

Introduction: Transnational Italian Poetry¹

Literature, and poetry in particular, has always been a tool to understand culture. Sometimes it has even gone beyond and helped cultures to expand and develop. Poets understand that language, essential to human survival, has its own limits, but they also see these limits as an incentive to produce new expressive forms, other languages that transcend the old one to understand and tell what is not yet immediately comprehensible or immediately utterable. This awareness, coupled with the desire to trespass the limits of one's language, have produced what we today call literature.

Language, intended as an instrument that offers the word countless opportunities, requires nevertheless a corollary of skills. Using it in a poetic way requires a certain familiarity with literature, or rather with literatures, with the oral and written traditions that preceded it, formed it, and complicated it. Language is therefore bound by the vast experience of the past. Italian, a language with a time-honored literary tradition, offers an exceptionally interesting case. On the one side, it boasts the legacy of its noble past, and contemporary poets frequently return to the classics to draw inspiration and new meaning. On the other, that same legacy becomes a burden that crushes the emerging voice under the immense weight of its greatness. This contradiction has produced different reactions, driving poets to experimentations that were considered at times reactionary or decadent by later authors, but which nonetheless have impacted the literary movements of twentieth-century Italian letters.

In the second part of the twentieth century, after the tragic experiences of fascism and WWII, the economic boom, the years of terrorism, the hedonism of the eighties, and the economic and political crises Italians experienced in the new millennium have exacerbated what Pier Paolo Pasolini defined as Italy's "anthropological mutation." The value he found in cultural and linguistic authenticity had been rejected while consumerism had deprived the new generations of the utopian dynamism that usually characterizes them. The great dreams that animated political and social movements in the sixties and seventies was extinguished, yielding a widespread sense of disenchantment and frustration. From the nineties, the ethical drift caused the rejection of every sense of civic responsibility while politics was bent to serve exclusively individual interests and personal agendas. Italy's cultural and social crisis was central to the poetry of the period and testified inexorable ruin often more effectively than narrative production ever could.

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However, even if a few poets have raised their voices against the collective malaise, poetic language has deteriorated, becoming popularized in poetry slams, devoid of social content, succumbing to a “poetic prose” that is as unconventional as it is arbitrary. The poets themselves, not infrequently called “pop” poets, have surrendered to the marketing strategies of their publishers, who have encouraged the readers to focus more on the authors than on their work. So-called literary festivals, a novelty of the new millennium, have fostered this personal relationship thanks to readings, presentations, and lectures often attended by a large audience. The possibility of a real and physical meeting with readers has lowered however the poetic language, which has been vulgarized for the purpose of popular consumption. The main goal has become that of a simplified poetic form that has, at the same time, difficulty in defining itself. This confusion of style, language, and content is arguably the reflection of the sweeping cultural crisis. In addition, since the beginning of the millennium, we have witnessed the death of many great poets, Bertolucci in 2000, Raboni in 2004, Luzi in 2005, Erba in 2010, Zanzotto and Giudici in 2011, Pagliarani in 2012, and Cappello in 2017.

On the positive side, we have seen a drastic reduction in editorial costs with a resulting larger accessibility to literary work in general and poetic anthologies in particular. This change in accessibility nevertheless has produced new questions about the value, message, and fruition of poetry in the contemporary world. This debate involves intellectuals, poets, and publishers, in particular from small and medium publishing houses, who have emerged as sensitive and supportive allies. Favoring one-on-one collaborations over the marketing dynamics of their larger national counterparts, these publishers have opened real poetic workshops, where the author’s artistic development is the focus of each collaborative project.

Convinced that poetry not only has a future but that it is experiencing a time of growth and transformation, Simona Wright and I thought about a publication that would reflect the cultural reality in which we are immersed. The phenomenon of migration experienced by Italy in the last thirty years together with the overabundance of publications by migrant and Italoophone writers have led us to ask ourselves what happens when a poet writes in a language different from their native one. What happens when the relationship between the poet and the reader suddenly is interrupted

by a language switch and when the only interlocutor is the language itself?

For this project, we invited eight Italian and Italophone authors who write in English to send us their work. Ilaria Boffa, Moira Egan, Allison Grimaldi Donahue, Monica Guerra, Baret Magarian, Sandro Pecchiari, Brenda Porster, and Rachel Slade accepted the invitation and submitted selected poems to critics, each with the task to write an introductory essay. We believe that this group is representative of a much larger and diversified literary reality. Thus, ours is but a modest proposal to document our transnational, translingual condition, a condition that is unstable and evolving but worth recording. An integral part of the project are the critics' essays that we asked Simona Wright (Ilaria Boffa), Victour Zarour Zarzar (Moira Egan), Ernesto Livorni (Monica Guerra), Cristina Perissinotto (Allison Grimaldi Donahue), Andrea Sirotti (Baret Magarian), Al Rempel (Sandro Pecchiari), Alessandro Canzian (Brenda Porster) and Loredana Magazzeni (Rachel Slade) to write.

The first element these essays highlight is the reiterated allusion to the poet's subjectivity, which reflects the condition of displacement experienced by the contemporary individual. Loredana Magazzeni writes that "Rachel Slade's poetry relates to the contemporary human condition, to feelings of nomadism, alienation, and acceptance of what is unknown and disturbing." When confronted with the challenge to settle in a foreign country where even "the dead sing louder than the living," the poet firmly declares "I am." Speaking of Moira Egan's poetry, Zarour Zarzar remembers that

"to walk away's both blessing and a curse" . . . And then there is the tension dictating the poetic production itself: the tension of a poetry written in English yet originating on Italian soil; a poetry that dramatizes the play between the centrifugal forces of emotion and the centripetal power of form; a poetry produced by a mind deeply versed in diverse linguistic traditions, and, as such, capable of distancing itself from the English language.

On the side of language, we find an interesting desire, quite often experimental, to innovate, and to find contact points among different cultural and poetic traditions. The poets' language is personal, original, their use of the word experimental, innovative, and stylistically provocative, as in the poetry of Pecchiari, Guerra, and Boffa. In others, like in Egan, Magarian, Porster, and Grimaldi

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Donahue, we can measure the spatial distance between the poet and their literary tradition and record the intrusion of the unfamiliar literary context which surrounds them. If on the one side, the Italian poets experiment with a great deal of freedom, exercising this liberty by way of the experimental penchant of Italian contemporary poetry, on the other side, Italophone poets hold onto their own traditions, problematizing them with the cultural context of their present reality. All of these poets have long abandoned the pretense of a definitive text. Poetry is a living body, through which experiences and knowledge are appropriated, filtered, and elaborated, like in the verses of Porster, Guerra, and Grimaldi Donahue.

Speaking of language, examining Ilaria Boffa's work Simona Wright notes that

a new language is a virgin territory, both strange and seductive. Exploring it can be liberating. Engaging with it can become a subversive act, as in the case of those writers who abandon the colonizer's tongue to adopt the language of their chosen destination country. It can fulfill the need for atonement and redemption, a rebirth that is both individual and cultural, a revisiting of the past that aims at mending a broken subjectivity, at restoring the memory of a communal history interrupted by colonial rule.

Al Rempel confirms this as he writes, in his essay on Sandro Pecchiari, that

when a poet writes in a language other than their mother tongue, it forces innovation and invention that would not necessarily occur to a native-speaking poet, whether it is because the poet attempts to describe something he does not have words for, or—consciously or unconsciously—translates ideas or turns of phrase from his mother tongue, or simply discovers new constructions by happy accident.

Considering Baret Magarian's poetry, Andrea Sirotti writes that "his multi-faceted production revolves around some common characteristics: the unshakeable conviction that literature plays an ethical role in society, the irreverent re-reading of literary forms and genres, and the sometimes painful analysis of the weaknesses and the distortions of social life." Cristina Perissinotto's essay underlines that

although Allison Grimaldi Donahue is mired in postmodern and confessional poetry, she shows modes and stylistic features that remind one of the poetic canon of the Italian tradition. . . . It works through mourning and loss, though the pain of love without a beloved, and offers

its own minor consolation. Even though such offering comes in sparing, precise language, it hints at a long tradition of poets and writers before her, who found consolation in the written word.

In his essay on Monica Guerra, Ernesto Livorni points out the significance of the poet's linguistic choice:

One of the languages that non-Anglophone writers mostly employ today, when they decide to write in a different language, is the English language. This may be a result of biographical reasons, but it may also be linked to the fact that English is becoming more and more a sort of lingua franca to which one recurs when in a foreign and strange territory. To be sure, this is not a novel phenomenon, as there have been several writers at least since the nineteenth century who have adopted English, rejecting their native language in favor of English in their literary writings. . . . However, the selection of a language other than the native language of the poet remains a delicate approach to poetry writing.

The editors of this volume are aware of the experimental and provisional critical approach utilized in this project, but wanted nevertheless to start a conversation on the possibilities offered by the complexities of our reality as they are witnessed, recorded, and experienced by Italian and Italophone poets today. We hope to have started a productive conversation that may help Italian and Italophone authors to develop their poetic expression further and we invite critics to articulate their own perspectives on this emerging phenomenon. Globalization informs our lives, often in a negative way. We hope that this exploratory volume inaugurates a debate on the expressive possibilities of the countless transnational encounters in which we dwell every day, at both the linguistic and the cultural level. Most of all, we hope that the rich complexity of these encounters can be translated in new and original poetic forms.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Translated from the Italian by Monica Guerra.