

A Poetics of Childhood: Domenico Adriano's *Bambina mattina*

Domenico Adriano's first book of poetry *La polvere e il miele*, revolves around a single subject: childhood. The style is perfectly suited to the theme. It is simple, yet compact, incisive, yet natural. The poetic voice has been established. It is quite distinct:

Il cantuccio che mi vide bambino.

Come il sole come un mattino.

Vi giunge, talvolta, il beduino
per la sua gemma di sale, l'ape
operaia per il fiore maturo.

The corner that saw me as a child.

Like the sun like a morning.

He comes there, at times, the bedouin
for his gem salt, the laboring
bee for his ripe flower.

Evidently in Adriano's work, childhood is much more than a mere theme. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the great Pascoli, it's a way of being that must be attained through poetry. Similar to Ungaretti's innocence, a condition the poet strives to realize, it is unblemished by the memories of adults and fathers. And like the early Ungaretti, Domenico Adriano's style retains a sober economy of words. Unlike the author of *L'allegria*, however, Adriano possesses a recitative vein, a seeming facility suggestive of children. His poems often appear more simple than they are. This manner is present in his four major books, *La polvere e il miele*, *Bella e Bosco*, *Bambina mattina*, and *Papaveri perversi*. And we note that each book has a binary title based on two elements. Each has a fairy tale flavor. And in each the major recurrent theme is childhood. Roberto Tortora has observed the development of this theme in Adriano's most recent volume, *Papaveri perversi* (Roberto Tortora, *La poesia di Domenico Adriano*, Ter Press, June 7, 2009). Here it is combined with others such as Eros, death, and fantasy, yet retains a central

place. An Icarus like child spreads his wings above the flaming fields of mystical poppies. These flowers are the custodians of childhood and life's integrity: *Nell'orrido nell'oro del torrente / si è lanciato per provare le sue ali* (*In the dazzling abyss in the stream/he hurled himself to test his wings*).

If we were to choose a book which best represents Domenico Adriano's poetry, of course we would select *Bambina mattina*. It is the point of arrival of the previous books and the condensation of his poetic vision. Clearly the attempt to create poems from the point of view of a *puer aeternus* is not new. Many poets have attempted this in various manners. Leonardo Mancino assembled these most recent attempts in an admirable anthology (*Dov'è finito il gioco. L'infanzia nella poesia italiana del Novecento*, Editoriale Sometti, pp. 166, 2002). Montale, Saba, Quasimodo, Sinisgalli, Sereni, Onofri, Govoni, Gatto, Ungaretti, Sbarbaro, Sanguineti, Rodari, Antonia Pozzi, Pasolini, Zanzotto are among the poets included (Enzo Golino wrote an excellent review of this anthology: *Bambini in forma di poesia*, *La Repubblica*, October 12, 2002). With a few exceptions such as Antonia Pozzi (*Il fratellino di quel bimbetto, / a due anni, è caduto in una caldaia d'acqua bollente: / in ventiquattro ore è morto, atrocemente*. (*The baby brother of that little child at two years old fell into a cauldron of boiling water;/in twenty four hours he died, atrociously*) most see childhood as a lost Eden, which must be recovered or preserved in some way. As Gatto wrote playfully, but quite acutely: *il tempo perduto / è sempre incantato*. (*The moments we have lost/ are always enchanted* from *L'assalto* in *Il Vaporetto*, Nuova Accademia, 1963). Alfonso Gatto's playful mode and unique poems on childhood were clearly a determining influence upon Domenico Adriano's work. Both poets show a preference for *quartine* (four line stanzas) and *rima baciata* (rhymed couplets). Both have a playful even surreal dimension to their poetry. But Domenico Adriano's poems retain a flawless recitative style overall, use less rhyme, preserve a balanced vision while avoiding the common traps such a *topos* presents.

Bambina mattina is a highly unified book consisting of 19 poems that move around the single leitmotif. Rodolfo Di Biasio has distinguished the progression of the poems from conception and an interior setting toward birth, language, light and the exterior world (*Bambina mattina* in *America Oggi*, April 20, 2003). Upon first glance it would appear to be a celebration of childhood as the title suggests, but we quickly learn that the

focus is deeper. It is also and most uniquely a maternal celebration of fatherhood combined with a surge of renewal and retrieval. Myths, fairy tales, and mirroring emerge from the pages of this admirable book inspired by the poet's new born daughter, but not restricted to one father's confined view of his own child. The poet now sees the world through and with the eyes of his daughter. His poems now emanate that sense of awe, wonder, and discovery:

[...] quella poesia
l'abbiamo scritta insieme.

[...] together we wrote
that poem.

Tamburelli ora con le dita
[...] forse chissà per suggerirmi
del verso il giusto verso.

You tap now your fingers
[...] or perhaps who knows to offer me
the right cadence for this verse.

[...] d'ora in poi
riconoscerò le mie poesie
se avranno il tuo viso.

From now on
I will recognize my poems
if they have your face.

He rediscovers language with and through his daughter. As the poet father is reborn through his daughter, at the same time, he remembers the myths of place (Rome, the Hill of Shards) and the fairy tales of his own childhood: *Somiglia al figlio che correva dietro / a suo padre per boschi e per foreste* (She resembles the son who ran after / his father through woods and forests). In this manner he renews and retrieves. The daughter is transformed into a son as the father is reflected in his daughter. Reality is magical, full of *fairy tales, sprites, gnomes and mother sorceresses* yet the magic has the terrestrial and very concrete force of jovial fire: *Ora la legna è allegra [...] arde* (Now the wood is cheerful [...] burns) The child is the fire and her parents nourish her while her fire kindles the family with warmth, vigor, and energy.

Domenico Adriano has faced the most obvious topic and yet the most difficult, choosing to write about one's own child. Such an endeavor is fraught with pitfalls. How can any author avoid sentimentality or falling prey to his or her own strong emotions in such a context? Is this even possible? Yes, it is, even though such an achievement is quite rare. As the above examples clearly suggest, the poet has indeed succeeded in recreating an enchanted and unique atmosphere in these poems whose magic travels through languages. How has he been able to bring about such a feat? First of all, as we have shown, he uses an economic and concise poetic line. The poems are all quite short, always highly condensed. They all fit on one page, are never longer than two stanzas, and range from 4 to 18 lines. There is no excess, no indulgence for suites of adjectives and sentiments. Unlike poets who use or overuse the typical suffixes such as Carducci, (*la pargoletta mano*) Umberto Saba (*favoletta, vesticciola, nuvoletta, letticiolo*) or Sbarbaro (*bambinetta*), there are very few in Adriano's work (four out of seventeen poems contain suffixes), nor can we consider them characteristic stylistic elements. If we study the first typical "liminal" poem we find a restrained and somber style consisting of few adjectives with many nouns and verbs. This eighteen line composition has 6 adjectives, 14 verbs, and 26 nouns. This piece, like the others in this book, is terse and concrete, not sentimental nor effusive. Its many objects evoke ancient forces: wood, mountain, hearth, fire, relics. These stable yet sturdy things are accompanied by the creatures and forces of nature: birds (swallows and sparrows especially), horses, mice, wind, water, storms, forests, rivers in a sort of incessantly repeating morning. There is a hint of darkness and

lucidity when the poet reminds us of how easily we forget our beginnings: *Sei piccola e nessuno ti ascolta* (*You are little and no one listens to you*). These beginnings are the source of possible and endless renewal through the earth's and nature's forces. *Bambina mattina* convinces us that the fantastical, the inexhaustible, the wonder of being is not merely in our children, but ultimately in ourselves. This magic derives from a fertile and endless shifting of roles in a double mirror that reflects the past along with the future that waits in every morning. *

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* Adriano's last book,
Dove Goethe seminò violette,
Edizioni Il Labirinto, appeared in 2015.