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Poessagio: Poeti Italiani d'America edited by Peter Carravetta and Paola Valesio and special double issue of *Gradiva* edited by Luigi Fontanella and Paolo Valesio

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list of fifteen famous women Sinatra loved, from Lana Turner to Mia Farrow. Further on the narrator returns suddenly to his own life: "A name day is also a festive one, but the truth is I've been alone all day with northerly gales blowing pollen in through my window. Dark clouds are rolling over." The next two paragraphs contain a tight dialogue, then we're back to names and naming, the rarified social and personal life of Sinatra, anecdotes retold through the narrator's father, who in turn brings him to speak again of Caruso and of how once he got arrested, something having to do with professionally unacceptable situations concerning his not showing up at concerts (perhaps to launch a singer to a captive audience), then the possible origins of the singer's association with the underworld, memories of special encounters with in/famous types, all this narrating with a flair for spontaneity, quick strokes that allow the characters to fill out on the page quickly, in their humanity, pride fear twitches and taboos included:

"Tell me, how's your uncle, Joey Gaff"
Lucky Luciano asked me in the car.

"He passed on."

"What a guy, Joey Gaff: flashy dresser, great driver. He was the best driver I ever had. In the old days we were tough, it's true, but, you know, we loved to dance. Joey, me, George Raft, we'd dress to the teeth and go uptown and dance. George, he was the best of us."

"Where did he learn the tango, do you know?"

"The tango was the rage. It was a new import from France. Valentino had danced it in *The Four Horsemen*." (32)

Thus *Valentino* is part story, part history, part anecdote, part personal musing, part cultural geography. The naturalness with which Valerio shifts point of view, blends the sacred and the profane, the official and the officious, hard facts with volatile beliefs is

remarkable and highly distinctive. His is not a narration of the unconscious, a stream-of-consciousness magma, but rather a conscious if bemused juxtaposition of mythography and desire, set in a continuity whose logic of framing is more attuned to casual, everyday, incidental exchanges between people. The syntax and the images are drawn from what we recognize as "normal" situations, or likely "conversations," such as two friends meeting at a bar who wile away an hour by comparing Cuomo to Iacocca, Mario Lanza to Caruso, or how the Mona Lisa one night visited them in their beds. Fantasies of history, the imaginary of a cultural identity, the musical chords of our background. As suggested by the list of sources on the last page, one might be inclined to call these stories freehand sketches of Italian Americana, an as yet unseen or unheard mosaic which is freed from plot and morality, and which adds a seductive voice to the complex Italian American human comedy.

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**Poesaggio. Poeti italiani
d'America**

Ed. by Peter Carravetta and Paolo
Valesio

Treviso: Pagus, 1993

and

"Italian Poets in America"

Special double issue of *Gradiva*

Ed. by Luigi Fontanella and
Paolo Valesio

Volume 5, Number 1, 1992-1993

I am here to present two anthologies that perhaps don't need an introduction, because they themselves are introductions to a yet-unrecognized

literary reality. Valesio in one of the books we are presenting, *Poesaggio*, calls it "a literary curiosity," and it is a literary curiosity of a special kind that seeks a space to expand its poetic voice. They are the Italian poets in America.

Let me clarify in advance that I shall not trace the genesis of these two publications; rather, I would like to bring forward their flavor, their gusto, as when the anticipatory tasting promises enviable paradises. Let it be an overture that gathers the tempos and movements of these two poetic journeys.

Both anthologies are tests. Not the kind that loom upon our students, but tests as an abbreviation of testimonies, witnesses, confessions of martyrs when the word martyr (*martirion*: witness) sheds its christian cloak to return to its primordial meaning of "the one who bears witness, that confesses". And the newness (the *novellitas*) of these books consists in their bearing witness of a voice that even though marginally present as appendix in the deserts of the poetic establishment—be this in Italy or in America—now for the first time screams its independence, its self-sufficiency.

The Italian poets in America are a reality that has to be dealt with, notwithstanding their belonging or unbelonging to the two worlds, the old left behind or the new just acquired.

They are just a handful, twelve in *Poesaggio*, like the twelve apostles, like the knights of the round table, suggests Valesio, smiling perhaps at the coincidence. And thirteen in *Gradiva*, thirteen, let's call it the Italian transgression, as Fontanella dared choosing a number that no American would have touched with a ten-foot pole.

Yes, they are very few, perhaps too few, and yet their voice rings as loud as any other poetic voice spread in this

continent.

Their voice now is gathered in these anthologies. It talks of recognition of the borders of its own diversity and deals with being at the frontier by renouncing the splendor of the world of things for the seduction of the world of self. To belong is to declare one's own being; and "Know thyself," as Valesio points out in his poetic manifesto, is really *be thyself*.

This is the powerful message of these two anthologies whose different premises, as we shall soon see, do not impede their arrival at the same landing: which is (to quote Valesio again) "the place of the heart" where distinctions fade because the all-encompassing place of rest is poetry if poetry means the making from the inside (*poiein* to make—*eso* inside). It is finally the place of convergence, the fateful encounter of father and son, the originating and the originated force where the son of man becomes father.

If there is a difference between these two anthologies, it lies in their intentions (in the original sense of *intendere*: stretch out toward). *Poesaggio* stretches toward an Italian public. It is the story of "suspended" poets, the Italian poets caught "between two worlds" (valesian label). And their story is told by the word "between" that connects and at the same time divides. It is a kind of flagbook (*librobandiera*) where the flag translates the festivity of a new birth, be it of a new nation or a new group. In this case it translates the birth of a new group, a new "tribe" (again valesian term). The desire is to make the mother country aware of this new tribe, that is why the entire book, the poetry and the prose, is written in Italian. (There is one exception: the first poem by Carravetta is in English as if the intent was to throw this poem in a space of challenge, of recognition and agnition and of reference (*rimando*) to a reality

outside the mother country.)

Gradiva instead stretches out in particular toward an English-speaking public. It works as an appeal to the new land to stop and listen and make space for this new voice, the voice of the Italian poets in America and also of some poets who define themselves as Italian Americans, having lived more in this country than in Italy. Thus it is all written in English except for the footnoted translation of the poetic texts.

It seems to me that the scoop, if scoop we want to call it, is perfect. The timing and the bidirectionality of these two texts will certainly help to make this "literary curiosity," the Italian poets in America, more visible and I hope will guarantee for them a place in the sun in the literary movements of the two worlds.

Let's stay just a little more with *Gradiva* before finishing with some words on *Poesaggio*.

While in the Foreword to *Gradiva*, Fontanella warns readers of the danger of classifying Italian American poets under an image that hyphenates them and stereotypes them into an ethnological mold (after all, Fontanella argues, Ezra Pound lived thirty years in Italy and nobody perceived him as other than American), Valesio in his Introduction confronts the dilemma of poetic bilingualism viewed perhaps as a way to "exorcise exile." Is poetic bilingualism possible? he asks himself. I shall not provide you with the answers, why spoil all the surprises, so I'll just send you back to this text if you are a little bit curious.

The poetic texts of *Gradiva* take shape in a distinctive and studied form. They fall into three categories: poetry and the tension of the word, poetry and the narration of the word, and poetry and the dream of the word. In this manner the reader is allured, almost seduced into texts whose

nature has been anticipated before his descent into an actual fruition.

Finally, the last pages of *Gradiva* are taken up by a questionnaire. Four are the questions each poet is asked to answer, and the replies sewn together represent the "poetic" story of all these writers. The answers talk of their dreams, their convictions, their poetries, their fears, and why not also of their loves.

Poesaggio is altogether another kind of beast, if I may use this term. If *Gradiva* has gathered the texts in specific spaces, *Poesaggio* lets them free. It seeks fluidity, rhythm. It is, and I quote Carravetta from his Introduction, "a dance of differences to underline Difference itself, a story of distances, an anthology of multiples or multiplicity." And it is more. It is melody and accompaniment, monodic chorality, if I am allowed the oxymoron, it is desire and risk.

Poesaggio, before being anthologized, lived and lives as (and I quote Carravetta) "happening, choral extemporaneous recital, jazz ensemble." It is a symphony, I may add, orchestrated by a conductor who intertwines poems as if they were musical scores to render a precise rhythmic modulation.

When *Poesaggio* becomes text it reflects in its body the genesis of its name. It is poetry and it is essay. A Poessay, Carravetta calls it. The poetry is the melody and the essay "saggio" from *sapidus* (where the root is *sapere* in the original meaning of taste, savor) is the accompaniment. Furthermore, the assonantic relationship between *Poesaggio* and *Paesaggio* (meaning landscape) evokes, according to Carravetta, "linguistic, historical and aesthetic landscapes." Allow me to go a little bit further and include in the *Poesaggio*/*Paesaggio* the sense of horizon in the making (where the *paese* is horizon and the suffix *aggio* from

agere: to make, suggests the making). Thus the poetic text of the anthology appears as poetry in the making (since each poem can only guess and doesn't know with whom it will share its contiguous space). And finally, and I promise this is the last stretch, let's translate *Poesaggio* with the English *Poescape*, and we see that all the semantic charges previously discussed are still there plus one. The one is given by the temptation of looking at the word *escape*. An *escape* is a *fugue* (*fuga*) in musical terms and the poetry of *Poesaggio* at times resembles the movements of a *fugue* with subject and countersubject, exposition and development.

The alternating texts of the twelve poets appended by a complementary explanation of their poetics border two fixed spaces represented by the introductory essay of Carravetta and the conclusive essay "Tribal fires" by Valesio. While Carravetta tells the story of *Poesaggio*, Valesio modulates its direction. Carravetta *narrates* the state of being of the poet as one "of finding himself contemporaneously on both sides of the mirror, of the language, of reality." Valesio on the other hand *defines* the poet. He distinguishes them in four categories, the last being the "smallest, the youngest, the less formalized tribe," meaning the Italians in America, the Poets of *Poesaggio*. This essay, which slides gently and poetically into the final "place of the heart," echoes an ancient musical score sung though by a modern Odysseus. It is an Odysseus who has come to know and accept himself as "unknown shrine of reality" (I am quoting Tagore), who has chosen not to be migrant but migrator, and to be in self-exile but with the renouncement to develop an hermeneutic of his own exile. What remains important, Valesio concludes, is to do something (*fare qualcosa*), discreetly, in silence, constantly and, we

might add, so that the fires of the tribe will always be kept alive in the night of man's journey.

As you noticed I have not mentioned poets individually. Had I done that, had I entered in the enchanted world of their verses, I would be here talking forever. In their poetry, each tune, each voice, each cadence creates a particular vibration that resounds intimately in our soul. So what I did was something poetically allowed if the poet is one of the few human beings who can afford not to take himself seriously. I decided to summarize all twelve poets with their own words. I will thus conclude now with something that evokes the flavor of a *minipoesaggio*, giving us *un assaggio*, a taste, a sampling:

e null'altro m'avrebbe fermato
se non la scandita liquida fuga
nel tuffo spezzato dal sole
nello spazio della mandorla e della fiamma
io sono un addio
con questa buccia così enormemente distesa
che disegna le parti per dare odore
all'ingresso
bianca cavalca la morte
e sul passo incerto, guarda incredulo,
meschino il mondo
bevendo quel sole che scioglie nel pianto
cascate d'edera
lassù dei monti in fuoco
spandono l'ultima chiarezza le vene dolenti
e il tuo giorno sarà invalicabile alla notte
e gli dei saranno alti.

[This text was first read at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York on April 13, 1993.]

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