

Innovation and Invention in “Kidhood”: When a Poet Writes in a Different Language

Sandro Pecchiari has published four poetry books with the Italian publisher Samuele Editore: *Verdi anni (Years Can Always Turn Green)*, 2012; *Le svelte radici (Uprooted and Rerooted)*, 2013; *L'imperfezione del diluvio – An Unrehearsed Flood*, bilingual version, 2015; and *Scripta non manent (Written Words Never Remain)*, 2018. Some of his works have been translated into Albanian, English, French, Spanish, and Slovene in several different anthologies and his poetry has been reviewed many times. With Alessandro Canzian and Federico Rossignoli, he organizes fortnightly poetry meetings named La Scontrosa Grazia at the bookstore TS360, Trieste, Italy. He has also collaborated with the Italian literary magazines *Traduzionetradizione* (Milan) and *L'Almanacco del Ramo d'Oro* (Trieste).

Pecchiari writes poetry in Italian, his mother tongue, as well as in English, and he has also translated English poetry into Italian and from Italian into English. The many themes in his writing include the intersections between his past and his present life, loss and hope, foreign lands and finding home, and between the known self and yet-undiscovered self. Pecchiari writes in an open, free verse style that moves fluidly between images and events, and the poet's commentary on them. His lines are generally compact and forceful, and in a stream-of-consciousness style, which reinforces the feelings and emotions he is trying to convey.

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. Pecchiari's poetry in “Kidhood,” a poem in thirteen parts about growing up as a farm boy in the aftermath of the Second World War, is replete with such invention. The poem also explores where language comes from, in the context of the ironies and contradictions of war, as well as within the setting of a coming of age story, where boy becomes man, and where manhood is not defined in a heteronormative sense, over and against the “manliness” of soldiers.

The title of the poem itself, “Kidhood,” while not a new invention, is not the natural choice for an English speaker. With it,

Pecchiari, adds layers of meaning that “childhood” doesn’t. Kidhood connotes playfulness as well as a roughness, a contradiction that typifies the many points of tension in this poem. It also plays with a double pun that operates both in English and in the Venetian dialect: kid can mean goat or child in English, and in Venetian it means, “the clipped ones,” referring to the haircuts boys were given for hygienic reasons as well as to imitate the look of priests. “Kidhood,” then, becomes a metaphor for a controlling and repressive education under the Roman Catholic system. In the opening scene, the neighbor boys are play-acting war games while the real war raged on outside of their idyllic farmyard just a handful of years before. Because of the ban on loud noises in the afternoon, a carry-over from the war, the boys mime their fighting and “shout” battle cries in hushed voices, an image that is stark and poignant as well as darkly comical. The girls watch, “nibbling at pumpkin seeds,” as if at a movie theater, but also re-enacting the adult world where the men go off to war and the women stay home, watching the news to see if they will come back alive. In the middle of this theater of war, this “kidding around” that is tainted by a deadly seriousness, the cows are unaffected, staring and munching—a contradiction that also mimics the real world, as battles raged across the once peaceful farms of Europe.

Other innovative uses of language are peppered throughout the poem, “the blue thin air of our past days,” “the gone-lost feeling of the dusk,” “unhomed by postwar,” and “the bluenight of your naming things” are just some of the examples. They carry with them an emotional weight or longing that complements and intensifies the imagery in the poem. “Kidhood” is really about an excavation of the narrator’s past, and an unflinching look at not only what happened, but also at the events that shaped who he became and what he left behind in order to become who he is now. The poet is therefore drawn back to his past but also at odds with it because it is no longer the same place; under the paved roads and “supermarket strollers stuffed with kids” and “recycle signs,” he asks, “what is this land now?” He yearns for “the far place that was called home.” Pecchiari’s search for language that will affect the reader at the same emotional level leads to a freshness of phrase and syntax. In discussion this author had with him regarding writing in a different language, he notes: “Writing in a foreign language makes me free from the weight of Italian culture and all the tradition behind it. [It] lets me experience feelings and ways of telling them I would not use in the mother tongue.”

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“Kidhood” constantly questions and explores where language comes from, that is, language acquired by the boy in order to become an adult—to make sense of the world, to be able to articulate what is happening to him, and to find a path to journey on that is his own. First of all, the narrator borrows and trades words from the “foreign kids” across the river from the farm.

at times we crossed at fords to barter
for long reeds or fish
lending our own world
borrowing words or weapons

Kids learn to speak from their peers, to use language as a tool, to take on slang as a fashion or fad as one does clothes, to use it to cope with their issues, and to mediate or manipulate situations and relationships. The river also takes on deeper meaning as a metaphor, as a border between foreign territory and homeland that echoes the relationships between countries as both war and peace are negotiated over the centuries. Pecchiari observes in the first section of his poem: “the river at the wind was our fence, / the fence a border.”

Secondly, language grows out of nature. The observable world is fundamental to language acquisition as a child, but becomes richer and more complete as a kid. The world is absorbed into the body through mouth and skin: “the world was food for us” and “our time spurred a new language of nettles, / against our skins.” This is especially true for the farm boy, who interacts deeply with the outside world, who plays all day and gets dirty, who needs “sun-warmed water” to “wash away our mud, / to wash us back / into a world of order.” It is the wilderness and wildness of the world that sprouts a complex vocabulary of image and metaphor, and that allows the poet to see and say things in a new way. For example, Pecchiari ends the second section of “Kidhood” with this inventive line: “cicadas spoke for us.”

Thirdly, language is also born out of silence. There is the silence of poetic contemplation that leads to new thoughts and ideas. There is, in “Kidhood,” the enforced silence in the remnants of the war-ban, which leads to the ironic play-acting of the boys, there is a silence created by the lack of technology:

It was years of silence
in the streets, in rooms

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...
the cuckoo clock ticking our emptiness in the parlour;
...
opening cans of tuna
plucking a turkey
with no words

There is also a silence of the erased past. A childhood friend is just a memory: “some said dead, some said gone, / not a word. . . answers like walls to me,” which echoes the erasure of the war – men that never came back, cities and the countryside destroyed, a rebuilding over that comes with progress and technology. In our discussion, Pecchiari notes that many people left Italy in the 1950s to go to America or Australia, including this friend with his family, and nobody wanted to tell him that they were never coming back. Out of these various silences, the poet has a chance to speak. Finally, there is a silence the narrator experiences because of his age: “they never spoke of the years before - / I was still small, they wouldn’t tell me,” and so he must begin the work of reconstructing what happened, and to find words to fill in his knowledge-gaps.

Fourthly, language is learned in the imprint that the war left on the physical and social landscape in the narrator’s youth. Terms like “prisoners of war,” “curfews,” “battlecore” are picked up by the boys and absorbed, much to the chagrin of the older generation:

My grandma flinched
at my quick learning of the lingo
annoyed -
the face of one who’s bound to polish all the silverware
and doesn’t want to

This learning represents the loss of innocence for the kids—they are growing up, learning about the terror and pain and ugliness of war—as the naïve ways of knowing and understanding slip away: “ancient consonants disappearing, / dismantled conjunctions.” The language of war and its realities is harsh: “barbed wire looped their skin /ashes looked like snow,” and so the kids “rolled pebbles of words / and plans of sandstone.”

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“Kidhood” is a coming of age story, where boys learn to become men, and in the case of the narrator, over and against the normative

definitions

of masculinity dictated by society. Homosexuality is hidden in such a conservative context:

We sucked from udders
hiding friendship in the cowsheds
wearing it like drops of white mulberries
on our lips, not showing off

The innocence of life on the farm ironically shelters and gives life to an age of experience. Even in the boys' war games, there is room for different expressions of what it means to be a man. In the middle of fake-battle, the narrator's friend shouts "Heal me" and so the narrator "thumbed a line along [his] imaginary wound, / wondering if it would work."

The language of healing and friendship continues in the section 4, the next section of the poem: "You wrapped me where I hurt / wound your way through me, / stung my heart." The narrator begins to experience both sides of love: the healing and the sorrow. In a stanza both slyly comical and poignant, Pecchiari writes:

Kings of the hamlet
- or queens -
we didn't know our hearts,
we knew our hands
and lips.

The narrator's coming of age is then experienced and negotiated bodily at first, just as language is. A child learning to speak will point at objects (nouns) and mimic actions (verbs), and this carries into adulthood in the use of gestures and body-language.

The past—while context for exploring one's sexuality and the locus of home—becomes a trap for the narrator: "The waving bluish TV screen / . . . in the village bar was unreachable. / The house was firmly bolted." In a stanza wild with language and metaphor, the poet writes about his escape:

My friends released me from all this:
their harsh dialect of wild smells tore open
the blank unknown maps of tongues
running to some love, unripened

Here language is a key to unlock the prison of the past, though harsh and complicated by real life: the love isn't waiting ripe to be plucked. As a boy, the narrator tried to use the language of war to bust out himself, it was his "only shining weapon / for this world," and in a reference back to his Roman Catholic upbringing, and alluding to a previous failed escape: "I tried with Christ / he would not." The rosaries of his childhood were "in the fresh shadow of the understairs / with spiders."

Pecchiari writes specifically about one friend (his first love?) who helped him move on from his past in section 8, the one who shouted "Heal me," the one he tracked deep in his eyes "the bluenight of [his] naming things." The narrator of "Kidhood" admits: "I never listened to my voice / but I remember yours," and later in the same section, "I learned so much / from your going away." The language of release is learned by others experiencing the same thing, by going through it first themselves, and so in another contradiction, the poet learns hope by experiencing loss. The implication in the next section is that this same friend is the one spoken of by the narrator, who, having left the past, could now find a sense of belonging and a new understanding of what his home is: "you quenched my thirst / showing me the far place that was called home."

The language of "Kidhood" becomes increasingly more complex and abstract in the last three sections. The point of view of the narrator is now one of an adult in the present moment, processing and examining his thoughts: "this must be unreal: / a time-bubble swelling swelling / until a joy a pain will sprout." Pecchiari takes more risks with his poetry here, as if he is wrestling with his ability to express his thoughts and feelings—punctuation markers are dropped, lines become longer and wilder, we have left the farmyard and are now driving along the highways: "the sun is there the moon is there a still landscape rolling straight road / is this your life slightly moving the wheel in your automatic car?" The adult now questions what is real and what has meaning, as so aptly expressed in the tongue-in-cheek line just quoted. Perhaps his friend returns to guide him; an unnamed "you" arrives in section 12: "you look at me and hug and lap my face / this is the way this is the way / home."

While Pecchiari tries to make sense of his past through language, and who he is – as the narrator states in the last section: "time to round up the wagons of a real 'being there' / rounding up with what we are deep down," he admits that this is not completely possible. In discussion with Pecchiari about his poetry, he

INNOVATION AND INVENTION IN KIDHOOD

hypothesizes that “parallel realities are...revealed, imagined, and guessed [at]; shattered and reorganized like a broken mirror. The reflection is there with an image that is the same but never exactly the same.” At the same time, there is a feeling that the past was something done to the narrator, and not something he could control:

What has been planned elsewhere
is somebody’s experiment
emptying our time of time
whitewashing lives

The sinister edge of Hitler’s war is implied in the chilling words “experiment” and “whitewashing.” The past was not only imposed on the narrator, but it was emptied out and then glossed over. The line “emptying our time of time,” is a powerful one. War puts the pause button on normal living, it disrupts it, it deletes it, and it irrevocably changes the past. The narrator will never get to experience a regular “kidhood,” where his play isn’t dominated by reenacting battle scenes and holding “brittle toys of power.”

The language in “Kidhood” is innovative in construction and expression. It pushes language at its boundaries in an attempt to describe the contradictions of growing up just after World War II and makes new discoveries in the process. Pecchiari delves into how the nuances of language are acquired by boys in the transition between childhood and adulthood, and how it can be used to try break free of a conservative and oppressive upbringing and find a way to healing and hope from the past. New poetic forms can be unearthed when poets write in a different language, and Pecchiari has done so as he excavates his own past experiences, with the added benefit that it opens up these discoveries to a wider community around the world. At the end of his poem, Pecchiari reverses the direction of the origins of language—from nature, from war, from the neighboring boys—and casts a devastating final note of uncertainty:

Sounds are men, they live through times
resound and make us proud
of being in unison sometimes.

The journey of poetic discovery is never about being absolutely certain, it requires a humility that comes from the understanding that language cannot describe one’s experiences or observations precisely, and this openness allows for a greater interplay between cultures and nations. Poetry can break down

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barriers and walls and poems can be the first diplomats to enter across the border, carrying new understandings and new ways of seeing the world.

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