

BOOK REVIEWS / RECENSIONI

Eugenia Paulicelli, *Parola e immagine: sentieri della scrittura in Leonardo, Marino, Foscolo, Calvino*. Fiesole: Cadmo, 1996.

Eugenia Paulicelli begins her study by explaining that Calvino assigns to the act of writing the function and the quality of giving form to the world by way of the continuous and varied border-crossing of visual images, and thus the scholar delineates the tension between the language of the written word — the art of time, and that of the visual image — the art of space. The tension evidences a complex dialogue that both modifies the very consciousness of language and informs a vision of reality rendered constantly mobile by the dynamic interpreter. The critic lays her theoretical foundation on the work of Charles F. Pierce to establish the iconic “ground” that activates the process of interpretation, and while valid and not unnecessary, certainly, this section is arid in comparison to the richness of the remaining chapters. What distinguishes this highly readable critical text is the balance the author achieves in keeping her interpretations finely tuned to the historical, ethical and aesthetic nuances of the writers she treats. Paulicelli has a deft touch in contextualizing her subjects so as to bring her thesis into high relief while managing to avoid the risks of condescension and the recounting of minutia. Much of the reader’s pleasure derives from the author’s smooth tracing of the knowledge of reality that the dialogue between the “languages” of word and image makes possible: from the verification of reality (Leonardo), to the discovery of previously unknown realities which invite the creation of formerly unimagined and unimaginable realities (Marino); from whence we return to history to envision a present and future national identity of unity that would create the perfect resting place and living space (“dimora”) for poetry (Foscolo, but also Paulicelli herself); finally, the word as a relational entity active in the acquisition of reality and in the rewriting of reality through interpretation (Calvino),

In “Leonardo Da Vinci e l’inquietudine della forma”, the author delineates how, in *Trattato della pittura*, Leonardo strives to establish

painting as a “science” on the justification that painting’s theoretical activity sets up the problematic relationship between word and image and, consequently, between visibility and language. The relationship is evidenced in the impulse to narrate the analytic trajectory of science as observation and experimentation; that is, when things are observed scientifically, they become quantifiable and therefore “nameable”; that which is nameable can be delimited, and therefore can be known. Thus it is that in the process of knowing the world, visibility coincides with the very formation of the structure of reality. It is in this way that the act of observation becomes an ethical-political act for Leonardo.

Paulicelli transitions beautifully from her discussion of Leonardo to Marino by taking quantifiable limits as her point of departure: while this was a dominating tendency during the Renaissance, the Baroque period instead experimented with the crossing of these very limits. In “*La Galeria di Giambattista Marino e gli spazi percorsi dalle parole*”, Paulicelli explores the common space shared in the production and reception of the “texts” of figurative arts and written language. For Marino’s aesthetic vision, most concerned with the spectacle of reality and its surprising effect; its multidimensionality; the changeability of forms; the rupture of canonical orders of representation, Galileo’s telescope was instrumental because this scientific invention allowed the discovery of a reality that no longer coincided with what had always been imagined to be reality nor with that reality already known. In other words, the telescope confirmed both the interruption of traditional linearity and the fall of ancient certainties.

In this environment, Marino’s literary correlate of the telescope stages something that is verifiable in language itself — its movements, evolution and contradictions, so as to constantly undermine the threat towards “silence”, and absence. From here derives a modified consciousness of the word which is constantly poised between worlds and rhetoric that respond to different laws. Marino’s literary drawing carries with it two contrasting but coexisting movements: nearness to the object allows definition of the object and thus knowledge of it (like the moon through the telescope); simultaneously the poet’s interpretation actually effects a distancing from the object itself and the interpretation becomes its own reality. In

this way the written word attains the necessary energy to become visual, tactile.

Paulicelli's fourth chapter is entitled "*Le Grazie* di Ugo Foscolo tra i silenzi del non finito: poesia, immagine, storia". Thus we move from Marino's world of kaleidoscopic wonder of reality, both actual and imagined, to Foscolo's investigation of and search for a historical reality that holds promise of a national identity. Within Foscolo's complex vision and profound consciousness of the possibilities of the word, there is established an altered relationship with history understood as myth, tradition and memory, as well as with the new phase of history still to be constructed. These two notions of history are held together by the very idea of nation, seen as an aspiration towards unity that helps create the perfect living space for poetry, literature and the arts. Not content to rest within the historical space inhabited by Foscolo, Paulicelli brings this idea to bear on contemporary issues of national unity and identity being debated today in Italy. The fact that *Le Grazie* remained an unfinished work bears witness to the difficulty of determining and identifying the complex phases that occur between the point of poetic inspiration and the poetic act per se, as well as the goal of national unity. Citing Argan, Paulicelli points out the affinity between Foscolo and Canova (whose sculpture appears in photographs) in their conception of art as the desire for liberation accompanied by the presence and consciousness of death that both myths (poetry and sculpture) incarnate. It is the poet's task to impress memorable images in the minds of the audience, whose reception of these images activates memory. The creation of art thus coincides with the production of history through the creation of memory.

From Foscolo and his macroscopic vision of history, Paulicelli proceeds to her final chapter, "*Le città invisibili* di Italo Calvino: fra microstoria e immagini della memoria". Just as her text under analysis is a narrative of unlimited spaciousness, the critical voice expands here. In Calvino's "Esattezza", we find the notion that within language there exists, on the one hand, the tendency and the necessity to specify exactly, unequivocally, the meaning of an enunciation, and on the other, the wish to discover an ulterior characteristic of language that tends instead towards the indefinite. In "Visibilità", Calvino describes the process whereby the written word itself acquires primary

significance in its being a written word. Moreover, reading and writing are closely connected operations in the process of the acquisition of reality, and also in the possibility of rewriting reality which is inherent in every critical interpretation. Therefore, *Città invisibili* explores how memory fabricates itself through an unstoppable process towards ever different narrative possibilities in which are also inscribed inevitable returns to the same, but changed, questions. The cities themselves, always connoted as female, embody two different but coexisting facts of language: imaginative aperture; the unlimited; the distant, on the one hand, and on the other, the precise logic of symmetry; the tendency to establish exact coordinates in the cognitive itinerary so to not get lost in the indistinct meanderings; in the unpredictability of the pathways; in the unlimited ramifications in language. Thus the human relationship of reading and writing lies on a tenuous borderline between life and death.

Tracing out a line of feminist criticism, Paulicelli locates within the process of narration a feminine dimension that weaves into a form of resistance to death: the maternal, understood here as protection and preservation of life. Moreover, she aligns invisibility — absence and lack vis-a-vis the symbolic order, with the feminine, such that “presence” is given and constituted precisely because there also exists its negation, which then dissolves into the duplicity of the image. Paulicelli then goes one important step further in identifying a parallel mechanism: that the invisible cities bring to light, in an extremely complex and stratified way, the internal contradictions to the very systems of signs to which we refer in reading and interpreting the real, the places where desires and fears are situated.

Thus the word is a relational entity that transforms with the modification of different modes of production of language and a plurality of approaches to the real. In confirmation of her thesis, Paulicelli concludes that to speak of language without considering its relationship with the notion of visibility, impoverishes its very meaning, since the relationship between visibility and language is situated on this continuous and omnipresent interplay.

Paulicelli, in her Foscolo chapter in *Parola e immagine*, writes what could be a gloss on her own collection of poems, *Dimore*: “The revisitation of the past is necessary for the goal of a newer reformulation of the present. [...] Language searches in this interpretative movement to find a fatherland, a ‘dimora’, a place in which to live” (107). In these poems, Paulicelli — Italian by birth, resident of New York City by choice and circumstance, poet, scholar, teacher — travels back and forth in space and time to explore her own linguistic, geographical, and existential uncertainties and freedoms. Indeed, the collection, divided into three sections determined by “contiguity of form and space on the page and in memory”, is aptly entitled since the compositions, which date from 1982 on, can be distilled into only several primary images: departure-return; city-world; past-present-future; living-writing; word-time-silence. Within such a unity and coherence of imagery, particularly in the first section where Paulicelli’s style is deliberately narrative-like, this unity tends, only at times, to border on redundancy.

In the opening poem, Paulicelli retraces critical steps that recall her work on Leonardo; unable to establish the facts of reality, one of the speakers in this dialogical poem claims:

“Sai cosa proprio non mi riesce? Vivere la / quotidianità,
Non riesco a chiamare le cose con i loro / nomi. Ma
quali sono poi questi nomi? Navigo cecità / e passioni.”

Like Marino, she evokes all five senses in “La vita insieme ai colori” in an attempt to ground her own understanding of reality: “il sapore del caffè ancora in bocca”; “il click fotografico”; “la fragilità di sapori inusuali che avvolgono i / miei occhi”; “impalcatura che si frappone tra me e il mondo”.

In the collection’s most playful and yet also the most signifying (and longest) poem, Paulicelli explores exactly that space “between” herself and all else:

“Il punto tra non è definibile — il punto tra non è / obliquo
ma / ambiguo.”

In this composition Paulicelli's metaphysical questions intersect with her critical inquiry as she seems to paraphrase Calvino:

"Individuare i punti tra assomiglia al processo di enumerazione delle possibilità, delle visibilità, quindi in qualche modo al racconto."

Significantly, within these points between there is also room for music: "Tra la lal la" the poem concludes.

The last section contains Italian poems, English poems and what Paulicelli refers to as "some examples of translation". While this last exercise harmonizes well in concept with Paulicelli's overall poetic project, its actual effect is to diminish integrity granted by the single language status, as well as the power of certain images: for example, the wonderful assonance in "di questo tenuo fragoroso rumore" becomes an irritating hiss as "of this tenuous noise"; and one envisions much more than "sunny cities" in the Italian "citta assolate". Nevertheless, it is this reader's desire that, in spite of the last line of the volume, "That's why I cannot return" that Paulicelli does indeed return in new poems.

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