RSA Journal 14/2003

MASSIMO BACIGALUPO

History and the American Poet

In the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads,* William Wordsworth remarks:

> Aristotle, I have been told, hath said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writin.g: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative. (79)

T. S. Eliot quotes this passage in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,* calling it "the new version of Imitation" and I think that it is the best so far" (75). He also comments on Wordsworth's simplicity of statement:

> I find that "it is so" very exhilarating. For my part, rather than be parroted by a hundred generations, I had rather be neglected and have one man eventually come to my conclusions and say "there is an old author who found this out before I did." (75)

Actually, what Aristotle really said is that poetry is more philosophic *than history,* by which he meant that it is more structured and rational:

> The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. (Section I, Part 9)

One should bear in mind that for Aristotle poetry was tragedy and epic, but not the lyric. Wordsworth and Eliot, on the other hand, thought of poetry as a unified field, a single genre with rather exalted prerogatives. It is notable that Eliot, a philosopher by education, should choose to

endorse Wordsworth's quotation of Aristotle, and not even take the trouble of correcting him on the matter of poetry versus history. For surely neither Aristotle nor Eliot could have believed that poetry was "more philosophic" than *all* other writing, including philosophy. Yet if Eliot chose poetry over philosophy early in life, it may be because something like its philosophic superiority was at the back of his mind. And his passion for Donne, Herbert and Marvell is connected with his notion of a poetry that bridges thought and sensation, ergo does philosophy's work — and much more.

In the matter of the relation of poetry and history, the Modernists agreed with the Romantics that poetry is a kind of essential history, "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," as Wordsworth puts it in the "Preface" (80). With *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* T.S. Eliot wrote his version of Oswald Spengler's *Twilight of the West* and his somber meditations on a world at war seeking redemption. His mentor Ezra Pound spoke of literature as "news that stays news," and famously defined the epic as "a poem including history." He called *The Cantos* "the tale of the tribe," claiming to have taken this phrase from Kipling *(Kulchur* 194). This historical project of American poetry goes back at least to Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* (1807), and continues in such monuments of the modernist and post-modernist canon as W.C. Williams's *Paterson,* Allen Ginsberg's *The Fall of America,* Charles Olson's *Maximus,* Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* and Adrienne Rich's dense poetic sequences (among them "Living Memory," and the tellingly titled *Atlas of the Difficult World).* Poets writing today like Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe surprise us with their fragmented texts and research into private and public history, often by way of documentary evidence. "Poet as historian" may well function as a definition of the American poetic temper: sometimes the poet by seeking to be a historian may even lose some of his philosophic pre-eminence, and be smothered by his own research. The American poet is always the American Scholar, not given so much to the lyric impulse as to the difficulties (and pleasures) of thinking things out and communicating

them to an audience of fellow-students. This-explains why American poetry has remained both more Augustan (think of Anthony Hecht) and more avant-garde (from Stein to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets) than its European counterparts. It is "neat as a bird's beak" (Pound's canto 99) or opaque and relentless like a sermon by a New England minister (Zukofsky, Olson). In any case, it is peculiar and frequently eccentric.

An excellent opportunity to seize today's poetry scene was recently offered to Italian readers by Mark Strand, himself a major figure, with a bilingual anthology, *West of Your Cities: nuova antologia della poesia americana.* Strand presents twelve poets, born betweem 1934 and 1950, who have come after the Beat generation, the Black Mountain group, and the New York School, all of which are quite well-known in Italy though only the Beats are often reprinted. The book includes painstaking translations by Damiano Abeni, a Roman M.D. with a passion for American poetry, and is a fascinating introduction to some major personalities. Strand is a descendant of Wallace Stevens — more humorous and less forbidding, but nevertheless given to abstraction and regular forms. Frank Bidart, the first poet anthologized (they are arranged in alphabetic order), presents two long self-portraits of sick people, one of them a killer and raper: an unconfortable echo-chamber of consciousness, very much related to current events. Charles Simic and C.K. Williams address contemporary politics through parables; witty and dramatic, while Jorie Graham (who grew up in Rome) and Charles Wright (who also spent lots of time in Italy and translated Montale) reflect on process in an organic style that ultimately derives from Whitman and Pound. Louise Gluck follows in Sylvia Plath's footsteps by inspecting an anguished world of personal relations and choosing, natural metaphors in short colloquial lines. With *West of Your Cities* Strand and Abeni have performed a notable service for the Italian reader and the student of American culture.

Could one teach contemporary American history from this 318-page book? Readers of *RSA* are encouraged to try it on their students. I have

found that these contemporary writers engage my students' attention. But I have also used as an example of a poet immersed in contemporary history Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose anthology *These Are My Rivers* (available in Italy in an inexpensive edition for which I wrote an introduction) is very much a history of the latter part of the 20th century, and an emotional response to it. A well-chosen anthology is a way of tuning in on some contemporary voices, and discover what their common note is, if any. Whether concerned with history or not, poems are certainly historical documents.

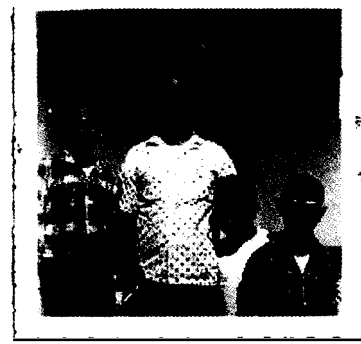
I found myself reading with students of a translation course a poem by Charles Wright, "Archaeology" *(Poetry,* August 2004):

The older we get, the deeper we dig into our childhoods,
Hoping to find the radiant cell
That washed us, and caused our lives
    to glow in the dark like clock hands
Endlessly turning toward the future,
Tomorrow, day after tomorrow, the day after that,
        all golden, all in good time.
Hiwassee Dam, North Carolina.
                Still 1942,
Still campfire smoke in both our eyes, my brother and I
Gaze far out at the lake in sunflame,
Expecting our father at any moment, like Charon, to appear
Back out of the light from the other side,
        low-gunwaled and loaded down with our slippery dreams.
Other incidents flicker like foxfire in the black
Isolate distance of memory,
                cross-eyed, horizon-haired.
Which one, is it one, is it anyone that cleans us, clears us,
That relimbs our lives to shining?
One month without rain, two months,
                third month of the new year,
Afternoon breeze-rustle dry in the dry needles of hemlock and pine.
I can't get down deep enough.

Sunlight flaps its enormous wings and lifts off from the back yard,
The wind rattles its raw throat,
but I still can't go deep enough.

This is an old man's poem, a Wordsworthian recollection of a moment in childhood, framed by a reflection on the sustenance one can (or cannot) find in such "archaeology." In the last lines, however, the "dry" present seems just as rich in metaphors as the distant past. A Poundian at heart, Wright cannot but remember the final lines of canto 116 ("Charity I have had some times, / I cannot make it flow thru"). In any case, the earnestness of this going deep into the past and questioning its worth seems to me typically American. There's a mood of self-accusation, and there is a concern with the "back yard" which is Whitmanian in its sticking to the near at hand.

When my translation students and I looked at the details of the scene salvaged from the past, we wondered what to make of "cross-eyed, horizon-haired," apparent qualifications of the "foxfire" of memory. One student said she had Googled "horizon-haired" and only come up with one occurrence, and this in Wright's own poem, which she had found reproduced in a blog. I followed suit, and sure enough found that a young American woman who calls her blog "Bellydancer's Nightcap" had taken the trouble to copy out "Archaeology" on 16 September 2004. What was interesting was that she added two snapshots from an old album of *"my Dad with his brothers and father"*, with the old jagged frames of the fifties:



So for her this poem about camping with one's father and little brother in North Carolina was personally relevant and made her think of *her* father and grandparents, of the family line, and of time. In her other entries this woman in her twenties appeared quite gifted and bright, but completely normal in her life — she married a man who was leaving for Iraq and told quite an adventurous tale about it, and now (2005) has had her first child. It was interesting to see how a "highbrow" modern poet could hold a place in her life (though in the next entry I found her listening to a dead friend's favorite song, by Paolo Conte). I still would like to explore the possible use of this kind of blog in a course on American culture like the ones I teach. (God plays a larger role in Bellydancer's thoughts than he probably would in those of most of my students.)

However, we had still to deal with "horizon-haired". I thought I would. bother Charles Wright himself. He kindly supplied an authorial interpretation:

> "cross-eyed, horizon-haired" refers to the foxfire of memory and its half-false illumination. The two double adjectives mean out of focus and myopic, regarding the viewer trying to look back. I know "horizon-haired" sounds odd but it's part of myopia; one sees little light spikes above everything. Anyhow, that's what I had in mind.
>
> . . . As for the poem, it's just the children's usual trust for their father. We're waiting for him to return, having finished his trip across the water.

This was very helpful, though it was not easy to see how the two words could mean what Charles said he wants them to. He also told me that the horizon looks kind of hairy to somebody who is myopic. But "horizon-haired" seems to be constructed on the model of "fair-haired," "dark-haired," where the first word qualifies the second and not vice versa. We can think about that. Meanwhile, some readers may be interested in the (unsatisfactory) translation we finally produced:

Archeologia

Più invecchiamo, più profondamente scaviamo nella nostra infanzia,
sperando di trovare la cellula radiante
che ci lavò, e fece in modo che le nostre vite
brillassero al buio come lancette d'orologio
che procedono ininterrottamente verso il futuro,
domani, dopodomani, dopodomanlaltro,
tutto dorato, tutto a suo tempo.

Lago Hiwassee, North Carolina.
Ancora 1942,
ancora con il fumo del bivacco negli occhi, mio fratello e io
scrutiamo in lontananza il lago infiammato dal sole,
aspettando che da un momenta all'altro nostro padre, come Caronte,
riemerga dalla luce dalla sponda opposta,
con il bordo quasi a pelo dell'acqua, carico dei nostri sogni scivolosi.

Altri momenti guizzano come fuochi fatui nella nera
isolata distanza della memoria,
sfuocati, sfrangiati.
Quale di essi, è uno di essi, è uno qualsiasi di essi che ci pulisce, ci assolve,
ricostituisce le nostre vite fino a renderle luminose?

Un mese senza pioggia, due mesi,
terzo mese del nuovo anno,
stormire pomeridiano della brezza, secco degli aghi secchi di abete e pino.
Non riesco ad andare abbastanza in profondo.
Il sole sbatte le sue ali enormi e si innalza dal cortile,
il vento si schiarisce la gola rauca,
ma ancora non riesco a scendere abbastanza in profondo.

An advantage for a translator of much American poetry is that the prose sense is quite explicit and can to a certain extent be carried across to another language. As for the music, that is a subjective matter. Charles Wright is addressing the common reader, and his object is truth to experience. So much so that a young woman responded immediately to

these lines and quoted them in her blog. This teaches us something about American poetry. To quote Whitman's famous lines about the American muse in "Song of the Exposition":

> By thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle undismay'd,
> Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial fertilizers,
> Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay,
> She's here, install'd amid the kitchen ware! (343)

Two recent conferences in 2005 gave opportunity to reflect on poetry and history. The XXI International Ezra Pound Conference, held in Rapallo, 4-7 July 2005, was devoted to the theme "Ezra Pound, Language and Persona." Some seventy papers considered aspects of Pound's language and "masks." For example, Fabian Ironside of East Anglia, discussed "Traces of Jacksonian Humor in Pound's Writing," placing Pound in the tradition of humorous cacography ("I' maskin' you"), and Stefano Maria Casella, a contributor to this issue of *RSA,* looked at the much-debated Italian cantos 72-73 ("Making Eyetalian New"). Casella left me dumbfounded by quoting back at me about ten different opinions I have printed on the value of these cantos (for which I have a high consideration, these being among Pound's most compelling as language, poetry and history). Very well, I contradict myself. Pound's many historical masks provided a fruitful field. Stephen Wilson spoke of "John Quincy Adams in Canto 34," Peter Makin of Confucius, Caterina Ricciardi of the Jamesian Pound, Diana Colecott of Pound's African masks... In fact Pound speaks explicitly of a fellow African American prisoner in well-known passage of canto 74:

> of the Baluba mask: "doan you tell no one
> I made you that table"
> methenamine eases the urine
> and the greatest is charity
> to be found among those who have not observed
> regulations (454)

Pound suggests succinctly the speaker's dialect pronunciation, showing his penchant for acting out many voices. Here surely the muse is happily installed among tables, convicts, guards, and methenamine. She is at work however in the touching reference to 1 Corinthians 13 ("but the greatest of these is charity") and in the masterful enjambment before "regulations" — the great actor's pause before getting the last word home.

Various talks dealt with Pound's problematic relationship to fascism. For example, Danilo Breschi suggested that he fits in with a long line of intellectuals that were wooed by Mussolini and quoted some interesting observations by Giovanni Ansaldo on this phenomenon. Breschi has written a book on Camillo Pellizzi (1896-1979), an interesting Fascist intellectual who was a student of English, and wrote several entries for the *Dizionario Bompiani delle Opere,* including one on *The Innocents Abroad* which protests against Mark Twain's disrespect for Italian culture!

To me, one of the most rewarding offerings on the program was Walter Baumann's "In Principio Verbum: A Seminar on lines 76 to 145 of Canto 74." Instead of the usual monological paper, Walter (who taught at Belfast) just went over this dense passage in the course of an hour, asking the audience to help along with the explication. What ensued was a lively confrontation to which everybody could contribute his or her special knowledge — of Italian, the Latin mass, Gardone, Bianca Capello, and so on. We were soon out of our depth, but the resonance of the lines we were reading was unmistakable. This kind of seminar discussion would be a good model for future conferences. Organizers take note.

Several sessions were devoted to "live reviews" of recent critical contributions, among them the Library of America edition of Pound's *Poems and Translations* (2003). This has been the object of critical debate because the editor, Richard Sieburth, has made some questionable editorial decisions, for example to begin with *Hilda's Book,* a sheaf of poems Pound gave Hilda Doolittle in 1907 but never published as such. Thus when we get to Pound's first book, *A Lume Spento* (1908), some

poems are omitted because already presented as part of *Hilda's Book*. Other uncollected poems are missing for no good reason, among them the very fascinating "For Italico Brass" *(Collected Early Poems* 253-54, on Brass's painting *La processione dei morti),* to which a whole seminar was devoted in 2004 by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (see the proceedings, *Venezia 1908).* However, the Library of America edition is clearly an event in Pound studies, and even the *New York Times Book Review,* never very friendly to Old Ezra, admitted that if there is a place for Longfellow in the LoA, there may as well be one for EP ("If we can live with Longfellow, we can live with him" — Gates 12).

Having the conference in Rapallo was a way of bringing home to the participants how much Pound's work is rooted in place and history. A map was provided so that participants could walk the roads and hill paths and look down at a landscape "in time" (canto 47) — and out of time. For example at the Pozzetto, a rocky swimming place between Rapallo and Zoagli:

> "C'e il babao," said the young mother
> and the bathers like small birds under hawk's eye
> shrank back under the cliff's edge at il Pozzetto
> al Tigullio. (458-59)

It is only recently that I found in a Pound letter a clue to this passage from canto 74. It is a wartime scene. The enemy bombers are arriving and the mother calls back the children who are swimming. 1943? 1944? The poet was watching and noting the language, the landscape, and the violence of the "babao." He indicates indirectly the nature of the "babau" (as I think we would call it in Italy) by comparing bathers and planes to birds and hawk. Like Charles Wright, who sees the sun flopping his wings. Only here the image is more closely related to the violence that is its secret implication.

Another great modernist, Wallace Stevens, who died in August 1955, was celebrated in Oxford, 25-27 August, at the Rothermere American

Institute. The conference, impeccably organized by Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg, was titled "Fifty Years On: Wallace Stevens in Europe." Stevens has not become a familiar figure like Eliot and Pound over here, not even in England. He's like a big cruiser (Seamus Heaney's comparison), all lit up, sucking up European influences but transforming them into a unique American idiom, as abstract as a theological treatise. An artist, Helga Kos, showed us a book of images inspired by the late Stevens poems set by Ned Rorem: an artist's book that tantalizes and surprises, as Stevens's work always does. There were of course talks on Stevens and Wordsworth and Stevens and Heidegger, but I'm not sure that the latter (whom Stevens never read) has anything to do with the Hartford executive. It's a wrong impression to give students, that you have to read this or that before you can handle a poet. Especially since it is hard to prove that any external information is helpful with Stevens. As with Pound's bombers, it is probably useful to suggest that Stevens's "Auroras of Autumn" are the Northern Lights, but there more or less it ends. This brings us to the New Historical Stevens that has been discovered by critics in the last decade or so. A seminar was devoted to "Esthétique du Mal," a major if uneven sequence of 1944, which opens thus:

> He was at Naples writing letters home
> And, between his letters, reading paagraphs
> On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned
> For a month. (313)

Beverly Maeder (Lausanne) opened the seminar by showing us pictures of American troops in occupied Naples photographed by Robert Capa, and reminding us that Vesuvius did erupt in 1944. But was the occupation of Naples, the misery and turmoil and absurdity portrayed for example by Norman Lewis in *Naples* '44, was, this relevant to Stevens's poem? Or rather, was "Esthétique du Mal" a relevant response to the events ? Because it appears that it was written in answer to a letter by a soldier to the *Kenyon Review* complaining that its contents were irrelevant to history. So Stevens wrote in canto 7:

> How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,
> The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
> The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,
> The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.... (318-19)

I'm not sure the combatants would have found this helpful. Thus, precisely by suggesting a historical test for "Esthétique du Mal," Maeder highlighted an inadequacy. From Stevens at least we cannot expect a direct response to the tragedy of war. He would have been unfaithful to his muse had he changed his mode. And critics who try to explain his relevance by direct recourse to history are misleading. Stevens offers consolation for those who are ready to be consoled, and many are. "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) has a coda that goes as far as Stevens can towards a response to the soldier's question:

> Soldier, there is a war between the mind
> and sky, between thought and day and night....
>
> How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
> If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech. (407-08)

"Proper words" is a final good. Otherwise, it is part of a soldier's vocation to be ready to die, and this he can do more humanely, as he can live more humanely, thanks to the Hartford writer. This position has been found wanting, even offensive, but Stevens is very serious. The poet's words are those of the funeral service and of the marriage service. Men need both, to remember what it is to live fully in language and history. It can be said that Stevens has a sense of the possible grandeur of human destiny, of the destiny of the individual soldier, meaningless though his death may be to others. Pound, though closer to our immediate reactions, and pitiful towards the men who fight and die, lacks this consolation. For example, he writes of the soldiers in canto 76:

> po'eri dia'oli sent to the slaughter

Knecht gegen Knecht
to the sound of the bumm drum, to eat remnants
for a usurer's holiday to change the
price of the currency (482-83)

Pound believes he knows the economic and ideological reasons of the war, and that is enough to deprive the soldier's slaughter of significance and grandeur. He can only pity them. Stevens on the other hand does not judge, and after all for him the soldier is Man, one example of a general situation, and it is the poet's job to make human sense, word sense, of the confusion of history.

WORKS CITED

Aristotle. *Poetics.* Transl. S. H. Butcher. http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.

Breschi, Danilo; Longo, Gisella. *Camillo Pellizzi. La ricerca delle élites tra politica e sociologia.* Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2003.

Eliot, T. S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,* London: Faber, 1933, rpt. 1964.

Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. *Poesie. Questi sono i miei fiumi. Antologia personale 1955/1993.* Ed. Massimo Bacigalupo. Transl. Lucia Cucciarelli. Roma: Newton, 1996.

Gates, David. "A Black Jacket for Old Ez." *New York Times Book Review,* 1 February 2004. 12.

Lewis, Norman. *Naples '44: An Intelligence Officer in the Italian Labyrinth.* London: Eland, 2002.

Mamoli Zorzi, Rosella. Ed. *Venezia 1908. Ezra Pound e Italico Brass.* Venezia: Edizioni della Laguna, 2004.

Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos.* 13th printing. New York: New Directions, 1995

-. *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound.* Ed. Michael John King. New York: New Directions, 1982.

Guide to Kulchur. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1952.

Poems and Translations. Ed. Richard Sieburth. New York: The Library of America, 2003.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems.* New York: Knopf, 1954.

Strand, Mark; Abeni, Damiano . Eds. *West of Your Cities: nuova antologia della poesia americana.* Roma: Minimum Fax, 2003.

Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose.* Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: The Library of America, 1982.

Wordsworth, William. *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism.* Ed. W.J.B. Owen. London: Routledge, 1974.