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Keywords
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“A Multi-Stemmed Flower”: Reading Sandro Penna in Search of Modernity

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Abstract: Sandro Penna’s poetry (1906-1977), is a delicate combination of melancholy and exhilaration, and shows innovation and modernity inside the Italian lyrical tradition. Critically stereotyping Penna’s poetry as a flower with no evident stem, meaning no external influences, narrows the depth of his literary corpus. In his notes Penna reveals himself as a voracious reader of modern international literature and critics Roberto Deidier and Pierfranco Bruni pointed out that his evident European influences completely lack investigation. Most criticism though do not seem to acknowledge how close Penna’s poetry is to the ideas of “modern” and “new” as fostered by Modernists and Imagists. This essay challenges the literary commonplace that Penna is a miracle out of history and time and, investigating Penna’s archives and poems, discloses connections, references and similarities between his poetry and the major movements - French Symbolism, Modernism, Imagism - and literary personalities of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Sandro Penna, Italian twentieth century poetry, Transnational Modernism, Imagism.

“If a man loses pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.”
(Henry David Thoreau)

“Sometimes Penna, who has been described as a man from the Mediterranean’s pagan past, seems more modern than Montale.”
(Peter Robb)

Italian poet Sandro Penna (1906-1977) has been considered one of the twentieth century’s finest poets on the subject of homoerotic love. Compared by critics to the Alexandrian and the Greek lyrical poets, Penna’s poetry gently combines melancholy and exhilaration and, though sitting inside the lyrical classical tradition, it shows innovation and modernity.

Italian critic Piero Bigongiari poetically called Penna “un fiore senza stelo apparente” (1952: 31), celebrating the originality and uniqueness of his poetry. Since then, other critics have defined Penna’s poetry as timeless and with no apparent external influence. Although the poet
himself created his own myth of literary isolation and loneliness, yet critical stereotyping of Penna as a purely lyric poet limits and narrows the greatness and depth of his literary corpus, accepting without questioning his own myth of ‘immaculate conception’. In the diaries, letters and notes found in his archives, Penna reveals himself as a voracious reader of contemporary literature and poetry. Self-taught but extremely cultured, Penna had a deep knowledge of modern international literature and modern visual arts.

Although awareness and appreciation of Penna’s poetry in Italy and abroad have recently grown, the focus remains upon his lyric treatment of homoerotic love. Few critics so far have identified connections between Penna’s poetics and the idea and practice of modernity in twentieth century poetry. Writers such as Roberto Deidier, Giulio di Fonzo, Peter Robb, William Riviere, Giorgio Luti and Pierfranco Bruni pointed out that an in-depth study and investigation of the European and international influences in Penna’s work are lacking, but still most critics surprisingly do not seem to acknowledge how close Penna’s poems are to the ideas of “modern” and “new” as fostered by Modernists and Imagists.

This essay challenges the literary commonplace that Penna has no roots and no influences and that his poetry is outside history and time. Narrowing down the investigation to notes and letters from Penna’s “archives”, connections to the twentieth century cultural movements such as French Symbolism, Modernism and Imagism will be discussed. Recent works on Modernism (e.g. Marjorie Perloff) have highlighted approaches to thinking about modernist literature in a wider and more inclusive way. In showing similarities and connections between Penna’s poetics and the works of the major personalities of the twentieth century modernist scene, this essay has not the aim to label Penna as a “modernist” poet, but to rescue Penna’s oeuvre from a narrow, national context and place his work inside an international body of poetry. My argument embraces the idea of a “transnational Modernism” running through the work of different poets and writers, despite the obvious cultural differences.

The term “modernist” is a very controversial one and it has always been difficult to provide an ultimate definition. Nevertheless it is possible to find some points on which to agree. The beginning of the twentieth century saw important historical and social events, such as the development of a mass working class movement, the socialist and communist ideologies and the tragedy of World War I. As pointed out by David Ayers in his essay on Modernism “[...] the notion of a group of artists announcing themselves to the world as a movement with a collective identity had come to fashion again in the first decade of the twentieth century [...] Italian Futurism was perhaps the most recent
movement to impact on England, offering an anti-bourgeois modernism, an alliance of all arts, a commitment to creating an art of modernism looking forward an industrialized world” (1). The poetic movement of Imagism, which occupied a key moment in Ezra Pound’s career and the Modernism of T.S. Eliot (translated in Italy by Eugenio Montale) will set the European literary background of Penna’s time. Relevant influences of Modernism on the Italian Novecento, have been discussed by Paola Sica in her essay on T.S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale.

Comparing the work of the two poets, Sica points out: “Until a few decades ago, Modernism in the West referred chiefly to works written in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France but recently [...] most critical accounts of Modernism changed their emphasis, by adopting a transnational focus” (1). The Italian modernists are mainly identified with the Futurist movement or such writers as Italo Svevo and Aldo Palazzeschi, but critics such as Fontanella, Guglielmi and McLaughlin pointed out comparisons and analogies among modernist writers, where also Italian Modernism can be seen in a comparative perspective (Sica 1). My essay on Penna is a small contribution leading in the same direction: re-assessing contemporary Italian poetic production often accused of provincialism.

The correspondence between Penna and Montale for instance, reveals how important the friendship between the two poets was and how deeply they knew each other’s work. Many Montale was Penna’s mentor and admirer and Penna relied upon Montale as the only adviser for his poetry. Recipient of the 1975 Nobel Prize in Literature and most authoritative Italian expert on Anglo-American literature, Montale made his breakthrough as one of the chief architects of modern Italian poetry in the 1920s. He translated into Italian many English writers and together with James Joyce, helped Italian modernist Italo Svevo to gain critical attention in Europe. T.S. Eliot came to know and appreciate Montale’s work and published a translation of Montale’s Arsenio in an early number of The Criterion.

Although Penna used to reject any official affiliation with Montale’s Ermetismo, nevertheless he was affected by the hermetic tradition. The use of epigram, the need for a personal tone of voice avoiding affectation and the richness of imagery shown in Penna’s oeuvre, are all recognisable features and tenets of the Hermeticism. Unlike the hermetics, Penna’s poetry depicts the humble everyday life, using a language that is never obscure, but a clear, immediate representation of reality.

At this point a short literature review seems necessary. Italian poet and critic Roberto Didier, who wrote extensively on Penna, described the
poet’s cultural training as: “una formazione autodidatta ed eterogenea, con visibile ascendenze europee, tutt’altro che indagate” (17). According to Deidier Penna used the literature of the past (English Romanticism to French Symbolism) as a ‘tool’ to re-discover and re-write the present, with hidden citations and imitations (18). Deidier also noted that Penna was “[…] un poeta che fin dagli anni cinquanta era stato classificato come un fiore senza gambo visibile secondo la nota definizione di Piero Bigongiari. In realtà nei versi penniani si erano resi già visibili alcuni senhals inconfondibili, che avrebbero ricondotto l’interpretazione di questo poeta entro i canoni della modernità” (22). Poet and critic Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of the closest and dearest of Penna’s friends, recognized the modernity of the setting in Penna’s poems; modernity expressed by images of “[…] luoghi cittadini con asfalto e erba, intonaci di case povere, interni con modesti mobili, corpi di ragazzi coi loro casti vestiti” (182-184).

In 1990 a significant symposium took place about Penna and his oeuvre. The proceedings were published in 1992 with the evocative title of Epifania del desiderio. In the Introduction, Cesare Garboli described Penna’s oeuvre as poetry beyond the human, base and divine at the same time, reaching the sublime in the glittering of the dirt, making sparkles of the dust.

In L’ombra e la luce: Penna e il Novecento, Giorgio Luti finds in Penna’s verse a basic feature of the twentieth century literary code: the theme of the epiphany, the moment when light and darkness seem to join and the opposition is resolved, Penna’s poems are filled with epiphanies: “In Penna il momento epifanico, in cui le cose si impongono di per se stesse e rivelano la loro essenza, si esprime completamente nel rilievo nitido dell’immagine che assume una funzione di emblema o di talismano”. (Luti et al. 20). Luti later supports his opinions about the ‘modernist trait’ of Penna’s epiphanies writing: “Ma forse è più giusto, come ha fatto Di Fonzo nel suo saggio del 1981, collegare Penna a un momento centrale del codice letterario novecentesco: quello connesso ai temi dell’epifania e dell’attimo […]. Il canzoniere di Penna va quindi letto come un romanzo che scintilla di epipanie” (20).

William Rivière’s paper: La presenza di Penna negli ambienti di lingua anglo-americana, compares Penna to W.H. Auden and the contemporary Thom Gunn (Luti et al. 242-246). Rivière also quotes W.C. Williams’s tenet ‘no ideas but in things’ suggesting, without developing it, a link between Penna’s stylistic choices and language and Modernism/Imagism.

Giulio Di Fonzo’s essay provides a quite different insight. The critic hints at the poet embracing the modernist call for a simple, precise, immediate language far from solemnity, reinventing tradition while searching for ‘the new’ and the centrality of the image. Di Fonzo finds in Penna what modernist
art would call the mixture of trivial and sublime: “È un procedimento tipico in Penna, conseguentemente, il sollevamento delle cose più umili e quotidiane, l’impreziosimento delle cose semplici ed usuali” (54).

In the proceedings of another symposium, published with the title: Life worrying, Sandro Penna: his destiny in foreign lands and the poetry of XX Century (2007), critic Pierfranco Bruni considers Penna’s poetry geographically beyond its original country and acknowledges structural elements in Penna’s verse that are close to American language and Japanese Haiku (Bruni, De Giovanni, Foreword). Years later Bruni wrote a book on Penna, La poetica e il linguaggio di Sandro Penna, in which he points out the clarity, modernity and originality of Penna’s language, which Bruni compares to Wilde’s style. The critic also notes that after the fascist dictatorship, Italian poetry opened to foreign literatures: “… una certa assimilazione tumultuosa di poeti stranieri rimasti poco noti durante il ’ventennio nero’… una volontà di acquisizione di una lirica realistica, T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Cummings” (2008: 13).

An interesting connection between Penna and T.S. Eliot is also pointed out – but not further analysed – in Elena Gurrieri’s book. Gurrieri underlines Penna’s love and interest in the ordinary people, workers, the poor and the underprivileged. Maintaining that Penna’s style shows European and international influences in the clarity of the language and the easiness of the images, the critic adds: “[chiarezza e semplicità]… ottenute senza ricercatezze lessicali o oscurità d’ermetico stampo. Tutto ciò a favore dell’impiego di un’obbiettività correlativa (Eliot), riconoscibile nel naturalismo delle raffigurazioni… adottate a correlativo oggettivo del dolore” (75).

Gandolfo Cascio analyses the way the concepts of Time and Space are dealt with in Penna and underlines how:

Le due categorie […] lo spazio e il tempo, hanno sempre influenzato non solo l’architettura e l’economia della scrittura poetica, ma anche l’analisi testuale e la valutazione estetica. Il Novecento se n’è liberato. Da Einstein a Nietzsche a Gabriele d’Annunzio a Proust a Pirandello […] i due concetti formali vengono prima relativizzati, per essere poi sostituiti da elementi eterogenei e soggettivi, per essere infine negati. Anche nell’opera di Sandro Penna la coscienza del tempo storico è indubbiamente moderna. (27)

Cascio claims that Penna is both a poet outside and beyond reality and yet also engaged in history. Evidence of this statement is given by the presence of objects, places, people that carry a strong modern, down-to-earth, pragmatic meaning like trains, factory workers, cars, newspapers:

[L]a presenza di ‘oggetti storici’, i quali sanno caricarsi di un forte messaggio grazie al loro significante più che al loro significato concreto e contingente. Mi riferisco, per esempio, ai tanti treni, un paio di calzoni, il ticchettio di una macchina da scrivere […]” (29)
Despite all the ‘hints’ to Penna’s modernity and the ‘new’ in his poetry so far considered, only few Italian critics and Peter Robb in the Times Literary Supplement (1990), wrote, specifically, about some “modernist” features in Penna. Let us see at this point what we can find in Penna’s notes, considerations and thoughts that can be related to relevant topics, themes and ideas which paved the way to Modernism and Imagism.

The term ‘archive’ is quite misleading when referring to the paper material found in Penna’s apartment, after the poet’s death, by Italian poet Elio Pecora, Penna’s close friend and most authoritative biographer. Notes, fragments of a journal and drafts of poems were, as a matter of fact, not meant by Penna for publication. The poet used to write on the most diverse pieces of paper, anything from newspaper borders to the reverse sides of envelopes, this material had no classification, but was scattered around Penna’s home; the correspondence with Eugenio Montale was hidden behind furniture. Papers and documents have no date or specific references, but they contain autobiographical notes, criticism about art, literature and Penna’s diverse readings, which are of the utmost importance for understanding Penna’s poetics.

Pecora provisionally divided the material into three sections: A. drafts of poems, B. scattered notes and fragments of a diary, and C. the letters (the whole correspondence with Montale has been published and some letters will also be quoted). Recently Roberto Deidier had the fortunate opportunity to examine and study the original material found in Penna’s apartment. I constantly refer to the outcome of his research (Le parole nascoste. Le carte ritrovate di Sandro Penna) as it is of the utmost importance in unveiling and understanding Penna’s thoughts, beliefs and influences.

The correspondence between Penna and Montale (Lettere 1995), deals mostly with personal matters. They write to each other commenting the Italian contemporary literary scene. Both complain about the hypocrisy of their fellow writers/poets, with Penna seeking advice about literary awards and Montale’s generous appreciation for Penna’s poems. Although there are no specific considerations about English literature and poets which can possibly help us to determine Penna’s readings in the English language, both poets use English words and expressions, Penna even quotes John Keats: “... this posthumous life of mine” (7). Montale informs Penna about his frequent trips to England and, eventually, we know that Penna himself was able to read and quote English poetry (Shelley, Dylan Thomas) in the original language as reported by Enzo Giannelli (40).

Many personal notes in Penna’s archives refer to French symbolist poets. Although Modernism was one of the major twentieth century
artistic and cultural movements which transformed every aspect of art with a new aesthetic, an artistic revolution in Literature had already begun in France with the Symbolist Poets, in the later part of the nineteenth century. English modernist Symbolism, with W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and E. Pound has its root in the French Symbolism and its major representatives, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmè, Valery and Claudel. These poets, while fostering a new way of understanding human nature and society, aimed to liberate the techniques of versification and used free verse and symbolic imagery to signify the state of the poet’s soul. These principles were subscribed by both Eliot and Pound; The Waste Land, for instance, represents a remarkable example of symbolist imagery and Pound’s Imagism echoed many symbolist features. Symbolist poets believed in formal experimentation as opposed to traditional academic art. Common ideals shared by both Modernists and Symbolists were alienation from society, emphasis on individualism and freedom in literature, rejection of conventional social and moral values. Symbolism has always been considered by critics one of the major influences on Penna’s oeuvre and most of the reference points and tenets of Symbolism shared by Penna are the same shared by the major representatives of English Modernism.

Penna read extensively the French Symbolists, translated symbolist poet Paul Claudel into Italian and shared with them the same rejection of a poetry made of statements, the same need to escape dull reality into a transcendental ‘realm of being’ in order to get to the essence of life. Complying with many symbolist reference points, Penna is nostalgic for the spiritual homeland of innocence and beauty that exists beyond and before the visible world. Let’s read, for instance, his consideration of the symbolist concepts of ‘illumination’ and ‘intuition’:

Roma 16 ottobre ’30

[…] Poesia, per me, è insomma questa illuminazione inconfondibile con altri stati d’animo di qualsiasi sorta, sentimentali o passionali, o intellettuali. Si chiami poi intuizione, o in altra maniera, quel che è certo è che essa è sempre inconfondibile e cioè sempre riconoscibile, sia in sè – quando si possiede – sia nell’opera di altri poeti ... (Penna in Deidier: 26-27)

Here is Deidier’s comment on the above passage:

L’“illuminazione” in Penna non ha nulla di evocativo... ma risponde essenzialmente a uno “stato d’animo”, né intellettuale né sentimentale o passionale. La si potrebbe anche chiamare “intuizione... intuizione come rivelazione delle cose nella loro essenza, comunione col mondo. Ardore e percezione al contempo... per costruirsi una poesia che sia “grande”: la “forza di vivere”, la prepotenza. Quel carattere “gagliardo” che si ritrova già alla fondazione del moderno. (29)
Bergson’s theories come of use when trying to understand the concept of ‘intuition’ in Penna’s diary and the peculiar idea and use of the category of “Time” in his poetry. Bergson maintained that immediate experience and intuition are more significant than rationalism and science for understanding reality. He argued that one can understand his revolutionary ideas about “Time” as “Duration” only through experiential, first-person intuition. Only intuition, getting back to the things themselves, has the ability to grasp the absolute.

Deidier detects Penna’s modernity in the poet’s very first volume of verse: “La prima stagione della poesia Penniana, quella che [...] si conclude con le Poesie del 1939, nasce già all’insegna del moderno, come ci confermano alcuni frammenti di diario del 1930” (24):

Roma 1-4-1930

Ho riletto certi miei appunti (sera di disperazione, sottili auto-osservazioni su minime cose ecc.)... Sento che il migliore di me è nella inconfondibile sottigliezza dell’autoanalisi, posta a servizio dei momenti di più struagente sensibilità... Fidarsi molto dell’arte, della composizione, dell’effetto, ma sempre come “sovrapposto” alla poesia, e ben sovrapposto... Basta con gli affannosi romanticismi e le ingenuità stilistiche. Ma il problema capitale è quello della mia stessa vita. Quello di conservare, anzi far rinascere la mia poesia. (Penna in Deidier 24)

Penna shows here his rejection of a romantic and sentimental expression of the “self” in poetry. The importance of human sense perceptions as the only means to grasp reality and ‘truth’ is also well underlined by Penna, showing how the poet was influenced by Bergson, Nietzsche and Freud. The desire for rebirth “far rinascere la mia poesia” and the symbolic character of the Child, the fanciullo in all of Penna’s poems, are also modernist topics. Modernists identified in childhood and innocence the symbols of’ rebirth and regeneration, as brilliantly argued by Sica in her Modernist forms of Rejuvenation, quoted previously.

Penna’s concept and use of a ‘circular’ not linear time in his poems, is also a concept aligned with Henry Bergson’s theories; Penna escapes and ignores a macro-History in favour of an everyday ordinary chronicle. Deidier here and Cascio previously, confirm that Penna’s idea of Time is the same as that in modernist literature: “Penna è rimasto davvero solo a rappresentarsi una lontananza spazio temporale che sfocia in una tematica sconcertantemente moderna, [...] della ricerca di uno stato precedente le strettoie della cultura e i drammi della Storia” (68). The same modernist concept of fragmentation and incoherence of our times is ascribed to Penna in Natalia Ginzburg’s foreword to Penna’s Il viaggiatore insomne: “Nella sua poesia, si riflette insieme l’infinità dell’universo e il tempo in cui viviamo, rotto e discorde e incoerente” (Penna, Viaggiatore 10).
Time to move from criticism to some text analysis; I will compare here themes and images from T.S. Eliot’s *Preludes* to similar themes and images in a selection of verse from Penna’s *Poesie.* A comparison of Penna’s poetry and the work of the most authoritative modernist writer might appear daring and bold, for no actual evidence has been found which can link the two poets. Some critical works, in the short literature review of this essay, have already pointed out similarities of themes, images and language choices between Penna and the Moderns. My argument, at this point, takes into consideration the close friendship between Montale and Penna and the closeness of poetic style and technique between Montale and Eliot extensively proved by Sica. In her essay the critic concludes that Montale adopted the Modernist tendency to embrace multifarious languages and styles: “A comparison of the writers’ work in a cultural context, finally, allows for a remapping of those poetic influences in which Modernist Italian poetry reveals its role in shaping a specific transnational cultural panorama” (11).

Mario Praz, major Italian expert in English literature, maintains that between the two wars, two poets have arisen in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Italy, whose outlooks show remarkable affinities: Montale’s poetry in fact shows the assimilation of strategies devised by Eliot, mainly the technique of the objective correlative (246). Given the friendship between Montale and Penna and considering how deeply the two poets knew and appreciated each other’s work, it is unlikely and unrealistic to believe that Penna was totally ignorant of Eliot’s work and his modernist influence on Montale, who was his friend, mentor and editor. Sandro Penna and his poetry were not unknown to English-language critics. Australian author Peter Robb, who reviewed *Poesie* in *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote this revealing passage about the ‘world’ of Penna’s poems and the references to T.S. Eliot, J. Joyce and Montale:

*[O]ne of the pleasures one gains from reading these poems is a growing sense of daily life in Fascist and post-war Italy - life seen from the point of view of a frequenter of railway stations, public lavatories and the cheaper cinemas. A society in the early stages of industrialization is viewed from its interstices: bicycles and donkeys appear more often than cars or trucks, and the anonymous public’s trams and trains are omnipresent. The railway, freighted with promise, links the city scene of winter poems, marked out by factories, stadiums, taverns and barbers’ saloons, with the summer world of coastal pleasures. The intent and self-absorbed figure who inhabits this Early Modern landscape belongs to the same urban world as Joyce and the early Eliot. Sometimes Penna, who has been described as a man from the Mediterranean’s pagan past, seems more modern than Montale (March 1990)*

Eliot’s poetry sometimes appears to be obsessed with incurable sadness and desolation. Although his poetry represents a personal
search for a hope of salvation, the desolate landscape of *Preludes* shows themes of hopelessness and aridity of modern urban life and its inhabitants. The landscape, the streets, the people and even their souls are dirty, soiled and somehow dark even in the morning light. Different moments of the day are introduced, but *Time* just seems to repeat a useless routine, devoid of meaning. Nothing really changes and everything is just a ‘masquerade’. We are never introduced to a whole person, Eliot only describes feet, eyes and hands. The characters seem to be waiting for something (salvation, change?) that never happens. This combination of disillusionment and pessimism in relation to the world and the human condition and “fate”, can be found, very much alike, in Penna’s poetry; together with the quest for some kind of salvation and escape from the aridity and squalor of contemporary reality. What we rarely find in Penna is despair. The squalor of modern suburban life, the injustice of the world are, most of the time, rescued and transformed by epiphanic moments brought about by the godlike apparition of some beautiful *fanciullo* messenger of hope. Penna describes common ordinary people, workers, humble characters, depicted against a poor, sometimes miserable and dirty suburban background, but the atmosphere remains somehow lively, though melancholy is there all the time. The similarities are to be found in the choice of modern themes and landscapes in the poets’ work, despite the different attitudes or conclusions.

*Preludes* Part I opens on a grim winter evening. Although the first two lines might suggest a sense of security or cosiness, the end of the day is not peaceful as the day itself has been “burnt out”. Nature is not comforting either; the leaves are dead and dirty, the only thing alive seems to be a lonely and miserable horse; as for people we can only see their feet. Descriptions of the end of a winter day in a suburban environment, using similar images and style, are frequent in Penna’s poems and they can also be sad and hopeless, like this lonely workman with a bad cough:

... Mia vita, è stolta
la tua fame testarda. È solo, e svolta
nella strada notturna l’operaio
con la sua tosse a fine di febbraio (99)

Here is another city evening of melancholy:

... La mia vita si appanna, e poi che piove
secolo il passaggio sotto il tunnel dove
tutto è molliccio, ma però non piove.
Qui tra la gente solita, che muove
il passo verso le solite cose
anch’io mi muovo tra cose non nuove.
Più comune degli altri, non so dove
muove il mio passo stanco... (167)
The rain surrounds the poet who looks for shelter in a tunnel. His life is *dimmed*, dull and he moves his steps among old things, not knowing where to go. The reality, as in *Preludes*, is misleading (*vita appannata* in Penna, *smoky days* in Eliot), the passageway which offers a shelter from the rain is soggy and probably smelly: in both poems *the same* ordinary people move toward an ordinary, weary routine. Natural elements such as the rain, the light and animals – the *horse* in both Eliot and Penna – are usually in Penna positive symbols of hope, but in the following two poems the same natural elements suggest desolation and hopelessness as in *Preludes*:

... La luce
non sa della pioggia. La pioggia
non sa della luce. Le porte
le porte del mondo son chiuse:
serrate alla pioggia,
serrate alla luce (77)

Penna’s *Mattino* starts with images of darkness and aridity (*grigiastro, secco*) similar to Eliot’s images. It does not bring new life but death (*il paziente moriva*), the horse is tied to a dirty rope and the Italian word *vinto* suggests more the idea of ‘defeated’ than tied. Like the horse in *Preludes* Part I the animal is miserable, oblivious of a time when the meadows were green.

Mattino
Grigiastro e secco. Ad una sporca corda
Vinto è un cavallo – e non sa più se c’era
Verde sui prati.
[...]
Il malato moriva... (282)

Yet Penna’s nocturnal cities, although sad and desolate, are still “dear” and never frightful; as often an anonymous youth, a workman or an apprentice, casts a ray of light even into the darkest alley:

Qui è la cara città dove la notte
alta non ti spaura. Amici
solitari qui passano e ti dannò
uno sguardo d’amore. O tu lo credi...(dots in the original) (205)

The final line though, brings back a sort of “Eliot touch” of disillusionment, as the love in the eyes of these anonymous people is more the poet’s attempt to modify a grim reality by deceiving himself. In *Preludes* the city goes to sleep without hope, expecting nothing new from the day to come. in Penna’s following lines the same working-class block goes to sleep with the noise of night trains. It is not going to be a long sleep as everybody has to go to work early. But the morning
will bring the sound of lively bells with the wind and the promise of recovery “guarirai” to the sick person that in the previous poem, *Mattino* was doomed to die:

Guarirai. Si odono i treni lontani, – e la città notturna perde la tramontana operosa, e si addorme un attimo in attesa di un vento di campane (256)

The arrival of the morning in the second stanza of *Preludes* does not bring any light. Eliot again avoids describing whole individuals, just hands, raising stained shades in a furnished room. The new day brings “masquerades” which are meant to hide the true meaning of reality: the usefulness of living. Mornings and dawns in Penna’s suburban landscapes can bring similar images of desolation:

Ma poi nella città tutto è sommerso. E la mia stella è quella stella scialba mia lenta morte senza disperazione (221)

It is worth noticing how in the same poem by Penna, as in every section of Eliot’s *Preludes*, the street and the day are made more of “things” like smells and noises, rather than of people and individuals:

Come è forte il rumore dell’alba fatto di cose più che di persone (221)

Sometimes it seems that Penna’s world, like Eliot’s, is without hope of salvation as in the beginning of this poem:

Livida alba, io sono senza dio. Visi assonnati vanno per le vie sepolti sotto fasci d’erbe diacce. Gridano al freddo vuoto i venditori... (20)

In *Preludes* PART III the tone becomes more personal and individual, using the pronoun “you”. The small, drab city sparrows singing in the squalor of the gutter in Eliot are sad and pitiable just like Penna’s swallows in another ‘dawn poem’:

Oh desolato all’alba volo basso di rondini sulla città deserta (42)

The “you” of *Preludes* lies in bed dozing between slumber and wakefulness, perceiving neither dreams nor full reality. This peculiar way of being in the world, half awake and half asleep, as in a dreamlike existence, is one of the most typical features also in Penna, for it is his favourite attitude and feeling about reality. The best example of this feeling is the
well-known two-line poem “Io vivere vorrei addormentato/entro il dolce rumore della vita” (59), but also in these lines, set at day-break:

Nel sonno incerto sogno ancora un poco
E forse è giorno
io sogno ancora un poco (7).

Furnished rooms, often dirty and grim, and unmade beds, are a recurring setting in Penna’s poetry, but can be totally transfigured by the beauty and innocence of a youth and his kitten as in this interior:

Interno
Dal portiere non c’era nessuno.
C’era la luce sui poveri letti
disfatti. E sopra un tavolaccio
dormiva un ragazzaccio
bellissimo.
Uscì dalle sue braccia
annuvolate, esitando, un gattino (45)

Although in another furnished room, Penna’s unsolvable, painful dilemma is demonstrated; in a more modernist mood, which can never be ‘absolute’ but always fragmentary and relative, anguish and pleasure are tied in a knot:

La camera mobiliata nel vicoletto. Il
campanile su dai piedi del letto.
Non è forse l’amore un nodo stretto
fra l’angoscia e il diletto? (370)

In Prelude Part IV time is mentioned again (evening), but it no longer matters exactly what time it is, as the same things happen each day. The character’s eyes think they can discern reality and certainty, but they cannot, because reality is obscured. There is a brief glimpse of hope that something “infinitely gentle/infinitely suffering thing” can come out of all this desolation to rescue the protagonist. However, it does not go any further, and we are plunged back into the usual urban squalor.

Beyond the similarities of themes and images, a difference between the two poets is the approach and treatment of corporeity, of the physical body and ‘Eros’ s. As David Ayers points out discussing the relevance of the physical body in Eliot, “despite the rejection of erotic love and the quest for salvation through Myth and Religion … it is completely clear that erotic love is the focus of Eliot’s poems as a whole” (28).

Eliot’s view as expressed in his poetry is that “human beings are confined to an existence given over to reproduction and death. It is a torment to be caught is such a cycle, since our sexuality is something which possesses
us and causes us to live unhappy and distorted lives.” (29) For Eliot the only possible salvation from life’s cycle and death’s necessity, seems to be the liberation from sex and the body, possibly through faith and religion, whilst for Penna the only possible salvation from erotic love seems to ‘give in’ to it even with the unavoidable sorrow that it brings. Penna accepts Life and its combination of bliss and despair: “E un’angoscia brilla/piena di gioia in me” (401). Also Penna, like Eliot and Joyce, used the myth in a modernist way to give shape and meaning to the world; but for the Italian poet it is the myth of Eros the only light in Penna’s “scialbo mondo” as it gives back to the poet “a strange joy of life”:

Cercando del mio male la radice
ho corso l’intera città
[...]
Ma Sandro Penna è intriso di una strana
gioia di vivere anche nel dolore (217)

Another modernist feature in Penna’s oeuvre worth investigating is the centrality and importance assigned to the image, which raises the question: was Penna an “Imagiste sans le savoir”? As Harry Levin wrote in his essay on Ezra Pound:

... he (Pound) had entitled his anthology Des Imagistes. Did the indefinite French article imply that there were un-included others, fellow travellers, Imagistes avant la lettre or Imagistes sans le savoir? Pound was not categorical at this stage [...] (2)

Although there is little evidence that Penna had contact with the Imagist movement or Pound, it is worth noticing that Pasolini (Penna’s best friend, critic and admirer) personally knew and interviewed Pound several times; while Montale, the other influential personality in Penna’s life, wrote about Imagism in his Uncle Ez (1973). As already suggested for Eliot’s Modernism, it is unrealistic to assume that Penna was totally ignorant of what his closest friends and fellow poets were reading and studying and what was going on in the literary scene of his time. Finally, Although Penna rejected any label, if we agree with Pound that there is no need for an artist to sign a manifesto, the imagist quality of Penna’s verse has to be eventually searched for in his poems.

I have already quoted Bruni’s criticism that Penna’s poetry is beyond time and geographical boundaries; Bruni also hinted at the “American flavour” in Penna's language and the Haiku quality of his verse (2007: foreword). This observations match Levin’s passage about Pound: “The ultimate criterion, in Pound’s judgement, became an immediate one; ‘a universal standard which pays no attention to time or country’ a Weltliteratur standard” (11). The imagist emphasis is not abstract but down-to-earth, the focus is on the neat image, “that which presents an
intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” as Pound put it. The Imagists were influenced by French Symbolism, by Chinese and Japanese poetry and art, and by the Greek lyric. They aimed to combine precision and suggestiveness in language, freer rhythms and innovation: “make it new” was Pound’s slogan.

Imagism came about around 1910. Pound and T.E. Hulme tried, in their poems, to catch in a concrete image some brief, fleeting aspect of existence; they recommended a “dry, hard” poetic style. Other commonly recognised features and tenets of Imagism are the use of simple language, lyrical but not obscure, innovative and free in its technique; a poetic style closer to classical balance rather than romantic uncontrolled sentimentalism. The focus was on the image and its epiphanic moment, the interest was in everyday life and objects of modern world. I will later compare poems by Hulme and W.B. Yeats to some by Penna; but before analysing the texts, it is useful to again quote some passages from Penna’s Diario 1930, about his ideas on writing poetry:

Far poesia di tutto… La luce e il movimento, la città, lo sport, le passioni poi…
Un vaso da fiori sul tavolo di un salotto in ordine e deserto. Questo “mio” mondo poetico è così fragile. Io stesso lo sento morirmi tra le mani. L’immagine di sopra così rivelativa nel “suo” momento! (Penna, in Deidier 25).

So what Penna is planning is to make a poem from everyday life and objects, to elevate the trivial to the sublime level of ‘real’ poetry. The ‘time span’ is limited to the revealing experience of the ‘momentum’ of the epiphany, caught in an ‘image’. The world appears ‘bland’ to the poet, but the same world could be rescued by the intensity of poetry. The stress on the ‘image’ revealing the ‘momentum’ or epiphany, definitely complies with the Imagist tenets. In the same folder containing Diario 1930 we find this note about what poetry should be, then a criticism against the uncontrolled romantic outburst of personal moods/feelings:

Roma 16 ottobre ’30

[È] giusto, anche per me, che non sia poesia lo sfogo romantico, l’autobiografismo, sia lirico che analitico, ecc., perchè poesia è sì la personalità del poeta, ma proprio la sua personalità “poetica”, cioè quel mondo indefinibile proprio – unico […] (Penna, in Deidier 26)

We find in Penna the same objections to romantic sloppiness in poetry expressed by Eliot, Pound and the Imagists: the dislike of poems that are just the moaning or whining about something or other, as Hulme put it. Also for Penna the expression of the personal moods of the ‘man’ (as opposed to the ‘poet’) does not make great poetry:

Fuori dunque sono dalla poesia vera Valery – e i piagnoni o chiunque racconti i propri stati d’animo (in quanto stati d’animo di “uomini” sia pure
sensibilissimi) e chi faccia come Saba un dono di tutti i suoi moti interni, sia pure nobili e pieni di grazia umana e di non enfasi. Ma la poesia è come una “sostanza” a sé, così come la volontà, l’intelligenza […] (Penna, in Deidier 27)

Penna has been compared to the Alexandrian poets, to Kavafis and to Sappho; the lyrical quality of his verse does have its roots in the Greek lyric tradition and represents a further link to Imagism, as for this passage by Ayers:

Pound wrote to Monroe (editor of the Chicago-based journal Poetry where imagist poems were published) about H.D.’s and Aldington’s poems bringing modern speech into poetry: “Objective – no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives; it’s straight talk, straight as the Greek!” H.D. and Aldington shared an interest in classical poetry, they found (especially in Sappho’s poems) the directness they wanted to recreate as the basis of a new modern poetic idiom, providing at the same time an important feature of modernism: that is neo-classicism. Eventually ‘classicism’ became a key element also in Eliot’s and Pound’s projects (2).

Borrowings and allusions, features of Modernism, are consistent in Penna and account for his modernity; as both features are: “Characteristics which reflect the present state of civilization, where traditions and cultures have mingled and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary.” (Ayers 26). Penna, even in his so called isolation outside history, is working in the present; following and absorbing the poetic tradition from Greek poetry through Petrarca, the Romantics and the French Symbolists, to Eliot and Pound and his contemporary hermetic and modernist poets.

Going back to text analysis, the origins of Imagism are usually found in two poems, Autumn and City Sunset by Hulme. Pound added five of Hulme’s poems to his book Ripostes frequently referred to as the formal initiation of the imagist movement into twentieth century poetry. Autumn is perhaps one of the most quoted imagist poems together with Pound’s In a Station of the Metro: both poems witness the poets’ taste for common life and everyday happenings. Let us consider Autumn by Hulme alongside one of the many poems by Penna involving nature, seasons and landscape:

*Autumn*

A touch of cold in the Autumn night —
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded;
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children

(Hulme, Poems) 13
La luna di settembre
sulla buia valle
addormenta ai contadini il canto.
Una cadenza insiste: quasi lento, respiro di animale,
nel silenzio, salpa la valle se la luna sale.
[...]
Altro respira qui, dolce animale
anch’egli silenzioso.... (87,1-7)

The similarities between the poems are striking and start from the setting: a valley, the countryside; the season and the time of the day are the same, and so are the characters: the moon, the farmers. Also similar is the connection between the natural elements (moon, animals) and the human characters, both symbols of innocence. Language and style in both poems comply with the imagist tenets as Pound defined them: free verse, choice of simple words, the direct treatment of the ‘thing’ with no use of excessive words which do not contribute to the presentation of the image/moment. In another poem, Autunno, we find directness, use of a simple language that is highly lyrical but never obscure, understandable by any reader, lack of rhetoric and honest presentation of what Pound defines as: “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”:

Autunno

Il vento ti ha lasciato un’eco chiara
nei sensi delle cose c’hai veduto
– confuse – il giorno. All’apparir del sonno
difenderti non sai: un crisantemo
un lago tremulo e una esigua fila
d’alberi gialloverdi sotto il sole (5)

The last lines of the poem show all the features we expect in an imagist/haiku poem: an extremely delicate treatment of images and feelings and the neat, precise use of adjectives; complying with the recommendations set down in the Preface to the anthology “Some Imagist Poets” (1916). The following poem was written by Penna after his first year in Rome during which he was amazed by the beauty and magnificence of the “Eternal City”:

In un salone in cui gridano gli ori
sorpresi dalla luce dell’Aprile
Il re ascolta cento e cento principi
lentamente si abbattono le voci
si spengono i colori... Il re si perde
dietro un lontano battere di ali (27)
The imagery and the style of this poem evoke a setting and an atmosphere which recall the renowned poem *Sailing to Byzantium* (particularly Part IV) by another modernist/imagist poet, W.B. Yeats:

[...]

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come (*The Tower* 1928)

Byzantium is for Yeats more than a city, it is a place of the mind, a product of Art and Eternity just like Rome was for Penna. The drowsy Emperor in *Byzantium*, fascinated by the artificial singing of the golden bird, becomes in Penna’s lines the King lost after a flap of wings. The lord and ladies in the first poem are the hundreds and hundreds of Princes in the latter. The hammered gold shining in *Byzantium*, are the *ori* which *gridano* under the April light in the King’s hall of the Italian poem. Both poets in their work explore the harsh reality of death and aging opposed to the transcendence of artistic expression, sharing common themes such as the craving for immortality, as well as the imperishable beauty of art over the transient and ephemeral human beauty and sensuality.

In conclusion, as Penna never signed any “manifesto”, his *affiliation* to any group of artists and poets looking for the “new” and “modern” in literature, has not yet been completely recognised. Nevertheless, Italian and English critics have hinted at undeniable affinities between Penna’s poetry and poetic practice and the poetic ideal of modernist and imagist poets. Affinities and similarities of themes, language choices and features have been pointed out in this essay by comparing and analysing poems by Penna and some of the most representative modernist/imagist poets.

All peculiar ‘signs’ of Penna’s poetry: the suburbs, the bicycles, the workers in the construction sites, the trains, the frustration and fragmentation of the modern world, go beyond any cheap ‘realism’ towards a lyric sublimation of the ordinary and the trivial. The peculiar modernist disagreement and the conflict between the dream of innocence and pristine bliss opposed to modern-world physical and cultural degradation, pervade Penna’s verse. Penna leaves us with some accomplished perfect ‘images’ of moments of epiphany able to rescue Penna’s – and our – ‘bland’ world; like the ‘fragments’ Eliot shored against the ruins of his *Waste Land*. 
NOTES

3 Luti et al., work cited.
4 Dr Gandolfo Cascio is a Lecturer and translator at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.
6 Quoted from: Prufrock and Other Observations. London: Egoist. 1917 print.
7 As most of Penna’s poems have no title I will provide the number of the pages of the 2000 Garzanti publication of the volume Poesie.
8 The 1989 Garzanti edition with a preface by Cesare Garboli.
9 The winter evening settles down
   With smell of steaks in passageways.
   Six o’clock.
   The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
   And now a gusty shower wraps
   The grimy scraps
   Of withered leaves about your feet
   And newspapers from vacant lots;
   The showers beat
   On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
   And at the corner of the street
   A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
   And then the lighting of the lamps.
10 The morning comes to consciousness
   Of faint stale smells of beer
   From the sawdust-trampled street
   With all its muddy feet that press
   To early coffee-stands.
   With the other masquerades
   That time resumes,
   One thinks of all the hands
   That are raising dingy shades
   In a thousand furnished rooms.
11 You tossed a blanket from the bed,
   You lay upon your back, and waited;
   You dozed, and watched the night revealing
   The thousand sordid images
   Of which your soul was constituted;
   They flickered against the ceiling.
   And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters,
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed’s edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.
His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o’clock
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.
I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.
Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

In *Ripostes*, by Ezra Pound, Swift, 1912.

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