

Brenda Porster: The Body as Home, the Home as World¹

Brenda Porster was born in Philadelphia and followed the PhD course in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. A scholarship to study in Florence fostered her interest for Italian culture and Renaissance Studies, giving her the opportunity to distance herself from the conservative political agenda dominating the United States at the time. Florence, which in 1966 had suffered the historic flood that had tragically destroyed part of its artistic patrimony, offered Porster the possibility to explore the arts and the culture of Italy and to recover the memory of her ancestors, who had migrated to the US from Eastern Europe. After her marriage she moved back to Italy (settling permanently in Florence) where she has taught English at the University of Bologna, the University of Florence, the University of Pisa, and the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR). In recent years, Porster has focused on translating works from English into Italian, among them Vicki Feaver's *La fanciulla che ritrovò le sue mani*, with Giorgia Sensi (*Poesia*, n. 209, ottobre 2006); *Corporea: la poesia femminile contemporanea di lingua inglese*, with Loredana Magazzeni, Fiorenza Mormile, e Anna Maria Robustelli (*Le voci della luna*, 2009); *La tesa fune rossa dell'amore: madri e figlie nella poesia femminile contemporanea di lingua inglese* (*La vita felice*, 2015); and *Matrilineare: Madri e figlie nella poesia italiana dagli anni Sessanta a oggi* (*La vita felice*, 2018). In 2016 she translated the texts created for Marco Mazzi's video-novel *Recognition*. She also translated the poems of Mario Luzi (*Toscana Mater*, Interlinea, 2004) and Mia Lecomte (*For the Maintenance of Landscape*, with Johanna Bishop, Guernica, 2012). Her poems, in English and Italian, have been published in various journals and online magazines, among them *Gradiva*, *Le Voci della luna*, *Pagine*, *Sagarana*, *El Ghibli*, and *The Browne Critique*. Her English poetry is included in the anthologies *Furori* (Avagliano, 2003), *Uomini* (Le Lettere, 2004), *Gatti come angeli* (Medusa, 2006), and *Corporea* (*Le voci della luna*, 2009). In Italian, she has published in the anthologies *Genesi* (Gazebo, 2005), *Varianti urbane* (Damocle, 2011), *Prismi* (Chemins de tr@verse, 2011), *Incontri con la poesia del mondo* (Urogallo, 2016), and *Il corpo, l'eros* (Ladolfi, 2018). In 2013 she won the first prize "Donna e Poesia" (Rome).

Porster's interest in poetry started at an early age. During her university experience, however, her work was harshly criticized,

producing a mental block that lasted until she moved to Italy, where she experienced a sort of “Renaissance” and returned to write verses. Her new cultural location would soon determine her linguistic choice, but in the first years her poetic voice lingered in a sort of cultural limbo, struggling to find a new subjectivity. The first poems were written in English, attesting to the persistence of her native cultural background but also isolating the poet from the Italian speaking literary circles. The participation in a “Laboratorio di scrittura” (creative language course), was instrumental in giving Porster the support to adopt her new language, Italian. Soon thereafter, she joined “La Compagnia delle poete,” a group of transnational female poets who had decided to write in Italian and perform their work on national and international stages.

The double literary identity so successfully embraced by Porster is reflected in the images she has chosen to define her new linguistic location. Talking about Italian as her new “home,” she indicates that languages are communities of loved ones sharing the same humanity and ethical values. Social and political commitment remain fundamental in Porster’s work, and she has recurrently criticized the US government for its insatiable appetite for global hegemony. Her migratory experience has led her to understand history as a series of personal experiences that form us as individuals and citizens. Space remains the key element of her poetic work, where it appears as places, events, and belongings that transform the self in a more open and welcoming sensitivity. It is in these terms that we can understand Porster’s work as an expression of her double identity as a writer and as a migrant, where her journey into another language signifies the opening of a new universe of imagination and creativity. Her experience epitomizes that of a wanderer, whose desire to know and understand the world around her never ceases to reveal the inhumanity, suffering, and loss which characterizes it. In her poems, we often encounter tragic figures, like this modern Antigone, a Rom mother arrested and charged with illicit concealment of a corpse “for burying her baby daughter on the beach of Apulia, where she had landed after escaping from Kosovo.”

Cast out we were
 into the dark sailing away
 not towards, but together,
 she exactly filled
 the empty cradle of my arm
 a damp-warm weight her need only I
 could meet, the dark vague depths

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of eyes, the desperate searching,
the shell-clenched fists rosy,
uncurling prawns grasping
my breast, tentative
lips and then that clamping pull
of life from me to her fulfilled
our mutual need, each to each
bound, in perfection,
the circle closed.

...

No! This could not be! I,
her mother, would provide
for her a warm covering, decent sand
and place, a collocation
of the mind, for both our needs, together
a final time, before I said
once more: good-night,
good-night, my heart's own dear,
and left her there.
("Antigone in Apulia," in Magazzeni et al, *Corporea*, 154-57)

The conflict exposed by Porster is the same one identified by Sophocles, between the natural and the human law, which tears the mother between the horrific loss of her child, her cultural traditions, and the European legal system. Designed to crush illegal migration it has as (un)intended consequence the suppression of humanity. Historical memories are a powerful element of Porster's poetic world, from which she recovers the memory of other tragedies, such as the Vietnam war, that have torn the fabric of American society, and that she witnessed as a young woman. Connecting distant and apparently disconnected events, underlining their emotional, cultural, and social significance for the present, is Porster's attempt to move our consciousness towards a modern humanism, centered on the complexity of contemporary existence in the age of globalization and neo-imperialism.

is that any way to treat
a so-called darling daughter?
shut up in a chamber
for my own good, he said,
but really meant: no sex for *you*,
my girl, till *I* decide;
("Danaë," in Landolfi et al, *Furori*, 242-43)

And

we were both deep in sleep when,
inaptnly late, we heard the ring
you answered anyway
and recognized a voice and spoke
friendly to a friend somewhere:
no, it was not too late (it was);
sleepy, I heard fragments filter through
... a child, political preoccupations...
dreamily, to pass the time,
I took you in my hand, you didn't mind,
and grew, still chatting ... no, better
not to isolate Austria but, hopefully,
Haider ... I heard, as you went on

and on,
interfacing across the continent.²

Porster sees reality in its complexity and the difficulty of human relations is often the central motif of her work, linking the personal to the social, the private to the communal, the microcosm to the macrocosm. The image of the "softening rain" is particularly important. In it, Porster embraces the amalgam of desire, necessity, and difficulties that shape human relations, relations with alterity, with difference, with otherness.

So much rain has been shed
the grass is growing, growing
knee-high and rank
cannot be cut
down, the mower is not working
and I'm choking on
the lust of it. ("Paranoia in Springtime," unpublished)

And

Not so long after
I understood
how earth might not desire
the softening rain,
her pain
at penetration, the stretch-marked crust's
slow smoothing to the touch

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of liquefying fingers,
the shyness of green shoots
just daring to suggest –
while toughened roots
already presage
oncoming drought.
(“The Cruellest Season,” Magazzeni et al, *Corporea*, 34-35)

It is the human dilemma emblemized by Antigone, who embodies the physicality of the poet, her migrant body whose worldview is informed by the journey. Imagining the “boy of five / trapped in a tunnel of snow,” she writes:

Snow drifts into memory now
they have spread salt to melt the snow,
the earth has drunk salty water. (“Salt of the Earth,” unpublished)

And in “Myles Bay Blues,”

I, too, am in migration.
No home now to go home to,
while squawking birds cut their way
through a watercolor wash of sky. (unpublished)

It is a dilemma similar to that of Antigone. The subjectivity, enveloped in a suffering body, is no longer migrating, but cannot escape the migrant’s condition. The native land is still calling and, although beloved and longed for, it remains inhospitable. Towards her the poet feels a complex mix of love and hate. Dry and fruitless, like “the earth (that) has drunk salty water,” it cannot but push its children away, it can only leave them homeless. To resist dissolution, the poet turns away from her native land but embraces the earth as a larger, borderless space. Only in this transformation can she find a home, albeit unstable, uncertain, and perhaps unfriendly.

Porster has a personal answer to her dislocation. Human existence cannot be shaped exclusively by the physical journey, but the condition of migrant allows her to see the world differently. Existence is a story that is continually retold, a narrative that is unapologetically in progress, never fully grasped, never completed. The earth is a desire, a hope, an aspiration, the “light-filled particles of gold dancing.” Their dance, like Porster’s, is evoked as a possibility, not an objective reality. Real is only the desiring body, the corporeality of her poetry, of the words that connect the poet to the world, to the earth, giving form and meaning to her passage.

looking up I saw
light-filled particles of gold dancing
in air reflections of sun filling
every pore, my body bathed
in warmth opening
to him and he penetrating
my inmost need (“Danaë”)

“My body bathed” is linked to

I understood
how earth might not desire
the softening rain,
her pain
at penetration. (“The Cruellest Season”)

The poet’s body is the only certitude, but it is also the only cartography that can project desire beyond one’s accepted cultural and linguistic boundaries. Trespassing those limits allows the body to claim coherence with the world. Home lies beyond one’s own familiar surroundings, beyond one’s dwelling. Friendship, love, understanding, community are components of a journey of discovery and growth that Porster has embraced. Our home is the world, our language a blending of idioms, our stories a complex web of histories, of stories full of love.

I know because he told me
how drowsy he held her hand
for hours, her vibrant presence spent
finally, her mouth swung open with the weight
of no words left to share, except,
at the last, I love you,
as she and he dozed off, together
to a space of infinite pity
beyond the mirror, beyond the phone,
beyond the bed. (“The Other,” unpublished)

ENDNOTES

¹ Translated from the Italian by Simona Wright.

² “Cucumber Cool” is published in Italian in Panzarella, *Madrigne di un'unica partitura*, Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2015, p. 52.

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