

BOOK REVIEW

‘E se paesani / zoppicanti sono questi versi’. Povertà e follia nell’opera di Amelia Rosselli, by SARA SERMINI, Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2019, 252pp., €24 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-22-26638-5

Publication in the Mondadori series *I Meridiani* has become the ultimate dream of everyone involved in Italian literature. Although often a power game, a matter of ‘dangerous’ relationships and, *ça va sans dire*, economic returns, having one’s own ‘Meridiano’ is comparable to being awarded the poetic laurel with which senator Orso dell’Anguillara crowned Francesco Petrarca in the Campidoglio on 8 April 1341. Unsurprisingly, this honour was bestowed upon Amelia Rosselli, certainly the most important woman in twentieth-century Italian poetry and, beyond any gender distinction (Rosselli herself preferred to be labelled *poeta* rather than *poetessa*), perhaps the most important poetic voice of twentieth-century Italy. From the beginning of her poetic career, experimental groups active in the late 1950s and early 1960s – respectively, Pasolini’s ‘Officina’ and the neo-avant-garde ‘Novissimi’ and ‘Gruppo 63’ – tried, in vain, to enlist her among their ranks. In 1963, Pasolini wrote about her verses in the journal *Menabò*: ‘I would say that I have never seen, in recent years, such a product, so powerfully amorphous, so objectively superb.’ Yet Rosselli remains a poet who escapes any label: her work is a ripe and magical orchard, constantly bearing new fruit and thus creating the need for new studies.

Rosselli’s collected works were issued in the *Meridiani* series in 2012, with a timely introduction by Emmanuela Tandello, one of the major scholars of Rosselli’s poetry. At that point, her poetry had already been the object of several studies, both in Italy and abroad: but the publication of her collected works gave rise to countless important critical readings, which demonstrate the impossibility of confining her work within a definition, a poetical trend or path. I am thinking in particular, among many others, of the two essays by Thomas Peterson (*Il manierismo e l’estetica dell’irregolare nella poesia di Amelia Rosselli*) (*Mannerism and the Aesthetics of the Irregular in the Poetry of Amelia Rosselli*) and Federica Santini (*Amelia Rosselli oltre lo schizomorfismo*) (*Amelia Rosselli beyond schizomorphism*) in the journal *Autografo* (50, 2013), *Laura Barile legge Amelia Rosselli* (*Laura Barile Reads Amelia Rosselli*, Notetempo, 2014), *I santi padri di Amelia Rosselli. ‘Variazioni belliche’ e l’avanguardia* (*Amelia Rosselli’s Sacred Fathers. ‘War Variations’ and the Avant-Garde*) by Antonio Loreto (Arcipelago Edizioni, 2014) and *Amelia Rosselli: biografia e poesia* by Stefano Giovannuzzi (Interlinea, 2017). The volume by Sara Sermini is in the same vein: her attention is focused, as the title suggests, on the recurring themes of poverty and madness in Rosselli’s work, whose roots are sought in the tragic events that marked the poet’s life and her perceived and permanent state of exile. This analysis is meticulously expanded to examine the influence of her formative readings, her working experiences, cultural movements of her time (in particular Jungian psychoanalysis), and her encounter with some key characters (Rocco Scotellaro, of course, but also Adriano Olivetti and the ethnomusicologist Ernesto De Martino).

The volume opens with a short essay by Antonella Anedda – to whom we also owe the precious introduction to Rosselli’s *Impromptu* (Mancuso Editore, 1993) – that highlights the numerous merits of Sermini’s work, including that of ‘going back to the origins and at the same time showing the

evolution of words such as action and poverty in Rosselli's poetics, illuminating unprecedented aspects of her perturbing presence in Italian literary circles' or her reflection 'on the contiguity of poverty and madness, between the *fool*, figure of truth, and the vanity of power', whose seeds can be identified in Rosselli's Shakespearean cultural upbringing. A brief introduction by Sermini follows, outlining the structure and objectives of her study and preceding the corpus of the volume, which is divided into three chapters. These are followed by two appendices containing first, a letter to Rosselli's brother John dated 1955 that includes two unpublished texts (one in French and one in English), and second, seven letters and two postcards sent by Rosselli to Giovanni Giudici. In the opening chapter ("A Shadow of Revolutionary Humanism": Philosophical-Political Formation: Renegotiations of Identity'), Sermini emphasises the importance of reconstructing what she defines as Rosselli's 'social practice' (p. 3) but inverting the norm: her analysis does not go from life to poetry, but starts from the poem itself to verify the 'thematic nodes that run through it' (p. 4). Then, from the verses we go back to the heavy personal inheritance and to the Venetian conference *The Resistance and Italian Culture* of 1950, the volumes of Rosselli's library (in many cases reconstructed through the poems), the years at Olivetti, and finally the relationships with Scotellaro and De Martino.

In the second chapter ("His Philanthropies Were Also Rushed": The Encounter with Psychoanalysis: Collective Unconscious and Philanthropy'), Sermini focuses on Rosselli's interest in the psychological sciences, demonstrating how it is possible that her relationship with the Olivetti entourage pushed her in that direction. The closing chapter, "Very Difficult Language of the Poor!" Between Poverty and Madness: Lines of Resistance (and Belligerence) in the Work of Amelia Rosselli' is dedicated, as already mentioned, to a reflection on how short the step between poverty and madness is and the relevance of the many figures that represent poverty and mental illness in Rosselli's poems. Sermini notes: 'Amelia, and the poetic "I" with her, decides to make herself a *fool*, to make a political-social choice, to speak as the people, from the moat, just as Rocco Scotellaro's Southern peasants speak, exactly with their own words' (p. 198).

Sara Sermini's book is an important work that adds yet another tile to the very complicated mosaic of Amelia Rosselli's poetry. Its greatest merit, I believe, is that the author never abandons the reader: as promised at the beginning of the book, everything moves from the poems, and the richness and appropriateness of the citations not only manage to give weight to and validate Sermini's ideas but offer easy access to Amelia Rosselli's poetry, even to those who are approaching it for the first time.

Beppe Cavatorta
 University of Arizona
 beppe@arizona.edu

© The Author(s), 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the
 Association for the Study of Modern Italy
 doi:10.1017/mit.2020.56