

All is Circle in Rodolfo di Biasio's *Patmos*

Today *Patmos* (1995) has become one of the undisputed masterpieces of contemporary Italian literature. Its thematic coherence and unity of style are particularly striking. Such qualities may be partially explained by the fact that the book consists of seven *poemetti*. A recurrent form in Di Biasio's recent works, this composition is distinguished by at least three long stanzas which alternate long and short verses. It is based on the original 13th century *canzone* which alternated *endecasillabi*, *settenari* and *novenari*.

Di Biasio's language distinguishes itself by a severe grace along with a capacity of intensely recreating the sensation of trauma. Deeply rooted in classical literature, the memory of Greek and Latin poetry pervades his writing. At the same time, a certain minimalism which we could qualify as *epigraphic*, establishes a strongly original tone granting unity to this suite of poems. From them the *mariner of the stars* appears, who at the beginning of the book, announces the return to the island of Patmos.

Di Biasio has often resided on this Dodecanese island, the most northerly of the twelve, in the Aegean sea between Turkey and Crete. Beyond the geographical place, the question which haunts this volume could be simply summed up: what does Patmos represent? Without a doubt, from a historical

point of view, it is primarily the place where Saint John the Apostle is said to have written the *Book of Revelation* also known as the *Apocalypse*. Thus, with the *rumble of the Greek sea*, the initial text, *Fragments for the Patmos Poem* (*It rumbles/ one rumble/ tonight, here in Patmos,/this Greek sea/ È un rombo/ un rombo solo/stasera, qui a Patmos/ questo mare greco*), clearly evokes an apocalyptic atmosphere. Yet beyond this allusion, the intertextual relations with the *Apocalypse* do not stand out in distinct manner. More fundamentally Patmos seems to represent an ideal originary place which figures on the horizon of a quest and yet remains an unattainable object as in *Poem of the Unattainable Region* (*Poemetto della regione inarrivabile*).

The impoverished condition of the poetic word is one of the dominant themes of the first *poemetto* which the following *Poem of Wind and Silence* (*Poemetto del vento e del silenzio*) takes up. Here the distinction between cry and silence is effaced.

Where silence can also be
in the multiple cries of the streets
in the desolation
of these habitual encounters

Dove il silenzio può essere anche
nei molteplici gridi delle vie
nella desolazione
di questi incontri abitudinari

The poet then returns to the sea, which cannot offer him answers but instead draws him with its endless variations:

This latest sea bends
ask for its variations

Si piega quest'ultimo mare
chiedergli le sue variazioni

As he asks this «Greek sea» for «variations,» we realize that it is the historical, cultural, and linguistic source of his poetry, even a dynamic echoing image of poetry itself. We can read these lines as a declaration of poetics. Thus each *poemetto* may be read as another «variation» of the initial *Fragments for the Patmos Poem*.

Desired Reawakening Poem evokes the suspension (night) and reawakening through the sea. *Sleep Poem* isolates the nocturnal motif and develops the paronomasia between sleep («sonno») and dream («sogno»). Of Vergilian and Ungarettian descent the character of Palinurus incarnates he who will return to *The matrix perhaps in water*. We rediscover the echo of the formal connection between «sonno» and «sogno» in «vento» and «vetro» in *Glass Poem: A deaf wind scrapes against glass* (*Sul vetro raschia un sordo vento*). Transparency is a desirable poetic goal but it is double edged since it easily turns to emptiness («vuoto»): *Mine is/ a gesture that remains empty/in night, shatters against glass. (È questo mio/un gesto che rimane vuoto/ nella notte/Sul vetro s'infrange)*. In the sixth

variation *Poem of the Fledgling Year*, these last two elements are still double edged yet they bring not only the desolation of Winter but renewal through the sea: *voices/their honey persuasiveness/The pain of the wind/incites them/on the geraniums*. Now the glass retains "relics:" *From outside few noises/ relics? persistence of what?/They work doggedly and deeply against glass* . The cycle of seasons is echoed in the second part of the final *Poem of the Unattainable Region*. The relentless monotony of time completes its nostalgic circle: *Again Winter/punctual Winter. (Ancora inverno:/il puntuale inverno)*.

Through their concise and lapidary qualities the six *poemetti* prolong the themes of the inaugural composition. They form the multiple offshoots while *Fragments for the Patmos Poem* becomes, once reconfigured, the emblem of the originary and unattainable place. Consequently, the suite of seven poems follow a circular movement, that of *Nostos*. According to our point of view, this circle may remain open or closed or both. This is the image, without doubt, of the manner in which this admirable work is meant to be read and reread. *Patmos* refines and transforms its ultimate variations of the *Nostos* theme already present in Di Biasio's earlier books, *Le sorti tentate* and *I ritorni* (*Attempted Destinies* and *Returns*):

We are inside the circle

echoes of happenings return to us

*Nel cerchio, dentro noi siamo,
gli echi dei fatti ci ritornano*

*At last one can say that all is a circle
which sends us back to ourselves.*

*dire infine che tutto è un cerchio
che ci rimanda a noi stessi¹*

In Di Biasio's most recent volume *Poemeti elementari* (2008), the circle becomes *a trap, it too is perfect* (*una trappola anch'essa perfetta*)². We appreciate the dimension and evolution of the *Nostos* theme in Di Biasio's work from 1977 until today.³ More than a theme, it is also a structure and a movement, the heart of these fragments composing the song consecrated to the lost isle of Patmos situated in the evanescent «Greek sea.»⁴

¹ These quotations are both taken from *Le sorti tentate*, Lacaita, 1977, pages 21 and 69 respectively.

² *Poemetto dell'orizzonte perfetto*, final verse, in *Poemeti elementari*, p. 35.

³ For a more in depth reading of Di Biasio's poetic work, please see my postface to *Altre contingenze/Other Contingencies*, Caramanica/Gradiva, 2002, pp. 269-280.

⁴ The present introduction is partially based on an earlier publication, *Patmos*, Gradiva Publications, 1998. However, it has undergone numerous modifications resulting from the interaction between the Italian, English, and

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French versions as well as the working with Michel Sirvent on translating *Patmos* into French.

