

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 8 *Combined Issue 8-9 Spring/Autumn*

Article 31

1999

Poems

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Recommended Citation

Nocerino, Kathryn (1999) "Poems," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 8 , Article 31.
Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/31>

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Kathryn Nocerino

Being that you Asked

I have all kinds of qualifications for this job.
I'm going to tell you all about them now;
I think that you should know what to expect.

When I was a little thing, just starting out,
Back home in Cochabamba,
I sold umbrellas to the missionaries.
They were black silk umbrellas, very old stock,
Slightly rusty;
But, still, socially acceptable.

I worked as a food taster for the Commandante for a whole year;
Then he died (of natural causes.)

I cook, too!
I can tell the difference between a mushroom and a toadstool:
Here's how:
You throw a silver dollar in the saucepan
While you're frying them:
If it turns green,
Keep away!
(My grampa taught me this.)

Later we moved to Florida
Where I had the job of clearing alligators
From people's homes and gardens;
Some of them didn't want to leave.

This is when I learned that life has problems;
I brooded and at length I set myself against authority.
This is something that I'm very proud of:
I am the only poet
Who has never signed a treaty with the U.S. government.

When the authorities come to get me,
As is their habit, periodically,
The earth in front of my apartment forms a natural barrier:
Before they know it,
They're up to their hips and sinking further.

Well, I think that wraps it up;
Now all you have to do is tell me when I start.

Inheritances

From my father, what they call
 Attitude,
 And a tendency to lead with the mind;
 From my mother:
 Loyalty, Slavic gloom,
 And the music of languages;
 From my father,
 The ability, beyond reason,
 To squeeze optimism from the hard nut of disaster;
 From my mother,
 A hungry eye;
 From my father,
 Attitude;
 From the two of them, really,
 When I think of it,
 A constitutional distaste for moderation;
 From my father,
 A polite anticlericalism;
 From my mother, Polish catholicism
 With its scapulars, its miracle-working icons,
 And its gaze, unblinking as a child's
 Upon eternity -
 (Although, last week,
 My mother called the sitting Pope
 "That stupid Polack");
 From my father,
 Attitude.

(1994)

Composition in 7 Parts

The band warms up as best as possible
 (Tin ears to match the instruments).
 These are the men (all of you have met them)
 Who flunked out of High School orchestra,
 Who, during practice
 Were out back with some hot number from the local Junior High
 Or with a case of Bud;
 Who cannot work in nightclubs
 And do weddings only when the father of the bride is cheap.
 Today
 They're playing backup
 For Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

Vlad's no prize, himself:
One is embarrassed.
You look at him
And see the owner of a Going-Out-of-Business store,
The kind of place which disappears
Before you have the chance to get a refund.
He has that air about him of a man
Who's trying not to look in back or to the side:
He owes a lot of money and he never uses the official source
In point of fact, he can't
(Oh, maybe, Silverado Trust)
And so he goes to Moishe, or Ramon, or Vito
Down the block.
What he's waiting for; expecting, even
Is the guy they send to get it:
Big Paulie's Collection Agency,
Eight feet tall with hands the size of catcher's mitts.

Here's Vlad on TV
Sweating like a pig.
"Did you really threaten to annihilate Australia?"
The questions seem beside the point.
It's all a plot
Designed to make him look preposterous.
A gleam comes to his eyes:
He has a secret weapon -
The Cosmotron, or something:
It works on vodka and potato-peelings.

The interview concludes
Or the speech is over
And the last thing that the camera sees
Is those musicians fading out of sight,
Wheezing
Through the mists of the Caucasus.
The number they are playing
Mournfully and out-of-tune, as customary:
Something which sounds like "Ochi Chornye" and a Sousa march Combined.
I separate these guys from their employer:
Somehow, you just know they're day help.
After Vlad goes home
You can see them opening the tuba-case
And bringing out the cold piroshkies
Or the cabbage
The wife insisted that they bring along.

There's a group like this nearby,
A few blocks south of City Hall.
They form in front of Bacigalupo's Funeral Home on Mulberry,
Loop around to Mott Street or to Baxter

Where they join the hearse.
Nostalgia!
Except that nowadays the mourners are Chinese.

I say, if a putz like Vlad can rate accompanists,
Why not me?
I'd have them follow me around on weekends:
"Attention, K-Mart shoppers, here comes Nocerino!"
I'd have them play their customary numbers,
The ones that immigrants request.
They'd do
Stars and Stripes Forever
And that nugget from I Vespri Siciliani.
I'd add these:
House of the Rising Sun
Unchain My Heart
Loo-eye, Loo-eye (that is, if they can manage it).
And when I sense they need variety
I'd have them choose their own selection.
If I know my customers
It's gonna be the Sousa march.

(1994)