

The Depths of Love and Sorrow in Allison Grimaldi Donahue's Poetry¹

Allison Grimaldi Donahue sounds the depths of love and sorrow with an economical language that is akin to some Italian hermetic authors of the twentieth century, with whom she is undoubtedly familiar. Her poetic production is directly influenced by the work of Robert Creeley and Eileen Myles (Grimaldi Donahue, "Attendiamo"), as well as by the poetry of Vito Bonito, which she also translated.² The present essay explores Grimaldi Donahue's poetic production in light of the Italian poetic tradition and of ancient and early modern suggestions. 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.

That the Italian literary canon is an important reference point for the author is evident, starting from the following poem:

i sat drunk at Dante's tomb 2 weeks before
you died asking him what to do
how to be better
even from my self-imposed exile
the lady behind me laughed as i asked silently
for an answer (4)

This poem epitomizes two of the main themes of Grimaldi Donahue's published poetry: a deep sense of absence, resulting in mourning for a loved one and a direct relationship with literary monuments from the past.

Notwithstanding her passion for the Italian canon, as well as for more offbeat poetry,³ conventions of poetry do not apply to her work, as Allison Grimaldi Donahue's poetry is unique. As a poet as well as a translator, Grimaldi Donahue is enchanted by language and constantly changed by it. In an article on language's plasticity Grimaldi Donahue writes:

In my own work I find that language is always changing me as much as I change it—that it is recreating me as I rework and reshape it. This is as much a feeling as it is a philosophy. Still, translation, under Nietzsche-cum-Malabou's plastic paradigm,⁴ is itself an act of re-creation. It is always making something out of something, not something out of nothing. (Grimaldi Donahue, "Poetry's Intrinsic Ontology")

The substantiality of poetry created as well as translated by the author reaches beyond the impermanence of the self, and—more importantly—the impermanence of the other, whose absences is often evoked as a focal point in Grimaldi’s work.

found a polaroid of the dog
on the couch the summer
before you died
those are your legs
the dog lies on
no human face only human legs
immobile dualistic
the mind already gone to some other place (6)

In this poem we can appreciate the masterful use of the object correlative, as explained by T.S. Eliot (“Hamlet and His Problems”) and later by Eugenio Montale (“L’intervista immaginaria” 569) as a sensation or an emotion that is systematically represented by an object or a series of objects.

Montale uses the symbolic aspects of the objective correlative in particular in his early collections. *Ossi di seppia* (1925) and *Le occasioni* (1931) are rich with object correlatives. See for example Montale’s famous “Spesso il male di vivere,”

Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato
era il rivo strozzato che gorgoglia
era l’incartocciarsi della foglia
riarsa, era il cavallo stramazzone. (*Ossi di seppia* 54)

Unlike the enumerative technique present in Montale’s poem, in Grimaldi Donahue the images are nesting into one another, which may be a reminder of the elusiveness of the image of the beloved, after her passing. The couch hides and then reveals a Polaroid, which portrays a dog, who is leaning on the legs of the person whose presence is still so strongly felt. All those aspects—couch, polaroid, dog and legs remind one of the absence that the author is mourning.

Objects that remind the author of an absence are another theme in Grimaldi Donahue’s poetry. In the following poem, the beloved is evoked through yet another series of object correlatives:

sometimes i run my index finger over my thumbnail
to feel the anemic bumps—
though nothing compared

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to your nails
i am able to convince
myself for a second that i am holding
your hand (7)

The void is therefore represented by present objects that correlate to the feeling of absence. Grimaldi Donahue's poetry is constructed around this void, and many of the objects depicted in her works (bones, dust, fingernails, mountains, etc.) are but a reminder of someone so elusive that they cannot be mentioned by name.

T. S. Eliot defines the object correlative as an element in the construction of poetry; Herman Rapaport comments that "what Eliot calls the objective correlative is, from another perspective, *the controlling metaphor that captures the social subject's actual relation at a point in historical time to the world*" (116). In the case of Grimaldi Donahue, the controlling metaphor relates to this immense absence, which is filled only partially by the author's poetic production.

If the controlling metaphor is the absence, we become used to looking for it in the poetry. *Mutatis mutandis*, this reminds us of a specific Petrarchan technique in the *Canzoniere*. When he does not mention Laura at the beginning of a sonnet, we instinctively look for her by the end of it. For example, the sonnet "Zephiro torna" gives us a needed respite from the sorrow of losing Laura: "Zephiro torna, e 'l bel tempo rimena, / e i fiori et l'erbe, sua dolce famiglia. . . ." However, although the reader relaxes in the first, vivifying part of the sonnet, in the last two stanza the pain of losing Laura comes back, and the reader is reminded of the tragic loss that the poet feels in his heart. Whereas Zephyr is harbinger of life and sweetness, the memory of Laura brings back sighs from the heart.

Ma per me, lasso, tornano i piú gravi
sospiri, che del cor profondo tragge
quella ch'al ciel se ne portò le chiavi.
(Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, 373)

Grimaldi Donahue is adept at hiding the absence, only to let it emerge in the last stanza. In a rather different context, one poem by Grimaldi Donahue follows the same mournful parable. No longer do we face the legendary spring depicted by Petrarch, but a similarly peaceful rural setting, probably nested in the Swiss Alps. Horses appearing as if spirited in, suggesting a rural, tranquil scene:

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horses always appear in
the rain
chewing grass
through fog
next to old silos
old caves
old bones
in Switzerland

In a stark turn of a sentence the scene changes in front of our eyes. The tranquil Swiss Alps are suddenly no longer green, no longer alive, but old and dusty, as much as the memory of an absent beloved, who is once again addressed in the second person.

the mountains here
are not green
if you, pile of dust
could accumulate
what kind of being
would you be (8)

This second part of the poem also refers to a recurring theme in Grimaldi Donahue's work, which is a strong connection an alchemical transformation of elements. The plasticity of her imagery allows objects to change shape as they correlate to different feelings. As a result, she produces images of bodies that often are turned into their elementary components, as the title of her 2016 collection *Body to Mineral*, suggests. The economy of her language further allows these difficult images to be readily accessed by the reader.

One of her poems speaks of death as a force that turns loved ones into bones, then into dust, then into precious stones:

after you die
i trace my fingers
along the rock in the garden
breaking my stubby nails
as i pick apart the granite
in search of the
ruby (19)

The theme of a chemical, as well as alchemical transformation recurs in Allison Grimaldi Donahue, for at least a couple of reasons. On the one hand, it is in line with the economy of her poetic language. The

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drying aspects that turns people from flesh into precious crystals is antithetical to a more traditional outpour of sorrowful feelings:

when they turned you
into mineral
no one offered
me an amulet (20)

The second reason is more profound and, if possible more universal. The explanation for this ruthless chemical transformation is apparently something elemental, that could even be traced in chemical textbooks.

all these things
are minerals now
found in my elementary
school chemistry
set at the bottom
of the basement stairs (20)

Even though these transformations can be found in chemistry textbooks, the constant transmutation of people into dust, bones, and eventually precious stones has an alchemical aspect that seems to be recurring in Grimaldi Donahue's poetry. In an essay on alchemy and poetry, Alexandra Lembert comments that "the return of alchemy in the literature of the late 20th century is part of a larger cultural phenomenon: the crisis of the Western world and the results search for solutions" (10). This disillusionment in modern belief of progress, according to Lembert, went hand in hand with new age beliefs in the postmodern era. Even though Lembert's book concentrates on British novels, she also points out how poetry and alchemy are interrelated. Since the early modern era, alchemists relied on poetry in order to unleash the possibility for alchemical transformation (Lembert 50). On this interconnection between poetry and the divine art of alchemy, she quotes from Martin's essay on British alchemists: "the alchemist . . . lives in a world of poetic possibility in which the ability of things to transform is only limited by his or her imagination and vocabulary. Language, the alchemist knew, is one of the ways to the Stone, and one of the key [sic] to freedom." (Martin 59–60, quoted in Lembert 50)

This same imagining, by which language creates chemical and alchemical transformations can be found in Grimaldi Donahue's work. Often the transformation is accompanied by the pain of the

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unburial, which is not fleshed out completely in Grimaldi Donahue's poetry, but it is often referred to in passing:

in dying you became
a plant since no animal
can be so alone
can't help but
whimper and cry
only a plant
could ever suffer
in such silence (21)

The transformation in this poem is wishful and consolatory. The body of the beloved, whom the author imagines alone in the universe, cannot be transformed in other than a plant, which might suffer, but silently, its own passing. While working out the question of what happens to the ones we love when they pass, Grimaldi Donahue delivers a message of devastating sorrow.

Even though Grimaldi Donahue's poetry is relentless in its exploration of love and grief, there is a small margin for consolation, which emerges in the form of a dream. This poem is a turning point in the collection, because all the previous imagery seems to come together, to deliver a small message of relief. In this poem, the author's soul rests for a short while in feelings provided by the dream.

i have dreams
where you bury
things dig them up
the dog helps
sometimes and sometimes
you are wearing a hat (17)

Here the digging foreshadows something happy, even with the presence of a spirit animal, the dog mentioned at the beginning of the collection. The second part of this poem reveals the findings:

usually you dig
for crystals
and usually you
hand them
to me in a
big woven basket
over a small small river
with no bridge (17)

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These crystals, precious stones buried deep in the earth, in other poems represented the final transformation of the beloved who passed away. In this particular poem, the beloved finds crystals deep in the earth, and gives them to the author in a basket.

The literature and criticism on the value of dreams in poetry and prose is large. From Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*⁵ onwards, literary dreams have often been a source of knowledge as well as a way to find solace from daily life. In this dream, the scene is peaceful and bucolic, and the reader no longer expects an absence, since the beloved is present with the author. In a way, the circle is complete—the author is included, and the lack of a bridge highlights the sense of *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden separated from real life.

Grimaldi Donahue's poetry is surprising this way. 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.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All the poems quoted in this essay are from Allison Grimaldi Donahue, *Body to Mineral*, Publication Studio, 2016.

² Vito M. Bonito, "Comedy of Flowers and of Emptiness," *Gamma*, translated by Allison Grimaldi Donahue, 2017, <https://gamma.press/weekly/september-24th-2017-twenty-eight-poets>, accessed 12 Jan. 2019.

³ See for example her translation of Gianluca Fùmari's "Quarta vigilia noctis XIX" 391–94.

⁴ Here the author is referring to a conversation with Catherine Malabou about Hegel's idea of plasticity as the "capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form" (Malabou, *The Future of Hegel* 60).

⁵ The *Somnium Scipionis* (The Dream of Scipio) composes the sixth and final book of Cicero's *De Re Publica*.

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