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*My Work in Poetry*

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By now I belong actuarially to the middle generation; I have gone past «the middle of the journey»: unless that point has been pushed, in this new millennium, from thirty-five to the fifties. In that case, I would still belong to the ranks of the young. The fact remains, however, that – having begun my *poiên* at about the age of eighteen – I find myself today looking back over thirty years of «work in poetry». And the six collections that I have published bear witness, I believe, to an evolution taking place, and provide, I hope, the basis for a further transformation and elaboration of so-called «poetic materials».

Seeking to recall a few of what have so far been the principal stylistic matrices (ones suitable for «elaboration») that I have happened to pursue, I can empirically subdivide all of my poems into four principal groups:

- texts of loose stratification;
- texts of association;
- gifts from the gods;
- tales in verse.

By texts of loose stratification, which were especially numerous in my second collection, I mean compositions that have loosely structured themselves around an idea-pivot: an idea that I could – possibly – have developed in prose, but which, since I am a poet, I found it just as natural to set forth in verse.

The poem «Like a Polyptych», for example, which appeared in *The Three Desires*, was born out of the awareness I have come to of no longer being able to comprehend all at once (in one single recollection, in one single grand image as happens with boys) the whole of my existence. By now, I realized, I too have begun to make my way through fragments, islands, *tranche de vie*. From this came the simile of a polyptych that within itself preserves the entire grand history in gaudy color, but does not display it: on the outside appear only fragments of the story in muted colors. The difference between this process of composition and those that I will describe in connection with the second

group lies in the fact that in this case the idea did not come from my seeing a polyptych in a Spanish church. The idea already existed, and would have been, in whatever manner (perhaps through another simile), actualized in poetry. The term of the comparison, therefore, did not prompt anything: it was calmly chosen because it seemed objectively more effective than other possibilities. In this poem, in short, I sought to present an argument: it was a matter of clothing it in the most aesthetically effective way.

Regarding the second group of compositions, defined as «associative», much more effectively than anything I could say, Mario Luzi in *Vicissitudes and Forms* has written that the great poetic moment, concentrated at times even only in a few verses in the middle of a poem, can be viewed as a synthesis between two concepts, two sentiments, two orders of perception or «universes of discourse» that had never before been placed in relationship to one another. In practice, according to Luzi, poetry occurs only when they happen to coincide («in a way that is, further, absolutely mysterious»), from one side «an emotional state and an artistic ability» on the part of the poet, and from the other side a particular moment («that one and not another») of universal being. Because the salient fact of the poetic event is the discovery (momentary perhaps, fleeting) of the coincidence or existence with vital essence. The poetic search – poetic work – is in the end nothing but the search for this coincidence.

I can more plainly indicate the difference from the poems of the first group by pointing out that in this case there was no preexisting idea to be transformed into poetry; there existed – strongly – only the «coincidence». As, for example, in «Greater Germany», a poem dated January 1990 and not yet collected into a volume.

Referring still to the poems of the second group, the external moment need not be distinctive (such as would belong to consciousness and then to the collective memory): it can also be something much less striking, some detail usually overlooked. In «The Pergusa Speedway», which has not yet appeared in book form, the coincidence occurred between the study I was then completing of «The Merchant's Tale» in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (whose characters include Pluto and Proserpine) and the television broadcast or a Formula Three auto race (from which came the real names of the drivers Moreno and Martini, who have now, I believe, moved on to formula One). It just so happens that the cave from which, according to the legend, Jupiter emerged to carry Proserpine off is found in Sicily near Lake Pergusa. A distinctive lake (already distinc-

tive by being a lake in Sicily) that, owing to reflections in its depths, frequently lakes on a red coloration. Like the race drivers' cars. Like their jumpsuits and flags. *Because the speedway was built right near that lake*. The announcer said: «...here at Lake Pergusa». I didn't realize at first that the name I'd left behind on the books in the study had followed me into the kitchen in the midst of the mineral water and white rice.

For the texts defined as «gifts from the gods», I believe that this phrase of Sereni's is quite clear. The author of *The Human Instruments*, however, related it (citing Valery) to the opening line, strongly suggesting that «the rest», on the other hand, was the work of the burin. As far as it goes, my own personal experience can extend the definition to several brief poems (four or five lines in all) written at one stroke in very varied moments, and passing unharmed through all subsequent and severe «recollections in tranquility». This brief text, arbitrarily entitled «The Asp», may serve as a good example:

The scent of resin and there  
Amid the rock clefts and the blades of grass  
Was the tiny red head of the asp.  
A little mountain carnation.  
Or the last poem in *The Three Desires*:  
Because I know the things I know  
And can't explain to you  
Because not all the words exist  
There's nothing else but distances and lime  
Between what I know  
And you'll need to

(left in suspension like that, without dots and without punctuation).

It happens that lines with this type of compositional matrix can also be found in more complex works. As, for example, the end of «Like a Polyptych» («While the whimsical wind / Like a lover / Courted the young poplars / Till it made them quiver») or the opening of «Lafcadio» in *Forty to Fifteen*:

The Vatican Church with reference to this  
– Secret secreted by its murky lips –  
Reproposes a bromide given  
For centuries to its soldiers, horses and boarding-school boys...

Obviously, for the expression «gifts from the gods» we might much more credibly substitute an objective reflection about the unconscious, conscious and preconscious, by virtue of which the gods would bestow the gift on someone deserving of it; in fact, it would be not really a gift, but the natural, inevitable harvest or *output* of so much that might previously have been sown along the course of the years, of the decades of reading and renunciations and life (omnicomprehensive *input*). But, all things considered, it still seems to me more in tune with the title of this discussion to define this type of *poiên* with the phrase of Sereni and Valery.

It is more complicated to illustrate the genesis of tales in verse, which, in their turn, can be of a directly narrative type, or more shaded, more lyrical. To this second group of verse tales belongs «Ear of Mad Com». The verse tales that are most explicitly narrative – such as «Blessed Be God's Name», «Protection of the Young», «Hayseed Airport» and «Carmelite Sister» – form the supporting structure of *Carmelite Sister and Other Tales in Verse*.

Paradoxically (or perhaps more accurately: logically) with the latest part of my poetic work I have come back to reclaim possession of the rhythmic song like quality belonging to the first phase, preceding even *In the Water of the Eyes*, as exemplified in the poem «The Academy of Athens as Seen by Caravaggio», which was first printed in 1978.

A rhythmic songlike quality, not necessarily metrical – since I couldn't, nowadays, be myself in those *settenari* and *ottonari* –; and yet, I must admit, my poetry has its roots in *quinario*, in double *quinario*, in *senario* and double *senario*: «Now there was no more need to try / As much as anything for an evening / She could hurt him with what she'd say». The hendecasyllabic came later. And later still its strangulation.