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Words Reaching Beyond Their Time

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con una traduzione di alcuni *Epigrammi* di Elio Pagliarani
a cura di Stefano Santosuosso

When Elio Pagliarani utilizes historical texts as sources for his poems (including *verbatim* citations), he is working against the strictures and the structures of Italian poetry as codified through the centuries. In this endeavor, he stands as an exemplar of the writers and intellectuals who brought the so-called Gruppo 63 to life (in 1963, precisely), vying to call into questions both the style and the content of “literature,” responding to the profound cultural and social changes occurring the post-World-War-2 Italy. What sets Pagliarani apart from the rest of the Gruppo is the path he sets for himself. His use of Girolamo Savonarola’s fifteenth-century sermons and of Martin Luther’s *Tischreden* (*Table Talks*; they were believed to have been written down *verbatim*, collected by some of his followers, and originally printed in 1566) indicate his desire to look at the past to address the present and the future, his attention to orality, and his interest in historically important texts that were nevertheless not well known. In a catholic country such as Italy, those uttering dissenting spiritual beliefs are not often remembered; although there are some exceptions (Giordano Bruno comes to mind; his statue in Campo de’ Fiori in Rome is a reminder of the overreach of the Catholic Church over those holding different beliefs, and it was erected in 1899, to spite the Church itself and underscore the anticlerical nature of the recently unified Italy), heretics are quickly forgotten, or utilized instrumentally.

Pagliarani’s operation is much subtler and more penetrating: by using Savonarola’s and Luther’s own words, Pagliarani makes his language less customary, inviting his readers to dwell on it. At the same time, he encourages us to adapt those utterances to a different context, the one of the *Epigrammi ferraresi*’s original printing (1987) and of its expanded edition (2001). In so doing, and through his homage to Pier Paolo Pasolini

(added in 2001), Pagliarani continues the work of the *neoavanguardia* by connecting the past to the present: how do we make sense of what is all around us and is seemingly impossible to understand and contextualize? Texts written at times of upheaval offer rich insights—but only if we are willing to pay attention to them, as a poet can. Savonarola's and Luther's fall in this category, one that Pagliarani connects to the late 1980s and the early 2000s.

Put otherwise, Pagliarani invites us to pay close attention to words, in their oddity and uniqueness, and in connection to their cultural, spiritual, and linguistic background. Consider Epigram IV:

*Fanciulli voi non avete fatto ogni cosa.
Lavate via il resto tutta questa quaresima.
Lavate via l'anatema: voi avete la maledizione in casa.
(Hanno tanta roba che vi affogano dentro).*

*Children you haven't done everything.
Wash away the rest of it all this Lent long
Wash away the anathema: you have a curse on your house.
(They have so much stuff that they drown in it).*

From its first word (*fanciulli*, children) the otherness of Pagliarani's language is undeniable, as he uses a poetic and obsolete term; yet the physicality of his subject matter emerges, though the anaphora of the command verb *lavate via* (wash away), itself juxtaposed to *anatema* (anathema), an abstract and striking term. Similarly, in closing, the parenthetical last line joins together the everyday (*roba*, stuff) and the highbrow (the pronoun *vi*, in it, is used far less often than its alternative form, *ci*); the anathema therefore is clarified: belongings have risen in importance, condemning those who seem innocent (*fanciulli*, children) but are in fact to purify themselves. The use of *quaresima* (Lent) and *maledizione* (curse) and the reference to the waters of baptism underscore the spiritual dimension, which clashes with and yet parallels the *roba* (stuff) that is condemning them.

In addition to the verbal and semantic levels, on the syntactical one, too, Pagliarani demands his readers' attention: he shifts from the second-person-plural apostrophe in his first line to the third-person-plural reference in the fourth. Thus, he goes from the authoritative position of a member of the same group as the *fanciulli* to that of outsider who keeps that group at a distance, creating a me (or us) vs. them detachment, which allows for the poetic voice to judge the others. The combination of these semantic and syntactical structures that Pagliarani puts in play create an insightful and productive tension: he is both part of and antagonistic to his contemporaries, as he cannot escape their presence (or company), wants to urge them to better themselves, and yet yearns to keep them at a distance and maintain his own integrity.

Four lines, two historical texts, one astute reader wordsmith. Now, thanks to a gifted translator, these distinct poems can reach beyond its Italian-language readership, inviting the English-language one to reflection and contemplation.

Elio Pagliarani's Select *Epigrams*

a cura di Stefano Santosuosso

The following excerpts accompanied by an English translation are included in Elio Pagliarani, *Epigrammi. Da Savonarola, Martin Lutero, eccetera* (Lecce: Manni, 2001). The translation of the entire volume with an introduction by myself and foreword by Maria Galli Stampino is forthcoming with the publishing house *Dei Merangoli* in December 2018.

Epigrammi ferraresi Ferrara Epigrams

II

La profezia non è cosa naturale né procede da causa naturale;
la immaginano molti sgorgata da disposizione individua
con purga e salasso: quanto più un uomo ha purgato dai vizi
volontà e affetto delle cose del mondo
tanto meglio le cose future sa divinare.

Questo non è vero e mostrasi: perché la profezia è stata data ancora alli cattivi
come fu Balaam huomo sceleratissimo.

Come è sera rompi il muro: non uscire dalla porta.

II

Prophecy is neither a natural thing nor comes from natural causes;
many people envisage it poured from individual disposition
by purgative and bloodletting: the more a man has purged from vices
will and affection for things in the world
the better he is able to prophesy future things.

This is not true and is demonstrable: because prophecy has been given again to the bad ones
as was Balaam very wicked man.
When evening comes, break the wall: don't walk out the door.

V

Ma li miracoli terminano a cosa finita
come è illuminare un cieco, che termina alla luce
o resuscitare un morto, che termina alla vita.

V

But miracles terminate at thing done
like it is either to light up a blind man, who ends up in light
or to resuscitate a dead man, who ends up in life.

SETTE EPIGRAMMI
DAI *DETTI CONVIVALI* DI MARTIN LUTERO¹

SEVEN EPIGRAMS
FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S *TABLE TALK*²

5

Tommaso Muntzer³ disse che cacava addosso
a quel Dio che non parlava con lui.

5

Thomas Müntzer⁴ said he shat on

¹ Il titolo originale in tedesco è *Tischreden Oder Colloquia Doct-Mart: Luthers*. Il volume è una collezione dei detti di Lutero compilati da Johannes Mathesius (Rochlitz, 24 giugno 1504-7 ottobre 1565) e pubblicati postumi per la prima volta venti anni dopo la morte di Lutero avvenuta nel 1546 (Eisleben: U. Gaubisch, 1566).

² The original title in German is *Tischreden Oder Colloquia Doct-Mart: Luthers*. The work is a collection of Luther's sayings compiled by Johannes Mathesius (Rochlitz, 24 June 1504-7 October 1565), and posthumously published for the first time twenty years after Luther's death in 1546 (Eisleben: U. Gaubisch, 1566).

³ Thomas Müntzer (Stolberg, 1489–Mühlhausen, 27 maggio 1525) è stato un predicatore e teologo tedesco, conosciuto per il suo disaccordo sia con Lutero sia con la Chiesa cattolica. Qualche tempo dopo, a capo dell'insurrezione dei contadini e plebei nel 1525, dopo la battaglia di Frankenhausen, fu catturato, torturato e condannato a morte.

that God who did not speak with him.

7

La carne è il mio peccato
il mio demonio, lo affronto corpo a corpo
leccami il culo gli dico, e gli piscio addosso.

7

The flesh is my sin
my devil, I face him hand to hand
lick my ass I tell him, and piss on him.

E GLI ECCETERA
DI UN CONTEMPORANEO

AND THE ET CETERA
BY A CONTEMPORARY

V

Proseguono metodiche
le operazioni di spegnimento.
Giorno per giorno accumulo
la mia porzione di cenere.

V

The switching off operations
are proceeding methodically.
Day-to-day I am hoarding
my portion of ashes.

⁴ Thomas Müntzer (Stolberg, 1489–Mühlhausen, 27 maggio 1525) was a German preacher and theologian, known for his opposition to both Luther and the Catholic church. Later on he became the leader of the German peasant and plebeian uprising of 1525, he was, after the battle of Frankenhausen, tortured and executed.

VII

Non so se avete capito:
siamo in troppi a farmi schifo.

VII

Don't know if you have understood:
there's too many of us to make me sick.