e del mare  
e dentro

The silence that now descends  
among the pebbles, ties them to Earth  
and makes tender oak forests immobile  
now nothing but silence  
of Earth and Sea  
and inside

le voci che si assommano  
abitundinarie  
(emphasis mine)

voices that gather  
habitually

Classical tendencies are also evident in Di Biasio's versification. In the first poem, we find a pattern of alternating long and short lines, one which repeats itself throughout *Patmos*. But in this poem most lines are less than 10 syllables (*novenari*, *settenari*, *senari* and *ternari*) with a few conspicuous longer lines of 12 or 14 syllables, such as in the second fragment "Avverto di aver disimparato la sua voce." (One also notes the marked assonance and alliteration in "e" and "v"). In the second poem, this pattern of long/short lines continues but becomes more pronounced since there are more long lines (of 12 or more syllables, often 14) which contrast more sharply with the *settenari* and *senari*. "Desired Reawakening Poem" has a more prosaic quality, since it has the most long lines of any of the seven texts that comprise *Patmos*. In the fourth piece, "Sleep Poem," most of the long lines are hendecasyllables. In the remaining poemetti the long/short pattern continues. This type of versification may be considered a descendant of the Thirteenth Century *canzone* in which hendecasyllables, *novenari*, *settenari* and *senari* alternated.<sup>9</sup> The hypermetric lines of more than 12 syllables stand out but they remain inferior in number to hendecasyllables and shorter lines.

Therefore, the versification (long/short pattern), lexicon, thematic motifs and imagery create a singular fluency which varies but remains constant. The *Nostos* structure is also the "mariner of the stars" reality. Depending on one's perspective, it may be considered open or closed or both, like a circle: "at last one can say that all is a circle/ which sends us back to ourselves." "We are inside the circle/ Echoes of happenings return to us."<sup>10</sup> In any case, it is certain that Di Biasio's poetic soul is in perfect symbiosis with the "sea" he sings: "The soul [which] becomes extinguished tide" ("L'anima si fa spenta marea").

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Di Biasio has published the following volumes of poetry: *Niente è mutato* (Padua 1962), *Poesie dalla terra* (Rome 1972), *Le sorti tentate* (Manduria 1977), *I ritorni* (Rome 1986), and, of course, *Patmos* (Grottammare 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Paolo Cherchi and Joseph Parisi in "Some Notes on Post-War Italian Poetry," special issue of *Poetry* CLV:1-2 (October-November 1989), p. 167. Di Biasio's "Poemetto dell'alba e della notte," in Italian and in English translation, was included in this issue (pp. 94-97). However, Di Biasio's poems appeared in English translation as early as 1974 in *The Vanderbilt Poetry Review*. More recently, the bilingual anthology *New Italian Poets* (1991), edited by Michael Palma and Dana Gioia, included a selection of his work (pp. 90-125).



<sup>3</sup>Michael Palma aptly described Di Biasio's poetry as one of "austere surfaces in which, while the expression of emotion is strictly disciplined, its pressure can be felt just below the surface. Like Doplicher, he is essentially classical in perspective. He views the modern world as a bleak landscape of discrete components. Less thickly textured than Doplicher's, Di Biasio's work strives to achieve, however precariously, a unifying vision," *New Italian Poets* (p 90). See also Luigi Fontanella's illuminating article in which he considers, among other qualities, the "discrezione" of Di Biasio's poetry: "Rodolfo Di Biasio tra (auto) riflessione e tensione cosmologica: a proposito di Patmos" in *Forum Italicum*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Fall 1996, p. 356.

<sup>4</sup>The phrase is from the second part of "Fragments for the Patmos Poem," line 23.

<sup>5</sup>At first the "Glass poem" stands out because it is the only composition of *Patmos* which is titled after an object. Nevertheless this object does have a connection to the sea; one has only to remember that glass is made of sand.

<sup>6</sup>Leopardi's verse may be translated as follows: "And, like the wind I hear storming through these plants, that infinite silence to this voice I compare..."

<sup>7</sup>"Flash" or "Bagliore," in the sense of incomplete reflection of a vaster "roar-light," is also present in "Sleep poem:" "When stars and earth/ suddenly appropriate our bit of light/ our intermittent flashes."

<sup>8</sup>The English translation of these words: "light," "sea," "Earth," "fires," "water," "wind," "voice," "Winter," "clouds," "night," "day," "evening," "dawn," etc., and "to collapse," "slide," "born," "dirge," "dispersion," "unhinging," "threads," "displace," "crush," "extinguish," etc.

<sup>9</sup>The canzone was first used by Sicilian Poets in the Court of Frederic the Second between 1200 and 1250. Dante and Petrarch used it extensively. In the Nineteenth Century the Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi modernized the form.

<sup>10</sup>These quotations are taken from *Le sorti tentati*: "dire infine che tutto è un cerchio/che ci rimanda noi stessi" p. 69 and "Nel cerchio, dentro noi siamo,/ gli echi dei fatti ci ritornano" p. 21.

## PATMOS

*I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!...  
O, Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*

P.B. Shelley