

Paolo Valesio

Franco Buffoni or Oblique Illuminations

in: «Yale Italian Poetry», 2002

Franco Buffoni shares with many of his generation's significant poets a merciless formal discipline (lexico-syntactic more than metrical) and a concentration on the «minime eternità dell'attimo» (S. Crespi, as quoted by U. Motta) – a concentration that is in the end neither mystical nor magical, nor particularly interested in the sacred. Buffoni acknowledges the impressive presence of theology («Blocchi di adamo nelle vene / Della grande teologia», *Adidas* [henceforth: A.] 91); but his poems seem – in this respect – to be concerned above all with an imaginative attention to liturgical details, not without irony and not without intensity («E le alabarde frecce ed aste oblique / Paiono dipartite da corna intrecciate / Di buoi rossocrociati» etc., in one of the poems of the present section). Buffoni also shares with many of his contemporaries the diffidence toward lyrical effusion and high diction (with the exception of some impressive exclamations that bring us back to theology: «Oh, Geremia, tu, che sai, / E parli d'amore», in *Quaranta a quindici* [henceforth: Q.] 25, or: «Beati gli aridi / Perché bruceranno fino all'ultimo» etc., A. 81). It might appear, then, that the already-noted (F. Brevini) «omogeneità» of Buffoni's verse production finds its correlative in a homogeneity with respect to the contemporary *koiné* which has just been sketched. But – as it was to be expected in the case of an original writer like Buffoni – his work turns out to be interestingly diversified, both within itself and with respect to the surrounding poetical experiences.

There is in him, first of all, a poetic fidelity to a certain Northern Italian atmosphere. I am speaking of a loyalty of clan and totem rather than a coldly historiographical «linea lombarda» – a loyalty that may be perceived even in a textual nook like «Come i balconi da cui le regine / Gettavano sale» (Q. 32), where I feel a subtle reprise of Carducci's *Canzone di Legnano* («Vi sovvien [...] / Che [...] / Scorgemmo da la via l'imperatrice / Da i cancelli a guardarci? [...] // Ella trassesi indietro [...]); and note the «allegoria della battaglia di Legnano» described in one of the present poems) – a loyalty that expresses itself also as *pietas* toward a modern poetical tradition. For instance, in the bare name *Vittorio Sereni*, which originally appears in boldface at center page as the title of a poem (Q. 21), but it is later italicized and shifted to the right corner of the page (A. 44), so as to appear as the epigraph of

that same poem, but shorn of the dative prepositions typical of the rhetoric of dedication (the person's name interacts with the place-name in the incipit of that poem: «Il sentiero scendeva sulla fronte di Armio»); or in: «[...] le carte / di Rebora a Stresa nella cella» (A. 95).

What we witness is mostly a parade of names that function at one level as phonic symbols, suspended between the popular and the solemn: «L'osteria della Briosca» (A. 18), but also «I longobardi da oriente sulla parete accesa (A. 51); «Da Ascona a Taino coi fianchi a rispondere / Al Cusio e al Ceresio» (A. 96), «Tra le robinie di Gornate Olona / A Castelseprio» (A. 99), «se ne reclami il dorso / In Lombardia» (Q. 67), «Poi che ti volgi e guardi / La Svizzera, dallo scoglio del Forte d'Orino / Tra il Sacro Monte e il Manica» (A. 97). The latter verses introduce an evocation of the First World War – an evocation which is de-sublimated by a Musil-based irony («Kakania dici ridi»); but what here testifies to the complexity of the poet's tone is the fact that he seems to be ironic toward his own irony. So suggestive is this Nordic diction of place-names that they sometimes communicate their resonance (in a beneficial contagion) to common nouns. Thus, in an incipit like: «Galaverna è neve che non cade» (A. 12), *galaverna* (a *terminus technicus* of mysterious etymology, designating a kind of icy crust) sounds like the name of a fortress or like a battle-cry. And, in what is the best among the poems presented here, the dialectal term *muga* (affectionately explained in the text of the poem) enters into a sort of genealogically paronomastic relationship with the place-name Macugnaga.

Another element in Buffoni's poetic world is the contrast implicit in the anti-intellectualistic approach to the world on the part of a professional intellectual. The traces of the poet's concerns as an expert of English literature tend to be minimizing and discreet. There is an interesting moment when, in a Shakespearian evocation, the speaker in the poem identifies himself/herself (or «himselves», as Frank O'Hara would say) with a yielding Desdemona: «E la canzone del salice che piange, / Emilia addio vorrei» (Q. 68); on a more prosaic level, there is for instance a philological wink reminiscent of Beppe Fenoglio's narrative in: «Per il resto barrack-baracche» (A. 105), where two etymologically related but not fully synonymical terms join hands across the boundary between English and Italian.

Thirdly, what deserve attention are Buffoni's neo- and para-logistic verbal plays, which are sparing and (therefore) effective – as in: «Non hai forse già riempito / tutto l'eserciziario?» (Q. 27), which recalls certain *-ario* terms used in Spanish like *ideario*, *temario*, and now also *poemario*; or in: «Vuoi sposarti un pochino accanto a me / – Le mani verdi sui rami?» (Q. 31). But on this latter example one must pause, for in a case like this the word-play becomes a sword-play – a serious game with the world. We have come, indeed, to the fourth element in

this quick survey of the poet's world: the element that had already been partially identified by the phrase «falsetto metrico» (G. Raboni), but at this point should be designated as «falsetto» *tout court* (for instance: «Tra gli urletti della neve che cade», *Q.* 30) – or perhaps (with a term that the author himself employs, borrowing it from Byron, in *Q.*; see his short introductory note, and the quote on p. 61) *burlesque*. The above-quoted paronomastic *sposarti* (/«posarti») introduces a tortuous and somewhat tortured sensuality that looms large in Buffoni's poetry, combining elements of bitterness («Ribadisce lo specchio: se non fossimo uomini / Né donne, / Saremmo perfetti», *A.* 31), roughness (rarely – but consider: «[...] seni di maschio / Colgono spiegàti quel poco di tela che si apre. / Ma poi sarai amato come troia bruna / Di nuovo carezzata tra le foglie», *Q.* 48), elegiac nostalgia (here the quotations would be too numerous), and more or less malicious playfulness – for instance: «Vestito da sposa per il contadino» (*A.* 74, where the first word may be read either as a substantive or as an adjective – a hypothesis which is confirmed by images like: «Il soldato si accarezza nel tragitto di guardia / Ornato come maschio nella carne della moglie», in *Q.* 14, and the whole poem which begins: «Mi vuoi col velo bianco delle vergini», in *Q.* 69); or (in one of the poems printed here): «[...] Tutte insieme / In un chiccione solenne / Irma Brandeis e la Gina / Drusilla e Lucia Rodocanachi», where the proper names hop along in metrical scansion (between the rhythm of an *ottonario* and that of an *endecasillabo*) and the overall tone is reminiscent of the already-mentioned O'Hara.

The last element that must be noted is that of a cruelly searching elegy (for which the attribute of «bittersweet» would be too weak). The poet's relationship with memory swerves between the private genealogy and the social context – as in that dark beam of light cast across a Holocaust antechamber, in the poem which begins: «Statue funerarie di affogati al corridoio» and ends parenthetically: «[...] Vuoto / Nella foto di Edith Stein)», in *A.* 78; and see, in the same vein, «Era luglio chimico dei morti:» etc., in *Q.* 37; or in the many sepia-colored scenes of personal past, for instance in the *muga* poem printed here. Oblique illuminations of eros, cruelly chiselled (and beloved) images of one person's childhood and youth: in this intersection lies, I think, the peculiar and risky strength of this remarkable writer, who meticulously crafts his subtly unsettling poems.