

THE POEMS OF ANTONIA POZZI

Antonia Pozzi. *Poesia che mi guardi*, a cura di Graziella Bernabo' e Onorina Dino Luca Sosella editore, Bologna, 2010; *The Poems of Antonia Pozzi*, translated by Peter Robinson. One World Classics, Surrey, UK, 2011.

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Antonia Pozzi was born in Milan in 1912. Found outside the city, in the snow, nearly frozen, after having taken poison, she died in Milan, in 1938. Antonia Pozzi's poems touch me as if I were holding a bird (not a wounded one, though), struggling to break out of my hands. I feel some fright and much life wanting to circle in the air: The prick of pushing claws, wings that work—vivid signs of warm vitality—and then resignation, by going still. But before the stillness, many penetrating flights have taken place.

I heard her poetry commented upon, during the centenary of her birth, in a large palace that since 1858 has housed the Società di Lettura e Conversazione in Parma, Italy. Her work was held up in feminist light like a filmy scarf from a trunk where far too many women's lives had been packed away. The speaker provided narrative order to the bleak outcome and conveyed personal regret. Somehow, I wanted more: less acceptance, deeper doubt: a gesture of pain and frustration so that we could feel the irreconcilable edges of the explanation. And to simply celebrate the young life, well, that seemed beside the point.

The Sala di Lettura is a large room dedicated to culture and the assumptions of its importance in the nineteenth century. The vast, polished wooden floor creaks. The natural light working its way through heavy curtains is tenebrous. That afternoon the room buzzed with women, largely in their sixties, dressed in finely tuned outfits, clustered at round tables where tea and cookies were served by a waiter, who collected five euros each for the service. They knew each other and they knew Pozzi's work. They were assembled as assenters, expecting, perhaps, as they did from most culture, to revisit work more than to discover anything new. The talk was to commemorate her poetry, not the injustices of her life. Many women planned to leave early because, here too, as assenters, they had meals to prepare and grandchildren to collect.

The patriarchy, Antonia Pozzi's father, would be touched upon; how he censored his daughter's poems and journals; how he re-wrote, after her death, letters and poems that revealed her agitated and detached state of mind (yes, he violated his role) but also, how he broke up the relationship

with the man she admired and loved. Nevertheless, the evaluation of his actions was tempered by comprehension: The social pressure of the times, his wish to protect his daughter, her reputation, and to give her a good life. These elements were put in play so as not to judge him unfairly.

In other areas, too, undisputed realism prevailed: The remembrance of what life was like in 1912 when Antonia Pozzi was born. She was privileged. Her mother's father a count, her father, a successful lawyer practicing international law. It is undeniable that her father's interventions—above all with regard to the classics teacher with whom she fell deeply in love and whom he obstructed in a prolonged process of withholding his daughter's hand—altered the state of her inner life until the split she experienced confirmed that the life she claimed as real existed only in her imagination. Outside of this drama, which was helplessly misjudged by those who knew her, she had much to envy. She traveled, (often sent away in the hope of separating her from her obsessions). The family proposed music and books. She attended university, had intellectual dialogues with cultural figures, loved mountains, skied, played tennis, was a photographer of real ability, as well as a first rate poet.

Her thesis explored Flaubert; as an artist he believed that art, for all its sacrifices, allowed a person to explore part of a larger reality. "A Bedouin in the desert" was a phrase he used for himself. Was it a phrase that was inappropriate for a woman artist? She seemed to think it fit. Madame Bovary's passions offered a mesmerizing focus. Why interest in a female destiny in which the woman, who made drastic, compromising decisions, finally faces ruin and commits suicide? Why analyze a French writer whose fiction was described as realism? Pozzi, like most women writers then, used men's models of women as mirrors more than as mirrors to crack.

Explanations that afternoon for Pozzi's taking her own life fell short: High strung, too sensitive, unbalanced. The terms for her behavior are unbearable. The basic blindness about sexism as not seeing one's humanity as equal is evident in the tautological judgments. Once resistance is characterized as unreasonableness, it doesn't take long for it to become defined as madness—a line illuminated by the British psychologist, R.D. Laing, who credits the schizophrenic with expressing in a realistic way the contradictions in front of her eyes. A writer like Antonia Pozzi, in the early decades of twentieth century Milanese society, becomes tragic because she cannot be unreasonable. She must turn against herself.

The Società di Lettura e Conversazione meets once a month. It is one of many late afternoon offerings in Parma scheduled for discussions on topics like books and book-binding, typeface, early prehistoric settlements, the

different productions of *Aida*, poems in dialect from the last century, the priest's role in the city. These free encounters attract fairly large numbers. Google maps might pick up the afternoon outcroppings and register them. The listeners are members of a dwindling tribe that physically gathers to remember, interpret and order culture's components. The conferences attract both men and women. They rarely break from conventional molds.

Allow me one more deviation before turning to Antonia Pozzi's energetic, sensuous poems. Translation of another time and place is always fragmentary and complex. Later I will speak about the Italian language and its ambiguities; how English language translations involve choices that eliminate the intrinsic jewel-box quality of Italian words. Many Italian words hold small, secret compartments, different meanings that adhere. Meanings come along like honey sticking to the letters. We lose that stickiness in English. Instead, here I am referring to how words usually sweep along in a story, without establishing how many assumptions underlie the story that seems so true, convincing, and real. Here I am saying translation of a culture or a life must fight very hard to be a picture of something real. Here, when the blurb on the English edition of her poems declares that her work is akin to that of Emily Dickinson's and Sylvia Plath's, too much is being assumed; these analogies set her voice at pitches unfamiliar to her. Her brief life deserves to be uncovered in a landscape where her originality beams light from her Italian humanism.

In Parma, a recent dinner party took off in the direction of Parma stories (most dinner parties here do), but they generally stay nostalgic. Instead, this conversation tumbled into a romp about gambling as a local curse, especially in villages around Reggio Emilia and Modena, where poverty once was extreme, and life deeply fixed. Little changed, except when the Po, whose riverbanks were unchecked above the villages, capsized monotony, making misery even worse.

The gambling tales touched on absolute ruin, a fortune wiped out in an evening or two, death threats to collect the money due, the compulsion of rich and famous artists, as well as gypsy types hoping for an up-turn in fortune. The elaborate interfaces between the gamblers—often from high social or newly rich classes—and the local priest, local communists and local Mafia, beseeched to negotiate the debts and their consequences, were complicated dealings kept secret, since gambling was illegal. Boredom, oppressive immobile social and economic boundaries, explained the compulsive temptation to court danger that could destroy one's life, image and place in society. Was this need in anyway the same as that of which Antonia Pozzi wrote in her diary at the age of fourteen: "Tic-Tock, Tic-tock, identical,

monotonous, unnoticed, until a night like this one, for another 365 days.” Was her notation of monotony that of an adolescent, that of a female, that of a person with social constraints or a mixture of all of them?

The all-or-nothing gamblers on the Po plain—the need for self-destruction in order to feel something (this conversation took place after the guests had left, while my husband put the dinner dishes into the dishwasher)—was hard to fathom since these tales of ruin became hilarious examples of collapse and addiction. Mud figured in many of the final scenes. Irony, threats of duels, made the incongruities seem like hard blows that were ultimately not for resolution but for show. There was meanness in the laughter about people’s plights and defeats. There had been tacit agreement, however, among the guests that, until recently, Italian society was so rigid that irrational acts were responses to desperation. To break open all that was holding one in one’s place, in order to create change the decision to take risks often appeared as close to being mad.

I thought back to an Italian friend who described discrimination against him because he was from the countryside. Professors taunted him as a rube, threw books at him when he answered questions, called him names and didn’t want to promote him. He still could touch the humiliation of being singled out and the professors’ sport of treating him badly. Behavior in Italy in the last century, cultivated by most of its oppressed people—tenant farmers, women, children—was often an effort to persist without protesting in an overt way that might stimulate those in power to impose even greater limits on one’s already limited condition. When a reaction finally occurred it was usually extreme: Violent and irreversible.

How many forms of conditioning to accept limits can be defined in the years in which Antonia Pozzi was growing up in privilege? The mud, the violence, the need to be respectable, the contrast between those who had social status and those who were without it, and then, the constraining nets that existed because of gender but also because families were perceived as hierarchical—which of these elements is germane to suggesting her sense of life and her use of words?

Antonia Pozzi wrote in years in which the threat of war made louder and louder intrusions. A few of her Jewish friends left Italy. She explored her general foreboding and wrote about it as a state of mind. Along the way, she announced her approaching death in so many words, with calmly growing awareness. She recognized feelings of going dead and found resonance with it in nature’s patterns. She looks at death but far less violently than Sylvia Plath would nearly thirty years later. Their conclusions to life’s meaning were vastly different.

Pozzi came from a more established family. She had none of the perceived insecurities of needing to earn a living or finding recognition. Unlike Plath, she had a father who followed her, only too closely. Listening to her work read out loud among the clatter of teacups and saucers, I felt a headache coming on. I didn't want to radicalize her, but I wanted an offering of full space and silence for her achievements and for the impossibility facing her in choices that we now take for granted. Her suicide cannot be reduced to a simple motive, but it was announced in the contrasts she illuminated and, more sharply, in the shadows she pointed out: the rivers without outlets, the dead grasses, hot impulses she acted on and felt ashamed of. She forged a vocabulary. She left it in her poems, her letters, having taken what she could from the work of men writers and her own spirited originality.

She wrote to Vitorio Sereni, a poet and friend, that she was Tonia Kroger, referring to Thomas Mann's character, Tonio Kroger. In Mann's novella we find the narrative of a young man who becomes a writer, drawing on his artistic maternal Italian side and pushing away the middleclass values that are his because of his father's Germanic roots. Tonio abhors bourgeois society and concludes that the artist must be an exile; his passions in love push him to abstractions in art. Pozzi found ancestors for her definition of herself as an artist in such characterizations. What she didn't find or admit was that her silence was augmented because of gender. Her basic definition of self uncovered solace in metaphor that encompassed obedience. She found images to express subtle and yet graphic borders. The poems are quiet cries like the one about little girls, changing their night gowns in a nun's antechamber, who then can light candles for evening, without waiting for the light outside to disappear before doing so. The progression, confines that promise some relief, expresses perception that is beyond anger or passivity. She records the openings in spiritual solutions.

Sylvia Plath, whose fictionalized version of her early illness, *The Bell Jar*, was recently commemorated in a fiftieth anniversary edition, is an iconic suicide for middle class women writers. She craved success. Her children, brought into her work, make us write about postpartum depression. We want Plath to have equal opportunity—the possibility for recognition and the freedom from suffering from the competition that made her life with Ted Hughes destructive. We protest the necessity for her to fight for a place at the starting line, where women writers were seen as second rate, incapable of transcribing action in life. Plath was treated for schizophrenia, depression. Antonia Pozzi, a sister suicide, a woman who felt language shut down, has probably never been seen as a poet who was writing to another side of that intractable mountain of inequality. As I write about her, she joins a larger

feeling of mine: I have so little idea of what I don't know.

Translations, unless stated otherwise, are by Peter Robinson, *The Poems of Antonia Pozzi*, One World Classics, London, 2011. Enter Antonia Pozzi in her own words thoughtfully carried into English. Any interpretation of her writing and her state of mind will touch the presence of loneliness and obedience. Hers was solitude, above all, that saw impassive, majestic mountains as mothers, and peace as a need that put an end to the "headlong flight" from a trap. "Oh words/ prisoners that beat/ beat furiously at the soul's door,/ and the soul's door/ bit by bit/ pitilessly closes." "Mortal cry of the unborn words towards the last dream of sun./And then/ behind the door/ for ever closed / there will be the night entire." Generally, Pozzi makes death a subject of calm, although fire and its arresting effects as sunsets and sunrises also capture her. But overall, peace will be the outcome of her experience: A small plot still free in the mountain churchyard.

Her transcription of contrasts in social class is an acute topic for her. While she experiences words' loss of traction, she continues to feel life outside of her own wishes as equally difficult to fathom and often to bear. She never loses that empathy. Her formulation of a dilemma for a mother is not one about writing, not having time for herself. It is about a deeper social concern—mainly poverty and the human condition. She is Tonia Kroger, looking for love as well as looking for a place for an artist outside of bourgeois expectations. In the nineteen twenties and thirties, when three-quarters of the society lived in near feudal conditions, she finds her contradictory place in Italy there.

In a poem called "Philosophy," she describes pushing the cart of an eight month old "mite" "soft stuff, saliva, little smile," and thinking about the child's mother, who has lost a two year old who fell into a vat of boiling water. She sketches how the mother cannot attend the meager burial because of grief, but also because mourning is a luxury for a peasant. She tells how the new baby can't understand the lack of light in her mother's eyes. She then returns to the philosophy book she mislaid at the beginning of her poem and says that she cannot find it. Her direct use of language is clear-sighted, understated, marked beyond her own condition. The suffering she documents has to do with what she ascribes to Flaubert: exploring a desert larger than herself. When her own situation finally overtakes her, the documentation of the outside world, the sightings that appeared often as photos, which was another talent of hers, she resists the activity of further exploration. "My life was like a cascade arched into the void./ Let me rest from too much leaping and be mute, at last."

Her hundredth birthday has arrived and much has changed for women.

That is important. But as I read the translation of her work, a very close, respectful translation, with much attention to sound, with much care not to fill in with one's own bluster, the transcriptions of her work by Peter Robinson, a poet, a scholar, a translator of Vittorio Sereni's poetry, I found myself wondering if she needed a woman to speak for her, to draw the lines slightly differently in order to let her voice be heard as one that was lonely because the world, her world, would not open to her. If I were translating some of the poems, I would choose to make her voice more assertive and conflicted, in part, by using conventional sentence order, subject, predicate, as she does in Italian, and with some good luck, to try to further free some of her images.

In her world, the first decades of the last century in Italy, with one war ended and another on its way, with peasants and poverty visible, with death a common result of childbirth, of illness, with women of her class offered many hours of leisure and hours to participate in culture, it is difficult to delineate her problem and her subject; yet it is precisely her sex, her definition of a self that needs to slip beyond the borders offered to her in her daily life that infuses her words with their foreboding, restless anguish. "Something from the sky descends/ toward the trembling shadows/ something passes/ into our dark/ like a whiteness/ something perhaps that isn't yet/ someone perhaps who will be /tomorrow—a creature perhaps/of our sorrow." The censorship of physical passion, the inappropriateness of sexual desire in women, she describes to Vittorio Sereni, confessing to being vulgar, not the "good Antonia" but the one "awaiting those caresses" she knows are "a stupid game that costs nothing and can cost a life." Here we see female torment that no longer can be left to be described only by men like Flaubert. She wants to use her own words and she feels the burden of being judged. In images that suggest, birth, fertility, a "whiteness" that isn't yet born, but perhaps will be tomorrow—a creature—that constant concern for a woman—she pulls out language from realities originating in her body. But the creature also carries the ambiguity of an image of a life that was deviated, and, which if it ever shall be realized, will have been generated from sorrow if it is not stillborn.

This awareness of numbness in Antonia Pozzi's work grows: metaphor adheres to reality. Her personal condition and connections to the natural world become ever more superimposed. In the poem "Thirst," she records thirst in the "throats of lizards," the "parched stalks"; lips are bleeding at the corner; the "ferocious" cuckoo is alone, and the puppy howls because the running horse has probably "struck it" in the face with its hoof. "The old dream of burning convoys" is called up. She begins to move closer to

the rains that fall all night and wash out all of summer's memories. She identifies with "black threads of poplars/ black threads of clouds/ on the red sky" ...and then notes: "But ice azures the paths—fog sends ditches to sleep—a slow pallor wrecks/ the sky's colors—/Night's falling/ no flower has bloomed—it's winter—soul—/ it is winter." Her fierce resistance to life that is no longer vibrant is close to perfect.

The occasion of revisiting her work, in Italian, in 2010 Graziella Bernabo' and Onorina Dino most complete collection of her writing to date and in Peter Robinson's very fine bi-lingual edition of her poems will make this writer available to more readers, many of whom, in the English-speaking world, probably had no idea that she existed. She reads differently in Italian than in English. She reads differently if she is read in light of her suicide. Both how she sounds in English and focusing on her suicide remove us slightly from her natural gifts. Her voice in Italian is bright with youth, with physical energy and its tensions. Perhaps she is abstract, but she is stoic and finds most of her images in nature. She is not a victim, nor does she assign blame. She documents reality that "burns until the shores are alight" and "in her nothing that could be burned" still follows her. She makes us understand how right and even natural it was for her to decide to be a writer in Italy. She lets us understand that becoming one was not impossible for her. More difficult was personal emancipation. Her problem was, perhaps, not seeing that being a woman was part of the desert that was to be crossed and understood. She makes us question where her sacrifice originates.

Each year brings her more credit as a writer. Montale reviewed her work in 1945 and Vittorio Sereni continued during his lifetime to propose it as a major contribution. She conquered new ground as an Italian poet, establishing in her letters and poems the beginnings of what few male writers could imagine as being lifted from them: Tonia Kroger expressing the "liberty of dreams" and bonds of passion in her own words.