

2014

# A Flower with Many Stems: Tradition and Innovation: The West and the East in the Poetry of Sandro Penna

Livio Loi  
*University of Wollongong*

---

## Recommended Citation

Loi, Livio, A Flower with Many Stems: Tradition and Innovation: The West and the East in the Poetry of Sandro Penna, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, School of English Literatures and Philosophy, University of Wollongong, 2014. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/4292>

## **UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

### **COPYRIGHT WARNING**

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

**UNIVERSITY OF  
WOLLONGONG**



**A FLOWER WITH MANY STEMS**

**TRADITION AND INNOVATION: THE WEST AND THE EAST  
IN THE POETRY OF SANDRO PENNA**

**Livio Loi**

Course: 201 Doctor of Philosophy  
Principal supervisor A/PR Anne Collett  
Co-supervisor A/PR Gaetano Rando

Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the  
School of English Literatures and Philosophy (SELP)  
Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts  
University of Wollongong  
July 2014



## **DECLARATION**

I, Livio Loi, declare that this report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Philosophy, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Wollongong, July 2014



## ABSTRACT

Italian poet Sandro Penna (1906-1977) has been considered one of the twentieth century's finest poets on the subject of homosexual love and has been compared to Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy and the Greek lyrical poets, notably Sappho. Penna's unique literary code is a peculiar combination of melancholy and exhilaration, in the manner of the Italian lyrical tradition from Petrarch's *Canzoniere* to Leopardi's Romanticism, but also with the clarity, the precision and the musicality of an Imagist.

Piero Bigongiari, whose long career in Italian poetry and literary criticism has been characterized by a strong commitment to innovation, poetically defined Penna "*un fiore senza stelo apparente*" 'a flower with no visible stem' which suggested the title for this study. Penna himself created his myth of isolation and loneliness, writing – as most critics define it – a timeless lyrical poetry, with no apparent external influences.

Nevertheless in the diaries, letters and notes found in his archives, Penna reveals himself as a reader of contemporary literature and poetry, familiar with modern Italian, European and American literature and modern visual arts.

In recent times, awareness and appreciation of Penna's poetry in Italy and abroad have grown, mainly focusing upon his lyric treatment of homoerotic love. Few critics so far have identified connections between Penna's poetics and the idea and practice of *modernity* in the European and international poetry of the twentieth century. In the literature review of this study I consider different points of view by critics, scholars and writers such as Roberto Deidier, Giulio di Fonzo, Peter Robb, William Riviere, Giorgio Luti and Pierfranco Bruni who acknowledged modernity and innovation in Penna's oeuvre. Also, an in depth study over the European literary movements and authors who affected Penna's poetic work and his life are still lacking and long overdue, as pointed

out by literary critic Roberto Deidier. This study aims to give its contribution to remedy this lack of investigation, but will also try to understand why Penna denied his influences and concealed his readings.

Another purpose of this dissertation is to object to the critical “stereotype” of Penna as a purely lyric poet (for it limits and narrows the greatness and depth of his literary corpus) and to rescue him from the position of an isolated poet, relegated to a representative of the lyric tradition insisting on a mere Italian context.

Following T.S. Eliot’s belief that “[h]onest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry”, I demonstrate that part of the greatness of Penna’s poetry lies in its unique synthesis of “Tradition” - as defined by Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” - and “innovation” as the artist’s desire to reinterpret tradition in a personal, original tone.

By investigating notes and letters from Penna’s archives, connections to the twentieth century literary and cultural movements such as French Symbolism, Modernism and Imagism are investigated. Through the analysis of Penna’s corpus, I show similarities and connections to the works of the major personalities of the twentieth century literary scene such as T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound, as well as representatives of the ancient lyric tradition such as Greek poetess Sappho and modern Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy. This work, written in the English language, is an invitation to consider and view Penna’s work beyond its national boundaries addressed to readers who do not wish to think of Italian poetry as ‘provincial’, readers who manage to find and enjoy in Penna’s verse suggestions and echoes of an international poetry.

Sandro Penna’s poetry may be challenging as it offers an unusual insight into the complex world of feelings and emotional experience of the poet, but with its freshness, its modern format and its suggestive imagery it has the quality of imperishable art.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My special thanks go to my supervisors Professor Anne Collett and Professor Gaetano Rando. They have constantly provided constructive criticism and encouragement while directing the writing of this thesis. My gratitude also goes to my partner Daz who supported me along the way.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
TABLE OF CONTENTS	9
INTRODUCTION	11
 <b>Part One: Sandro Penna</b>	
Chapter 1: Life and literary Fame	21
Chapter 2: Penna and the Critics. A Literature Review	53
Chapter 3: Penna's Myth and "The Anxiety of Influence"	87
 <b>Part Two: The Flower's stems</b>	
Chapter 4: Penna's influences: the West	103
Chapter 5: Modernism(s): an alternative view	141
Chapter 6: An "Imagist <i>sans le savoir</i> "	179
Chapter 7: East of Penna: the Haiku style	199
 CONCLUSION	 259
BIBLIOGRAPHY	263



## INTRODUCTION

Amavo ogni cosa nel mondo. E non avevo  
che il mio bianco taccuino sotto il sole.

I loved everything in this world. And all I had  
was my blank notebook under the sun.

*(Sandro Penna)<sup>1</sup>*

A poet, they say, for the very few  
Who see, through the murk of the twentieth century,  
The universal, the sun coming through . . .

*(Harry Clifton, "The Poet Sandro Penna, in Old Age")*

If a man loses pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a  
different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however  
measured or far away.

*(Henry David Thoreau)*

I became aware of Sandro Penna's poetry not by reading in an Anthology or a  
literary magazine, but it happened, strangely enough, by watching a popular talk show  
on Italian national television where, between a commercial and a chat, Italian poet Dario  
Bellezza, managed to read Penna's poem "Nuotatore" 'Swimmer'<sup>2</sup>, urging the audience

---

<sup>1</sup>"And then I am alone. Only/ the gentle company/ of luminous ingenuous lies remains." *Appunti* (1938-1949).

NOTE: All translations of Italian criticism are mine. In-text quotations of Italian criticism are given translated into the English language in order not to interrupt the English text when reading. Original quotations in Italian are provided in the footnotes. I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Gaetano Rando who assisted and advised with his expertise.

All translations of Penna's poems are mine, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> "Dormiva...?/ Poi si tolse e si stirò./ Guardò con occhi lenti l'acqua. Un guizzo/ il suo corpo./ Così lasciò la terra." 'Was he sleeping?/ Then he stood up and stretched./ He watched the water, slowly. His body/ wriggling./ That was how he left the earth.' *Poesie* (1939).

not to overlook and forget his late friend Penna: a great poet. I was so impressed by those captivating verses that I decided to look for more poetry by Penna. That was in the eighties, about ten years after Penna's death and, despite the interest and recognition of readers and critics, Penna was still "a poet for the very few", who stepped to his own music.

Italian critic and essayist Alfonso Berardinelli wrote that Sandro Penna is one of the Italian poets of the twentieth century who seems to require little explanation and thus makes you feel that any criticism is quite pointless, and yet Penna will remain, probably "an unfathomable mystery".<sup>3</sup> We might agree with the critic when he says that Penna's poetry does not need to be "studied" in order to be read, and yet that Penna is so unique that he seems to be "unapproachable". Nevertheless, the same critic admits that "the critical bibliography on him is still small" (19). The purpose of this study then is not an additional or -according to Berardinelli - pointless attempt to "explain" Penna, rather it is an invitation to read his oeuvre from a different point of view, to consider Penna's work from beyond its national boundaries. It is addressed to readers who do not wish to think of Italian poetry as 'provincial', readers who also manage to find, and enjoy, suggestions and echoes of an international poetry in Penna's verse.

Sandro Penna (1906-1977) is considered unanimously by Italian and international critics to be one of the twentieth century's finest poets on the subject of homoerotic love. The dreamy and delicate quality of his verse has been compared to Alexandrian poet Costantine Cavafy, the Greek lyrics and Sappho. Penna's poems succeed in combining classical lyricism with modern directness and economy of words. Lacking any vulgarity they appear suspended between real experience and the poetically

---

<sup>3</sup>"Sandro Penna è uno dei poeti italiani del *Novecento* che meno sembrano richiedere spiegazioni e che quindi fanno sentire inutile o quasi l'attività del commento . . . Probabilmente Penna è un mistero insondabile" Berardinelli, A., "Penna o l'altrove" in: Napolitano, Pecora et al., *Sandro Penna, una diversa modernità*, Rome: Fahrenheit 451, 2000, p.19.

imaginative world. Penna's unique literary code is a peculiar combination of melancholy and exhilaration, in the manner of the Italian lyrical tradition from Petrarch's *Canzoniere* to Leopardi's Romanticism; but it also employs the clarity, precision and musicality of the Imagists.

Piero Bigongiari (1952), whose long career in Italian poetry and literary criticism has been characterized by a commitment to innovation, poetically defined Penna "un fiore senza stelo apparente"<sup>4</sup> 'a flower with no visible stem' - which suggested the title for this study. Penna created his own myth of isolation and loneliness, writing – as most critics define it – a timeless lyrical poetry that has no apparent external influences; his is a corpus where History, above all, barely seems to be considered. The main purpose of this study is to refute the critical "stereotype" of Penna as a purely lyric poet, for this label limits and narrows the greatness and depth of his literary corpus, and confirms – without questioning – his self-created myth of "immaculate conception" and literary isolation. Following T.S. Eliot's belief that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry"<sup>5</sup>, I will demonstrate that part of the greatness of Penna's poetry lies in its unique synthesis of "Tradition" – as defined by Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" – and "innovation" according to the artist's quest to reinterpret tradition in a personal, original tone.

In the past, critical appreciation of Penna's work grounded criticism on his biography, sometimes confusing moral judgements with aesthetic values. Recent awareness and appreciation of Penna's poetry in Italy and abroad (most European countries, the USA, South America, China and Japan) has focussed in particular on his lyric treatment of homoerotic love, particularly evident in Penna criticism in the English

---

<sup>4</sup> Bigongiari, P., p.47.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen 1920.

language (Cascaito 1981, Butcher 2002).

The main argument of this thesis, as stated above, is to question some critics' statement that Penna has no roots, no mentors, no influences and that his poetry is just a miracle out of history and time. This thesis will focus less on the obvious homoerotic content (which has been widely commented on) instead, through the investigation and the analysis of Penna corpus, this study proposes an in depth look at themes, style and imagery in the work which will disclose a different understanding of his poetry as it relates to twentieth century literary and cultural movements such as transnational Modernism, European and American poetry, Imagism and the Japanese haiku. I will investigate similarities and connections to these major literary and poetic movements and their representatives, affinities which have been neglected or overlooked by most critics. Italian critics favoured the idea of Penna as an "isolated" poet, even in the midst of Italian literary scene; nevertheless in the diaries, letters and notes found in his archives, Penna reveals himself to be a voracious reader of contemporary literature and poetry; although self-taught, he was familiar with modern European and American literature as well as modern visual arts.

This study will show the closeness of most of Penna's poems (some of them very brief: two, four lines or few more) to the idea of "modern" and "new" as fostered by the Modernists, and will illustrate how the use of only a few strokes to sketch a situation, the centrality of the 'image' and the consistent presence of Nature, are close to the style and mood of Japanese haiku and the tenets of Imagism. An investigation of the European literary movements and authors that affected Penna's poetic work and life is long overdue: as poet and literary critic Roberto Deidier points out when he remarks that Penna's training was "heterogeneous, with evident European influences, still not



investigated at all”.<sup>6</sup> This study seeks to understand why Penna denied his influences and concealed his readings, and hopes to cast new light on Penna’s work, moving the focus from the passionate, intense treatment of homoerotic love which permeates his poems, to a recognition of the obligation that his originality of style and the modernity of his poetry owes to Tradition.

William Simone Di Piero, American multi-award winning poet and major translator of Penna in the English language wrote: “Penna was perhaps the least visible, the least public, of important Italian poets . . . . In conversation with (Italian) writers and critics I was often told that any understanding of modern Italian poetry would be incomplete without consideration of Sandro Penna”.<sup>7</sup> Although Penna is now considered an important representative of twentieth century Italian poetry, and despite his fortune abroad, in depth and complete study by English-language critics and academics is lacking. Pierfranco Bruni who wrote extensively on Penna maintains: “Penna’s poetry, however, is geographically beyond its country of origin, that is, Italy. Besides, his poetry can not be considered, from a critical point of view, only of Italian or European origins.”<sup>8</sup> A significant outcome of this research will be to release Penna from the restricted literary scene of the Italian *Novecento*<sup>9</sup> and to place him in the broader frame of an international lyric poetry tradition, in order to highlight the stylistic quality of his poems beyond their recognised literary worth and merit.

\*

---

<sup>6</sup> “una formazione autodidatta ed eterogenea, con visibile ascendenze europee, tutt’altro che indagata” Deidier, R., *Le parole nascoste, le carte ritrovate di Sandro Penna*, Palermo: Sellerio 2008, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> Di Piero, W.S., “Foreword” Trans. *This Strange Joy. Selected Poems of Sandro Penna*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1982.

<sup>8</sup> “Penna, comunque, geograficamente è oltre il suo paese d’origine, ovvero l’Italia. D’altronde la sua poesia non può essere considerata, dal punto di vista critico, con delle matrici soltanto italiane o europee.” Bruni, P., “Introduzione” in Bruni, P., De Giovanni, N., *L’inquietudine del vivere: Sandro Penna, la sua fortuna all’estero e la poesia del XX secolo*. Cosenza: Pellegrini 2007, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> Namely the Italian twentieth century literary and artistic background.

Penna's distinctive life, his troubled literary fame and his self-created myth, will be illustrated in the first chapter, together with a general overview of the twentieth century literary scene in Italy and Europe. Penna wrote poetry for more than forty years and was witness to many important historical events and social changes. Though shy and diffident towards other intellectuals and critics, he was able to gain the friendship and consideration of leading Italian poets and writers such as Umberto Saba (1883-1957), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), Elsa Morante (1912-1985), Alberto Moravia (1907-1990), Elio Pecora (1936-), Dario Bellezza (1966-1994) and Dacia Maraini (1936-). We will see, in chapter one, how his literary fame was problematic, despite having been defined as the best poet of his generation by Pier Paolo Pasolini, a genius by Ginzburg and a peer by Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale. These were the fellow writers who helped to create a myth out of Penna's life.

The critical studies that I have considered in my research will be examined in chapter two. In this literature review, I point to the critics who are in agreement that Penna's poems are the expression of a solitary and imaginative personality whose literary influences are either well hidden or not worth investigating. On the other hand, I also present the small body of criticism which hints at the influence of ancient and modern writers, and admits that very limited and incomplete research has been carried out by way of revealing possible connections, influences, contacts between Penna and the poetry of the twentieth century *international* literary scene. The final section of chapter two outlines the extent of Penna criticism in the English language.

In the third chapter I consider the question of the "anxiety of influence" as it pertains to Penna, which is one of the reasons that make it difficult for a critic to trace Penna's roots. Harold Bloom's famous essay will provide the theoretical background, while Penna's notes, readings, diary and poems will be quoted to develop and support

an argument. In chapter four I take up Deidier's recognition of a blindness to Penna's European influences (18) and examines similarities of themes, imagery and style between Penna and writers of different languages, cultures and times - including ancient Greek and Alexandrian poets, English Romantics and French Symbolists. The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence of Penna's hidden and denied influences, and to reveal how –by working from *within* the European poetic tradition with originality and modernity – he achieved an idiosyncratic synthesis of tradition and innovation.

The poetic movement of Imagism, which occupied a key moment in Ezra Pound's career and the Modernism of James Joyce and T.S. Eliot sets the literary background of chapters five and six. Until a few decades ago, Modernism in the West referred mainly to works written in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France, but recently, critical accounts of Modernism have adopted a transnational focus. While in the past an Italian modernist tendency was identified mainly with the Futurist movement, now critics such as Fontanella (1922), Guglielmi (2001), McLaughlin (2000) and Sica (2003) for instance, point out relationships between modernist writers of different cultures and languages, including Italian authors such as Svevo, Palazzeschi, Pirandello and Montale. In these chapters I demonstrate the circulation and the influence of Modernist works among Penna and other modern Italian poets. An affinity between Penna's poetry and Modernism may sound difficult to prove, and it has certainly been disregarded by most Italian critics. But Australian author Peter Robb has hinted at it quite clearly in his article on Penna, "Poise of the Powerless", in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1990). Here, Penna's modern landscape is compared to the urban world of Joyce and Eliot, and the poet is considered, in some way, to be more modern than Montale. Thus, given the importance of Penna's close friendship with Eugenio Montale, in chapter five I present a short overview of Montale and his oeuvre

which will clarify his position as one of the major and most authoritative Italian experts on and translators of American and English literature and poetry. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1975, Montale made his breakthrough as one of the chief architects of modern Italian poetry in the 1920s. Penna's correspondence with Montale reveals that Penna's readings and knowledge was not confined to a merely national horizon but included European and English literature as well.

I then consider some features of Penna's poetic production (themes, style and imagery) and compare them to some of the features, style, principles and beliefs of twentieth century avant-gardes and modern writers. The focus will be on modernist poetry outside Italy. But, as Penna did not pen any 'manifesto' and rejected any connection to literary movements of any kind, his affiliation to this group of artists and poets (who were looking for the "new" and "modern" in literature) is investigated strictly in terms of literary/poetic forms and content. Text analysis reveals connections between Penna's poems and works by Eliot, Pound and other modernist authors. The goal of chapter six is to prove how close Penna's poetry is to the imagist tenets and poetic features stated and fostered by Pound, and also to provide a substantial link to the argument of the final chapter that establishes the haiku quality of Penna's verse. Affinities between Penna's poetry and haiku have been suggested, though never investigated in depth, by many Italian critics (Di Fonzo 1981, Luti et al. 1990) but also by Robb in the article mentioned earlier. This final chapter discusses Penna's *orientalism*, providing in the first section a brief overview of classical Japanese and Western haiku, then showing in the following sections how *orientalism* affected, in different ways, the only writers that Penna himself acknowledged as mentors - Wilde, Baudelaire, Saba and Ungaretti. A close examination of Penna's work and haiku poems

brings the final chapter to conclusion.

This study is an attempt to re-assess Penna's corpus from a different perspective, disclosing what and who influenced his poetry, not in order to diminish his originality and uniqueness, but rather to place him in the position he deserves in international modern literature.



## **PART ONE: SANDRO PENNA**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **SANDRO PENNA: LIFE AND LITERARY FAME**

	<i>Introduction</i>	23
1.1	Penna's life and times	25
1.2	A problematic literary fame	34
	<i>Penna's choices</i>	35
	<i>Bohemianism</i>	40
	<i>The context: fellow artists and critics</i>	41
	<i>Commodification of art and mass culture</i>	43
	<i>Literary climate and critical response</i>	45
1.3	Censorship and publication	46





## *Introduction*

Sandro Penna died in 1977, but it was almost ten years before the first official biography *Sandro Penna: una cheta follia* - by Italian poet Elio Pecora<sup>10</sup> - was published. This was followed in the same year by Enzo Giannelli's biographical work *L'uomo che sognava i cavalli. La leggenda di Sandro Penna*.<sup>11</sup> Reading these books gives a comprehensive insight into the events of his life, so in this chapter I will give only some basic information about Penna's life, focusing on the historical and literary events of his time.

After his death Penna's poems and short stories were included in some American anthologies of gay writers, helping to fuel the myth of a transgressive, *maudit* poet. As a matter of fact Penna himself contributed to the creation of his own myth referring to himself as "*poetadel mistero*" 'poet of the mystery'. He rejected any affiliation with literary movements, showing a kind of "anxiety of influence" as discussed by Harold Bloom in his essay of 1973.

Throughout his life Penna took up the position of an outsider with respect to Italian society. Although sharing the condition of all intellectuals who disagreed with the Italian Fascist regime, Penna found himself in a different position, in some ways more difficult, for his "transgressions" exceeded the temporal and ideological limits of the fascist age raising the perplexity of some social and literary circles about the scabrous content of some of his poems for years after the regime was overthrown. This goes some way toward explaining why Penna himself had the feeling of always being on the margin of social life even after his official entry into literary society. Elena

---

<sup>10</sup> 'Sandro Penna: a quiet madness' Pecora, E., *Sandro Penna: una cheta follia*, Milan: Frassinelli 1984.

<sup>11</sup> 'The man who dreamt of horses. The legend of Sandro Penna' Giannelli, E., *L'uomo che sognava i cavalli. La leggenda di Sandro Penna*, Rome: Armando Curcio Editore 2007.

Gurrieri noticed how many times Penna – in poems and letters – apologized for his ‘ignorance’ and asked for forgiveness (“*perdono*”). Thus we find the image of a poet and a man: “who is constantly feeling guilty and looking for forgiveness, almost apologetic for the mere fact of existing . . . All this mixed with a substantial distrust of himself”.<sup>12</sup>

But it was not only his sexual choice that made him stand apart from the general condition of Italian intellectuals of the thirties and, later, those of the fifties and sixties. The other reason for his marginality was his extraneousness to the world of work - the world of success which can bring money and fame - and his refusal to create for himself an established status in the literary world and in society in general. Penna has always carried out his activities (even writing poetry) in an irregular manner which risked insecurity and poverty. He certainly had relations with the literary world, and had, as friends, the best writers of his time, but he always maintained a sort of detachment, refusing to compromise himself. As explained in this ‘portrait’ of Penna by his friend Natalia Ginzburg:

Living outside the laws that Time decides and imposes, and not acknowledging, in his world, social classes, nor ideological scaffolding; maintaining and having always kept a full and clear indifference to power and entertaining a relationship of absolute simplicity and equality with the living and with the dead, with the powerful and the powerless, he is one of the most free human beings who ever lived.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>“L’immagine di un poeta e di un uomo che si sente sempre in colpa ed è alla costante ricerca di un ‘perdono’, chiesto quasi scusandosi per il solo fatto di esistere. . . . Tutto ciò è mescolato a una sostanziale sfiducia nei confronti di sé: penso alla reiterazione di ‘perdonarmi’, ‘perdonare’ . . . .” Gurrieri, E., p.24.

<sup>13</sup>“Vivendo egli fuori dalle leggi che il tempo determina e impone, e non conoscendo egli nel suo mondo né classi sociali, né impalcature ideologiche, e mantenendo e avendo mantenuto sempre una piena e limpida indifferenza nei confronti del potere, e intrattenendo con i vivi e con i morti, con i potenti e con gli inermi, un rapporto di assoluta semplicità e parità, egli è uno fra gli esseri umani più liberi che siano mai esistiti.” Ginzburg, N., “Sandro Penna”, in: Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore insonne*, p.10.

## 1.1 Penna's life and times.

¿Qué es la vida? Un frenesí.  
¿Qué es la vida? Una ilusión,  
una sombra, una ficción,  
y el mayor bien es pequeño;  
que toda la vida es sueño,  
y los sueños, sueños son.  
(*Pedro Calderón de la Barca*)<sup>14</sup>

\*

Un altro mondo si dischiude: un sogno  
.....  
. . . Un lieve sogno  
La vita...  
(*S. Penna*)<sup>15</sup>

\*

Io vivere vorrei addormentato  
entro il dolce rumore della vita.  
(*S. Penna*)<sup>16</sup>

Sandro Penna was born in Perugia in 1906. The first significant date of his life was the year 1920 when his mother, due to the difficult relationship with her husband, left Perugia and moved to Rome. Sandro's school career had some interruptions due to his frequent illnesses, but also because he used to quit school for weeks to go and stay with his mother in Rome. Throughout his youth, Penna spent his holidays in Porto San Giorgio (a popular coastal location in the Marche region) where he met Acruto Vitali who became a life-long friend and shared with Penna a passion for poetry and art. In 1929 Penna decided to move permanently to his mother's apartment in the heart of

---

<sup>14</sup> "What is life? A madness. / What is life? An illusion, / a shadow, a fiction. / And the greatest good is little enough: / for all life is a dream, / and dreams themselves are only dreams". Calderon de la Barca, P., *La vida es sueño*, "Segismundo's soliloquy", Act II, l. 1195.

<sup>15</sup> "Another world there unfolds; a dream/.../ a light dream/ life ..." in *Stranezze* (1976).

<sup>16</sup> "I want to live sleeping/amid the sweet noise of life." in *Poesie* (1939).

Rome. It was a key decision in his life which opened up two new possibilities hitherto impossible to achieve: the implementation of his artistic projects and the cure of his neurosis, which had been causing persistent problems for some years.

During his early months in Rome Penna sent some of his poems, under a pseudonym, to Italian poet Umberto Saba. Saba was impressed and replied, encouraging him to keep on writing. After repeated calls from his parents to look for a job, Penna found an accounting position, but in a few weeks lost the job due to his inability to work in an office for more than a few hours. In the meantime he contacted a doctor - a Freudian psychoanalyst, Edoardo Weiss - to address his mental health problems. Weiss happened to be the same doctor whom Saba was also consulting. The psychoanalyst talked to Saba about Penna, as Saba knew his poems but did not know him personally. When they finally met, Saba confirmed his appreciation of Penna's work and promised to help him publish. Saba not only took care of circulating a booklet containing some of Penna's poems among the intellectuals of his city, but also managed to have two of those poems published in *L'Italia Letteraria*, one of the most important literary journals of the time. Around this time, Penna went to Florence where, in the thirties, authoritative literary magazines such as *Solaria*, *Il Frontespizio*, *Campo di Marte* and *Letteratura*, hosted a lively cultural debate on the relationship between intellectuals and power, between literature and history and between European culture and Italian culture.

In Florence Penna met Montale and came into contact with the editors of *Solaria*. The magazine, founded in 1926, claimed the autonomy of art and literature with respect to history in general and to that specific contemporary time in Italy. *Solaria* also fostered the circulation of European literature, raising awareness and interest in Russian and middle-European writers. The last issues of this journal, which would close down in 1936, saw its associates engaged in a less literary and more ideological debate. The role

of intellectuals and writers who witnessed the decline of European civilization and the consolidation in Italy of the fascist regime, became the first concern of the cultural debate in the magazine. Penna, however, approached *Solaria* with a different attitude, he was never really interested in political debate; he saw in the magazine (characterized by eclecticism and modernity) the best possible publishing platform for his poems. Penna's interest in the Florentine literary scene of the twenties and thirties was also motivated by the presence of the Hermetic movement. This was a group of eminent Italian poets and critics that included Nobel laureate Montale, Ungaretti, Luzi, Sereni and Nobel laureate Quasimodo. According to some critics, Penna was also part of this group/movement. However, when he arrived in Florence at the beginning of the thirties, his affinity with the group was quite difficult to see. Penna was still an isolated, discordant voice. Nevertheless what brought him closer to Hermeticism was the same search for a clear, essential, accurate poetic language and the interest he shared with the hermetic poets in a verse form which could convey neat images using only the minimum amount of words. The trip to Florence had a positive effect on his activity as a poet because it resulted in the publication of some poems in *Solaria* which attracted the interest of authoritative critic Sergio Solmi. But Penna's private life was still troubled as he was not able - or not willing - to find another job.

Back in Rome Penna started socializing with other writers and continued to receive encouragement from Montale to publish his poems. Saba was also interested in helping Penna publish, but Penna was still hesitant. It was not until 1935 that he prepared a small collection of poems, written over the previous years, and contacted *Solaria* about prospective publication. The project, however, came to an abrupt halt after a short time when the editors of the magazine, Montale in particular, decided that many of the poems had such transgressive content that they would not get past the strict

censorship of the regime. Consequently, with *Solaria*'s forced shutdown in 1936, the project finally ceased. In 1938 Penna was in Milan, where, thanks to the efforts of Solmi he found a job as an assistant in a bookshop. At the same time Solmi showed his interest in the publication of Penna's first volume of verse, such that by the summer of 1939, the first edition of Penna's poems with the title of *Poesie* was published by Parenti. Soon after in the same year Penna lost his job in the bookshop, he left Milan, returned to Rome and settled back into his mother's house. Italy was just about to enter the Second World War when Penna, after having finally published the poems he had been writing for years, found himself still without a steady job and economically dependent on his mother. Throughout the war, he continued to live in Rome where he met Italian novelist Elsa Morante - Alberto Moravia's wife, Elsa remained among his most intimate and faithful friends until his death. Morante, with a number of fellow writers in Rome, would put together a small sum of money to help Penna immediately after the war, as the poet was having serious financial problems.

At the end of World War II, the questions that had fuelled the debate in the Italian cultural world of the late thirties, returned with newer and greater intensity. Confronted by the haunting landscape of a war-ravaged Europe, the dominant tendency among the intellectual elites was to give literature the task of recounting the tragedy just ended. This commitment gave writers a civil value and "Realism"<sup>17</sup> in literature and the Arts supported the forces that were fighting to re-build a better, more peaceful new world society; but those involved in this project were also committed to portraying the atrocities of the war and the waste it had left. This literary trend is part of a wider cultural and artistic movement generally referred to as "Neorealism".

---

<sup>17</sup> Although Penna never thought of himself as a "realist" poet or a politically committed one, both Pier Paolo Pasolini and Amelia Rossetti called him a "real" revolutionist. (See literature review in Chapter 2).

In Italy - with the end of the war and the fascist regime - interest in foreign literature increased. French surrealists and modern Russian writers were among the favourites. Special attention was also paid to American literature, which was translated and presented to the Italian audience by the same writers who had participated in the debate on the new culture, such as Cesare Pavese, who translated Steinbeck and Dos Passos, and Elio Vittorini who published his anthology *American* which had been censored by the fascist regime. What these Italian writers of the forties and fifties found particularly interesting and attractive was the lean, essential language of American writers, which ended up influencing their own work.

Penna was certainly not immune to these influences: he read and studied the French Symbolists and, in 1947, completed his translations from French of *Présence et prophétie* (1958) *Presenza e profezia*<sup>18</sup> by symbolist poet Paul Claudel, and four short stories by Prosper Mérimée<sup>19</sup>. An admirer of American literature, Penna was familiar with the works of Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman and Jack London. Later in this chapter - in the section about Penna's alleged "anxiety of influence" - I will quote Penna's own words about these American authors but here it is worth remembering what Pierfranco Bruni - in *L'inquietudine del vivere* - pointed out about the features of Penna's language: ". . . there are structural elements in his actual verse, that bring us back to the idea of an American language".<sup>20</sup>

In 1945 Penna met Italian novelist Natalia Ginzburg, who was working as an editor at the Einaudi publishing house. They met at Einaudi offices in Rome, and talked about Penna's plans for the future. Although Ginzburg was impressed by Penna's work,

---

<sup>18</sup> Claudel, P., *Presenza e Profezia*, trans. Sandro Penna, Rome: Edizioni di comunità 1947.

<sup>19</sup> Merimée, P., *Carmen ed altri racconti*, trans. Sandro Penna, Turin: Einaudi 1943.

<sup>20</sup> ". . . ci sono elementi strutturali del verso stesso che ci rimandano ad un'idea di linguaggio Americano." Bruni, P. et al., p.6.

she admitted to not recognising their importance in the Italian literary scene<sup>21</sup>, only later acknowledging Penna's significant position in Italian twentieth century poetry and in contemporary literature in general. Ginzburg was amazed at the absolute irresolution of the poet and remembers him with a draft of his book under his arm yet with no particular desire to publish it. Penna had also already refused the suggestion made by Bobi Bazlen, an intellectual and promoter of cultural initiatives, that he prepare a new collection of poems for Meridiana, a prestigious publishing house in Milan. Later, however, Penna decided to go through with this project and in 1950 the volume *Appunti* was published by Meridiana.

The third volume of Penna's poems was published in Milan by Scheiwiller, a very small publishing house that specialized in poetry. The volume, *A strange joy of life*, is another milestone in the history of Penna's oeuvre, not only because it was awarded the literary prize "Le Grazie" (established in Florence) but above all for the interest it received from critics, the most authoritative being Italian controversial writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. In an article published in *Paragone Letteratura* 'Comparing Literature' –Pasolini drew a brief history of Penna criticism, highlighting gaps and misunderstandings, and providing a different, original image of Penna as a modern poet - not so "idyllic" and not simply "Hellenistic".

After the hesitations that preceded the publication of *Appunti*, Penna went through a period of intense activity. Unfortunately Saba, who had been of fundamental importance not only for Penna but for the whole Italian literary scene, died in 1957. We will see later in this thesis how - according to some critics – the two poets influenced each other, Penna playing the role of cultural mediator between Saba's lyricism and the more essential, dry language of Hermeticism. According to this interpretation, Saba

---

<sup>21</sup> Ginzburg, N., "Sandro Penna" in Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore insonne*, p.7.



acquired the taste for a simpler language from Penna, reducing his tendency to excessive lyricism and adopting the short and intense epigrammatic style which he so much admired in Penna's verse. I will discuss this reciprocal influence in chapter five when referring to haiku, we will read how Penna in his notes used to criticize Saba's sentimentalism and overly romantic expression of the poet's feelings.

Meanwhile, Penna's private life underwent some changes. He was fifty years old when he fell in love with a boy, Raffaele, who proved different from the other boys that Penna had met so far. For the first time, the poet and his young lover lived together. Raffaele stayed with Penna for years, sharing with him the uncertainties and disappointments of living together. The relationship gave Penna some stability and for that reason also gained the approval of Penna's close friends Morante and Pasolini. The latter seemed to replace Saba in the role of encouraging Penna, who was constantly affected by low self-esteem.

Thanks to Pasolini's insistence and confidence in Penna's work, in 1957 Garzanti published the volume *Tutte le poesie*<sup>22</sup> 'All the poems' – containing the three collections of Penna's poems published so far: *Poesie* 'Poems' (1939), *Appunti* 'Notes' (1950) and *Una strana gioia di vivere* 'A strange joy of life' (1956). On this occasion Penna informed Garzanti of the existence of a substantial number of unreleased poems that were ready for publication. Despite uncertainties about which poems to publish and his usual doubts about their value and reception, Penna began to show a growing interest in their publication and the following year, 1958, he agreed to publish the volume *Croce e Delizia* 'Sorrow and Bliss' with Longanesi, the publishing house of Morante and Pasolini. It was as if he wanted to contradict his reputation as a 'stingy' poet who was always hiding his best poems from the public, anguished by the

---

<sup>22</sup> Penna, S., *Tutte le poesie*, Milan: Garzanti, 1957.

possibility that his inspiration might in some way dry up. *Croce e Delizia* marked the end of a particularly intense decade not only for the publication of Penna's verse, but also one in which his presence had been felt in Italian literary life. In the following years, however, Penna's private life changed: he found himself alone in his deserted house, for his mother had died and Raffaele had left. He kept trying to cure his many diseases with an excessive use of drugs, though still writing and occasionally receiving visits from friends. He also kept trading items from his collection of paintings and rare books, but soon they began to accumulate in the house one on top of the other, the messy rooms taking on the appearance of a bizarre warehouse. It is during these years that the Italian painter and Penna's friend, Mario Schifano, filmed the poet and interviewed him in his house. The short movie provides an interesting biographical perspective, as it shows Penna's expertise in visual arts.

Meanwhile Italian culture was changing. The elements of ambiguity present in Neorealism such as the desertion of any formal research in literature in favour of the writers' social and political commitment, ultimately lead to a crisis associated with that trend in poetry and fiction. The 'formal' aspect of the work of the writer became of more interest, with avant-gardes fostering language renewal and experimental forms of art and outlining new theories about a literature which could transcend historical reality.

In 1970 Garzanti published a new edition of Penna's poems, a most significant event for the poet as it provided some financial resources necessary for his mere survival. In the last months of 1976 Penna managed to finish two more books - *Stranezze*<sup>23</sup> 'Oddities' and *Il viaggiatore insonne*<sup>24</sup> 'The sleepless traveller'.

---

<sup>23</sup>Penna, S., *Stranezze* (1976).

<sup>24</sup> Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore insonne* (1977).

*Stranezza* was awarded the “Premio Bagutta”<sup>25</sup> in January 1977, but, prostrated by disease, the poet was unable to go to Milan to collect his prize and therefore it was collected on his behalf by Natalia Ginzburg. The same year, a few days after receiving the award, Sandro Penna died alone at his home in Rome. His last work, *Il viaggiatore insonne*, was released posthumously, with two touching but clear-headed prefaces by Natalia Ginzburg and major Italian writer and critic, Giovanni Raboni.

Sandro Penna’s life was, particularly in his later years, in some respects distressing: he was constantly asking friends for help, tormenting them with long phone calls in the middle of the night. He lived in disorganization and chaos, besieged in his house by the remains of his life. But even as an elderly poet, he remained proud of his peculiarities, and believed himself to be free from the bonds of economic and affective dependence. Poverty perhaps was for him first and foremost a way of life: no job, no power relations to be respected, free of any worldly connections as his friend Natalia Ginzburg described him: “. . . he is one among humans freer than ever existed. He never let himself be affected by other people’s ideas; never became a servant of an idea that circulated around; never has he bent or thought according to a model given to him by others, or floating in the air.”<sup>26</sup>

## 1.2 A problematic literary fame.

There are those who will leave this world  
On a gun-carriage, draped in the flag of state,  
Like my friend Montale,

---

<sup>25</sup>The “Bagutta Prize” is a prestigious Italian literary prize that is awarded annually to Italian writers.

<sup>26</sup> “. . . egli è uno fra gli esseri umani più liberi che siano mai esistiti. Mai si è lasciato dominare da un’idea altrui; mai è diventato servo di un’idea che circolasse all’intorno; mai si è piegato a essere o a pensare secondo un modello fornitogli da altri o fluttuante nell’aria.” Ginzburg, N., “Sandro Penna”, in Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore insonne*, p.10.

. . .  
And there is me,  
Sandro Penna, turned seventy  
Last summer, without votes of congratulation  
. . .  
My reputation? It's invisible —

(*Harry Clifton, "The Poet Sandro Penna, in Old Age"*)<sup>27</sup>

As we have seen in the previous section, Penna was unwell all his life, suffering from psychological and physical illnesses since his teenage years: bronchitis, neurosis, insomnia and a heart condition. To cure his depression and neurosis, Penna underwent psychoanalytical treatment, and read Freud's works, which he often discussed – and criticised – with his friends Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Umberto Saba, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, Dacia Maraini, Natalia Ginzburg, Alfonso Gatto, Carlo Emilio Gadda and Mario Soldati. They were all admirers of Penna's work and, to anyone familiar with Italian modern Literature, many of those names will sound much more famous than the name of Sandro Penna. Despite the consideration and appreciation of his fellow writers, Penna never gained the literary fame they achieved in their lifetimes. He has been called an outsider or an 'island' within twentieth-century Italian poetry.

Yet one of the most respected Italian literary critics, Cesare Garboli, went so far as to depict Sandro Penna as the greatest Italian lyric poet of the twentieth century and Italian poet and critic Roberto Deidier placed Penna on the same level as major Italian poets Umberto Saba and Eugenio Montale. Penna's work, when finally published, after delays, issues and difficulties, generated within Italy a substantial amount of interest and

---

<sup>27</sup> Clifton, H., "The Poet Sandro Penna, in Old Age", in *The poetry Ireland Review*, No.35 (Summer, 1992), Published by Poetry Ireland, pp.14-18.

criticism. But both inside and outside Italy, appreciation of Penna's work has been for many years affected by moral judgements grounded on his biography. Although Penna showed at times a complete insecurity about the value of his poetry, he was also quite aware that he was writing something new and innovative. Penna was an individualist but not a 'socially acceptable' individualist. He was never able to balance his originality and uniqueness with the obligations of belonging to a society; which is what is required if you want to become famous or are in anyway interested in the approval of an audience. To use Leo Braudy's words: ". . . a famous person has to be different enough to be interesting, yet similar enough not to be threatening or destructive."<sup>28</sup>

We can identify at least two main sets of reasons responsible for delayed recognition of Penna as one of the greatest Italian lyric poets. The first concerns the poet himself, with his distinctive individualism, his choices in life and in poetry, his 'bohemianism', his ideas about art and literature, his 'resistance' to fame and his rejection of the commodification of art. The second - no less important- involves the historical and literary context of his life, his fellow writers, the critics and the audience of Penna's time.

### ***Penna's choices***

Penna did not 'write about' protest and transgression: he experienced them firsthand. As for his poetry he saw his mission as a bystander, according to what he wrote: "Sempre affacciato a una finestra io sono/ . . . / unir parole ad uomini fu il dono/ breve e discreto che il cielo mi ha dato"<sup>29</sup> 'I am always leaning at a window/. . . / joining

---

<sup>28</sup> Braudy, L., *The Frenzy of Renown*, New York: Oxford University Press 1986, p.8.

<sup>29</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

words to men has been/ the gift, brief and discrete/ heaven gave to me'. Garboli, a friend and a poet himself, wrote about Penna's choices:

Penna is the only poet of the Novecento who has quietly refused - without outburst - the ideological, moral, political and intellectual reality of the world we live in . . . rejected by him as a worthless world, a little vulgar, a little miserable, made of ridiculous cheating and notorious vanity.<sup>30</sup>

Penna chose to live a bohemian life, refused to get a permanent job and lived in poverty in order to devote himself to the writing of poetry. His extreme individualism resulted in a refusal to belong to any intellectual elite and places him among those artists who did not want to be involved in the "wealth generation" or take part in the production of commodities.

Throughout the years critics have found many colourful expressions to define Penna, based on his life and poetry. He has been called "the vagabond", "the Polynesian", "the saint", "the tramp" of the Italian twentieth century poetry, and - of course - a "bohemian". Bohemianism for Penna was a way of life, a state of mind, an atmosphere. It was about living richly and irreverently, beyond convention; it was about being uninhibited, unbuttoned, creative and free. It is the freedom that appeals: the freedom to ignore social conventions and not having a boss. Penna's attitude toward established order is explained by Peter Robb in his article "Poise of the Powerless": "His fixation on the adolescent boy is of a piece with his repudiation of the nexus of work, money and power. His attention is directed exclusively at a figure poised uncertainly between childhood and manhood, pre-eminently the being without power, or

---

<sup>30</sup>"Penna è il solo poeta del Novecento il quale abbia tranquillamente rifiutato, senza dare in escandescenze, la realtà ideologica, morale, politica, intellettuale del mondo in cui viviamo . . . lo ha rifiutato come un mondo insignificante, un po' volgare, un po' miserabile, fatto di ridicoli imbrogli e di vanità risapute." Garboli, C., *Penna Papers*, Milan: Garzanti 1984, p. 45.

even a real place in the world.”<sup>31</sup>

Making a living as an artist is fundamental to Bohemianism - to be committed to his art was, for Penna, vital. His first poems date back to 1922 when he was 16. At the age of 22 he had already made his choice about his future life, and wrote to his friend Acruto Vitali that poetry was the only thing which interested him in life and that poetry was never going to leave him. Penna was not forced into poverty; rather he voluntarily accepted a frugal lifestyle in order to sweep away all possible distractions to his commitment. His laziness and his disdain for the notion that he should find an “ordinary job” to support himself are made clear in the pages of his extremely short autobiography, recorded on audiotape and edited by Elio Pecora<sup>32</sup>. The list of jobs that friends and family found for him and that he refused or quit after a couple of weeks, is long and varied. It runs from quite modest positions as an accountant (he had a diploma in accounting) to requests from literary magazines and journals to write some criticism on contemporary poets which he refused most of the time. As noted previously, he accepted requests to translate two books from French, one of these was, aptly, *Carmen* by Mèrimèe - with its bohemian gypsy character. Italian critic and poet Garboli wrote: “When he was young, Penna lived the blessed life of a bird, the haughty and luxurious life of a flower; the life of the poor but more whimsical and more imaginative than a rich man’s one.”<sup>33</sup> Despite the ostracism he received, caused by his sexual orientation, most of the time Penna enjoyed most of the time this type of life, as stated in this poem:

Arso completamente dalla vita  
io vivo in essa felice e dissolto.  
La mia pena d'amore non ascolto

---

<sup>31</sup> Robb, P., “Poise of the Powerless”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 1990, n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Penna, S., *Autobiografia*, work cited.

<sup>33</sup> “Quando era giovane, Penna conduceva una vita beata di uccello, la vita altera e lussuosa di un fiore. La vita di un povero, ma più capricciosa e più fantasiosa di quella di un ricco”. Garboli, C., pp. 27-28.

più di quanto non curi la ferita.<sup>34</sup>

Burned completely by life  
I live in it happy and resolved.  
My pain of love I don't listen to  
any more than I treat the wound.

Penna used to move from one city to another, always in a state of moral prostration and suffering terrible economic conditions, continuously asking for help from friends and people who admired and respected him. But even in the most difficult times in the thirties - when some of his poems had already been published with success in one of the most important Italian literary journals *L'Italia Letteraria* - he still hesitated to accept the offer, for instance, from Italian critic and publisher Pavolini to collaborate with reviews of poetry, despite the pressure from his friend and mentor Italian poet Umberto Saba to accept an occupation that would bring him some earnings. In the winter of 1931 he wrote to his friend Acruto Vitali: “Mi trovo in un tale decadimento fisico e spirituale che non credo io possa più uscirne se non attraverso l'annullamento”<sup>35</sup> ‘I am in such physical and spiritual decay that I do not think I can get out, if not through annihilation’. We have seen that his insecurity, but also his laziness, made him reject offers and suggestions on how to improve his financial status throughout his life.

Depression, anxiety, addiction to sleeping pills and severe economic conditions lasted throughout his life even when, after the fifties, his poetry had been awarded two major literary prizes (“Premio Viareggio”, “Premio Bagutta”). At that time his friends, Italian novelists Enzo Siciliano and Natalia Ginzburg, persuaded a major Italian publisher Garzantito pay Penna a small monthly salary. In the pages of the national newspaper *Paese Sera* donations were called for the needy poet. Penna even allowed a

---

<sup>34</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

<sup>35</sup> Penna, S., in Pecora, E., p.113.



*café* near his home to place a donations box with his name on the counter. But these circumstances in the life of Penna should not lead us to see the poet as a sad, grumpy, resentful, bitter person who did not appreciate life. Quite the opposite, in his autobiography Penna writes:

I miei critici, anche quelli che ormai esagerano in lodi, vedono nella mia poesia una tragedia. Vorrei ricordare, anche per il divertimento di chi legge, qualcosa di questa mia tragedia che non è vera affatto. Ho avuto una vita molto felice, l'unica tragedia la dicono le poesie.<sup>36</sup>

My critics, even those who exaggerate in praise now, see my poetry and my life as a tragedy. I'd like to recall, even for the amusement of the reader, that this so called tragedy is not true at all. I had a very happy life, the only tragedy is told by my poems.

Gianmarino De Riccardis also quotes an interview where Penna recalls:

I 'mestieri' che ho esercitato non sono stati, ahimè, i soliti forti mestieri dei grandi poveri: non ho mai lustrato le scarpe, non ho fatto la barba, non ho né cucinato né lavato piatti a nessuno. Ho vissuto in ozio beato dovuto alla bontà, soprattutto, di una madre avara e laboriosa, proprio il mio contrario... solo nel '43, nel colmo della fame, e non solo mia, trovai un sollievo economico nel vendere agli amici poeti o pittori un po' di prosciutti, o di pastine glutinate. Non riuscivo a capire come si potessero guadagnare tre lire al giorno. Eugenio Montale in quegli anni, mi rispondeva: Io ho le tre lire al giorno ma sono ugualmente infelice.<sup>37</sup>

The 'trades' that I have exercised are not, alas, the usual strong jobs of 'the great poor': I have never shined shoes, never worked in a barber shop, I have never washed dishes for anyone. I lived in blissful idleness due to the goodness, above all, of a stingy and hard-working mother, so different from me... Only in '43, at the height of the famine, and not only mine, I found some economic relief selling to my friends, painters and poets, some hams, or gluten canned soups. I could not understand at the time how you

---

<sup>36</sup> Penna, S., *Autobiografia*, p.29.

<sup>37</sup> Penna, S., in De Riccardis, G., pp.28-29.

could earn three *Lire* a day. Eugenio Montale in those years, used to reply to me: I have three Lire a day but I am equally unhappy.

### ***Bohemianism***

When I associate Penna with Bohemianism it is based on his life and art choices, and I refer to the term *Bohemian* in the way it has come to be commonly accepted in our day as the description of an artist or *littérateur* who, consciously or unconsciously, retreats from conventionality in life and in art. Penna was an outsider, set apart from conventional society and (not always but most of the time) untroubled by its disapproval. He displayed all the characteristics of irresponsibility, laziness, adolescent romanticism, and suffered a pervasive lack of funds, commonly associated with artists who did not achieve success or fame, who did not sell their work for appreciable sums of money.

It is a matter of fact that Penna was never interested in achieving literary fame, cared nothing for literary society, and did not consistently cultivate or maintain literary friendships. All he wanted to do was ‘write poetry’ as a need for himself only, not for any audience. I would like to recall here Harry Clifton’s verse, quoted at the beginning of this section: “A poet, they say, for the very few”. Similar to the ‘early nineteenth-century dandy’ or the avant-garde artist at the end of the nineteenth century described by Leo Braudy, for Penna too “the audience is not the ‘people’ but the ‘happy few,’ for whom the poet or artist becomes a socially alienated saint” (466). In the same essay Braudy, referring to American poet Emily Dickinson’s reticence and love of privacy, wrote: “Dickinson limited her immediate audience as much as her ideal one, decisively separating the poet’s calling from any aspect that might be called public. As her poems continually assert, the poet’s calling is not practical but divine, not in the world but

exterior to time”(480). The same could be said of Penna.

*The context: fellow artists and critics.*

Critic Anna Vaglio points out: “Penna’s first contacts with the cultural world were quite peculiar. He entered the [Italian] literary scene obliquely, through a peripheral zone, and therefore in some ways more advanced”<sup>38</sup> ; moreover, referring to that specific historical period, the critic adds:

We can thus think that the fascist regime before - and after that the postwar period - has been, in some respects, the sharpest and most violent expression of those laws according to which Penna was an offender: work ethic, rhetoric of good sentiments, confidence in economic and social progress, compliance with propriety, hypocrisy. His dissent is, in some way, a pre-political and an existential one.<sup>39</sup>

Writing poetry for almost 40 years, during the ‘30s under Fascism in Italy and then in the decades after World War 2, Penna lived through a period of great anxiety, exacerbated - for all artists- by the fear that autonomous thought and creativity were lost. In those times of revolutions, war and authoritarian systems of government, Penna carried on his personal war against the hypocrisy and the ugliness he saw around him, in a quest for love and happiness beyond boundaries and limits. Although he called himself on more than one occasion the poet of Love, and the poet of Mystery - rejecting any labels, he was very much aware of living in times of mass culture and commodification of art. We cannot ‘label’ Penna as a modernist or a futurist or an avant-

---

<sup>38</sup>“I primi contatti con il mondo della cultura sono per Penna abbastanza particolari. Il suo ingresso sulla scena letteraria avviene di lato, attraverso una zona periferica, di frontiera, e quindi per alcuni aspetti più avanzata” Vaglio, A., p.15.

<sup>39</sup>“Si può quindi pensare che il regime fascista, prima, e il dopoguerra, poi, siano stati l'espressione più netta e più violenta, per alcuni aspetti, di quelle leggi nei confronti delle quali Penna era trasgressore: l'etica del lavoro, la retorica dei buoni sentimenti, la fiducia nel progresso economico e sociale, il rispetto delle convenienze, la copertura dell'ipocrisia. Il suo dissenso è in certo modo pre-politico ed esistenziale” *Ibidem*, p.13.

garde rebel, as his individualism and originality escape any ultimate definition, but we can certainly say that he shared most of the ideas and tenets of these cultural movements.

In Penna's time the so called 'avant-gardists' (Cubists, Expressionists and Futurists) were confronting the rules, morals and values of the bourgeoisie and asserting the autonomy of art as an end in itself. Although Penna refused any political commitment, his oeuvre - based and inspired by a 'scandalous' kind of love - was seen by his contemporaries (especially by the Italian ones) as a criticism of the dominant morality. Modernism, in literature and art, was a movement in quest of new kinds of expression; the autonomous spirit of art was paramount, attended by commitment not to succumb to commodification. Writers moved their attention away from society to the single individual, focusing on their irrational complexities, and artists rejected old values and forms for an emotional view of reality which was to some degree influenced by thinkers such as Freud, Nietzsche and Bergson.

Penna's friends were avant-garde and surrealist artists, including Italian painter and poet Filippo De Pisis (1896 - 1956), other famous painters such as Mario Mafai (founder of the modern art movement called "Scuola Romana"), and Mario Schifano (1934 - 1998) - Italian painter, film-maker and musician of the Postmodern tradition who, as noted in the previous section, filmed Penna in his house. Paintings by De Pisis and Mafai, gifts the two artists gave to their friend, were found in Penna's bedroom after his death, leaning against the walls. His friend and mentor, Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale, the champion of Italian Hermeticism, was also an appreciated modernist writer known at European level. Montale's poem "Arsenio" was translated and published by T.S. Eliot in an early number of *The Criterion* in 1928.

Penna himself was an art expert; he comments in his *Autobiografia* about Mafai

paintings: “. . . faceva quadri belli . . . per quelli che ha dipinto dopo posso addirittura chiedere una somma per l'expertise” (27) ‘. . . he used to make beautiful paintings. . . for those paintings I can even ask a sum for my expertise’.

On the other hand it is interesting to note Penna's complaint against Mafai later in the *Autobiography* where he speaks of the artist 'succumbing' to market taste, his painting becoming quite ordinary, instead of pursuing 'great art' even at the risk of not being popular or not selling:

Mafai dice di essersi disperso. La sua dispersione è stata una cosa bella perchè gli ha fatto fare molte cose. E ogni cosa gli riusciva molto bella, certo nell'epoca buona. Una riserva che posso fare su Mafai è che lui è un genio, ma che è riuscito a rivelarsi verso i trent'anni . . . . In seguito ha dipinto quadri piuttosto scialbi che di sicuro sono riconoscibili come suoi, ma non danno nessuna commozione.<sup>40</sup>

Mafai says he is lost. His 'dispersal/dissolution' was a beautiful thing because it made him do many things. And everything managed to be very beautiful, in his golden age, of course. One criticism about Mafai is that he's a genius, but he had expressed himself fully when he was about thirty. Later his works were quite dull, they are of course recognizable as his own, but they give me no emotion.

### ***Commodification of art and mass culture***

As major critics of the commodification of art and mass culture (Adorno and Horkheimer in the first place) have pointed out in so many ways in their works, the culture industry is one which does not tolerate autonomous thought or 'deviation' to any degree. To the Italian audience and to critics of Penna's time - mostly provincial and for 'survival' reasons fascist- Penna's poems appeared disturbing, unnatural, and perhaps even morbid, like the *dadaist* or surrealist paintings of his friends; but as a poet, Penna does not seem to have had any audience in mind when creating -only the individual

---

<sup>40</sup>*Autobiografia*, p.27.

single human being. The same emphasis on ‘the individual’ can be found in the first editorial page of *Blast*, where Wyndham Lewis shows his interest also in Italian Futurism and Marinetti’s manifestos. Lewis states that *Blast* is not addressed to a particular social class but “[t]o the individual. The moment a man feels or realizes himself as an artist, he ceases to belong to any milieu or time. *Blast* is created for this timeless, fundamental Artist that exists in everybody. . . . *Blast* presents an art of individuals”(7,8). Penna was interested in Italian Futurism- even though his lyric poetry has nothing to share with the Futurists; in 1928 he attended a lecture in Perugia by Marinetti, about which he was impressed enough to write in his notebook: “Liberazione: equilibrio. Sano, felice - attività spasmodica - coscienza del proprio genio - felicità, giovinezza - scavare la mia originalità con forza futuristicamente” “Liberation: balance. Healthy, happy - frantic activity - conscious of his own genius - happiness, youth - digging up my originality with a futuristic strength’.<sup>41</sup>

Penna’s quest for happiness demanded absolute freedom and he was definitely ready to pay the price for it. The Italian mass culture of Mussolini’s regime was intended and expected to confirm the validity of the system. Art was no longer understood as an end in itself but was meant to primarily affirm and celebrate the system, its ideals, its purpose. Autonomous thought - as noted above - was a threat to the established political and social power and its morals. During the years of fascism the censorship of works of literature was quite severe and certainly very different from what we are used to in our present-day cultural climate. In the years of the Fascist *ventennio*, social conventions could never consider a sexual relationship between two males as “normal”; it was sinful and to be condemned without exceptions. To quote from one of Penna’s poems published in *Poesie* (1957): “Fuggono i giorni lieti/ lieti di bella età/

---

<sup>41</sup> Penna, S., in Pecora, E., p.68.

non fuggono i divieti / alla felicità” ‘The pleasant days of the beautiful age run away... but the bans to happiness still stay’. Penna was an artist who did not confirm the authority of fascist society. He simply ignored it, offering his personal view of the world, which was not gloomy and dark like a prison but bright and full of harmony as in the famous two-line poem with the title “Moralisti” ‘Moralists’:

Il mondo che vi pare di catene  
tutto è tessuto di armonie profonde.<sup>42</sup>

The world that seems in chains to you  
is entirely made of profound interwoven harmonies.

### *Literary climate and critical response*

A more comprehensive overview of criticism, both in the Italian and the English language, will be discussed in the next chapter “Penna and the critics. A Literature Review”; here I will just point out that Penna’s work has never been fully accepted by many literary critics who clouded its image either with silence or by deeming him to be a pariah of social disapproval. To quote Gianmarino De Riccardis: “His ‘irregular Eros’ has never been fully accepted, because it stretched the rules of morality and good poetry.”<sup>43</sup>

Italian critics at the time presented Montale’s Hermeticism as the best example of successful, good modern poetry, so they found themselves caught off guard by a kind of poetry that threatened those canons and whose originality made it a unique case in the Italian poetic context of the twentieth century. As Italian poet and critic Elio Pecora writes in his preface to Penna’s *Autobiografia*: “Penna had, as a native gift, the honesty

---

<sup>42</sup> In *Poesie*, Garzanti 2000, re-print 2010, work cited, p.304.

<sup>43</sup> “Il suo ‘eros irregolare’ insomma non è mai stato del tutto accettato, perchè costituiva uno strappo alle regole della morale e della ‘buona poesia’ ” De Riccardis, G., *Sandro Penna: Un poeta oltre*, Lecce: Milella 1997, p.171.

claimed for poetry. Honesty as a necessary expression, which precedes compromises, prohibitions, ornaments. Wasn't that the 'holiness' that Pasolini recognized in Penna?"<sup>44</sup>

Major novelist, playwright and journalist Natalia Ginzburg was one of Penna's dearest friends, close to the poet until the end. She defined Penna as "a genius" who "[a]lways maintained a full and free indifference towards any established power living outside the laws that Time determines and imposes."<sup>45</sup>

This peculiar concept of Time in Penna's poetry, but also in his life, can explain why History- as all his critics pointed out- seems never to appear in the poet's work, and also might account for Penna's indifference toward achievement of literary fame during his life. As Leo Braudy observes about fame: "In the ancient world the desire for fame is a desire to make an impact on Time, to be remembered" (27), and further, "Fame frees its possessor from human time"(30).

### **1.3 Censorship and publication**

A brief overview of the difficulties encountered in the publication of his work is useful to demonstrate Penna's kind of 'resistance' to the common concept of literary fame and to underline his lack of interest in the publication thereof, witnessed by fellow writers and publishers. As pointed out previously in this study, the hermetic avant-garde was at the centre of twentieth century Italian poetry, with the absolute aesthetic pre-eminence of Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970), Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) and Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968). Penna had the difficult task of writing at a time

---

<sup>44</sup> "Penna possedeva, per dono nativo, l'onestà che si pretendeva per la poesia. Onestà come espressione necessaria, che precede i compromessi, i divieti, gli ornamenti. Non era questa la santità che Pasolini riconosceva a Penna?" Pecora, E., work cited, p.9.

<sup>45</sup> Ginzburg, N., in Penna *Il Viaggiatore*, p.10.



when contemporary Italian poetry had reached amazing heights with Quasimodo receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959 and Montale in 1975. Although Montale called Penna “a peer” and Ungaretti believed so much in Penna’s work that he helped him publish *Il Giornale del Popolo* in spite of the strict censorship during Mussolini’s regime, nevertheless, for all critics, Penna remained an outsider, difficult to label, and his poetry difficult to assess because of its censurable, embarrassing subject matter.

At this point we can ask ourselves why do certain books or authors become famous or, in the case of Penna, why not? I have already pointed out some relevant factors: Penna’s choices and the social, cultural and political context of his time - responsible for the delay of literary recognition for a poet whose work was so deeply admired and appreciated by contemporary fellow writers and intellectuals. But it is also interesting to note what W.S. Di Piero of Ohio University wrote in 1982 in the foreword to the first and most complete translation in English of Penna’s poems:

In 1973, when I was doing my first translation of Sandro Penna’s poems I hoped to meet Penna and show him the results of my work . . . but the meeting never came about . . . he refused to see anyone except a few close friends. Penna was perhaps the least visible, the least public, of important Italian poets, yet his reputation as a distinguished lyric poet seemed unquestioned among Italian men of letters. In conversation with (Italian) writers and critics I was often told that any understanding of modern Italian poetry would be incomplete without consideration of Sandro Penna.<sup>46</sup>

Let’s go back to the first poem written by Penna which was also the first to be published. On the night of the 24th of August 1928 Penna wrote on the edge of a sheet of newspaper *La vita ... è ricordarsi di un risveglio*, which would open his first volume of poems. One year later, in 1929 he sent some poems to major Italian poet Umberto Saba who, as we know, replied, encouraging the young poet to go on writing. But that

---

<sup>46</sup> Di Piero, W.S., “Foreword” xv.

was all. Three years later in 1932 in Rome Penna finally had a chance to meet Saba under the strangest circumstances, through the efforts of Dr Weiss, Saba's psychologist. When meeting Penna in person, Saba immediately remembered his poetry with enthusiasm and helped him publish two poems in the 20th of November 1932 issue of the literary journal *L'Italia Letteraria*: up until this point Penna had already been writing poetry in solitude and poverty. Through Saba's contacts though, Penna was able to meet Eugenio Montale, who liked Penna and his work and became his friend and literary mentor - they started a correspondence which lasted for six years. In 1933 Montale helped the young Penna to publish two more poems in the literary journal *Solaria*. Penna received appreciation and encouragement from his fellow writers for those few published poems and by the age of 27 it looked like a literary career was about to take off. We have seen in the section about his life how, in 1936 (Penna was 30) when the editors of *Solaria* discussed putting together a volume of Penna's verse and Penna requested the assistance of Montale to decide which poems to publish, Montale said the plan was useless since most of the better poems were liable to be censored in those years of Mussolini's regime. This is an example of a poem that was at the time liable to be censored:

Quando la luce piange sulle strade  
vorrei in silenzio un fanciullo abbracciare.<sup>47</sup>

When street-lights weep  
I want to hug a boy in silence.

Later on even Penna's old friend Elsa Morante - herself the author of novels dealing frankly with the issue of homosexuality, advised against publishing material that was too explicit. As a matter of fact the first attempt to publish a volume of Penna's poetry in

---

<sup>47</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

1936 failed on the question of "decency". This was an issue which played a vital role in Penna's decisions whether to publish or not in the future.

The volume was finally published with the title *Poesie* by Parenti in 1938 and the critical reception was enthusiastic. It seemed that finally critics and some readers had become aware of this 'new' poet, who was swimming upstream, writing lyric poetry in times of Hermeticism and celebrating homoerotic love in times of fascist censorship. Nevertheless we have to wait until 1950 (twelve years later) to see the publication of the second collection of poems, published by Meridiana with the title *Appunti* 'Notes'. Contrary to what one might have expected, except for Pasolini and major critic Piero Bigongiari, Italian critics 'ignored' the book. Where had all his friends and admirers gone? I have already pointed out that Penna was not good at cultivating literary friendships and that he was an indomitable individualist, but Garboli also suggests:

Many Italian modern poets - his contemporaries, owe a lot to Penna . . . nevertheless it is difficult to say why they thought of him as an unreachable, elusive and somehow 'intimidating' competitor. Montale owes Penna something in his *Mottetti*, Saba learned from him.<sup>48</sup>

Penna was never interested in literary competition - when he tried and competed for literary awards it was only because he was constantly in need of money to survive. Penna's only interest was in his poetry and his freedom, but perhaps it was precisely for this attitude that he was seen as an 'elusive and intimidating competitor'. Penna's closest and sincere friend Natalia Ginzburg helps us to understand what are, perhaps, the most decisive reason and cause of Penna's delayed fame. We remember how Ginzburg marvelled at how uninterested Penna had always been in the publication of his work. As Ginzburg explains, Penna used to visit her at her office and chat, then leave

---

<sup>48</sup> " . . . tanti poeti italiani contemporanei sono debitori di Penna, ... è difficile dire per quale ragione lo abbiano sentito un fuggitivo ed inarrivabile concorrente. Montale gli deve qualcosa nei *Mottetti*, Saba ha imparato moltissimo da lui" Garboli, C., p.19.

without any agreement or plan about publishing his work.<sup>49</sup>

This was an enduring characteristic of Penna as a writer. Publication of his poetry was always problematic but he seemed to be undisturbed by the inevitable delays and issues. After the second volume *Appunti* (1950) Penna published the short story *Arrivo al mare* (1955). In the Spring of 1956 the publisher Scheiwiller accepted thirty of Penna's poems and published *Una strana gioia di vivere* 'A strange joy of living'. This time interest in Penna's literary reputation was rekindled once again by Pasolini who reviewed the volume in the literary journal *Paragone* in April 1956. In 1957 a new collection, *Poesie*, was published by Garzanti. This volume combines the contents of his first poetry book with more than a hundred unpublished poems. Here is further evidence of Penna's peculiar personality. Penna was always reluctant about offering his poems for publication and as such they are extremely difficult to date - he used to tell friends and publishers who were asking for new poems that he had not written anything for years. For instance, Penna's volume of prose pieces, *Un pò di febbre* 'A little fever' had been written over thirty years before it was published in 1973.

In 1957, after the committee's long and bitter struggle to reach a decision, *Poesie* won the "Premio Viareggio".<sup>50</sup> This was the first important literary award for Penna but it was a bittersweet achievement because his victory was condemned by right-wing intellectuals as a triumph for the left, pornography and immorality. The judges who supported him, Giuseppe De Robertis, Giorgio Caproni, and Leone Piccioni, were particularly reproached. Although Fascism and World War II were gone, Italy was not ready yet for Penna: once again the man was not in accord with the times. *Poesie* was followed in 1958 by *Croce e delizia* 'Trouble and Delight' which contains

---

<sup>49</sup> Ginzburg in Pennall *Viaggiatore*, p.8.

<sup>50</sup> The *Viareggio Literary Prize* is a prestigious Italian literary award, whose first edition was in 1930, and is named after the Tuscan city of Viareggio to rival the *Bagutta Prize*, given in the city of Milan.

forty-three previously unpublished poems. The 1960s appeared to be a quiet decade for Penna with no apparent literary activity to report. Eventually in June 1975, two years before his death, Penna was persuaded to offer for publication a selection of his oldest poems, then he changed his mind, probably out of insecurity (evidence of this insecurity about the artistic value of his poems can be found in most of his letters addressed to Montale), and lack of concern, as usual, about literary success, despite the fact he was so poor that the previous year (1974) Natalia Ginzburg and Goffredo Parise raised ten million lire to help ease his situation, which anyway made little difference in his standard of living. These poems were published posthumously in 1980 with the title *Confuso sogno* 'Confused Dream'.

During the last years of his life the poet was terribly sick, suffering from insomnia and spending most of the time in bed. He did not want to see anyone, not even his closest friends. Nevertheless in 1976 Garboli persuaded Penna to publish 119 of his poems written between 1957 and 1976; this volume was given the title *Stranezze* 'Oddities'. Although Penna was immediately sorry that he had released this particular group of poems, accusing the critic of having somehow 'stolen' them, *Stranezze* won the "Premio Bagutta".<sup>51</sup> Ginzburg and Garboli went to Milan to receive the prize for him only one week before his death on 21 January 1977.

---

<sup>51</sup> The "Bagutta Prize" is an Italian literary prize that is awarded annually to Italian writers. The prize originated in Milan's *Bagutta Ristorante*. Italian writer Riccardo Bacchelli discovered the restaurant where numerous friends would dine together and discuss books.



**CHAPTER TWO**  
**PENNA AND THE CRITICS - A LITERATURE REVIEW**

<i>Introduction</i>	<b>55</b>
<b>2.1 Themes</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>2.2 Chronological Overview of Italian criticism</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>2.3 Anglo-American criticism</b>	<b>82</b>





Sandro Penna was, according to the vast majority of critics (see in chapter one) and his fellow writers, a great poet: original, new, independent, isolated and controversial. His friends and admirers, such as Italian poet and critic Elio Pecora, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Italian poet and critic Cesare Garboli, have the great merit of having encouraged literary criticism to re-analyze and deepen Penna's work, during the life of the poet and after his death in 1977. The same critics agreed that, although Penna's work generated - first within Italy then in Europe and the US - a fair amount of criticism, complete and in depth studies over his oeuvre are still lacking, particularly in the English language. Due to its unusual evenness and its lack of an evolving line or development, it is difficult to give a precise and consistent *excursus* of his poetry, which could possibly establish the various stages of Penna's production. In this chapter, therefore, I will report and discuss the critical interpretations and understanding of Penna and his poetry over the years, both chronologically - according to a timeline - and through the theme-based routes and topics identified and examined by critics. The critical works I refer to are all cited in the bibliography of this study.

Understanding and criticism of Penna's work has divided both the audience and the critics. It has changed over the years and generated controversy and different 'schools'. We will find that Penna's position within the outline of poetic schools or movements in twentieth century Italian Literature is difficult to determine; even a very brief analysis of Penna's status within the framework of Italian *Novecento* will lead to different interpretations. Most entries on Penna in dictionaries of contemporary literature depict the poet as an outsider, stranger to all the literary movements of his time, a self-exile from the literary culture and the society which surrounded him,

adverse to any classification.<sup>52</sup> If we consider Penna's placement in authoritative anthologies of twentieth century Italian poetry, we will find that the ground upon which to classify Penna and his poetry is unsettled. In the Giacinto Spagnoletti anthology (1973), Penna is found among the poets grouped together under the heading "Valori poetici tradizionali ed esperienze nuove" 'Traditional poetic values and new experiences'. This category finds itself in between the avant-gardes (such as Futurism) and the "pure poetry" of Hermeticism - embodied by Montale, Ungaretti and Quasimodo. Earlier, in 1971, Edoardo Sanguineti had already placed Penna well within the group of the Hermetics together with Quasimodo, Gatto e Luzi; whereas Montale and Ungaretti were classified as "Lirici nuovi" 'New lyric poets'. Finally, in Gianni Pozzi's work (1970) on the poetry of the Italian Novecento, Penna appears within a group named, in a quite unusual way, "Alleati, dissidenti e oppositori" 'Allies, dissidents and opponents/antagonists'.

I personally find Spagnoletti's classification closer to my view of Penna's oeuvre as a synthesis of tradition and innovation, but we will read in this chapter that most criticism only emphasizes the historical uniqueness of Penna and the peculiarity of his poetry, following Bigongiari's well-known pronouncement - often quoted in this study - that Penna's poetry is a flower with no stems. But there are different opinions. Another school of criticism, for instance, classes Penna as an ingenuous and uncontaminated poet of ancient "Greek or Alexandrian" purity, with comparison made to Sappho and Alexandrian modern poet Costantino Cavafy, as both shared the same source of inspiration in homoerotic love.

As Penna happened to write his poetry in the age of Hermeticism (the dominant poetic movement of the twentieth century Italian poetry) and was a close friend of

---

<sup>52</sup>*Dizionario universale della letteratura contemporanea*, Milan: Mondadori, 1960. Vol. III, p.1018.

Eugenio Montale<sup>53</sup>, not only Sanguineti, but also other anthologists (e.g. A. Pellegrinetti), have labelled Penna as a “hermetic” poet - due to the epigrammatic quality of his verse and the modernity of his simple and direct language. Many of these critical works were written when Penna was still alive, but he remained indifferent and unresponsive to the ideas of his critics, as he was (or pretended to be) to the ideas and works of his fellow writers. Nonetheless, evidence has been given by his friends (e.g. Ginzberg) and biographers (e.g. Pecora) that he was a sophisticated reader of both modern and classical poetry.

Poets and critics such as Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>54</sup> and Amelia Rosselli<sup>55</sup>, great poets but also political activists, called Penna a ‘realist poet’. They saw him as a forerunner of post-war realism, a socialist, a revolutionary who challenged, with his life and his work, the social rules and hypocritical moralism of Italian *bourgeoisie*. Eventually, only a few critics looked beyond the boundaries and limits of Italian literary history, to find for Penna a place in a wider, more international poetic tradition. Some have seen influences of Anglo-American literature (Bruni 2007), others have shown links and analogues in Japanese haiku or Indonesian *pantun* (Mengaldo 1990), stressing the Oriental rather than the Occidental nature of his poetry (Di Fonzo 1981) - but also these critics did not go further to focus on text analysis or to explore Penna’s poetic choices, leaving just hints in their journal articles, reviews and essays.

---

<sup>53</sup>Eugenio Montale (October 12, 1896 – September 12, 1981), champion of the Hermeticism, was an Italian poet, prose writer, editor and translator, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975.

<sup>54</sup>Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922 – 1975), was an Italian film director, poet, writer and intellectual, a highly controversial figure in Italian literature and art.

<sup>55</sup> Amelia Rosselli (1930-1996). The daughter of an Italian father and an English mother, Rosselli was born in Paris, multilingual poet, journalist and critic, she experienced the murder of her father and her brother killed by order of Benito Mussolini.

## 2.1 Themes: "*I fanciulli*"; *Life; Time; Dream; Religion; Nature; Language*

With regard to the themes pointed out, analysed and discussed by critics, the homoerotic element has quite obviously monopolized attention since the first collection of poems, provoking more discussion and interpretation than any other theme. It must be said that Penna's attitude toward his homosexuality is at times defensive, and he does not speak in his poems of his obsession with young men in terms of its being an actual problem, though most of the poems characteristically involve a young boy. To critics, friends and admirers who asked for a less monothematic subject matter, the poet replied with the following lines:

Sempre fanciulli nelle mie poesie!  
Ma io non so parlare d'altre cose.  
Le altre cose son tutte noiose.  
Io non posso cantarvi Opere Pie<sup>56</sup>

Always lads in my poems!  
But I can't talk about anything else.  
Everything else is boring.  
I can't sing you pious chants.

Over the years, and after subsequent publications of Penna's work, criticism moved away from an understanding of Penna's oeuvre only in terms of homoerotic lyricism. Penna's fascination with the nude bodies of men is reminiscent of a similar tendency in Walt Whitman, but Penna's *fanciulli* are characterless, idealized boys who seldom have personalities or even faces. Instead, what makes up the substance of the poetic experience, are gestures or attributes, generic and impersonal, like a sailor uniform, the lighting of a cigarette in a cheap cinema, or a voice singing in an empty room.

---

<sup>56</sup> In *Poesie*, (7<sup>th</sup> edition 2000), work cited, p.305.

*Vita* 'Life' is the most recurring word in his poems after *fanciullo* 'lad', and the concern about life seems to be at the very core of Penna's inspiration and the major motivating force responsible for it, as in his own lines: "Arso completamente dalla vita/ io vivo in essa felice e dissolto"<sup>57</sup> 'Burned completely by life/ I live in it happy and resolved'.

The very first of Penna's poems *La vita... e* 'Life ...is' - starts with that iconic word, Life is depicted as a ceaseless alternation of sorrow and euphoria which cannot be resolved, an enigma that, however, the poet is bound to confront. Despite this pessimistic view, which he in fact shared with the Hermetics, Penna was a poet in love with life; he described himself as "intriso di una strana gioia di vivere"<sup>58</sup> 'permeated with a strange joy of living' - a 'strange' joy due to the humiliations of the poet's life and the sorrow caused by the exclusion from 'normal' society in the years of the Fascist regime, and even later.

Penna's very peculiar concept and understanding of 'Time', together with the themes of 'sleep' and 'dream' have also been pointed out and analysed by many critics: *sogno* and *sonno* are key words for him and indeed the word *dreamlike* has been often used to describe Penna's perception of reality. It has already been said that Penna's poetry had been defined 'cosmic' and timeless, and, apparently, unaware of History and the very crucial events (wars, revolutions etc.) which marked his troubled era. Penna's poems instead present and hint at a 'circular time'. Reality and its rhythms and routines are eluded in favour of sleep and dreams, stressing the difficulty the poet had coping with the everyday actuality of the real world. The title of Penna's last collection of poems is *Il viaggiatore insonne* 'The Sleepless Traveller' and the poet himself appears

---

<sup>57</sup> In *Stranezze* 'Oddities' (1976).

<sup>58</sup> In *Una strana gioia di vivere*, XVII, (1956).

as moving as if in a dream, taking long walks through Roman streets to lose himself on the path of some inaccessible truth.

The absence of a wise tone of philosophical meditation and the lack of any conformity with traditional religion also won the interest and attention of critics, as well as the omnipresent pantheistic feeling of nature. Penna himself wrote: “Io sono senza dio”<sup>59</sup> ‘I am without God’ and “la Natura adoravo/come da una prigioniera”<sup>60</sup> ‘I idolized nature / as if from jail’. He only refers to the ‘gods’ or the “dio dell’amore” ‘god of love’ in his poems, where the ‘divine’ is represented and aimed to by the apparition of his *fanciulli*.

The language of Penna’s poems, with its basic, colloquial diction and a simple syntax, also generated a great deal of interest, criticism and controversy. It has been defined as modern, innovative and at the same time has been placed within the Italian tradition of lyric poetry which runs from Francesco Petrarca to Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi. All critics highlighted the stunning beauty, richness and variety of Penna’s imagery, underlining the pictorial quality and musicality of the poet’s language. The importance of adjectives of colour has been stressed, as a chromatic antithesis is always clearly discernible. Some critics have explained this heightened sensitivity to colour as deriving from his friendship with the Post-impressionistic Italian painter Filippo De Pisis<sup>61</sup>, who was also a poet. Another clear feature of Penna’s verse is repetition of rhymes, words, entire lines and alliteration.

Influences of the twentieth century Italian poet and novelist Gabriele D’Annunzio - major representative of Italian Decadentism, the twentieth century Italian poet and novelist Umberto Saba, the French symbolists, Marcel Proust and the twentieth

---

<sup>59</sup> “Città” in *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>60</sup> In *Il viaggiatore insonne* (1977).

<sup>61</sup> Filippo De Pisis (1896- 1956): Italian painter, poet and writer, maintained an interest in futurism.

century Italian avant-gardes, have also been recognised in Penna's language choices. Bruni (2007) identified an 'American flavour' in Penna's poems which could be credited to his readings of Jack London, E.A.Poe, Walt Whitman, among others, some of them quoted by Penna in his letters and notes or reported in interviews and articles.

## 2.2 Chronological Overview

Penna criticism began in 1939, the date of publication by Parenti of his first volume of verse, *Poesie*. At this first stage the general critical trend was to identify some key points of his poetry: the linguistic purity, a certain tendency towards impressionism and *naïveté* which was considered to be a limit. Italian literary critic and essayist Luciano Anceschi (who taught aesthetics at the University of Bologna), wrote one of the first reviews on Penna's poems in 1939, in which he identified their purity, clarity, grace and a childlike innocence, matched with the physical joy of eroticism. On the topic of language and style Anceschi points out that "the very language, and its vocabulary, provides a stunning modernity to this verse"<sup>62</sup> and later: ". . . this undisciplined Eros is free and purified in a natural way without issues".<sup>63</sup>

Italian poet Sergio Solmi, major critic and essayist of the twentieth century Italian literary scene, reviewing *Poesie* in 1939, found in Penna's verse signs of poetic grace and a sensual innocence, shaded at times by melancholy, the critic also valued the concision and essentiality of the poems (32, 33). The first negative criticism came from Aldo Borlenghi who found in Penna no uniqueness or originality but a mere imitation of

---

<sup>62</sup>"Proprio il linguaggio, e il suo vocabolario, garantisce la imparagonabile attualità di questo canto" Anceschi, L., "Sandro Penna: Poesie", in *Letteratura*, III, 4, October 1939, then in *Saggi*, work cited, pp.149-150.

<sup>63</sup>". . . questo indisciplinato eros si libera e si purifica in una naturalezza senza problemi" *Ibidem*.

major Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti. He also put a “moral limit” on the poems’ subject, which was considered to be indecorous (3).

Lanfranco Caretti, instead, appreciated what he called “the simplification of the language and the extreme musicality of Penna’s verse”.<sup>64</sup> Paolo Cavallina, still reviewing the 1939 volume, focused his criticism on the freshness of Penna’s imagery and analysed the peculiar attitude toward Nature in poems where we can enjoy “a view of nature without tragedy or drama where the leaves on the trees are happy with their colours”.<sup>65</sup> In 1940 Umbro Apollonio, still referring to Penna’s first publication, noticed that Penna’s poetry is based on a “simbolismo impressionistico” ‘impressionistic symbolism’.<sup>66</sup> After the first wave of critical reactions to Penna’s first publication, we must remember that the second collection of Penna’s verse, *Appunti*, was published many years later in 1950. Giorgio Cusatelli in 1957 reviewing Penna’s second publication, found a limit and a drawback in Penna’s repetitiveness, that being, the degree to which the poet imitated himself.<sup>67</sup>

Piero Bigongiari, Italian critic and a poet counted amongst the masters of Italian Hermeticism wrote for the first time, in 1950, about Penna in the literary journal *Paragone*. Appreciating the stunning imagery of Penna’s poems, the critic placed him “in the noisy interlude between the elderly and young people of Italian poetry . . . Sandro Penna was able to start his small but complete voice, while still remaining so

---

<sup>64</sup>Caretti, L., “Sandro Penna”, in *Il Corriere Padano*, 18 November 1939.

<sup>65</sup>“Una natura senza drammi . . . le foglie degli alberi felici di colore” Cavallina, P., p.779.

<sup>66</sup>Apollonio, U., “Candido prodigio di Penna”, in *Prospettive*, IV, 3, 15 March 1940.

<sup>67</sup>Cusatelli, G., first in *Rassegna*, September 1957. Then in Pecora, E., *Sandro Penna. Appunti di vita*, Perugia:Electa 1990, p.136.



dangerously close to his elders”.<sup>68</sup> On that same page Bigongiari also defined Penna’s poetry as ‘impressionist’ whilst insisting on its originality and uniqueness.

Three decades later, Giulio Di Fonzo, one of the most innovative amongst Penna’s critics, would object to a reduction of Penna’s poetry to a mere purity of images. He began to question the lack of influences in Penna maintained by Bigongiari and wrote:

Restricting [Penna’s poetry] to the sensitive-impressionistic aspect of it, will make it impossible to discern a symbolic-mythical pattern, full of deep unconscious. Narrowing the criticism to ‘the image’, makes it impossible to outline a vision of the world and even more an ideology, one of the most original and unusual, akin to mythical and oriental themes.

Limitarsi all’aspetto sensibile - impressionistico, renderà impossibile scorgere un disegno simbolico-mitico, denso di profondità inconscie. Limitarsi all’immagine comporta l’impossibilità di delineare una visione del mondo e ancora di più una ideologia, tra le più originali e inconsuete, affini a tematiche mitiche e orientali. (13)

The year 1957 was quite an important and decisive year for Penna, for it was the year he won the “Premio Viareggio”<sup>69</sup> with the volume *Tutte le poesie*, which was reviewed very positively by the influential Italian critic Giuseppe De Robertis<sup>70</sup> who appreciated above all Penna’s simple and innovative language, so different from the obscurity of the Hermetics. Later on, in 1961, Gaetano Salvemini wrote an essay on a group of Umbrian poets including Penna. What is new in this essay is that Salvemini points out Penna’s desire for renewal in ethics but also in poetic practice. The critic finds in

---

<sup>68</sup>“... nell’intervallo rumoroso tra gli anziani e i giovani della poesia italiana . . . Sandro Penna è riuscito ad avviare il suo piccolo ma completo discorso, pur restando ancora così vicino, pericolosamente, ai suoi anziani” Bigongiari, P., “Per una sistemazione poetica”, p.47.

<sup>69</sup> The “Viareggio Prize” is a prestigious Italian literary award.

<sup>70</sup>De Robertis, G., “Passato e presente di un poeta”, in *Tempo Illustrato*, 14 September 1957.

this poetry: “. . . a contrast between the secular and the divine, between the suffering from an unremitting moral crisis and the aspiration for a solution through the renewal of ethical and aesthetic perspectives . . . a man who wishes to reconstruct a happy and free world”<sup>71</sup> - presenting Penna as a poet aware of the ethical crisis of his time, but also interested in an innovation in the poetic forms.

In the same year Giorgio Barberi Squarotti would focus on Penna’s language and his stylistic choices. According to the critic, Penna voluntarily refrained from using an obscure language to differentiate himself from the Hermetics. Squarotti also objected to the classification of Penna as a primitive and naïve poet, totally unaware of any literary culture, writing: “The stylistic clarity of Penna’s texts bears the weight of a culture, which is the result of a consciousness of style . . . a cultural wisdom, all concerned in the search for a firm and clear tone”<sup>72</sup>.

One year after the “Premio Viareggio”, Penna published a smaller volume of verse *Croce e Delizia* (1958), then he refused to publish any new work for a decade. When in 1970 Garzanti came out with a new edition of *Tutte le poesie* (with a preface by Enzo Siciliano and Pier Paolo Pasolini) Italian poet Dario Bellezza, reviewing the volume of verse, went so far as to write: “Penna is perhaps the best Italian living poet, even though he has not become as famous as Ungaretti and Montale”<sup>73</sup>. One year later, in 1971, Bellezza, who had become one of Penna’s friends and a great admirer, added more criticism observing in Penna’s verse a modernist use of the ‘myth of youth’: “A

---

<sup>71</sup> “. . . un contrasto tra profano e divino, tra il patimento di un’insistente crisi morale e l’aspirazione ad una soluzione tramite il rinnovamento delle prospettive etiche ed estetiche . . . L’uomo che desidera ricomporre un mondo libero e felice” Salvetti, G., p.18.

<sup>72</sup> “La chiarezza stilistica dei testi penniani ha dietro di sé un peso di cultura, nel senso che è il frutto di una coscienza di stile [...] una sapienza culturale, quindi, tutta coinvolta nella ricerca di un tono fermo e trasparente” Barberi Squarotti, G., p.52.

<sup>73</sup> “Penna è forse il miglior poeta italiano vivente. Anche se non è stato baciato dalla fama come Ungaretti o Montale” Bellezza, D., *Sandro Penna*, p.8.

need for external order to oppose an interior disorder . . . shaping the chaos, for him, is the result of a daydream, never of a nightmare . . . in these poems, where an eternal youth seems to rule”.<sup>74</sup>

In 1970 Amelia Rosselli had already described Penna as: “. . . the only Italian author who was a revolutionary socialist, his socialism being not sought or flaunted, given his total lack of interest in politics, [a socialism] reached innocently, almost unwillingly”.<sup>75</sup>

Major Italian critic Carlo Bo, following Salvetti’s opinion quoted above, also objected to the so called natural and effortless ‘grace’ of Penna’s poetry, claiming for the poet awareness of his art: “. . . being natural for Penna should not be understood as the absence of a specific critical awareness . . . [even though] Penna seems to be able to make poetry out of nothing”.<sup>76</sup> That is, his being “natural” is the result of a precise, hard work on language and style.

Still in 1971, a completely different tone can be found in Umberto Marvardi. Penna, according to Marvardi, is a sick person who depicts, in his work, an absurd world of mere perversion: “Penna’s poetry is very rarely a metaphor, his images coinciding with the object of his sensations, repeated in the pleasure of his, alas, pathological abnormalities”.<sup>77</sup> Two years after Penna’s death, Giovanni Raboni,

---

<sup>74</sup>“Un bisogno esteriore di ordine da opporre all’interiore disordine . . . Dare forma al caos, per lui, è il risultato di un sogno a occhi aperti mai di un incubo . . . in queste poesie, dove regna una eterna giovinezza” Bellezza, D., *Ma ionon posso*, p.18

<sup>75</sup>“. . . l’unico autore italiano socialista e rivoluzionario, un socialismo non cercato o sbandierato, data la sua assoluta non politicità, ma raggiunto innocentemente, quasi senza volerlo” Rosselli, A., “Sandro Penna”, in *L’Unità*, 1 July 1970; later with the title “Per Sandro Penna”, in *Nuovi Argomenti*, 20, October-December 1970, p.249.

<sup>76</sup>“. . . essere naturale per Penna non va inteso come assenza di una precisa disposizione critica . . . (anche se) Penna sembra poter fare della poesia con nulla” Bo, C., “Vento di poesia”, in *Corriere della Sera*, 18 June 1970, p.11.

<sup>77</sup>“La poesia di Penna è assai raramente metafora, le sue immagini coincidendo con l’oggetto delle sensazioni, ribadite nel compiacimento di una sua ahimè patologica anormalità” Marvardi, U., “La poesia di Sandro Penna”, in *Persona*, March-April 1971, p. 26-27.

instead, understood Penna's different sexual orientation not as the 'cause' of his poetry but more as the 'form' or 'means' to maintain his "self-exclusion from the world"<sup>78</sup>.

Giacomo De Benedetti<sup>79</sup> agreed with previous critics about Penna refusing to be involved in history and the poet's resolution to escape the alienation of the modern world, but the critic objected that the very action to 'delete' history proves how much Penna was aware of it, and that the places and the characters of his poems testify and acknowledge the modernity of his world. This point of view was shared by Massimo Raffaeili<sup>80</sup> who maintains that only what the critic calls 'macro-History' is banned from Penna's poetry, and that the poet shared his avant-garde friends' fascination with modernity, filling his poems with trains, factory workers and modern city landscapes.

As noted previously in this chapter, Pasolini was not only one of the closest and dearest amongst Penna's friends, but probably his greatest admirer. Pasolini always called for a deeper understanding of the psychological background of Penna's verse, his main interest being to prove how Penna's use of a smooth, clear and un-academic language, was functional to the poet's aim to convey - poetically and in an seemingly 'innocent' way - a content which was, *per se*, highly controversial and 'scandalous'. James Anthony Cascaito called it a "euphemistic process" and quoting some of Pasolini's own words, pointed out: "For Pasolini, Penna's *"tono originale medio"* is the product of a 'structural euphemistic process' which transfers . . . onto the most pure linguistic plane the most "awful" . . . impurities . . . (123). Of course the word "impurities" was voluntary intended by Pasolini and referred to the Catholic catechistic

---

<sup>78</sup>"autoesclusione dal mondo" Raboni, G., *Il 'diverso' nella poesia di Penna*, in *Letteratura Italiana. I contemporanei*, 111, Milan: Marzorati, 1969; later in *Novecento*, IX, work cited, p. 8445.

<sup>79</sup>De Benedetti, G., *Poesia italiana del Novecento*, Milan: Garzanti, 1974.

<sup>80</sup>Raffaelli, M., "Sei nella voce di un treno lontano nella notte", in *II Manifesto*, 30 December 1980.

definition of all sexual sins. Pasolini instead called Penna a ‘saint’ and Penna’s poems ‘my religion’, defining this poetry as a piece of *temps retrouvé* made of “[p]laces in the city with asphalt and grass, plaster of poor houses, interiors with modest furniture, boys dressed in chaste clothes”<sup>81</sup>. Pointing out, in Penna’s verse, a continuous alternation of anguish and euphoria, and relating the pain and the sorrow of the poet with the trauma of his difference, the critic/poet also claimed that this “trauma [his homosexuality] defies any possible diagnosis, not only by a literary critic but even by a psychologist”.<sup>82</sup> Many critics, notably Giulio Di Fonzo (1981), Gianmarino De Riccardis (1997) and the same Cascaito quoted above objected to Pasolini’s view of homoerotic love as the only source of inspiration in Penna. The controversial writer and filmmaker was accused of projecting his interior conflict and his catholic bias on Penna who, on the contrary, lived his difference without guilt, as proved by the poems quoted above in the “Themes” section of this chapter.

We come now to the criticism either written after Penna’s death or written before but revised after 1977. Gaetano Mariani considered Penna an outsider far from literary fashion and anxious to assert his originality; underlining the clarity and the formal precision of the poet’s language the critic found “the rejection of any easy tradition, the search for essentiality as a rule of writing”.<sup>83</sup> According to Antonio Pinchera, a myth has been created around Penna’s personality and oeuvre: everything

---

<sup>81</sup>“... luoghi cittadini con asfalto e erba, intonaci di case povere, interni con modesti mobile, corpi di ragazzi coi loro casti vestiti” Pasolini, P.P., “Sandro Penna: Un po' di febbre”, in *Tempo*, 10 June 1973; later in *Scritti corsari*, pp. 182-184.

<sup>82</sup>“... un trauma che sfugge a ogni diagnosi oggi possibile non solo al critico stilistico ma forse a uno stesso psicologo” Pasolini, P.P., *Passione e ideologia*, Milan: Garzanti, 1960; later published by Einaudi, Turin 1985, pp. 345-346.

<sup>83</sup>“... il rifiuto di ogni facile tradizione, la ricerca di essenzialità come regola di scrittura” Mariani, G., “Sandro Penna”, in *Letteratura Italiana. I contemporanei*, III, Milan: Marzorati, 1969; later in *Novecento*, p. 8428.

has been said about Penna but apparently we still know very little about him: critics have always expressed, from the beginning, only definitive judgments.<sup>84</sup>

A first attempt to ‘rescue’ Penna from the narrow and sometimes limited Italian literary scene - revealing a more international side to his poetry – came in 1979 from Gilberto Finzi. He wrote that Penna’s art is not only rich in natural ‘grace’ but it also incorporates much culture and literary wisdom in his verse: “His short poems, made of few lines, recall the Chinese poems, or those compositions with a fixed structure called Japanese haiku”.<sup>85</sup>

Giuliano Manacorda analysed the influences of Italian poet Umberto Saba and the Hermetics on Penna, but also stressed what I would call the ‘imagist features’ of his poetry, observing that Penna avoids the stylistic effect of easy rhymes or the constancy of the verse, rather relying completely on the simple and straightforward ‘image’ with no ideological mediation”.<sup>86</sup> A similar view of Penna’s technique comes from another article by Dario Bellezza who, reviewing *Confuso Sogno*, noted how in Penna’s poems “. . . the scene must be reconstructed with meticulous precision, as in any evocation/recollection, words must be those and only those”.<sup>87</sup> Dominique Fernandez, found in Penna the male counterpart of ancient Greek poet Sappho, as Penna owns the same ability to condense into four lines, sometimes only two, the splendor of his fleeting love epiphanies: “. . . no erotic details , but the uninterrupted thrill of love

---

<sup>84</sup>Pinchera, A., “Alle origini della poesia di Sandro Penna”, in *Rapporti*, V, n. 12-13, March-June 1977.

<sup>85</sup>“Le sue liriche di pochi versi ricordano le poesie cinesi, o quelle composizioni a struttura fissa che sono gli *hai-kai* giapponesi” Finzi, G., p.104.

<sup>86</sup>“. . . rinunciando agli effetti facili delle rime o della costanza del verso (*Penna*) affida l’espressione tutta all’immagine semplice e immediata senza mediazioni ideologiche” Manacorda, G., p.292.

<sup>87</sup>“. . . la scena va ricostruita con minuziosa esattezza; come in ogni evocazione le parole devono essere quelle e non altre” Bellezza, D., “Penna poeta scandaloso”, work cited, p.13.

excitement” “. . . nessun dettaglio erotico, ma il fremito ininterrotto dell'eccitazione amorosa”(224-225).

Gianni Quadrozzi pointed out in Penna's last volume of verse “the consciousness of life and death” and the attempt to come to a more mature consideration which could overcome personal experience and make of his poetry a human pattern in which everybody could be included and recognize themselves. According to Quadrozzi this poetry finds its solace in “memory” which becomes the poet's shelter and the only way to accept reality and life. This ‘shelter’ is not always safe, but most of the time is illuminated by the certainty of an absolute existence, superhuman, a sort of eternal return in the others who will come; revealing Penna's readings of Nietzsche and his belief in a sort of metempsychosis.<sup>88</sup>

Piero Cimatti (1980) reviewing *Stranezze* - published in 1976, one year before Penna's death and winner of the “Premio Bagutta” - foresaw the growth of what he called Penna's myth, stating that it was a kind of poetry meant to last. The critic also acknowledged the persistent presence in this final verse collection of “. . . old style Chinese short poems . . . a poetry made of silvery clear crystal”.<sup>89</sup>

Di Fonzo's essay has already been quoted in this chapter as it provides a quite different insight into Penna's oeuvre. The critic finds in Penna what in modernist art has been called the mixture of the trivial and the sublime, lifting and giving dignity to everyday humble things in life and embellishing the simple and the everyday.<sup>90</sup> In the chapters of the essay titled “L'epifania e l'attimo”, “Il sistema della immagini” and

---

<sup>88</sup>Quadrozzi, G., “Stranezze: 'quasi' una conclusione”, in *Dismisura*, XI, n. 61-62, September-December 1982, p.22.

<sup>89</sup>“ . . . le odicine cinesi di antica dinastia . . . una poesia di cristallo argentino trasparente” Cimatti, P., pp. 244-245.

<sup>90</sup>“ . . . il sollevamento delle cose più umili e quotidiane, l'impreziosimento delle cose semplici ed usuali” Di Fonzo, G., p.54.

“Una storia mitica”, Di Fonzo hints at the poet embracing the modernist call for a simple, precise, immediate language far from solemnity. (I will develop and analyse these aspects - which Di Fonzo only suggested - in chapter five which focuses on Modernism.)

Italian major novelist Natalia Ginzburg revealed something about Penna’s supposed lack of influences and his ignorance about what was going on in the literary scene of his time:

In his room among piles of papers, books, paintings and drawings . . . why he has so many books in the room nobody knows as he says he never feels like reading anything, but he knows of a world of things, in which years he read or studied it all no one knows.

Nella sua stanza in mezzo a montagne di carte, libri, quadri e disegni . . . perchè abbia tanti libri nella stanza non si sa dato che egli dice di non aver mai voglia di leggere niente; tuttavia conosce un mondo di cose, in quali anni le abbia lette o studiate, non lo sa nessuno<sup>91</sup>

Later Ginzburg wrote about Penna’s personal concept of History and his total freedom pointing out Penna’s indifference towards any established power, the poet entertained with the living and with the dead, with the powerful and the powerless, a relationship of absolute simplicity and equality.<sup>92</sup>

Italian essayist Cesare Garboli was one of the protagonists of literary criticism and Italian culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Admirer and close friend of the poet, he published *Penna Papers* in 1984, reviewing sixty-five unpublished poems by Penna. The essay contains the writings dedicated by Garboli to Penna in the

---

<sup>91</sup> Ginzburg, N., p.8.

<sup>92</sup> “Vivendo egli fuori dalle leggi che il tempo determina e impone, e non conoscendo egli nel suo mondo né classi sociali, né impalcature ideologiche, e mantenendo e avendo mantenuto sempre una piena e libera indifferenza nei confronti del potere, e intrattenendo con i vivi e con i morti, con i potenti e con gli inermi, un rapporto di assoluta semplicità e parità, egli è uno fra gli esseri umani più liberi che siano mai esistiti.” *Ibidem*.10.



seventies when the poet was still alive- a new enriched edition was published in 1995. The book is a diary, a journey, a long, uninterrupted dialogue- sometimes a discussion- with the poet. Garboli defined Penna's poetry as "extraordinary" his verse as "outstanding" and the poet himself a "mythical lawmaker"(31).

In 1984 Italian poet and critic Elio Pecora published the first and most authoritative biography<sup>93</sup> of the poet. Pecora chronicles Penna's life with the accuracy and honesty of the witness, but also with the affection of a friend and the attention of the reader. Without indulging in legends and anecdotes, he traces Penna's existence using the papers, diaries and notes found in the house. It is the portrait of a man troubled by opposing truths, by sadness and joy, a bright mind haunted by a "cheta follia" 'a quiet madness'.

Magda Vigilante focused on the iconic character of the *fanciullo*. According to the critic all Penna's poetry is an uninterrupted attempt to achieve perfect and complete togetherness between the poet and his godlike apparition. The *fanciullo* represents the ideal image of Love, which Vigilante links, quoting C.G. Jung, to the archetypal, primeval image of the child or angel who "manifests itself/arises in a moral conflict to announce a new content, unthinkable for the consciousness".<sup>94</sup> This anonymous lad reveals himself, in some poems, as "the saviour", in some others he is the hero with superhuman powers, winning out over human adversities.

In 1990 a significant symposium of national importance took place in Perugia - Penna's hometown- about Penna and his oeuvre. The proceedings were published in

---

<sup>93</sup> Pecora, E., *Sandro Penna: una cheta follia*, work cited.

<sup>94</sup> "... si manifesta, in una situazione conflittuale della coscienza, per annunciare un contenuto nuovo, inconcepibile per la coscienza" Vigilante, M., "Il mito del fanciullo e la poesia di Sandro Penna", in *La Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana*, A, 91, VII, No.2-3 May-December 1987, p.469.

1992 with the evocative title of *Epifania del desiderio* 'Epiphany of Desire'<sup>95</sup>. Garboli wrote the preface to the book where he points out the importance of the symposium as the first national gathering of University researchers, scholars, writers and artists to present their work on Sandro Penna and his poetry; a poetry that Garboli describes as "outside, beyond the human" meaning above and below normal reality, feral and divine at the same time. He claims for Penna the ability to "[r]each the sublime in the glittering of the dirt, making sparkles of the dust".<sup>96</sup> Most of the papers present views and criticism by critics and writers already considered in this chapter. Among the most interesting and original papers are those which investigate the relationship between Penna's poetry and the international literary and artistic scene of the twentieth century, as well as possible influences on Penna's oeuvre. In this chapter I will briefly summarize the studies and papers presented by Giorgio Luti, William Rivière, Gualtiero De Santi and Bruno Corà.

Giorgio Luti finds in Penna's verse a basic feature of the twentieth century literary code: the theme of the "epiphany", the moment when light and darkness seem to join and the opposition is resolved. The critic writes: "In *Stephen Hero* Joyce described the epiphany as the moment the soul and the identity of things leap towards us, out of the veil of appearance".<sup>97</sup> Penna's poems are filled with epiphanies, maintains the critic, his world is an irregular, twinkling revelation of the 'unlimited' and the absolute truth.

---

<sup>95</sup> Luti, G., et al., *Epifania del desiderio*, *Atti del Convegno nazionale di studi su Sandro Penna*, editors: Roberto Abbondanza e Maurizio Terzetti, Perugia: Provincia di Perugia 1992.

<sup>96</sup> "... raggiungere il sublime nello scintillio della sporcizia, nel far brillare la polvere" *Ibidem*, Garboli, C., "Introduzione".

<sup>97</sup> "In *Stephen Hero* così Joyce definì l'epifania: è l'attimo in cui di fronte a un oggetto la sua anima, la sua identità balza verso di noi, fuori dei veli dell'apparenza" Luti, G., "L'ombra e la luce: Penna e il Novecento", in Luti et al., pp. 17-27.

William Rivière's paper<sup>98</sup> deals with the presence of Penna in the Anglo-American literary environment and tackles the problem of translating poetry in a language other than the original, concluding that - although W.S. Di Piero has done an excellent job with Penna - one always loses when translating poetry. In his search for similarities between Penna and the Anglo-American poets, the critic associates the Italian poet with P.B. Shelley and notes that he would be in good company among the English poets of the nineteenth century such as Emily Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Finally Penna is compared to W.H. Auden and the contemporary Thom Gunn, but - other than the similarity of the homoerotic theme - the critic seems to find only differences. Rivière also quotes W.C. Williams' tenet: 'no ideas but in things' but misses the link with Penna's stylistic choices and language and finally he omits altogether any association with Walt Whitman, suggested by other critics.

Gualtiero De Santi's paper explores some of Penna's European influences. De Santi considers that Penna's oeuvre is not peripheral nor incidental in the European literary scene but at the very heart of it; identifying in the Romantic and Symbolist movements - and notably in Arthur Rimbaud and German lyric poet Friedrich Hölderlin - Penna's main models. De Santi defines these influences as 'suggestions' and 'images' which sometimes turn into almost direct quotations, but acknowledges in Penna the subtle ability to disassemble any poetic 'loan' and make it new, modern and up-to-date. The English poet given most consideration is P.B. Shelley, and the list of English poems compared to Penna's verse includes "Ode to the West Wind", "The Indian Serenade", "Love's Philosophy" and "A Summer Evening Churchyard". In conclusion

---

<sup>98</sup>Rivière, W., "La presenza di Penna negli ambienti di lingua anglo-americana", in Luti et al., pp. 242-246.

the critic states: “Penna does not rewrite or revise Shelley, but from the English poet he retrieves metaphors and visions”.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, Italian art critic and writer Bruno Corà’s contribution to the symposium, *Penna, i pittori, l’arte*, (230-235) ‘Penna, the painters and the Arts’, reveals another outstanding facet of Penna’s eclectic personality: his interest, passion, knowledge and even expertise in modern art, which will be further explored in the chapter of this study dealing with the pictorial quality of Penna’s poetry.

Oreste Macrì stressed the divine essence of Penna’s *fanciullo*, and quoting the poet’s line “ogni nuovo ragazzo è un nuovo Dio” ‘every new boy is a new God’; comes to the conclusion: “In short, the lad is the poet’s true God and not in a metaphorical sense, but in real terms, since his presence, or sometimes his mere image . . . instills into the poet’s mind a fullness that is synonymous with life and happiness. Everything in the *lad* is ‘deified’ and almost idolized, to every last drop of his sweat . . . with similar miraculous effect”.<sup>100</sup>

Anna Vaglio’s study, published in 1993, gives a detailed and accurate overview of the European and Italian twentieth century literary scene. Dealing with Penna’s language she writes:

The aim of his language choices and style is ‘terseness’ along with the tenets of the poetry of the thirties-forties; engaged in an attempt to restore the tradition of Italian poetry, and at the same time to make Italian culture less provincial.

Il fine della sua scelta linguistica e stilistica è l’essenzialità sulla falsariga della poesia degli anni Trenta-Quaranta, impegnata in un tentativo di

---

<sup>99</sup>“Penna non riscrive o rielabora Shelley, ma in lui reperisce metafore e visioni” De Santi, *Penna e le immagini della poesia Europea*, in Luti et al., pp.29-46.

<sup>100</sup>“Insomma il ‘fanciullo’ rappresenta per il poeta il vero Dio e non in senso metaforico, ma in termini reali, dato che la sua presenza, o a volte la sola immagine [...] infonde nel suo animo una pienezza che è sinonimo di vita e di felicità. Ogni cosa del suo fanciullo è ‘divinizzata’ e quasi idolatrata fino all’ultima goccia del suo sudore . . . con simile effetto taumaturgico” Macrì, O., p.542.

restaurazione della tradizione poetica Italiana, e in un altro tentativo paralleo di sprovvincializzazione della cultura Italiana.(94)

To this regard it is interesting to note that ‘brevity’ and a precise, accurate use of the ‘correct’ word, were common features of Italian Hermeticism and European avant-gardes; and that Penna published for the first time in the Italian literary journal *Solaria*. Based in Florence the journal was committed to making the Italian audience aware of European and international literatures, and maintaining the autonomy of art from history and from social and political influences.

Italian essayist Roberto Deidier has published extensively on Penna and his poetry. In one of his essays (1997), Deidier brings together his studies and articles based on Penna’s diaries and notes found in the poet’s house after his death. The diaries and the letters in particular, show Penna’s great interest in contemporary and modern poetry, despite the ‘myth’ of the poet’s unresponsiveness to the literature of his time. As noted in the previous chapter, Deidier also questioned the lack of influences in Penna’s work recalling that Penna was:

A poet who has been, since the fifties, classified as ‘a flower without visible stem’ according to the well-known definition by Piero Bigongiari. In fact Penna’s verse had already shown some evident unmistakable *senhals*, that would have led the interpretation of his poetry back to the canons of modernity.

Un poeta che fin dagli anni cinquanta era stato classificato come un “fiore senza gambo visibile” secondo la nota definizione di Piero Bigongiari. In realtà nei versi penniani si erano resi già visibili alcuni *senhals* inconfondibili, che avrebbero ricondotto l’interpretazione di questo poeta entro i canoni della modernità.(22)

Deidier agrees with Ginzburg about Penna’s wide and eclectic literary culture and awareness, and notes that Penna’s European influences have never been completely

investigated.<sup>101</sup> According to Deidier, “Penna’s roots seem to plunge right into modernity”<sup>102</sup> and, referring to the epiphanies of the ever present *fanciullo*, writes: “His presence [of the lad] becomes, in a twentieth century mode, the occasion for an objective correlative”.<sup>103</sup>

Luigi Tassoni, Italian literary critic and semiologist at the University of Pecs, Hungary, published in 2004 an essay which includes all his previous work on Penna. The scholar describes Penna’s oeuvre as a modern song book in which time and space are not considered in the linear time of physical reality, but are expanded and enlarged in a circular dimension. Tassoni focuses on the main figure of the songbook - Penna’s *fanciullo* - a god-child messenger who represents the mirror image of the poet himself. The two protagonists of Penna’s poems (the poet and the lad) pursue, recognize, reach and lose each other innumerable times. The circular time of the poems, repeatable in every instance, justifies and explains the repetition and the monothematic nature of Penna’s poetry. Finally, what Tassoni finds different and new in this poetry, compared to the Italian poetry of the poet’s time, is the freshness, the colour and the spontaneity of Penna’s poetic narrative.

Italian writer and critic Enzo Giannelli became a close friend of the poet during the last year of Penna’s life. He wrote a sort of unauthorized biography (2007) as the old and ill poet opened up to his young friend without hesitation, making judgments and telling stories about the major Italian and international literary personalities of his time. The book is not a critical study of Penna’s poetry but it unveils Penna’s literary knowledge of his fellow writers. Comments and criticism would include Shakespeare

---

<sup>101</sup>“una formazione autodidatta ed eterogenea, con visibile ascendenze europee, tutt’altro che indagata” p.18.

<sup>102</sup>“Le radici di Penna sembrano affondare direttamente nel moderno” p.19.

<sup>103</sup>“La sua presenza diviene, novecentescamente, occasione di una correlazione oggettiva” p.19.

(Penna claims to know the *Sonnets* quite well), Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Neruda, Thomas Mann, E.A. Poe, Jack London (Penna greatly admired his vigorous and masculine way of writing), Truman Capote, Walt Whitman, André Gide, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and of course Oscar Wilde. We find out that Penna was able to read English poetry in the original language and quote some lines by Shelley by heart.

Daniela Marcheschi's study (2007), investigates the constant presence of the 'body' and the celebration of the 'corporeity' in Penna, which reveals Nietzsche's influence on the poet. According to Marcheschi the only possible knowledge for Penna is to be found in your own body and it must come from physical experience. The critic cites Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, which Penna read early in his life: "... the actual knowledge, precisely 'the Life and the Earth' are 'in your body' as - indeed- Nietzsche taught him".<sup>104</sup> Penna therefore is: "Poet of the corporeity which means poet of the whole, that is the body as flesh, mind and soul"<sup>105</sup>. As for Penna's lads, they all are "beyond Good and Evil", in a primeval state of innocence where no sin yet exists. Marcheschi also analyses a peculiar and recurrent theme in Penna: Time. According to the critic, Penna has a modern, Bergsonian perception of time: "In a very modern way Penna felt that what we call 'time' is a multiple and simultaneous whole, and that, therefore, in this multi-dimensional set, the great social History and the small personal, individual stories, have the same right to exist".<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> "... la vera conoscenza, precisamente 'la vita e la terra' sono 'nel tuo corpo' come gli aveva appunto insegnato Nietzsche" Marcheschi, D., p.31.

<sup>105</sup> "Poeta della corporietà significa poeta del 'tutto' ossia del corpo come: carne, mente e spirito" *Ibidem*, p.13.

<sup>106</sup> "Molto modernamente Penna avvertiva che quello che chiamiamo 'tempo' è un insieme molteplice e simultaneo e che, perciò, in questo complesso pluridimensionale stanno sia la storia 'grande' delle società sia le 'piccole' cronache ... dei diversi individui." *Ibidem*, p.29.

Pierfranco Bruni (*La poetica* 2008) points out that Penna's poetic production covers a long period of time - almost forty years. After the fascist dictatorship, the critic explains, Italian literary scene and Italian poetry opened up to foreign literatures and the controversial social and political ideas of Socialism and Marxism. A turbulent assimilation of foreign poets took place (authors who were little known during the "dark years of Fascism") thanks to the circulation of works by Majakovskij, Bertolt Brecht and the Modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot, Joyce and Cummings (13). Bruni also admits a closeness between Penna and the Alexandrian poets and explores some of Penna's familiar topics such as sleeping and dreaming (the only way to cope with or escape reality), the alternation of sorrow and bliss, and the continuous dialogue between the poet, Nature and the Cosmos. Critical work on Penna's language underlines its clarity, modernity, originality and his epigrammatic style, which Bruni compares to Wilde's. Finally Bruni agrees with major Italian critic Giovanni Raboni in identifying in Penna's otherness not as the cause, but rather the means of the poet's self-exclusion from the world.

Quite an opposite view of Penna as an Alexandrian poet, comes from Francesca Bartellini (2008) who labels Penna as a "post-modern poet" (7). Bartellini is a writer, actress and film director who worked in Italy, France, Greece, South Africa and the US. Her short documentary film is a portrait of Sandro Penna as the poet and the man behind the poems. It opens with a conversation with Elio Pecora, Penna's close friend and major biographer. It traces the life of the poet through images, interviews and readings of his verse. Bartellini states in the introduction: "Sandro Penna was not, as it has been said, a poet of ancient sensibility, but a post-modern writer who rediscovers



the 'cosmos'. And what I mean by cosmos is the perception of a total and absolute reality, a link between heaven and earth."<sup>107</sup>

Elena Gurrieri's essay on Penna (2010) brings together the work of ten previous essays. In the foreword Gurrieri introduces the poet as: "One of the most interesting but unheeded poets of Italian twentieth century literary scene, who was- until a short time ago- little known, or famous for the wrong reasons."<sup>108</sup> Gurrieri offers a critical-philological approach to Penna's oeuvre. Of particular interest is the work dedicated to the early Penna: the critic focuses again on the concept of time, writing: "Time in the 1939 *Poems* is cyclical, having a 'weather-like' connotation rather than a chronological one"<sup>109</sup>- that is: time is marked by the seasons and the hours of the day, by the sunny weather and the rain rather than by a 'past' or a 'present'. Gurrieri, like Pasolini and Rosselli before her, underlines Penna's love of and interest in the ordinary people, workers, the poor and the underprivileged. As for his language the critic acknowledges the clarity and easiness of Penna's images that are "achieved without lexical refinement/ subtlety or hermetic obscurity", observing that Penna favours the use of Eliot's objective correlative, which can be detected in "his natural images . . . correlative of the sorrow."<sup>110</sup> Thus the poet does not appear so isolated and unaware of the cultural developments of his time.

---

<sup>107</sup> "Sandro Penna non è stato, come si è detto, un poeta dalla sensibilità antica, ma un post-moderno che ritrova il cosmo. Per cosmo intendo quella percezione della realtà totale e assoluta, quel collegamento tra cielo e terra" Bartellini, F., p.7.

<sup>108</sup> "Uno dei più interessanti ed inascoltati poeti del Novecento, fino a poco tempo fa di certo poco noto o mal noto" Gurrieri, E., p.9.

<sup>109</sup> "Il tempo in *Poesie* del 1939 è ciclico, avendo una connotazione metereologica anziché cronologica" *Ibidem* p.58.

<sup>110</sup> " . . . ottenuti senza ricercatezze lessicali o oscurità d'ermetico stampo. Tutto ciò a favore dell'impiego di un'obiettività correlativa Eliotiana, riconoscibile nel naturalismo delle raffigurazioni [...] adottate a correlativo oggettivo del dolore." *Ibidem* p.75.

Anna Maria Guidi's recent approach (2010) to Penna's work is quite unusual and elaborate. Guidi - a poet herself - follows the theories of Charles Mauron, founder of the discipline which combines stylistic and literary criticism with applied psychoanalysis. She makes use of her expertise in psychoanalysis in order to understand the sources and characteristics of Penna's inspiration. The poet's erotic drive is - according to the scholar - at the origin of his poetry, where the *fanciullo* is a mixture of eros and innocence who becomes capable of creative events. Penna's lad is the bearer of myth and the only means - for the poet- to grasp the reality and gain freedom from it. According to Guidi there is no difference between Penna the poet and Penna the man. Moreover, Guidi questions the claims for the Alexandrian quality of Penna's language maintaining that the freshness and conversational tone of his style is nothing like the subtleties of the Alexandrians' emotions. Penna's emotions are real, not fabricated, and the immediacy and spontaneity of his poems is far from any unnecessary sophistication; though Guidi admits that such easiness is the result of a job so well done that no one notices it was done.

In 2010 Andrea Barbetti, Giuseppe Grasso and Silvia Peronaci published a short but subtle study on Penna's most symbolic and possibly most quoted poem *La vita... è ricordarsi* 'Life...is remembering'. The poem is - for the critics- more a transposition of reality into 'images' than a precise narrative. They maintain that all Penna's poetry is based on 'ambiguity': everything appears, at the same time, as much real and physical as fantastic and dreamlike. It is a project which seeks an eternal, infinite and reversible Time. All natural elements are epiphanies of a superior absolute Beauty, which is the only possible 'Salvation' revealed sometimes by the sea, or the trees, or the colours but more often by the ever-present *fanciullo*, with his innocence and beauty.

Another good point in favour of Penna's modernity comes from Gandolfo Cascio. In his essay (2011) Cascio - professor of Italian literature at Utrecht University, Holland - analyses the way the two categories of Time and Space are dealt with in Penna. These categories, which have always influenced the text analysis and the critical evaluation of poetry, have been challenged by the culture of the twentieth century.

Cascio writes:

From Einstein to Nietzsche, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello and Marcel Proust, both formal concepts (space and time) have been, first formally reconsidered, then replaced by subjectivity, to be finally denied. In the work of Sandro Penna, as well, the consciousness of historical time is undoubtedly modern.

Da Einstein a Nietzsche a Gabriele D'Annunzio a Proust a Pirandello i due concetti (spazio e tempo) formali vengono prima relativizzati, per essere poi sostituiti da elementi eterogenei e soggettivi, per essere infine negati. Anche nell'opera di Sandro Penna la coscienza del tempo storico è indubbiamente moderna.(27)

Cascio then agrees with Garboli in his definition of Penna as a poet outside and beyond reality, but still deeply in history. Evidence to support this statement is given by the presence of objects, places and people that carry a strong modern, down-to-earth, pragmatic meaning. As the critic points out, "I refer, for example, to the many trains, to a pair of trousers, the ticking of a typewriter, factory workers, running cars, people passing by carrying newspapers."<sup>111</sup> The article also highlights Penna's partiality for the present indicative tense - everything seems to be happening here and now. It is as though Penna wants to win the past and make it stay and belong to us forever. Finally the critic considers the space in Penna's poems. He describes it a natural, amazing theatre which changes continuously; where trees are easily replaced by street lamps, a

---

<sup>111</sup>“... mi riferisco, per esempio, ai tanti treni, un paio di calzonì, il ticchettio di una macchina da scrivere ... operai, automobili che corrono, gente che passa carica di giornali” Cascio, G., p.29.

river by a street. The lads who populate this space are Penna's unknown, anonymous *fanciulli*, who are all the lads of the world joined in a loving cosmic unity. Places and landscapes are beautiful and evocative but imprecise, so they can be 'any place': "Anonymous are the places, as the boys, apprentices, sailors and workers are anonymous. They are without a name because they do not exist, except as a poetic (I would not say here metaphysical) category/entity: Love."<sup>112</sup>

### 2.3 Anglo-American criticism

The first record of Penna in English language appeared in 1962 in the anthology *Contemporary Italian Poetry*.<sup>113</sup> What is really interesting is that Penna was included in the third of the six sections under the heading, "Tradition and Experiment", while the fourth section, which is the longest one, deals with the "Hermetic Poets" (Ungaretti, Montale, Gatto, Luzi and Sereni). The anthology presents five poems by Penna, translated by Carlo Golino. After this first interest in Penna, during the sixties and the seventies, the only relevant articles or short essays came from George Singh and Robert Dombroski.

In 1971 Singh<sup>114</sup> identified Penna's most significant gifts with the autonomy of writing and his originality; whereas Dombroski's article (1973)<sup>115</sup> compares Penna to the Alexandrian Cavafy, as already pointed out by many other critics. Penna's best

---

<sup>112</sup> "Anonimi sono i luoghi, come anonimi sono i fanciulli, i ragazzi, i garzoni, i marinai e gli operai. senza un nome perché non esistono, se non nella loro unità di categoria lirica (non direi qui metafisica): l'Amore" *Ibidem* p.40.

<sup>113</sup> *Contemporary Italian Poetry*, edited by Carlo L. Golino, Los Angeles: University of California Press, Berkeley 1962.

<sup>114</sup> Singh, G., "Sandro Penna: Tutte le poesie", *Forum Italicum*, 3 - 1971.

<sup>115</sup> Dombroski, R., "Sandro Penna", *Books Abroad*, April 1973.

qualities are - according to latter critic - the clarity, simplicity and concision of his poetic style. These two studies on Penna, though short and at times repetitive of previous criticism that originated in Italy, are important for they were published in *Forum Italicum* and *Books Abroad* (later named *World Literature Today*)- literary magazines with a wide circulation not only in the US and North America but also in Ireland and the UK.

In 1981 James Anthony Cascaito<sup>116</sup> wrote a doctoral dissertation on Penna which focuses mainly on the poet's homosexuality as the main source of inspiration for his poetry. Cascaito compares, in an interesting and quite exhaustive way, many different points of view on the matter. But the turning point for Penna's appreciation in North America came in 1982 when American poet and critic William Simone Di Piero, professor at Stanford University, published the first and most complete translation in English of Penna's poems. Di Piero wrote in the foreword:

In 1973, when I was doing my first translation of Sandro Penna's poems I hoped to meet Penna and show him the results of my work . . . but the meeting never came about . . . he refused to see anyone except a few close friends . . . Penna was perhaps the least visible, the least public, of important Italian poets, yet his reputation as a distinguished lyric poet seemed unquestioned among Italian men of letters. In conversation with (Italian) writers and critics I was often told that any understanding of modern Italian poetry would be incomplete without consideration of Sandro Penna. (3).

Australian writer Peter Robb - who spent some time travelling in Southern Italy - reviewed *Poesie* (the 1989 "Garzanti" edition with a preface by Cesare Garboli) in the March 1990 issue of *The Times Literary Supplement*. In his article Robb explores some literary influences attributed to Penna and goes so far as to compare the urban landscape

---

<sup>116</sup>Cascaito, J.A., *Lieto Disonore: The Poetry of Sandro Penna*, PH.D Dissertation, Columbia University, Michigan: Ann Arbor, (DAI), ) July 1981.

in Penna's poems to the modern chaotic world of Eliot and Joyce: "... the intent and self-absorbed figure that inhabits this Early Modern landscape belongs to the same urban world as Joyce and the early Eliot. Sometimes Penna, who has been described as a man from the Mediterranean's pagan past, seems more modern than Montale."<sup>117</sup> As the references to the oriental "flavour" of Penna's verse quoted by Robb (Omar Khayyam, haiku and the Sufi mystical poets) are notably relevant to this thesis, Robb's review will be quoted in full in the chapters on Modernism and haiku.

A second important translation of Penna's poems, *Remember Me, God of Love*, was published in 1993 by Blake Robinson. The critic noted in the foreword: "Penna gave titles to few of his poems . . . He uses simple language but shuns the very colloquial, not to mention slang. With time almost all old-fashioned literariness was purged from his style, which tended toward greater and greater concentration. Penna is often mysterious but not obscure. Rhyme is not essential, and his line is varied-hendecasyllable to *vers libre*" (11). Robinson later published more articles with translations from Penna: one<sup>118</sup> in *Chelsea* the twice-a-year literary magazine based in New York City, and another<sup>119</sup> in *Gradya* the "International Journal of Italian Poetry".

John Butcher's contribution to Penna criticism is a long article (2002) which:

. . . concentrates on reading a generous selection of those texts by Penna that allude in one way or another to sexual organs or actions. It will be seen that there exists in the Perugian poet a tendency to present the more erotic aspects of his existence in an enigmatic way . . . when it comes to all things sexual Penna can be quite a cryptic writer, sometimes deliberately leaving a great deal to his reader's imagination.(2)

---

<sup>117</sup> Robb, P., work cited, n.p.

<sup>118</sup> Robinson, B., "Sandro Penna", *Chelsea*, 59, 1995.

<sup>119</sup> Robinson, B., "Good to the Lees", *Gradya*, 17, 1999.

Later the critic adds: “It would appear, in fact, that questions of ‘decency’ played a vital role in Penna’s decisions as to whether to publish or not”(124). Butcher concludes his study with “. . . a final thought. It is not easy to imagine a more thematically restricted writer than Sandro Penna. His verse revolves principally around love or, more precisely, erotic love for young men. In addition to this, the poet devotes ample space to the natural world, perhaps the only other thing that impassioned him as much as his *fanciulli*.”(128)

In conclusion, this Literature Review leaves us with most of Penna criticism focusing on the controversial subject matter of his poems (notably the Italian criticism) and whether or not the poet’s ‘difference’ contributed to his poetic vocation. The originality and uniqueness of Penna’s work is reaffirmed by the majority of critics, however investigation of Penna’s literary influences remains minimal - above all the search for connections with poetry outside Italy. This is partly due to Penna’s determination to conceal sources, readings and literary influences, and his adversity to being ‘labelled’ or associated with any literary movements. This leads us to the next chapter where I attempt to explain Penna’s ‘reluctance’ through the application of Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence”, which, according to the critic, affected many other great poets of the past.





## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **PENNA’S MYTH AND “THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE”**

<b>3.1 Penna’s narcissism</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>3.2 The “mythical lawmaker”</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>3.3 The “anxiety of influence”</b>	<b>96</b>



### 3.1 Penna's narcissism

As a poet he was more loved than studied, his poetry worshipped - by some - as a religion.

(*Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo*)<sup>120</sup>

Penna's myth of "uniqueness" was possibly started by Piero Bigongiari, one of the first Italian critics to write a review of Penna's verse. Bigongiari defined Penna's poetry as "*impressionista*" but acknowledged its originality and uniqueness, devoid of any visible influence.<sup>121</sup> Around the figure of Sandro Penna, aided by his own admirers Saba, Montale, Pasolini and Natalia Ginzburg, the myth of the poet's "holiness" and pure lyric grace, isolated from society and time, grew throughout the years, nourished by Penna himself and his lifestyle. Ginzburg, for instance, celebrated the poet as to be one among humans freer than ever existed, maintaining that the poet never let himself be affected by other people's ideas; never he bent or thought according to a model given to him by others, or found floating in the air.<sup>122</sup>

But once Penna's work became known and studied beyond the intellectual elites, some alternative voices made themselves heard. According to Italian critic Antonio Pinchera, for instance, everything has been said about Penna, but still only a little is known. Critics, Pinchera added, have always expressed, from the beginning, ultimate judgments; a myth was created, the myth of Sandro Penna, and we approached it as if it

---

<sup>120</sup>“... poeta più amato che non studiato, con punte di vero e proprio culto” Mengaldo, P., p. 734.

<sup>121</sup>“Un fiore senza gambo visibile . . . uno di quegli intensi fiori di lago che sembrano galleggiare sull'acqua.” Bigongiari, P., p.47.

<sup>122</sup>“... egli è uno fra gli esseri umani più liberi che siano mai esistiti. Mai si è lasciato dominare da un'idea altrui; mai è diventato servo di un'idea che circolasse all'intorno; mai si è piegato a essere o a pensare secondo un modello fornitogli da altri o fluttuante nell'aria.” Ginzburg, N., in: Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore*, p.10.

were “a beautiful and shocking prototype of the most advanced technology finally installed under glass in a museum, made taboo.”<sup>123</sup>

Italian poet Alfredo Giuliani, who knew Penna personally, described him as an intelligent man, but in some ways primitive and impulsive, cunning and innocent, extremely selfish and in love with himself and the world.<sup>124</sup> This narcissistic side was also observed by Pasolini who was certainly the biggest supporter of Penna’s myth. When Mengaldo (in the epigraph to this section) speaks of someone to whom Penna’s poetry represented a “religion”, he was actually referring to Pasolini, who identified in Penna a protest against social conformity and called him “the best poet of his generation”, “a saint” and claimed that his poetry is “my religion”.<sup>125</sup> But from a critical point of view Pasolini questioned the innocence of Penna’s inspiration and, although identifying in Penna a kind of mysticism, also underlined Penna’s “narcissism”. Analysing the sorrow of Penna’s *persona* in his oeuvre, Pasolini identified the trauma of Penna’s exclusion from normal society as a crucial wound to the poet’s narcissism.<sup>126</sup> While subsequent critics tend to agree with Pasolini’s identification of Penna’s narcissism, many have reacted violently to Pasolini’s interpretation of Penna’s sorrow as the product of the trauma of being an outsider (e.g. De Riccardis). But all the controversy, in some way, ended up fuelling Penna’s myth.

Penna’s narcissism coexisted with his insecurity and helped the growth of his own myth; we find the best witness of it in Giannelli. Italian writer Enzo Giannelli who

---

<sup>123</sup> “uno splendido e scioccante prototipo della più avanzata tecnologia, infine installato sotto vetro in un museo . . . , fatto tabù” Pinchera, A., “Alle origini della poesia di Sandro Penna”, in *Rapporti*, V, n. 12-13, March-June 1977, p.817

<sup>124</sup> Giuliani, A., “Sandro Penna: Poesie”, in *Il Verri*, II, 1, 1958; later in *Immagini e maniere*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965, p.293

<sup>125</sup> Pasolini, P.P., *Passione e ideologia*, pp.345-346.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.345-346.

lived next to the poet in the last years of Penna's life, replying to a reporter's question: "Why did you want to meet Sandro Penna?" wrote: "Man needs myths and Sandro Penna was a myth. After meeting him, I realized that myths do not exist. It was only fascination. But that remained."<sup>127</sup> Giannelli also pointed out how Penna, despite his insecurities, was actually fully aware of the value of his poetry: "Penna knew he was a great poet and expected laurels and praise, but he lacked that 'footman attitude' - an indispensable requisite according to La Bruyère - to succeed in attracting luck in life."<sup>128</sup> Penna was never completely joking when, discussing poetry with Giannelli, he used to say he was, together with Dylan Thomas the best poet of this generation, or that he himself, Penna, and not Quasimodo, should have been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1959 for his lyrical poetry.<sup>129</sup>

### 3.2 The "mythical lawmaker"

Italian essayist Cesare Garboli was one of the leading critics of Italian culture in the second half of the twentieth century. An admirer and a close friend of the poet, in 1984 he published *Penna Papers* - an essay but also a diary, a journey and a long, uninterrupted dialogue with the poet. Garboli defines Penna's poetry as "extraordinary", his verse "memorable" and the poet himself as a "mythical lawmaker".<sup>130</sup> It was to Garboli that Penna finally spoke out his concern about and his

---

<sup>127</sup> "Perchè hai voluto conoscere Sandro Penna?" "L'uomo ha bisogno di miti e Sandro Penna era un mito. Conoscendolo mi sono reso conto che i miti non esistono. Esiste solo l'incanto. E quello è rimasto" Giannelli, E., p.212.

<sup>128</sup> "Penna sapeva di essere un grande e pretendeva incensi e allori, ma non aveva quell'animo di lacchè, requisito indispensabile, secondo La Bruyère, per riuscire a conquistare la fortuna nella vita" *Ibidem*, p.213.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*, p.57.

<sup>130</sup> Garboli, C., p. 26, p.31.

annoyance at for being constantly associated with the Alexandrian poets or any other movement/poet of the past, asking to be defined just as “poet of the mystery”<sup>131</sup>, thereby almost dictating his epitaph to posterity. But there is more, for, suggesting for himself the definition of ‘poet of the mystery’ Penna reveals, in my opinion, the way in which he built up his myth of uniqueness out of his narcissism.

Penna was a sophisticated writer and had an intuitive intelligence and the word suggested by Penna, ‘mystery’, is here connected to ‘divination’ which is the accepted origin of all poetry (Bloom 59). Perhaps Penna wanted to suggest that he never needed any ‘influence’ as his poetry was a ‘divine gift’ a ‘grace’ (the word “*grazia*” is often used by critics to define the peculiarity of Penna’s poetry and I have just quoted Pasolini worshipping this poetry as a religion). The association of poets and poetry to Divinity is of course not new. Since Greek civilization and up until the 19th century artists were considered to have magical powers connected to religion and divinity; they acted as a *medium* between Divinity and humans. Similar to the artist of ancient Greece (with whom Penna was associated by critics), Penna felt a profound sense of responsibility toward his gift and toward poetry in general. Poetry is not something light that can be taken up or put down at will; it is not just a game - as he stated in this early poem written in his twenties:

La mia poesia non sarà  
un gioco leggero  
fatto con parole delicate  
e malate  
...  
La mia poesia lancerà la sua forza  
a perdersi nell’infinito.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup>*Ibidem*, p.33.

<sup>132</sup>In “Giovanili ritrovate” *Poesie* (re-print 2010), p.271.

My poetry won't be  
a light game  
made of fragile  
sickly words  
...  
My poetry will launch its strength  
to lose itself in the infinite.

In the lines that follow from a letter to his friend Vitali (13<sup>th</sup> February 1928) we find the evidence of Penna's 'lack of hunger' for literary fame: he was obsessed by poetry as only Poetry allowed him the directness of personal assertion because only there could he describe himself.

. . . non amo più che pochi poeti ma il mio amore per la Poesia credo sia ora così forte che mi stia tutto trasformando e non mi lasci più! . . . non sono, come credevi, lontano dalla poesia, e mai lo potrò più essere, poiché in me la passione è allo stato puro ne è imbevuta tutta la mia anima e non mira alla, ahimè comune, mania letteraria . . . amo soprattutto i poeti che non hanno voluto fare del loro nome una parola universale, amo i poeti che nessuno conosce.<sup>133</sup>

I love not more than a few poets, but my love for Poetry is now so strong I think it is changing me and will never leave me! . . . I am not, as you expected, away from poetry, and never more shall I be, because my passion is pure, my whole soul is soaked with it, and does not aspire to the, now alas, very common literary craze . . . I love above all poets who have not wanted to make their name a 'universal word' I love the poets that nobody knows.

\*

Roberto Didier recognizes Penna's uniqueness and how he represents a mythical figure in the Italian literary scene, his "mitografia" 'mythography' of loneliness and

---

<sup>133</sup> Penna, S., in Pecora, E., pp.141-142.

alienation being so widespread among his audience and readers.<sup>134</sup> Deidier goes so far to compare Penna's uniqueness to Emily Dickinson's and W.H. Auden's:

These poems [Penna's] constitute, in their confused combination, a case similar to Emily Dickinson's or Cavafy's texts; as well as, in times closer to ours, to Pavese or W.H. Auden. The first two achieved that extraordinary isolation of individual texts which refuse to accept any constraint or hierarchy or editorial position, they are offered in all their dazzling uniqueness.

Queste poesie configurano, nel loro confuso insieme, una situazione testuale analoga a quella di Emily Dickinson o di Kavafis, nonchè, in tempi più vicini a noi, di Pavese o di W.H. Auden. Nei primi due si realizzava già quello straordinario isolamento dei singoli testi, quel loro rifiutare qualsiasi costrizione o gerarchia o collocazione editoriale, per porsi in tutta la loro folgorante unicità.<sup>135</sup>

But in Deidier we also find an authoritative and definitive refutation of the alleged complete uniqueness and originality of Penna's poetry, untouched and unaffected, according to the poet and some critics, by any influence. Deidier acknowledges that beyond the originality, antecedents and influences are clear in this poetry. The critic also reveals how Penna deliberately hides his readings and knowledge of earlier poets' work. Too many times - according to the critic - we accepted without questioning this 'brand of originality'. Analysing Penna's poetic imagery, Deidier points out how from the 'images' of Penna's verse "[a] substratum of meditations emerges, together with long disowned readings. We know that every author has to metabolize their sources, and tries to camouflage their apprenticeship."<sup>136</sup> In the case of Penna, the critic concludes,

---

<sup>134</sup> The actual sentence reads: "la stessa immagine *vulgata* dal poeta, con la mitografia della solitudine e della disappartenenza alla società letteraria e artistica" in Deidier, R., p.84.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibidem*, p.114.

<sup>136</sup> "[...] riaffiora un sostrato di meditazioni e letture lungamente sconfessate. Ogni autore si sa metabolizza le proprie fonti, cerca di mimetizzare l'apprendistato [...]" *Ibidem*, p.23.



the cult that has been created around his person somehow prevented a complete investigation of his influences.<sup>137</sup>

Major critic Carlo Bo, in 1970, also objected to the so called natural and effortless ‘grace’ of Penna’s poetry, claiming for the poet ‘awareness’ of his art and arguing that being natural for Penna should not be understood as the absence of a specific critical awareness: Penna seems to make poetry with nothing but his being natural is the result of a precise and hard work on language and themes.<sup>138</sup> Also Elena Vaglio insists on Penna’s contribution in creating a myth of himself as a sort of defensive way (typical of the poet’s personality) to protect himself and his poetic world from the moral disapproval of the external world and society, and building: “[a]n inaccessible poetic world closed in his own myth.”<sup>139</sup> Later Vaglio, commenting on Penna’s volume *Tutte le Poesie* (1957), concludes: “Penna reveals his way of writing, which is also a revelation of how he consciously builds his myth.”<sup>140</sup> We have already seen how Natalia Ginzburg had revealed something about Penna’s supposed ignorance of the literary scene of his time, noting that in his room - among piles of papers, books, paintings and drawings - there were so many books. But still Penna used to repeat he never felt like reading anything, though, Ginzburg concludes, he knows of a world of things, when he read or studied it all no one knows.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> “una formazione autodidatta ed eterogenea, con visibile ascendenze europee, tutt’altro che indagata” Deidier, R., p.18

<sup>138</sup> Bo, C., “Vento di poesia”, in *Corriere della Sera*, 18 June 1970, p.11.

<sup>139</sup> Vaglio, E., p.11.

<sup>140</sup> “Penna rivela il suo modo di scrivere che però è anche una rivelazione di come lui consapevolmente costruisce il suo mito” *Ibidem*, p.28.

<sup>141</sup> Ginzburg, N., in Penna, *Il Viaggiatore*, p.8

All these remarks and opinions - coming for the poet's critics and friends - along with Penna's strong individualism, confirm the cult which surrounded the poet over the years and lead to presume a supposed "anxiety of influence" in Penna, in the manner theorized by Harold Bloom.

### 3.3 The "anxiety of influence"

Es ist nicht nötig, nicht einmal erwünscht, Partei für mich zu nehmen: im Gegenteil, eine Dosis Neugierde, wie vor einem fremden Gewächs, mit einem ironischen Widerstande, schiene mir eine unvergleichlich intelligentere Stellung zu mir.  
(*Friedrich Nietzsche*)<sup>142</sup>

Bloom's argument is that all strong poets have suffered, in one way or another, from the anxiety of influence. Some of them saw influence as something positive some rejected the notion of influence as a limitation to the originality of their poetry. Penna belongs to the latter group in his rejecting any comparison to other fellow poets.

In his essay Bloom often quotes the works and ideas of Nietzsche and Freud. Both thinkers/writers had some influence on Penna. As Didier points out in analysing Penna's diary and scattered notes:

The temporal dimension [in Penna] is reduced to the experience of the moment . . . it aims, in these notes, to make itself 'willpower' and 'possession/mastery'. Again Schopenhauer and Nietzsche here . . . inspiration . . . in Penna, is nothing but 'love and faith in himself'.

La dimensione temporale si riduce all'esperienza dell'attimo . . . ambisce in questi appunti a farsi 'volontà e 'possessione'. Ancora Schopenhauer e

---

<sup>142</sup> "It is not necessary, nor even desirable, to take my part: on the contrary, a dose of curiosity - as with an unknown plant - with an ironic resistance, would seem to me an incomparably more intelligent attitude toward me." Nietzsche, F., in a letter to Carl Fuchs, 29 July 1888, 1888, KSB 8: 1075.

Nietzsche . . . l'ispirazione, a sua volta, in Penna altro non è che 'amore',  
'fede in se stesso'.(25)

Deidier is here referring to Nietzsche's principle of "will to power", which in Penna leads to a desire to believe in himself (*fede in se stesso*). Penna had read Nietzsche, specifically *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as noted by Deidier (38). What Deidier missed, in my opinion, is the connection, or better the contradiction, between Penna's attraction to Nietzsche's ideas of power and self-confidence and the poet's "anxiety of influence". From his reading of Nietzsche, Penna drew some basic principles which inspired him and are shown in his poems. For instance the line "Livida alba, io sono senza dio" 'Ashen dawn, I am without god',<sup>143</sup> clearly echoes Nietzsche's "Death of God". The death of God is a way of saying that humans are no longer able to believe in any cosmic order since they themselves no longer recognize it. The death of God will lead, Nietzsche says, not only to the rejection of a belief in cosmic or physical order but also to a rejection of absolute values, to the rejection of belief in an objective and universal moral law, which applies to all individuals. Another attribute of Nietzsche's 'death of God' is the tendency to unmask the hypocrisies and illusion of outworn value systems. All these ideas were deeply felt by Penna, who also embraced the concept of the eternal return, or 'eternal recurrence', the belief that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur an infinite number of times across infinite time and space, as in Penna's following lines, quoted earlier: ". . . ragazzi ancora/ dormiranno nel sole in riva al mare./ Ma non saremo che noi stessi ancora"<sup>144</sup> . . . otherboys/ will sleep in the sun by the sea./ But we'll only be ourselves again'.

This concept of the eternal recurrence is maintained by Indian philosophy (Penna

---

<sup>143</sup> "Città" in *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>144</sup> "Guardando un ragazzo dormire" in *Stranezze* (1976).

expressed the deep impression he received from reading Tagore, the great Indian poet: “Tagore helps me to believe in the birth of a religion”<sup>145</sup>), and is later found in Greek philosophers and poets, another of Penna’s major influences. Although Penna, in other poems, refers to the gods or the god of love and even speaks of a bad god who, with a single gesture, petrified an entire landscape that seemed to share the poet’s pain<sup>146</sup>, the God of Christianity is never invoked.

Finally, Nietzsche’s principle of the simultaneous presence of good and evil, joy and pain in our lives and the universe is also part of Penna’s thought (see the title of Penna’s volume of verse *Croce e delizia*, ‘Sorrow and bliss’) as noted also by Didier: “[a] fundamental part of the Penna’s psychology, addressed, from Nietzsche’s perspective, to the acceptance of a coexistence of good and evil, of pain and joy that simultaneously mark each experience.”<sup>147</sup>

But of particular interest to this study is Nietzsche’s theory on the topic of *influence* as reported by Bloom:

Nietzsche is one of the great deniers of anxiety-as-influence . . .  
Nietzsche was the heir of Goethe in his strangely optimistic refusal to regard the poetical past as primarily an obstacle to fresh creation . . . he did not feel the chill of being darkened by a precursor’s shadow.  
Influence, to Nietzsche, meant vitalization.(50)

According to Nietzsche thus, a great poet, like a great man, is someone who has a tremendous force stored up, which is actually what his precursors have created for him to use and develop; so a strong artist should not be bothered by any comparison to previous ‘models’. But at this point Bloom quotes Goethe’s remarks in *Theory of*

---

<sup>145</sup> Di Fonzo, p.116.

<sup>146</sup> “sembrava/ che un dio cattivo/ avesse con un sol gesto/ tutto pietrificato” in *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>147</sup> “ . . . un fondamentale tratto della psicologia penniana, indirizzata, secondo la prospettiva di Nietzsche, verso l’accettazione di una compresenza del male e del bene, del dolore e della gioia che contemporaneamente scandiscono ogni esperienza.” Didier, R., p.38.

*Colour* about models: “even perfect models have a disturbing effect in that they lead us to skip necessary stages in our *Bildung*” and further, “everything great moulds us from the moment we become aware of it.”(51) In the same page Blooms adds that although these statements would discourage most poets and artists, Goethe elsewhere still believes influence is not a threat to the great artist, stating that models are anyway only mirrors for the ‘self’, and what the *latecomer* loves in his precursors is only what they lend him, their own selves, a version of him. This argument supports the idea that poets in general do not actually “read” other poets, but only see, in the other poets’ work, what can be understood as a reflection of themselves -to quote Penna: “Ero una volta Holderlin... Rimbaud...”<sup>148</sup> ‘I was, once, Holderlin... Rimbaud...’. Bloom also reports another of Goethe’s statements which shows how self-confidence can overcome this sort of anxiety:

Do not all achievements of a poet’s predecessors and contemporaries rightfully belong to him? Why should he shrink from picking flowers where he finds them? Only by making the riches of the others our own do we bring anything great into being.(52)

Thus, according to Goethe, the world will influence us from the moment we come into it till we die; originality lies only in our own energy and will and what we are able to do with it. But Penna - despite his strong individualism, his independent lifestyle and strong-willed personality - was not self-confident at all, neither was he ‘energetic’ - previous quotes from his letters, diary and poems have shown all his doubts and insecurity each time the moment comes to publish his work.

The great theorist of the anxiety of influence in the twentieth century was Freud. Freud’s work was well known to Penna, as the poet admits in his *Autobiografia*:

---

<sup>148</sup> “Letteratura” in *Stranezze* (1976).

Anch'io avevo creduto di essere l'esempio tipico della psicanalisi, di uno che s'identifica con la madre e cerca un ragazzo da amare, come la madre lo amava. Oggi devo dire . . . che avevo già ripudiato la psicoanalisi. Fui tra i primi ad andare dallo psicanalista . . . Avevo letto le *'Trente leçons de psychanalyse par Freud'*. Era un volume molto divertente, Freud è uno scrittore molto divertente.”<sup>149</sup>

I had also believed myself to be a typical example of psychoanalysis, one that identifies with the mother and look for a boy to love, like mother loved him. Today I have to say . . . I had already repudiated psychoanalysis. I was among the first to go to a psychoanalyst . . . I had read the *'Trente leçons de psychanalyse par Freud'*. It was a very funny book, Freud is a very funny writer.

Freud located the origin of the “anxiety of influence” in the “family romance” and defines anxiety as a mode of expectation, like desire. Penna underwent psychoanalytic treatment for years with one of Freud’s disciples because of his neurosis and depression. Penna’s mother abandoned him and the family when Penna was a teenager and Penna’s relationship with his father was problematic - to use a euphemism. According to Freud we all suffer from this type of anxiety, whether we are poets or not. Anxiety is a state of ‘un-pleasure’ different from sorrow and grief; it is a response to a situation of ‘danger’ and reminds us of the universal fear of domination, of the ‘trap’ and ‘dungeon’ that our body can turn out to be for us all. Freud connects this anxiety to the birth trauma, the separation from the mother and the non-gratification of needs, the fear of exclusion and finally the fear of death. Poets incarnate all these anxieties in their ‘melancholy’, whose final outcome is the ‘poem’.

There are of course for Bloom a number of analogies between these human anxieties and the poets’ anxiety of influence, as, for Bloom, the poet’s precursors represent the father figure every poet fears and has to fight in order to become ‘adult’, and every poem already written can be a ‘danger’ for the latecomer, an obstacle to the gratification of his needs, that being to see his originality and greatness acknowledged.

---

<sup>149</sup> In *Autobiografia al magnetofono*, work cited, pp. 35-36.

It would appear that, in rejecting any connections to other poets and suggesting for himself the definition of ‘poet of the mystery’, Penna was, in a way, trying to by-pass his literary ‘parents/ancestors’ and claim for himself the grace of divine inspiration. Moreover, the words of the Australian author and critic Peter Robb “. . . his attention is directed exclusively at a figure poised uncertainly between childhood and manhood, pre-eminently the being without power” perfectly summarize what Penna was actually rejecting: “power”. The power that fame and money can bring would have come together with acceptance of compromise, and sacrifice of part of his freedom; the freedom to not ‘become adult’ ”.<sup>150</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Robb, P., work cited, n.p.





## PART TWO: THE FLOWER'S STEMS

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### PENNA'S INFLUENCES: THE WEST

<i>Introduction</i>	105
<b>4.1 Hellenism</b>	106
<i>The Alexandrian School: literary features and legacy</i>	109
<i>Constantine Cavafy and Penna</i>	111
<i>Alexandrian VS. Modern poetry</i>	117
<b>4.2 Romanticism revisited</b>	118
<i>At the heart of Europe: Penna and P.B. Shelley</i>	119
<i>The infatuation with Youth</i>	125
<b>4.3 On the way to 'modernity'</b>	130
<i>Irriverence and Individualism</i>	133
<i>Nature and the urban landscape</i>	136
<i>"Modernité"</i>	138



## ***Introduction***

Antiquity and modernity, East and West are interwoven in the work of Sandro Penna, with a constant shifting of tone levels . . . that makes any influences almost indiscernible.

(*Gualtiero De Santi*)<sup>151</sup>

If we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.

(*T.S.Eliot*)<sup>152</sup>

I have discussed, in the previous chapters, the authoritative opinions of Penna's most important critics and readers (Garboli, Deidier, Di Fonzo and Robb) who pointed out various influences on Penna's poetry: Classicism, Italian authors Dante and Petrarch, Romantic and Decadent poets, the modern poetry of Symbolists and Hermetics. These influences have been identified, but both Garboli and Deidier have stressed the fact that they have not been explained or investigated sufficiently. Penna, throughout his twenties, read the works of Italian Romantic Giacomo Leopardi and became familiar with the writings of Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arthur Rimbaud. He also read Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde and Charles-Pierre Baudelaire; was fascinated by the ecstatic nature-worship of decadent poet Gabriele D'Annunzio but appreciated American writer Jack London, whose *Martin Eden* (1909) he found full of great and virile poetry.

Being 'influenced' by past writers and working 'inside' Tradition (in Penna's case the classical and Italian lyric tradition) does not imply any negative criticism nor

---

<sup>151</sup> "Antico e moderno, occidente e oriente si intrecciano nell'opera di Sandro Penna, con un costante slittamento dei livelli tonali . . . da rendere pressochè indiscernibili gli influssi" Luti et al. p.30.

<sup>152</sup> "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood*, work cited.

any decrease in Penna's originality, if we agree with Eliot's view (quoted earlier) on tradition in poetry that any influence of *old* poets on the *new* poet should not be seen in a negative sense. Eliot in fact speaks of a renewal of the tradition that is neither an 'imitation' nor a 'copy'. The modern poet can find in the work of the past poets a "poetic object" - which can be a theme, a shape, or a use of the language - which is already present in his mind, and that the *new* poet will make his own, turning it into something new by investing in it his own personality.

#### **4.1 Hellenism**

Cesare Garboli recalls an interview in which Penna complained about the longevity of his fame as an "Alexandrian" poet. Penna told Garboli how bothered and almost resentful he was about the definition as he was deprived of his originality. He would prefer to be called "un poeta del mistero" 'poet of mystery', but the "magical fluidity" and the "divine simplicity of Penna's verses" (Garboli 26), would completely justify, even for Garboli, all the references to the Alexandrians. Despite the poet's complaints, not only Garboli but also Pecora in the biography and Deidier and Bruni in their essays - quoted in chapter two - accepted the label "Alexandrian" for Penna, identifying connections and analogies with the lyric poet Constantine Cavafy, the most famous amongst modern Alexandrian poets, who could so easily be associated with Penna in terms of poetic features, themes, style and musicality.

Italian critic De Santi <sup>153</sup> reaffirms Penna's classicism quoting the eminent scholar of ancient Greek poetry Bruno Gentili; while according to Pierfranco Bruni Penna's poetics and language echo the ancient Greek poetic prosody: "... a classical language

---

<sup>153</sup> In Luti et al., p.30.

modulated on the immediate predecessors.”<sup>154</sup> If we read and consider the style, the language and the theme in the following lines:

Non è la timidezza che tu celi forse un sogno  
confuso degli dei?<sup>155</sup>

Isn't the shyness you hide perhaps a confused  
dream of the gods?

\*

. . . al cancello  
hanno posto gli dei per la mia gioia  
un fanciullo che gioca con la noia.<sup>156</sup>

. . . at the gate  
the gods have placed for my joy  
a boy playing with boredom,

we understand why, later in the same essay, Bruni becomes even more explicit about Penna's poetry and writes: "These are verses which - carefully studied - recall not only Sappho's poetry but, as many critics have written, there is an evident call throughout Penna's poetic world to *Hellenism*".<sup>157</sup> In his conclusion Bruni agrees with what major Italian critic Luciano Anceschi wrote on Penna, classical Greek poetry and the importance and current value of tradition: "Ancient Greek poetry can be reborn in new forms; through an updating process it can be both ancient and modern in its reference to the universality and eternity of the 'human'".<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> “. . . un classicismo linguistico modulato sugli immediati predecessori.” Bruni, P., *La poetica*, p.25.

<sup>155</sup> In *Appunti* (1950).

<sup>156</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>157</sup> “Sono versi che studiati attentamente ricordano non soltanto la poesia di Saffo ma, come hanno scritto molti critici, il richiamo è evidente per tutto il suo (di Penna) mondo intriso di *greco*.” Bruni, P., *La poetica*, p.34.

<sup>158</sup> “La poesia greca può rinascere in forme nuove, con un processo di storicizzazione può essere antica e moderna nel suo riferirsi alla universalità ed eternità dell' umano” *Ibidem*, p.35.

Another strong advocate of Penna's classicism is Gianni Mazzei, who underlines how the myth of Eros and the character of the Child (*fanciullo*) symbolising Time and Eternity align Penna with pure classical ideas as presented, for instance, by Ancient Greek philosopher Alcmaeon (Delia, Mazzei et al. 31 -38). Mazzei also finds in Penna's pagan celebration of Beauty and Love, in his mixture of melancholy for the transience of life, loss of beauty and frustration of his desire for love, many similarities to the work of Greek poetess, Sappho.

Penna valued his originality and rejected even the most obvious influences or affiliations, including the one with the Greek and Alexandrian poets. What I will point out in this chapter is an ideal line of historical influences - from the ancient Greek poetry through the Alexandrian school, to Romanticism and finally, in the following chapters, to Modernism and Imagism. This is an ideal, imaginary line along which Penna worked his way toward his own original synthesis of Tradition and Innovation, in accordance with Eliot's view that no poet/artist has his complete meaning alone, but their significance and appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the past artists. To value a poet - according to Eliot - we must set him/her, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.<sup>159</sup>

I will discuss the influence of ancient Greek poetry – notably Sappho – on Penna's oeuvre, in the chapter dedicated to Imagism, whereas in the initial section of this chapter I will deal briefly with the Alexandrian school of poetry, its influence over the centuries on Italian and European literature which finally reached the twentieth-century artistic movements, and whose common traits and analogies can be found in Penna's work.

---

<sup>159</sup> "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood*, work cited.

### *The Alexandrian School: literary features and legacy*

According to the definition given by the *Encyclopædia Britannica*:

The Alexandrian school is a collective designation for certain tendencies in literature, philosophy, medicine, and the sciences that developed in the Hellenistic cultural centre of Alexandria, Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>160</sup>

Started as an attempt to continue and develop old Hellenic culture, the Alexandrian *literati* absorbed the classical Greek literary tradition, adopting, at the same time, many essential innovations of technique and content. This might be understood as knowledge and respect for Tradition with a drive for innovation. The new Alexandrian features embraced all the literary arts like epigrams, elegies and novels, inspired the majority of Roman poets from Catullus to Ovid and Virgil, reached Western Europe in the Renaissance period and, from the eighteenth century onwards, found its way to Italy, France, England, Spain and elsewhere in the Western world. The entry of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* distinguishes two Alexandrian schools: the Alexandrian school of poetry and science and the Alexandrian school of philosophy. What I am interested in here, is the description of the qualities of the poetry written by Callimachus, the leading representative of the School of Alexandria, and the Alexandrian poets in general. This poetry was:

. . . distinguished by artistic form, purity of expression and strict attention to the laws of metre and prosody . . . perfect command of verse . . . constant endeavours after terseness and neatness of expression.<sup>161</sup>

Other features commonly associated with Alexandrian poetry are erudition, brevity, attention to form, a taste for quotation and the mixing of literary genres, and the original

---

<sup>160</sup>Encyclopædia Britannica: entry: *Alexandrian School*, 1911 Volume 1.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibidem*, n.p.

introduction of the ironic mode in poetry. This is a mode of deceptive appearances which hide difficult truths or serious themes - for instance when dealing with gods and myths. Beyond the specific historical period, I have found that the term “Alexandrian”, or *Alessandrinismo* in Italian, is used to indicate a highly sophisticated kind of poetry.

Examples of *alessandrinismo* abound in Latin literature (I have already quoted Catullus, Ovid and Virgil) and later in the Italian literary canon - from the literary works and aesthetics of the Italian Renaissance to the Decadent movement, whose leading representatives in Italy were Gabriele D’Annunzio e Giovanni Pascoli. It is worth remembering that D’Annunzio and Pascoli are among the most acknowledged poets of the Italian tradition, who are also said to have had influence on Penna’s poetry (as explained in chapter two). Let’s focus on a few examples of Alexandrian influence highlighted by Mario Praz:

The Hellenistic civilization, of which Alexandria was one of the main centers of irradiation, spread itself throughout the Mediterranean world and its hinterland, to Afghanistan, the Panjab and Java. Hellenistic models, proportions and patterns . . . influenced the art of all countries within this sphere of influence (think of the Gupta sculpture for instance) and likewise Hellenistic antiquity left an impression on Western literatures.<sup>162</sup>

As far as Italy was concerned “Hellenistic literary models were the most common in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance”.<sup>163</sup> Later Praz, a leading Italian critic who wrote extensively on English literature, deals more specifically with some English writers and poets:

---

<sup>162</sup> “La civiltà ellenistica, di cui Alessandria fu uno dei principali centri d'irradiazione, si diffuse per tutto il mondo mediterraneo e il suo retroterra, fino all'Afghānistān, al Panjab e a Giava: i tipi, le proporzioni e gli schemi ellenistici, . . . influirono sull'arte di tutti i paesi entro questa sfera d'influenza (si pensi allascultura Gupta); analogamente ellenistica fu l'impronta lasciata dall'antichità sulle letteratureoccidentali.” Praz, Mario“Alessandrinismo” in *Enciclopedia Italiana Traccani*, n.p.: online version TRECCANI.it - II Appendice 1948.

<sup>163</sup> “Ellenistici furono i più diffusi modelli letterarî nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento” *ibidem*, n.p.



The verses - in John Donne's *Anniversaries* - in death of the young girl Elizabeth Drury, are *Alexandrians* in the full sense of the word, especially in their way of deifying the character they celebrate . . . But a direct influence of the classical Alexandrian School can also be followed up in the poetry of Alexander Pope, since he brought to perfection the *heroic couplet* under the influence of Ovid and the Alexandrian epigrams . . . Even Tennyson can be called *Alexandrian* for his attitude when dealing with heroic legends.<sup>164</sup>

Although Praz followed the Alexandrian influence on English Literature only up until the nineteen-century, the fascination with the Hellenistic culture continues in the twentieth-century. Published in 1922, E. M. Forster's *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* was one of two books, along with *Pharos and Pharillon*, in which Forster sought to describe the city in which he was stationed as a Red Cross volunteer during World War I.<sup>165</sup> Forster famously befriended Constantine Cavafy and, in the same essay, included a translation of one of Cavafy's poems, "The God Abandons Antony".

### ***Cavafy and Penna***

The reference to E.M.Forster in the previous paragraph is not incidental, Forster was a major modernist writer and his interest in Alexandria and Cavafy's poetry cannot be confined to their common sexual orientation, but has something to do with common literary taste as well. Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) was a renowned Greek poet who lived in Alexandria, but also - after his father died - in England, worked as a journalist and wrote in large part about erotic experiences. Since his death (1933) Cavafy's reputation has grown. He is now considered one of the finest European

---

<sup>164</sup> "I versi di John Donne negli *Anniversaries* in morte della giovinetta Elizabeth Drury, sono alessandrini nel pieno senso della parola, anche per quel loro divinizzare il personaggio cantata . . . Ma l'influsso diretto dell'alessandrinismo classico può anche seguirsi fino nella poesia di un Alexander Pope, dal momento che egli portò a perfezione quel distico eroico sotto l'influsso di Ovidio e degli epigrammi. . . . E alessandrino può chiamarsi il Tennyson per il suo atteggiamento di fronte alle leggende eroiche" *ibidem*, n.p.

<sup>165</sup> Forster, E. M., *Alexandria: A History and a Guide*, 1922. Ed. Michael Haag, introd. Lawrence Durrell. New York: Oxford UP 1986.

modern Greek poets. If all major critics of Penna's work agreed in associating the two poets (even though I could not find any in depth study) it is because of the numerous substantial analogies between Cavafy and Penna, despite the fact that no evidence has been given of Penna reading the older fellow poet. Features and qualities of Cavafy's poetry can be easily juxtaposed to Penna's: their poems are, typically, concise but intimate and evocative; they allude to uncertainty about the future; deal with unconventional subjects for the time, such as homosexuality and sensual pleasures and exhibit a fatalistic existential nostalgia. But the stylistic features say more: their poems exhibit a skilled and versatile craftsmanship. While Cavafy was the last representative of the Alexandrian school and his brilliant use of historical imagery and aesthetic perfectionism made him one of the best lyric poets of the Western world, Penna - who obsessively refined every single line of his poetry - was celebrated as "poeta dalla grazia Alessandrina" 'the poet of quintessential *Alexandrinism*'.

Let's start with the common feelings that both poets show towards nature, especially the sea. Nature represents an escape in moments of melancholy, a refuge from the world of men, the social world which often can appear hostile, unfriendly and unwilling to understand. What both poets find soothing is the calmness of the unchanging elements, here is an example from Cavafy:

"Morning Sea"

Let me stop here. Let me, too, look at nature awhile.  
The brilliant blue of the morning sea, of the cloudless sky,  
the shore yellow; all lovely,  
all bathed in light.

Let me stand here. And let me pretend I see all this  
(I actually did see it for a minute when I first stopped)  
and not my usual day-dreams, here too  
my memories, those sensual images.

The “cloudless sky” and the lovely light of the morning all conjure “sensual” memories, the sort of day-dream from which the poet is seeking escape but still craving. The same search for a still moment of quietness, or an eternal unchanging realm beyond the world of reality while the soul is almost crying, is suggested by Penna in this four-line poem:

Il mare è tutto azzurro.  
Il mare è tutto calmo.  
Nel cuore è quasi un urlo  
di gioia. E tutto è calmo.<sup>166</sup>

The sea is all blue.  
The sea is all calm.  
In my heart almost a cry  
Of joy. And all is calm.

Here is another example of the soothing light of the sea, this time with the sensual presence of a reassuring “silent” boatman:

The wind blows hard across the wharf.  
The eye is offered the light’s calm display.  
A tilting sailboat passes. A man  
near prone, guides it in the silence<sup>167</sup>.

The sentiment of nature as comfort and escape from the alienating world of men has undoubtedly romantic traits, but the use of simple adjectives and the direct transposition of the experience into sharp and precise images, relying on terms from the everyday language, definitively suggest a modern and imagistic taste. In fact, in both poets, examples of urban settings abound and recall the ‘modern cities’ of Eliot and Hulme; while the choice of subject matter such as unconventional love affairs enacted in the stark furnished rooms of industrial suburbs, are in accordance with the freedom of the modernist artists in expressing whatever topic they saw fit.

---

<sup>166</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>167</sup> Penna, S., trans. Robinson, B., p.39.

There is no Romantic ‘sentimentalism’ or hue in the following poem by Cavafy, but a free verse, that is dry and modernist in style which seems to anticipate W.C.Williams’ theory “No ideas but in things”<sup>168</sup>

“The Afternoon Sun”

This room, how well I know it.  
Now they're renting it, and the one next to it,  
as offices. The whole house has become  
an office building for agents, businessmen, companies.  
This room, how familiar it is.  
The couch was here, near the door,  
a Turkish carpet in front of it.  
Close by, the shelf with two yellow vases.  
On the right - no, opposite - a wardrobe with a mirror.  
In the middle the table where he wrote,  
and the three big wicker chairs.  
Beside the window the bed  
where we made love so many times.  
They must still be around somewhere, those old things.  
Beside the window the bed;  
the afternoon sun used to touch half of it.  
. . . One afternoon at four o'clock we separated  
for a week only . . . And then-  
that week became forever.

Furnished rooms - often dirty and grim - and unmade beds, are also a recurring setting in Penna’s poetry, as in Eliot’s, and this brief poem by Penna seems to echo the same feelings of Cavafy’s lines:

A great love would last  
no more than a week.  
Oh how the years passed  
in erring retreat.<sup>169</sup>

Elsewhere Penna presents the same suburban room totally transfigured by the beauty

---

<sup>168</sup>In W.C.Williams’ poem : “A Sort of a Song”, repeated in the epic *Paterson* (published between 1946 and 1958, first version 1927).

<sup>169</sup> Penna S., trans. by Robinson, B., p.50.

and innocence of a youth and his kitten as in this “Interno”:

Dal portiere non c’era nessuno.  
C’era la luce sui poveri letti  
disfatti. E sopra un tavolaccio  
dormiva un ragazzaccio  
bellissimo.  
Uscì dale sue braccia  
annuvolate, esitando, un gattino.<sup>170</sup>

“Interior”  
Nobody in the porter's lodge.  
The light was glowing on miserable  
unmade beds. And on a rough wooden board  
a tough boy slept,  
gorgeous.  
From his cloudy arms,  
hesitating, a kitten leapt away.

Iconic places of the modern urban environment: a bar, a streetcar and the outskirts, provide the background for the same sort of brief encounters in the next poems, the first by Cavafy, the second by Penna:

“Half An Hour”

I never had you nor, I suppose,  
will I ever have you. A few words, an approach,  
as in the bar yesterday -nothing more.  
It's sad, I admit.

\*

He was something of a common sort  
around the city, but awfully nice.  
And so he was that time in the streetcar.  
A slow blush appeared, disappearing.  
We were slowly cast so softly adrift.  
And in the outskirts day was dying.<sup>171</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>171</sup> Penna, S., trans. by Robinson, B., p.33.

Finally all the Alexandrian flavour, the “magical fluidity” and the “divine simplicity”, the epigrammatic style celebrated by Garboli is revealed in the three poems that follow, in a timeless setting populated by the pagan gods of ancient mythology, sometimes threatening, sometimes favourable:

. . .  
E la terra bagnata  
e i neri altissimi monti  
tacevano vinti. Sembrava  
che un dio cattivo  
avesse con un sol gesto  
tutto pietrificato.  
E la pioggia lavava quelle pietre.<sup>172</sup>

And the wet earth  
and the black towering mountains  
were silent, defeated. As if  
some bad god  
with a single gesture  
had petrified everything.  
And the rain washed those stones.

\*

Esco dal mio lavoro tutto pieno  
di aride parole. Ma al cancello  
hanno posto gli dei per la mia gioia  
un fanciullo che giuoca con la noia.<sup>173</sup>

I leave my job filled  
with dry words. But at the gate  
the gods have placed for my joy  
a lad playing with boredom.

\*

Non è la timidezza che tu celi forse un sogno  
confuso degli dei?<sup>174</sup>

---

<sup>172</sup>In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>173</sup>In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>174</sup>In *Appunti* (1950).

Isn't the shyness you hide perhaps a confused  
dream of the gods?

### ***Alexandrian VS. Modern poetry***

The influence of the Alexandrian school on Penna's style and the affinity with the Alexandrian poet Cavafy discussed in this section - despite the obvious differences - does not seem to contradict or ban links to modernity and the modernist spirit, as far as both poets worked inside a tradition, re-interpreting classical models and patterns in unconventional, modern ways, opting most of the time for free verse and modern themes.

The Modernist period was marked by unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world - there was definitely a reaction against the culture and aesthetics which had prevailed in the previous centuries. A break with tradition is one of the fundamentals of the Modernist stance, whilst the Alexandrian school of poetry preserved and celebrated the Greek culture and aesthetics that came before it. Nevertheless in Eliot and Pound the interest in the literatures is manifest and stated in their works and criticism. Other common features - especially as far as style and poetics are concerned- can be highlighted. Among the characteristics of Alexandrian poetry noted by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* we read: erudition, brevity, high formal care, taste for quotation and the mixing of literary genres – also a constant endeavour after terseness and neatness of expression. It is easy to see at this point how many of these qualities are close to the tenets that Eliot - and above all Pound- recommended, centuries later, as terms for good poetry.

The Alexandrian were learned researchers, but also erudition, extensive knowledge about past cultures and sophistication, are traits easily traceable in many Moderns: for instance in the world of art, generally speaking, Modernism was the

beginning of the distinction between “high” art and “low” art, and though the Moderns expressed a disdain for most of the literary production of the previous century, they admired the French Symbolists for the sophistication of their imagery. The ornamental, verbose style of the first Alexandrians was certainly to be avoided, especially according to Pound who was much closer to ancient Greek poetry of which he admired the pureness, preciseness and hardness of language choices. But we have seen that in a modern Alexandrian poet such as Cavafy, as well as in Penna’s verse, any excessive, unnecessary language has been purged.

Finally I will add to the list of similarities between these different “schools of poetry” so distant to each other in time, the use of myth. The poetry of the Alexandrians was a highly intellectual, allusive poetry with its layering of meanings and contrasting of styles, often accused of obscurity. We can look again to Eliot for support: he was not nostalgic or romantic about the past but he did look backwards for inspiration, his poetry made extensive use of myths and it was ‘highly intellectual, allusive and erudite’<sup>175</sup> as well.

## **4.2 Romanticism revisited**

We have seen in the previous section of this chapter how Classicism - specifically Hellenism - can be counted as an important influence in the poetry of Sandro Penna. Classicism has also provided a common ground for both Romanticism and Modernism. It is always difficult to give a strict definition of artistic tendencies, and this is particularly true when defining large and complex literary movements such as Romanticism and Modernism. Many think that Modernism is the opposite of classicism,

---

<sup>175</sup> The same adjectives are used in the Encyclopædia Britannica to define the Alexandrian School, 1911 Volume 1.



but Modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound who found the excesses of Romanticism distasteful, looked to Antiquity for more austere, classical forms of expression.

Classicism is characterised by aesthetic forms of expression that claim as their model the art, literature and architecture of Greek and Roman Antiquity, but every version of Classicism constitutes its own universe. Every era and every place have seen in Antiquity what they themselves wanted to see, created a classical view of the past in their own image, or sometimes have simply chosen a few shapes and styles and created something of their own.

In this section I will move from Classicism to Romanticism and later I will consider Romanticism's contribution to the Modernist movement and some Modernist poets' affiliation with the Romantics. Differences and similarities will be taken in to account, listing general features of both literary movements in Europe and in Italy, with reference throughout to Sandro Penna and his work. This section aims to point out how Penna, although influenced by the ideas and poetic practice of the Romantics, moves towards a more modernist point of view in the themes and language choices of his oeuvre. Penna's affinity to European and English Romantics, specifically P.B.Shelley, has been largely investigated by Italian critic Gualtiero De Santi, on the Italian side post-romantic decadent poet Giovanni Pascoli will be quoted as an acknowledged influence on Penna's poetics while W.B.Yeats will be considered as example of the transition from a romantic to a modernist attitude toward art and literature.

### *At the heart of Europe: Penna and P.S.Shelley*

Borrowings and allusions are features of both Romanticism and Modernism (consistent in Eliot and Pound for instance). They can also be traced in Penna's oeuvre and vouch for Penna's modernity as far as these features are: "[c]haracteristics which

reflect the present state of civilization, where traditions and cultures have mingled and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary.” (Ayers 26) As a matter of fact Penna was fond of quoting and sometimes did not even mind hiding the sources - we have already seen in chapter one and two how Penna was able to read English poetry in the original and I have pointed out his quotes from Keats, Shelley and Dylan Thomas in the letters to Montale as well as in his conversations with Enzo Giannelli.

In his paper (included in the proceedings of the symposium on Penna: *L'Epifania del desiderio* 'Epiphany of desire') Gualtiero De Santi wrote: “Antiquity and modernity, East and West are interwoven in the work of Sandro Penna, with a constant shifting of tone levels . . . that makes any influences almost indiscernible.”<sup>176</sup> De Santi's paper explores Penna's European influences and argues that Penna's oeuvre was not peripheral or incidental to the European literary scene but at its very heart. He identifies in the Romantic and Symbolist movements - notably in Arthur Rimbaud and lyric poet Friedrich Hölderlin - Penna's main models. De Santi defines these influences as 'suggestions' and 'images' which sometimes turn into almost direct quotations, but acknowledges in Penna's work the subtle ability to disassemble any poetic 'loan' and make it new, modern and up-to-date (30).

P.B. Shelley is the English poet more widely considered than any others by De Santi in his paper. De Santi claims that Penna does not rewrite or revise Shelley, but rather he retrieves metaphors and visions from the English poet (31). Let's take this recollection of the well-known “Ode to the West Wind” as example:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven

---

<sup>176</sup> “Antico e moderno, occidente e oriente si intrecciano nell'opera di Sandro Penna, con un costante slittamento dei livelli tonali . . . da rendere pressochè indiscernibili gli influssi” Luti et al. p.30.

and compare it with “Già mi parla l’autunno” by Penna:

Già mi parla l’autunno. Al davanzale  
buio, tacendo, ascolto i miei pensieri  
piegarsi sotto il vento occidentale  
che scroscia sulle foglie dei miei neri  
alberi solo vivi nella notte.<sup>177</sup>

Yet Autumn talks to me. At the windowsill  
dark, silent, I listen to my thoughts  
bending under the west wind  
pouring down the leaves of my black  
trees, the only living thing in the night.

The “dead leaves”, which for the English poet evoke the presence of ghosts (according to his romantic taste in “like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing”, 3rd verse), appear also in Penna’s poem like mysterious entities, as ghosts which only ‘live’ and are more accessible during the night. In addition, the definition of “Western Wind”, totally understandable in its derivation by Shelley - but defined as quite unusual in an Italian context by De Santi - will come back in other passages, in the same combination of ‘night and west/autumn wind’ as in these lines from other poems by Penna: “Il vento dell'autunno scuote le tue persiane.”<sup>178</sup> ‘The Autumn wind shakes your shutters’; and

Al primo soffio dell'autunno il treno  
gaio alleato parla di lontano.<sup>179</sup> (329)

At the first whiff of Autumn the train  
my cheerful accomplice from far away talks to me

“Shelley-like” words such *as dream*, *romantic*, *wind* and *night* which appear in these poems, are also seen in the emblematic title and the first line of:

---

<sup>177</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>178</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibidem*.

“Sogno dello scrivano romantico”  
Suona il vento e la notte ...<sup>180</sup> (41)

“Dream of the romantic scribe”  
The wind plays its music and the night ...

The same terms recur in the line:

Mi nasconda la notte e il dolce vento.<sup>181</sup> (18)

Let the night conceal me and the mild wind.

But what most frequently and convincingly links Penna to the great English Romantic poet is the concept of the sameness of Life and Love, which we can find - in Penna - sometimes expressed with the same words. Let's take the beginning of Shelley's "Song for Tasso"(1818):

I loved—alas! our life is love (I)

a line which, in the Italian translation by Rodolfo Quadrelli, reads:

Ho amato ahime, perchè vivere è amare.<sup>182</sup>

Penna will use exactly the same words in the well-known line:

Vivere è per amare<sup>183</sup>

*Life, Love, Evening and Wind* come together again in these three lines:

Se la vita sapesse il mio amore  
me ne andrei questa sera lontano  
me ne andrei dove il vento mi baci.<sup>184</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>181</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>182</sup> P.B.Shelley, *Poetical works*, trans. Rodolfo Quadrelli, Milan: Dall'Oglio 1965, p 29.

<sup>183</sup> In "Giovanili ritrovate" *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>184</sup> *Ibidem*.

If Life knew my love  
I would go far away tonight  
I would go where the wind could kiss me.

The glorification of Love and Beauty in Shelley's *Love's Philosophy* (1819) ends with the lines:

And the sunlight clasps the earth,  
and the moonbeams kiss the sea;  
what are all these kissings worth,  
if thou kiss not me?

If we read Penna's poem "La lezione di estetica" "A lesson in aesthetics" the topic is the same glorification of Beauty. The title of the poem is significant because the vast majority of Penna's poems have no title, but what is remarkable is the similarity of the last line:

E tu  
mi guardi e non mi dai neppure un bacio?<sup>185</sup>

And you  
You look at me but you do not kiss me.

De Santi pointed out another common feature shared by the two poets (or maybe Penna was inspired by reading Shelley ...) that is the coincidence of the presence of the "child" (the *fanciullo* in Penna) in the cemetery poems of both authors. The critic quotes Shelley's "A Summer Evening Churchyard" : "Here could I hope, like some inquiring child / Sporting on graves, that death did hide from human sight /..." – which he compares to Penna's "Cimitero di campagna", "La tomba del padre", "Cimitero nel sud", and concludes: "The curious lad [in Shelley] who plays on the graves and - in doing so - is acting in accordance with the serene and mysterious character of death, matches those 'apparitions' in Penna of adolescents who push away death with their

---

<sup>185</sup> In Croce e delizia ( 1958).

luminous existence.”<sup>186</sup> Romanticism remains a model for Penna, and Shelley’s

romantic lines:

And still I love and still I think,  
But strangely, for my heart can drink  
The dregs of such despair, and live,  
And love ...

with their mixture of joy in despair, melancholy and exhilaration will return again

throughout Penna’s oeuvre:

Ma Sandro Penna è intriso di una strana  
gioia di vivere anche nel dolore.<sup>187</sup>

But a strange joy of life permeates Sandro Penna  
even in pain.

\*

Ecco. E un’angoscia brilla  
Piena di gioia in me.<sup>188</sup>

Here it is. This anguish is shining  
full of joy within me.

\*

Arso completamente dalla vita  
Io vivo in essa felice e dissolto.  
La mia pena d’amore non ascolto  
Più di quanto non curi la ferita.<sup>189</sup>

Burned completely by Life  
I live in it happy and dissolved  
My pain of love I do not listen

---

<sup>186</sup> “Il giovinetto curioso, che gioca sulle tombe e che così facendo agisce conforme al carattere sereno e misterioso della morte, si contrae dentro i testi penniani in quelle apparizioni di adolescenti che allontanano la morte con la loro esistenza luminosa.” Luti et al., p.32.

<sup>187</sup> “XVII” in *Una strana gioia di vivere* (1956).

<sup>188</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

<sup>189</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

more than I heal the wound.

### ***The infatuation with Youth***

Romantics did not look at Childhood and Youth as the age of innocent unawareness or ignorance, rather the opposite as the child is “father of the Man”. The obvious example is William Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, with its emphasis on childhood memories and a connection between the divine and humanity. In the second stanza the poet describes how age causes Man to lose sight of the divine. The poem relies on the concept that children can connect with Nature and witness the divine within it. As children mature, they become worldlier and lose this divine vision. The French Revolution, which started in 1789, and the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who claims that the original impulses are good because they are natural and men have become evil because they left uncontaminated Nature, are evident influences in the works of the Romantics. Rousseau also thought materialism makes people evil because they suppose that they can own everything in the world. This Romantic, revolutionary attitude towards Man and nature is thoroughly shared by Penna who opted for a bohemian life and poverty as a reaction to a society based on commodities production, and turned to the powerless world of adolescent boys and their natural impulses and desires, where ‘history and ‘morals’ still do not exist. I need here to quote again Peter Robb’s article:

When he [Penna] decides, “I tend, perhaps to the hills, where I find ... the adolescent odorous of figs”, he is turning from the city to the peasant society of the hinterland . . . the shepherd boy and the milkmaid who turn up in a couple of poems are not figures in a pastoral dream but child labour working . . . His fixation on the adolescent boy is of a piece with his repudiation of the nexus of work, money and power. His attention is directed exclusively at a figure poised uncertainly between childhood and

manhood, pre-eminently the being without power, or even a real place in the world.<sup>190</sup>

The interest and emphasis on Childhood and Youth is the trait which associates Wordsworth and Italian post-romantic and decadent poet Giovanni Pascoli, whom all Italian critics from Bigongiari to Deidier, point to as a major influence on Penna's poetics and language choices. Pascoli marked a milestone in the process of cultural and stylistic renewal of the Italian literary scene in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In line with a time of change and uncertainty (due to the collapse of the myths of science and progress), his work was characterized by contradictory elements, in relation to the concept of poetry and the resulting language choices. He believed that life is a mystery; only symbolic associations discovered in the humble things can give Man a glimpse of the truth behind mere appearances.

Peter Westland explains that:

The great Romantic poets found the sense of mystery not only in the inspiration of the Middle Ages and Greek art, but also in the simplicities of everyday life; an ordinary sunset, a walk over the hills, a cluster of spring flowers, the rain-bearing west wind, the song of the nightingale, a cottage girl, a simple old dales man –such are a few of the subjects that inspired to supreme achievement a Wordsworth, a Coleridge, a Shelley, a Keats (19).

The insistence on the mysterious nature of human life and fate is a typical feature in Penna's work, we have seen the only definition or 'label' Penna accepted for himself was "*poeta del mistero*". Penna is also often associated with Pascoli in their similar rejection of any classical and romantic influences on their oeuvre. This persistent, almost obsessive rejection by both authors of any comparison to the past poets is ultimately revealing of a very distinctive 'modernist' attitude towards Tradition. In a refusal of

---

<sup>190</sup> Robb, P., work cited, n.p.



Classicism and Romanticism, Pascoli opposed both the renunciation of self-analysis and the abandonment of the self-centred point of view, in favour of a semi-irrational comfort which the poet gives himself through poetry. Poetry, which is the only and ultimate comfort for all Romantics, for Penna equals Life itself as clearly expressed in so many poems:

Amavo ogni cosa nel mondo. E non avevo  
che il mio bianco taccuino sotto il sole.<sup>191</sup>

I loved everything in the world. And all I had  
was my small blank notebook under the sun.

Or with a more romantic *impetus*:

La mia poesia lancerà la sua forza  
a perdersi nell'infinito.<sup>192</sup>

My poetry will launch its strength  
and lose itself in the infinite.

Poetry is the only “dono” gift, skill, that Life (whom Penna is in love with) gave to him but also the true meaning of an existence spent “at the window” :

Sempre affacciato a una finestra io sono,  
io della vita tanto innamorato. Unir parole  
ad uomini fu il dono breve e discreto che  
il cielo mi ha dato.<sup>193</sup>

I'm always standing by a window,  
so much in love with life. Joining words  
to men was the gift, brief and discrete  
Heaven gave to me.

Going back to what I called the ‘infatuation’ with Youth, the similarities between the great English Romantic Wordsworth and Pascoli about the power and importance of the ‘childhood vision’ are remarkable. One of the outstanding features which gained Pascoli

---

<sup>191</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>192</sup> In *Il viaggiatore insonne* (1977).

<sup>193</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

a position of primary importance in the history of Italian literature is the so-called “poetica del fanciullino” ‘poetics of the child’, in which he issued a detailed definition of his poetical stance. According to Pascoli in every man lies a ‘little boy’ who has the ability to look with amazement at what surrounds him. But men, becoming adults, tend to lose this particular sensitivity of childhood. The aim of the Poet is to retain that childhood awareness in the adult age as the only way to grasp reality in its fullness; poetic language therefore should be made similar to a simple childhood language, (a sort of preconscious language which echoes the Wordsworthian concept of ‘pre-existence’) - where sound takes on greater force and meaning.

Poetry, according to Pascoli, would be the unceasing capability, typical of childhood, to be amazed by the mystery of the world. His earlier poems look simple, and focus particularly on domestic life and nature, whereas his later ones are more experimental, but they all reflect his knowledge of classical antiquity, he wrote in fact in both Italian and Latin and even translated English poetry. Despite the evident classical influence Pascoli’s sensitivity and his conception of poetry (intended to express a multifaceted interpretation of reality) are modern in their multilingual experimentalism and innovative metrics. Pascoli’s poetry shows interesting affinities with European symbolism. He replaced the learned language of Italian lyric tradition with precise, neat, sometimes technical words, the musicality of his verse open both to foreign languages and to vernacular and onomatopoeic terms, signs of a literary research oriented towards modern poetical language.

The myth of Youth is embodied, in Penna’s oeuvre, by the ever-present character of the *fanciullo*. Di Fonzo compares Penna’s *fanciullo* to the same character of the “child” in romantic poets such as Pascoli and Giacomo Leopardi. The critic also points out very clearly the mythical value of the *fanciullo* who, with his appearance, becomes a

symbolic archetype of Truth, Light and entirety of the Universe, as well as a symbol of rebirth: “. . . the *fanciullo* in Penna is reminiscent of the same “child” in D'Annunzio, Pascoli, Leopardi and back to the *eromenos* of Greek lyric . . . As it is linked to archetypal images, the appearance of the unconscious symbol of entirety.”<sup>194</sup> In the following lines Penna's lad is full of “light” he comes from the “water”, primeval element of the planet, and is immersed in silence and sunlight:

Ecco il fanciullo acquatico e felice.  
Ecco il fanciullo gravido di luce  
più limpido del verso che lo dice.  
Dolce stagione di silenzio e sole  
e questa festa di parole in me<sup>195</sup>.

Here is the aquatic happy lad.  
Here he is full of light  
clearer than the verse which tells of him.  
Sweet season of silence and sunlight  
and a feast of words in me.

\*

The celebration of childhood as that season of life in which Beauty and Truth reveal themselves to the innocent child is a classical theme which runs from the Greek lyrics through Romanticism to the modernist myth of *Rejuvenation* and *New Beginning*. The Moderns saw Western society as old, sick and weakened: *youth* is seen as the golden age. In her essay on Eliot and Montale, Paola Sica writes: “In the wake of Walter Benjamin, such works as Giorgio Agamben's *Infanzia e storia* ‘Childhood and history’ place the hope of unification between experience and knowledge in a mythical theory of childhood.”(6) The modernist myth of rejuvenation rejects nineteenth-century positivism and proposes a return to idealised ancient cultures. In fact Sica detects in Eliot's poetry

---

<sup>194</sup> “. . . il fanciullo penniano richiama quello sabiano, quello dannunziano, quello pascoliano, quello leopardiano fino all'*eromenos* della lirica greca; . . . legato come è alle immagini archetipiche, il suo aspetto di simbolo inconscio della totalità” Di Fonzo, p.98.

<sup>195</sup> In “Poesie inedite” *Poesie* (re-print 2010), work cited, p.162.

“[a] longing for a return to the beginnings: the ‘origins’ of literature . . . or the first phases of an individual life (childhood, adolescence, youth).” (8)

The myth of childhood - embodied in the ever present *fanciullo* - is a fundamental, essential theme in Penna’s oeuvre, which goes beyond the obvious representation of the poet’s erotic desire to symbolise a complete rejection of the “adult” world with its rules, morals and hypocrisy as pointed out by Robb in the article quoted above. Despite the differences the romantic model remains the foundation of Modernism, with the coexistence of common traits in many modern writers. In Penna – as in the Moderns – Romanticism makes sense as far as it must be overcome - in doing this the Italian poet is well within the mainstream of European twentieth century poetry.

#### **4.3 On the way to ‘modernity’**

Romanticism emerged in the late eighteenth century and continued until the middle of the nineteenth century, whereas Modernism appeared in the late nineteenth century to continue into the twentieth century - the turn of the century with its social, political and scientific changes being crucial. Both movements were against ‘Enlightenment thinking’ based on reason and logic and the belief that the world is rationally ordered, lamenting instead the social, political, economic and cultural problems of the modern, industrialized world. Romantic and modernist writers and thinkers tended to challenge the existing system with the hope of creating a new one, which - in some cases - would be able to fulfil the needs and expectations of the people who were living in unsatisfying circumstances.

Modernism is therefore a genre of art and literature that makes a self-conscious break with previous genres; it is a strong reaction against the political, religious and social views of the time as well as a rebellion against the romantic attitude and practice in

literature. At the same time we must agree that Romanticism had also presented itself as a break with the previous aesthetics in literature and ‘Enlightenment thinking’, the word ‘rebellion’ itself is by definition ‘romantic’, therefore it can be said that a nest age of the romantic rebellion lives in the modernist movement. Romanticism celebrated nature rather than civilization, believed in the awe and beauty of nature, in the natural goodness of common Man and in childhood as a special moment in life. Romanticism is all about imagination, strong senses, emotions and feelings. Keats, whose oeuvre is possibly the highest expression of English Romanticism, believed poetry should express the poet’s “highest thoughts”. High thoughts, memories, prodigious natural talent, youth, desires and passion seems to belong only to the Romantics and the neo-Romantics, while Moderns are usually depicted as bitter and disillusioned.<sup>196</sup> Modernist literature is about individualism (the modernist poet writes often in first person, so did the Romantics), mistrust of institutions, and the disbelief in any truths. In literature and art Moderns departs from conventionality and ‘feelings’: the modern poet “sees”, then consciously and unsentimentally, presents what he sees (“no ideas but in things”).

These contradictory ideas about poetry: expression of the poet’s emotions, feelings, intuitions of the Romantics, mere presentation of the ‘thing’ or the ‘image’ of the Moderns and Imagists, is everywhere present in Penna’s notes and diary:

. . . Poesia, per me, è insomma questa illuminazione inconfondibile con altri stati d'animo di qualsiasi sorta, sentimentali o passionali, o intellettuali. Si chiami poi intuizione, o in altra maniera, quel che è certo è che essa è sempre inconfondibile e cioè sempre riconoscibile, sia in sè - .quando si possiede- sia nell'opera di altri poeti.<sup>197</sup>

. . . Poetry, for me, is in fact this unique illumination/revelation, not to be confused with other moods of any kind, romantic or passionate, or

---

<sup>196</sup> Bitterness, disillusionment almost to nihilism were peculiar traits of Italian Hermetics, with whom Penna has been, by some critics, associated.

<sup>197</sup> Penna’s archives ‘Dated manuscripts 1922-1943’ II. Folder 3:1930, in Didier, R., p.26.

intellectual. We can call it intuition, or in any other way, what is certain is that it is always unique and that is always recognizable, either in yourself - when you have it - or in the work of other poets.

Elsewhere the need to “get back to the things themselves” can be found in a more ‘modernist’ consideration (quoted previously) about poetry: “Far poesia di tutto: guardare un muro - l'interno del treno - la sera . . . La luce e il movimento, la città, lo sport, le passioni poi ... un vaso da fiori sul tavolo di un salotto in ordine e deserto.”<sup>198</sup> ‘Turn everything into poetry: looking at a wall - the inside of the train - the night . . . The light and the movement, the city, sports, passions, then ... a flower vase on the table in a living room in tidy and empty.’ Penna, who showed elsewhere in his verse a romantic attitude towards Nature, Youth and Art, in the same folder containing *Diario 1930* wrote this harsh criticism against the uncontrolled romantic outburst of personal moods/feelings and against the idea of poetry advocated by Valery, at the same time revealing an irreverent and individualistic side of his personality which might be attributed to both Romantic and modern attitudes: “I also agree that it is not poetry the romantic outburst, autobiography, both lyrical and analytical, etc., For a poem is the personality of the poet, but his own ‘poetic’ personality/*persona*, that is his indefinable own world - only.”<sup>199</sup> On the same page Penna goes on criticizing Valery (though the French poet had been a major influence in his young years), and even Umberto Saba, his older friend and mentor. According to Penna in Saba’s poems the ‘man’ and the ‘dreamer’ always overcome the ‘poet’ and in Valery there is no ‘real’ poetry.

Fuori dunque sono dalla poesia vera e Valery - e i piagnoni o chiunque racconti i propri stati d'animo (in quanto stati d'animo di ‘uomini’ sia

---

<sup>198</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>199</sup> “E’ giusto, anche per me, che non sia poesia lo sfogo romantico, l’autobiografismo, sia lirico che analitico, ecc., perchè la poesia è sì la personalità del poeta, ma proprio la sua “personalità” poetica, cioè quel mondo indefinibile proprio – unico . . .” Penna in Deidier, R., p.26.

pure sensibilissimi) e chi faccia come Saba un dono di tutti i suoi moti interni, sia pure nobili e pieni di grazia umana e di non enfasi. Ma la poesia è come una ‘sostanza’ a sè, così come la volontà, l’intelligenza . .

200

Therefore Valery is ‘outside’ the real poetry and so are all the whiners or anyone who just expresses their moods (because they are moods of ‘a man’, even though of a very sensitive man) and also those poets -like Saba- who give all of their personal emotions as a gift, albeit noble, full of human grace and non-emphatic. But poetry is a ‘substance’ in itself, as well as the will, the intelligence . . . .

### ***Irreverence and Individualism***

Where Romantics saw in the restoration of the “natural” order of the simple, humble life of the countryside the solution to the chaos and evils of industrialism, for the modern poet life is ‘un-ordered’ and the ‘virtues’ of the Past cannot help the moral and cultural degradation of the Present. But there are many critics who saw continuity between Modernism and Romanticism (Marjorie Perloff and the most authoritative Harold Bloom among others), although we must consider Modernism as a reaction against Romanticism in the first place, nevertheless there are some characteristics that it borrowed from the Romantic Movement. According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane: “A number of critics have been tempted to see Modernism as a resurgence of Romanticism, though conceivably in a more extreme and strained form of pure irrationalism (46)”. The two critics accept the fact that there are similarities and differences between the two movements but maintain that *irrationalism* and *irreverence* are very important elements of Modernism because they emphasize the irrational forces within Man himself and the effort of the new poets to tear down “the virtues” of the past: Romantics and Modernists both reacted ‘irrationally’ to the social, political, cultural and economic disenchantments of their time. Bradbury and McFarlane mention Hiller

---

<sup>200</sup> Penna, in *ibidem*, p.27.

Miller's claim about the same issue by stating that: "Hiller Miller (says that) a new kind of poetry has appeared in our day, a poetry which grows out of romanticism, but goes beyond it" (47). Individualism, rebellion and irreverence, alienation, the concept of 'beauty', the desire to escape to an utopian dream world, the infatuation with Youth and regeneration, together with the anguish over the limitations and decay of human experience, these are some of the 'traits' that associate Romantics with Moderns. In the following paragraphs I will show how these features were shared by Penna as well - not only when we consider his choices in lifestyle but also with reference to his poetic practice.

Individuality is one of the most important common characteristics of both movements. Individuality is expressed through the idea of independence and subjectivity. E. E. Cummings claims that: "So far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was, is, and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality."<sup>201</sup> But Individualism was also a trait of Romanticism which came into sight with the acceptance of Man as an independent valuable entity and the belief that what is special in a Man is to be valued. It was Romanticism's great emphasis on the expression of emotion and passion of man which opened a path to the significance of a poet's individuality. Keats, for instance, following the previous romantic poets such as Wordsworth, exalts the freedom of the individual genius: the poet as a creator is free to range all times and climes, to explore to the utmost the whole circuit of human imagination. In consequence a poet's work becomes subjective, intimate and has the charm of strangeness, remoteness, or mystery. Penna follows, in this regard, the

---

<sup>201</sup>In Dendinger, Lloyd N. *E. E. Cummings, The Critical Reception*. New York: B. Franklin & Co. Inc. 1981, p. 351.



Romantic spirit, creating in his poems an imaginary world, a *utopia*, in order to depict his dream of a better world, which would be remote from the tensions of everyday life.

Reading this long, very personal note from Penna's *Diario*, gives us an idea of how deeply aware Penna was of his value as a poet and how concerned he was about preserving the uniqueness and originality of his verse and his "individuality". On the other hand he somehow rejects the Romantic excess of sensitivity and in his constant endeavour to "far rinascere", "make it new", regenerate and give *rinascita* 'birth/beginning' to his poetry, we detect instead some modern, unexpected "imagist" traits:

"Roma 1-4-1930"

Ho riletto certi miei appunti (sera di disperazione, sottili auto-osservazioni su minime cose ecc.). In tutti trovo 'qualche cosa'. Ricostruire; su stile di Cardarelli-Solmi, o su metrica leopardiana - Montale - Io ?Sento che il migliore di me è nella inconfondibile sottigliezza dell'autoanalisi, posta a servizio dei momenti di più struggente sensibilità (anche di fatti minimi, s'intende!).Imbastire queste osservazioni con molta originalità di stile, come si conviene al mio temperamento, del resto naturalmente complesso, ambiguo, insincero. Fidarsi molto dell'arte, della composizione, dell'effetto, ma sempre come 'sovrapposto' alla poesia, e ben sovrapposto. Del resto, credere così all'arte, è già essere poeti, per questa fede pura e sincera. Basta con gli affannosi romanticismi e le ingenuità stilistiche. Ma il problema capitale è quello della mia stessa vita. Quello di conservare, anzi far rinascere la mia poesia."<sup>202</sup>

I re-read some of my notes (evening of despair, subtle self-observations of the smallest things, etc...). In all I find 'something'. Rebuilding; according to the style of Cardarelli-Solmi, or the Leopardi-metric, or Montale - or myself? I feel that the best of me is the unmistakable subtlety of self-analysis, placed at the service of the most poignant moments of sensitivity (even in the smallest facts, of course!) Outline these observations with a lot of originality of style, as it fits my personality, which is of course complex, ambiguous and insincere. Trust art a lot, composition, effect, but always as 'overlaid' to poetry, and well

---

<sup>202</sup> Penna quoted in Deidier, R., , p.24.

superimposed. Moreover, believing in Art so much, it means you are already a poet, because of this pure and sincere faith. No more frantic romanticism and stylistic naiveté. The major problem here is that of my own life. To preserve, indeed revive my poetry.

### *Nature and the urban landscape*

Ditemi, grandi alberi sognanti,  
a voi non batte il cuore quando amore  
fa cantar la cicala ... ?<sup>203</sup>

Tell me, you great dreaming trees  
doesn't your heart beat when love  
makes the cicada sing ...?"

As noted in the previous sections, one of the fundamentals of Romanticism is the idea that Man, in a state of nature, would behave well but is hindered by civilization, meaning that the harmony between Man and Nature is destroyed by urban life - that was the reason whysome English Romantics rejected the option of living in a city. Penna's feelings for Nature are certainly 'romantic'. Escaping to nature is sometimes for Penna the only answer to the sorrows of his life and the incomprehension of a moralistic, hypocritical society. Nature is a better listener than humans and it understands and talks to the poet:

Lasciato ho gli animali con le loro  
mille mutevoli inutili forme.  
Respiro accanto a te, ora che annotta,  
purpureo fiore sconosciuto: assai  
meglio mi parli che le loro voci.<sup>204</sup>

I've given up on animals with their

---

<sup>203</sup> In *Poesie*(1939).

<sup>204</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

thousands of useless changing forms.  
Now, at night, I breathe beside you,  
unknown purple flower: you say so  
much more to me than their voices.<sup>205</sup>

Elsewhere Penna, having been left alone by “they” (his kind), comes back to Nature and talks to the trees, as if they could share human sorrow; signified in the poet’s loneliness and his insecurity:

Mi avevano lasciato solo  
. . . sotto la pioggia fina, solo.  
Mi guardavano muti  
meravigliati  
i nudi pioppi: soffrivano  
della mia pena: pena  
di non saper chiaramente ...<sup>206</sup>

They had left me alone  
. . . in the misty rain, alone  
The naked poplars, mute  
and amazed,  
watched me, suffered  
my pain, this pain  
of not knowing clearly ...

Romantic escape to nature was dictated by the feeling of alienation towards the rising industrial society. The Industrial Revolution, which emerged in the eighteenth century, affected both Romanticism and Modernism. Industrialization became an economic and social problem which caused inequality as a result of class division in urban life. Humans came to be seen as a commodity, which could be used in the factories, and urbanization became a cultural problem. The Romantics argued that going back to nature, to the innocence of childhood or to the imaginative realm of Art, was the solution. The concept of beauty had as fundamental impact on Romanticism as

---

<sup>205</sup> Translation by W.S.Di Piero (1984).

<sup>206</sup> *Ibidem.*

imagination, emotion and nature. To the Romantics, urban life was ugly, monotonous and dehumanizing, beauty could only be found in the simplicity of Nature and the imaginative, spiritual life opposed to the material world.

Later, Modernists objected that there was no way back and disclosed, in their work, the irreversible “fragmentation” in every field of life.

### **“Modernité”**

By modernity I mean the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent which make up one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.  
(Charles Baudelaire)<sup>207</sup>

Baudelaire’s poetry was a major inspiration for Penna who, in his adolescent years, called the French writer (together with Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde) “magnificent tormentors / of pent-up hurricanes of passion”<sup>208</sup>. But Baudelaire was also credited with coining the term ‘modernity’ (*modernité*) to designate the fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis, and the responsibility art has to capture that experience. Later Penna rejected any affiliation with these writers, abjuring their harmful decadence, but - despite his Romantic attitude to Nature - he never rejected city life. Rather, he embraced the loud and frantic life of the modern city and celebrated in his poems the urban landscape and its inhabitants, as noted by Robb:

One of the pleasures one gains from reading these poems is a growing sense of daily life in Fascist and post-war Italy - life seen from the point of view of a frequenter of railway stations, public lavatories and the cheaper cinemas. A society in the early stages of industrialization is viewed from its interstices: [...] the anonymous public’s trams and trains are omnipresent. The railway, freighted with promise, links the city scene

---

<sup>207</sup> Baudelaire, C., “The Painter of Modern Life” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, edited and translated by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, p.13.

<sup>208</sup> “magnifici tormentatori / di chiusi uragani di passion” in “C’è ora nel mio cuore adolescente” written in 1927 and collected in Penna’s *Confuso sogno* (1980).

of winter poems, marked out by factories, stadiums, taverns and barbers'  
saloons . . . .<sup>209</sup>

Penna's choice to depict and celebrate this emerging social class shows his interest in modernity, where "modernity" must be understood according to Baudelaire's definition quoted above.

In this chapter I have examined and discussed Penna's influences and the way the poet drew inspiration from Tradition, but although affected by the writers, Penna's poetry shows no nostalgia for the past. In the following chapters I will demonstrate Penna's interest in innovation and renewal of poetry, his reception of the new, revolutionary ideas of the twentieth century such as the 'fragmentation of reality', the new concept of time by Bergson, and Freud's psychoanalysis. A closer examination of Penna's poems will also reveal how his poetic practice and themes are in accordance with many tenets and principles of the new aesthetics brought about by modernist and imagist writers; also a manifest *orientalism* of themes and style, which has never been fully investigated, will be discussed.

---

<sup>209</sup> Robb. P., work cited, n.p.



**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**MODERNISM(S): AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW**

	<i>Introduction</i>	143
5.1	About Modernism	144
5.2	Modernism in Italy	146
	<i>Modernist publications and translations in Italy</i>	146
	<i>Italian Modernists</i>	149
5.3	Reading Penna's notes	153
	<i>Penna's "archives" and French Symbolism</i>	156
5.4	The correspondence with Montale	161
5.5	Comparing poets and poems	166
	<i>Preludes</i>	168
	<i>Conclusion</i>	177





## *Introduction*

We have left Penna, in the previous chapter, on his way to modernity carrying with him the “weight” of Tradition, from ancient Greek poetry to Romanticism. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that Penna’s influences, which I have identified and discussed so far, do not prevent a view of Penna’s poetry as innovative. I will compare Penna’s style and the themes of his poetry to the works of some modernist and imagist writers not in order to ‘label’ Penna as a “modernist” poet, but to show that the affinities with modern writers are sufficient to rescue Penna’s oeuvre from a narrow national context and place his work inside an international body of poetry. Approaching Penna’s oeuvre from a different point of view, I will consider the idea of a “transnational Modernism” running through the work of different poets and writers in the first part of the twentieth century literary scene - specifically the interactions of Italian and Anglo-American poetry, despite the obvious cultural differences.

Recent works on Modernism (e.g. Marjorie Perloff<sup>210</sup>) have highlighted emerging approaches to thinking about modernist literature in a wider and more inclusive way. Victoria Rosner, for instance, has included Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci and Italian Futurist writer Tommaso Marinetti in her course on Transnational Modernism at Columbia University, writing in the introduction:

We will discuss works by writers whose modernist practices originate outside of the United States and Western Europe . . . Ours will be a “long modernism” expanding well past the traditional boundary of WWII; the implications and logic of this choice will be a matter for our discussion and debate. We will consider a range of topics and issues, including the autonomy of the intellectual, resistance to war and fascism, the internationalism of the avant-garde, cosmopolitanism.

---

<sup>210</sup> Perloff, M., “The Aura of Modernism” In *Modernism Revisited*, work cited.

Elsewhere Italian critic Paola Sica in her essay on Eliot and Italian poet Eugenio Montale points out: “Until a few decades ago, Modernism in the West referred chiefly to works written in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France” but recently most critical accounts of Modernism changed their emphasis, by adopting a transnational focus(1).

In this chapter, relevant influences of Modernism on the whole literary scene of the Italian *Novecento* will also be examined; but, looking beyond a national-based approach to Modernism, I will rather stress the similarities that associate modernist writers of different cultures and nationalities. A close analysis of Penna’s texts compared to modernist works will conclude the chapter.

### **5.1 About Modernism**

The term “modernist” is a very controversial one and the difficulty of providing an ultimate definition for literary and artistic movements has already been stressed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless it is possible to find some points on which to agree.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw important historical and social events, such as the development of a mass working class movement, socialist and communist ideologies and the tragedy of World War I. As pointed out by David Ayers in his essay on Modernism, “. . . the notion of a group of artists announcing themselves to the world as a movement with a collective identity had come to fashion again in the first decade of the twentieth century” (Ayers 1). But in the “Introduction” to *Modernism Revisited*, Paul Scott Derrick writes:

The more we think about the Modernists, for example, the more we might perceive of what they share, in their deepest concerns, with their Romantic predecessors. If there ever really was a break between them, as Eliot, Pound and others were quite keen to profess, it was on the visible

surfaces. And like the break, or boundary, between the surface of the skin and the surrounding air, the closer we get to it, the more porous and indefinite it appears.<sup>211</sup>

Although Modernism stands in antithesis to Romanticism for the most part, there are scholars and critics who maintain Modernism has inherited the romantic legacy, that means in much modernist poetry we can identify a romantic spirit and heritage.

Modernism is defined as a break with tradition, but authors such as John Bayley in his book *The Romantic Survival*, Robert Langbaum in *Poetry of Experience*, or Harold Bloom in his works, saw Modernism as a development of romantic tradition.

Modernism was a refusal to accept conservative views, ideologies and theories; it was revolutionary in the sense that it challenged the issues that blocked human 'progress'. Themes of modern literature include the inner dilemmas humans must face, the existence of God in the modern world, overwhelming technological changes and the struggle of Man to fit in urban life. With Modernism experimentation and individualism, practices which had been discouraged before, became desirable; the poets took fullest advantage of the new spirit of the times, and stretched the possibilities of their art - for instance modernist works did not present events and experience in connected, sequential time lines. In general, there was a disdain for most of the literary production of the previous century, but not for everything or everyone: French Symbolist poets and Charles Baudelaire, for instance, were appreciated for the sophistication of their imagery, but also ancient Greek poetry and the Italian lyrical tradition of Dante and Petrarca were admired by modernist masters such as Eliot and Pound.

---

<sup>211</sup> Perloff et al., p.5.

Finally, some more features, commonly agreed to be pertaining to Modernism and to which I will refer when discussing Penna's affinity to the Moderns, are: the freedom of the artist to delve into subject matter that had usually been considered taboo, the model of the self-taught artist-hermit who has no desire for public adulation (that would become synonymous with the poet in the modern age) and the widespread feeling of alienation with society and the world at large.

## **5.2 Modernism in Italy**

Before beginning to investigate any affinity between Sandro Penna and the modernist poets through textual analysis, it is necessary to explain when and how Anglo-Saxon Modernism came to be known in Italy, who were the representatives of Italian Modernism and how the theories and tenets of that literary movement influenced twentieth-century Italian poetry. In providing an overview of the Italian literary scene of the early twentieth century I will focus on Montale and Saba. They are not only relevant as major representatives of modern Italian poetry, but above all they are central figures in this research on Penna, Montale being his mentor and editor, and Saba the writer to whom Penna sent his first poems seeking advice. Indeed, Saba 'discovered' Penna, admired his poetry and supported him all his life. Finally Montale and Saba - with their international reputation as 'modern' writers and their connections to Eliot and Joyce – could represent the *missing link* between English Modernism and Penna.

### ***Modernist publications and translations in Italy***

English modernist authors such as Eliot, Joyce, V. Woolf, but also French, American and *Mittel-European* ones, were introduced to Italian readers in the twenties

and thirties by a great number of literary journals of which *Solaria* was probably one of the most authoritative. Established in 1926 it was directed among others by Montale and Sergio Solmi. I have already pointed out how relevant Montale's friendship was in Penna's life, and we have seen in the previous chapters that Penna's first poems appeared on *Solaria* - later it was thanks to the support of Sergio Solmi that Penna's first volume of poetry was published in 1939.

*Solaria* was very active in the fight to rescue Italian literature from provincialism and connect it to the major European literary movements. The Journal made known not only French and English authors, but also American (Hemingway, Faulkner), Russian (Mayakovsky, Esenin, Pasternak) and Central European (Rilke, Kafka, Thomas Mann, Zweig). *Solaria* introduced - with two special double issues - modernist Italian novelist Italo Svevo, in March-April 1929 and May-June 1930. Together with major Italian poets such as Ungaretti, Montale and Saba, the pages of *Solaria* hosted Proust, Valéry, Gide, Joyce and Eliot. Although the magazine was repeatedly subjected to censorship and in 1936 was forced to end publication - due to increasing difficulties created by the fascist censorship - readers of *Solaria* and other innovative journals and literary magazines, had been given the opportunity in the twenties to read fragments of the *Waste Land*, chapters of *Ulysses* and Proust's *Recherche* which critics, writers and translators not infrequently could read in the original languages.

As for official complete translations of English Modernists in Italian, the works of Joyce<sup>212</sup> and V. Woolf<sup>213</sup> were available in Italy in 1933 and poems of Yeats<sup>214</sup> and

---

<sup>212</sup> James Joyce, *Dedalus*. Trans. Cesare Pavese. Turin: Frassinelli («Biblioteca europea», 5), 1933.

James Joyce, *Gente di Dublino*. Trans. Giulio e Adriana Lami. Milan: Corbaccio (I Corvi. Sezione Scarlatta, 5), 1933.

<sup>213</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*. Trans. Alessandra Scalero. Milan: Mondadori («Medusa», 15), 1933. Virginia Woolf, *Gita al faro*, Trans. Giulia Celenza, preface by Emilio Cecchi. Milan: Treves («Scrittori stranieri moderni»), 1934.

Eliot<sup>215</sup> in 1939 and 1941. In 1929 a young Alberto Moravia published *Gli indifferenti*, a work that, with its international success, revitalized the Italian novel. We know from the previous chapters that Moravia, together with his wife Italian novelist Elsa Morante, appreciated Penna's poetry. Morante became one of Penna's best friends, and she along with all fellow writers and friends in Penna's circle, were admirers of Modernism as is demonstrated in this quote:

I was barely fifteen and at the beginning of my literary experiences as well . . . so I spent all my savings to buy *Ulysses* . . . And since then, for some years, either at home in my town or on my holidays, I use to take the book with me.<sup>216</sup>

The importance and influence of Eliot's poetry on the Italian Novecento is finally underlined by Sara Sullam in her essay on Italian translations of English poetry:

The reception of English poetry in Italy after World War II is strongly influenced by the figure of TS Eliot: no surprise, given that even in the English landscape the author of *The Waste Land* . . . has an unparalleled influence on the whole field of literature, even on poets older than him.<sup>217</sup>

Finally, in 1952, following publication of Eliot's work, two members of the next English generation - W.H.Auden and Dylan Thomas<sup>218</sup> - saw the complete official translations of their works published in Italy.

---

<sup>214</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Poesie*. Trans. Leone Traverso. Milan: Giovanni Scheiwiller, 1939

<sup>215</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Poesie*. Trans. Luigi Bertì. Modena: Guanda («Fenice», 4), 1941.

<sup>216</sup> “Non avevo ancora quindici anni ed ero agli inizi così delle mie esperienze letterarie . . . Spesi così tutti i miei risparmi per comprarmi l' *Ulysses* . . . E da allora, per alcuni anni, in città come in villeggiatura, me lo portai dietro.” Moravia, A., “Omaggio a Joyce”, in *Prospettive*, 4.11 (1940): p. 12-13.

<sup>217</sup> “La ricezione della poesia inglese nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra è fortemente condizionata dalla figura di T.S. Eliot: nessuna sorpresa, dato che anche nel panorama inglese l'autore della *Terra desolata*— che muore nel 1965 — ha un' influenza senza pari sull'intero campo letterario, persino sui poeti più anziani di lui.” Sullam, S., p. 142.

<sup>218</sup> Both published by Guanda, Parma 1952.

### *Italian Modernists*

The category of criticism and historiography of Modernism in Italy tends to assume not only a chronological value, but one that gives it a distinctive critical value: Modernism is not a mere container devoid of identity; it not only covers a period of time, but it describes distinctive cultural and artistic traits and therefore commands specific criteria of inclusion and exclusion, as far as artists are concerned. The “culture” of Modernism is expressed in all major European languages and its representatives are cosmopolitan: Eliot and Pound were American, Virginia Woolf was English, Joyce and Yeats Irish and Proust was French. It seems also remarkable that some of its non-Anglo-Saxon proponents were geographically marginal figures like Italo Svevo in Italy (Trieste) or Franz Kafka in Prague. Despite different languages and backgrounds, all modernist artists and writers felt somehow separated from their historical origins: their criticism of capitalism and dehumanization, the autonomy of the intellectual, the resistance to war and fascism, the internationalism of the avant-gardes and their protest against the loss of meaning and the absurdity of modern life sound all but the same within this group of artists.

Relevant influences of Modernism on the whole literary scene of the Italian *Novecento*, have been discussed by Paola Sica in her essay on Eliot and Italian poet and critic Eugenio Montale, quoted in the previous section. We know that as far as an Italian modernist tendency is considered, it was identified mainly with the Futurist movement or such writers as Italo Svevo and Aldo Palazzeschi, but also Luigi Pirandello<sup>219</sup> Eugenio Montale and Umberto Saba. Sica also maintains that in the work of critics such as Fontanella, Guglielmi and McLaughlin it is easy to find comparisons and analogies

---

<sup>219</sup> Luigi Pirandello was an Italian dramatist, novelist, poet and short story writer, awarded the 1934 Nobel Prize in Literature.

among modernist writers and poets of different cultures, where also Italian Modernism can be seen in a comparative perspective (1). This fifth chapter, “Italian Modernists”, leads, in a sense, in the same direction, aiming to re-assess contemporary Italian poetic production often accused of provincialism. As Domenico Valenza claims in *Letterature Compare* ‘Comparative Literatures’:

The moment has come (and actually has come for several years now) to start considering and studying Italian literature together with and within the European framework, and according to categories that are shared by European critics, who have long been speaking – following the example of the Anglo-Saxon and Portuguese and . . . the Spanish and Hispanic – of Modernism to define the most innovative poetry and fiction of the early twentieth century.<sup>220</sup>

We cannot talk about Italian Modernism as a ‘movement’ or a ‘school’ in the same way we can talk about Italian Decadentism or Italian avant-gardes like Futurism, which have a manifesto, and international acknowledgement and notoriety (see Wyndham Lewis’ interest in Futurism for instance). Modernism in Italy is rather a trend, sharing a common culture and a poetics aimed to rejuvenate the theory and practice of literature. Hence a question: how were Svevo, Pirandello, Montale and Saba – Italian writers quoted in Sica’s essay and commonly considered *modernist* – classified in Italian manuals of literature and anthologies? Do they just belong to an unspecified Italian “avant-garde” or are they seen within a broader European background? I will consider very briefly four different works dealing with the history of Italian Literature of the twentieth century: two of them, quite traditional and conservative, written by Alberto Asor Rosa and Ugo Dotti, and two more innovative ones by Cesare Segre and Giulio Ferroni. Both Dotti<sup>221</sup> and

---

<sup>220</sup>Valenza, D., in the *Introduction* to the textbook of the course on “Compared Literature” at the University of Catania: Nicola, Gardini, *Letteratura comparata*, Milan: Mondadori, 2002.

<sup>221</sup> Dotti, U., *Autori e testi della letteratura italiana*, Milan: Laterza, 1997.



AsorRosa<sup>222</sup> fit Pirandello “in the great twentieth-century avant-garde movement in Europe” and Svevo would be in line “with the European avant-garde conception represented by Proust in fiction and poetry by TS Eliot”. That means they use the definition ‘*avant-garde*’ for Pirandello and Svevo but also for writers and poets (Eliot and Proust) considered in Europe to be representatives of Modernism.

Cesare Segre’s volume *Testi nelle Storia* ‘Texts in History’<sup>223</sup>, appears more indepth and accurate and, above all, innovative. Segre places novelists such as Pirandello and Svevo under the common definition of “I maestri della modernità novecentesca” ‘Masters of twentieth-century Modernity’ and associates them with a number of international authors such as Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Musil, Kafka and Thomas Mann, all of whom are commonly defined as *Modernists*. Strangely enough Segre does not use the same procedure for Italian poets; in fact he places Ungaretti, Montale and Saba outside any literary classification concerning the literature between the two world wars, leaving us with the nationally limited definition of “Nuovi Lirici Italiani” ‘New Italian Lyric Poets’.

Finally, in 1991, with Giulio Ferroni’s *Storia della letteratura italiana*<sup>224</sup> ‘History of Italian Literature’, Italian ‘*Modernists*’ join the European scene. According to Ferroni, at the beginning of the Italian *Novecento*, we should distinguish and separate decadent and avant-garde literature from that group of modernist artists and authors still characterized by a ‘denial’ of tradition but without the urge to rush towards the future, without pretending to accelerate the path of history, authors who broke from the inside the modes of communication by re-inventing rather than ignoring the tradition. These

---

<sup>222</sup> Asor Rosa, A., *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Firenze:La Nuova Italia, 1997.

<sup>223</sup> Segre, C., *Testi nella storia. La letteratura italiana dalle origini al Novecento*, Milan: Edizioni Scolastiche Mondadori, 1997

<sup>224</sup> Ferroni, G., *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Torino: Einaudi, 1991.

authors, according to Ferroni are: Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Thomas Mann, Musil, Eliot, Woolf, Valéry, Celine and, in Italy, Pirandello, Svevo, Gadda, Montale and Saba. Once again Montale and Saba are associated, in a manual of literature, with *modernist* Eliot and Joyce. What emerges from Ferroni's work, is that all the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century - Expressionists, Futurists, Surrealists - were born from what has been called the 'unitary culture of Modernism'. The avant-gardes, however, did not exhaust the possibilities of Modernism. They expressed only one side, the most extreme one, broke ties with the past and took the lead in a process aimed to anticipate the future and the triumph of progress. They were also interested in action that was not only artistic but also political. Futurism was the Italian avant-garde which gained great resonance at an international level. But some Italian writers of the previous generation, such as Pirandello and Svevo, or the new generation, such as Gadda, Montale, Ungaretti, and Saba, did not adhere to these movements; they kept their distance and sometimes openly argued with them. They lived and worked inside the modernist culture in a more individualistic way. They asked themselves the same questions as the authors of the avant-garde, but gave different answers. They did not break completely with the past, rather, despite being decisively and boldly innovative, they found a way to resume, extend and reinvent tradition. As pointed out by Valenza: "[these poets] are united by the same break with the previous generation of poets and the same need to rebuild a sense after the dissolution of the avant-garde (as indicated by Montale in terms of epiphany and allegory in his modernist work *Occasioni* . . . " <sup>225</sup> Referring to the different definitions and labels ascribed to these authors, Valenza underlines: "The formula /definition that they shared in the anthologies . . . of 'new lyric poets' suppressed their

---

<sup>225</sup> "[questi poeti] sono uniti da una stessa rottura nei confronti dei poeti della generazione precedente e dalla stessa esigenza di ricostruzione di un senso dopo la dissoluzione effettuata dalle avanguardie (indicata in termini epifanici e allegorici dal Montale più modernista, quello delle *Occasioni* . . . " Valenza, D., work cited, "Introduction", n.p.

differences, flattening them on a single line of post-symbolist origin, but still catching a ‘family resemblance’ that we can now recover by giving it the name it deserves: Modernism.”<sup>226</sup>

Valenza concludes with a list of the works he considers “[i] capolavori del modernismo italiano” ‘the masterpieces of Italian Modernism’ - the list (quoted in the footnote) is important for this study as Valenza includes “le poesie di Penna” ‘Penna’s Poems’ in it as ‘other modernist works’.<sup>227</sup>

### 5.3 Reading Penna’s notes

Despite the ‘hints’ to Penna’s modernity and the innovative drive of his poetry considered in the previous sections of this study, not many critics wrote specifically about “modernist” features in Penna. The most authoritative remark, in this regard, came from Australian author Peter Robb, quoted in previous sections, who compares Penna’s urban landscape and the inhabitants of his poems to the urban world of Eliot and Joyce and considers Penna, in a way, more “modernist” than Eugenio Montale.

---

<sup>226</sup> “. . . la formula che li accomunava nelle antologie . . . di “lirici nuovi” soffocava le differenze appiattendoli su una improbabile linea unitaria di matrice postsimbolista, coglieva tuttavia una aria di famiglia che oggi possiamo recuperare attribuendole il nome che si merita: modernismo.” *Ibidem*.

<sup>227</sup> “I suoi (del modernismo italiano) capolavori sono: *Novelle per un anno* (la loro raccolta e riclassificazione parte dal 1923) e *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (1921) di Pirandello, le novelle di Tozzi ( *Giovani* è del 1920), *La coscienza di Zeno* di Svevo (1923), *Allegria di naufragi* (1919) e *Sentimento del tempo* (1933) di Ungaretti, *Ossi di seppia* (ma più l’edizione del 1928 che quella del 1925) e *Le occasioni* di Montale (1939), *Il Canzoniere* di Saba (1921, poi 1945), la *Cognizione del dolore* (che risale al 1937 ed esce a puntate fra il 1938 e il 1941) e il *Pasticciaccio* (la cui redazione originaria è del 1946) di Gadda. Ma ne fanno parte anche *Il peccato* di Boine, 1914 (unica opera narrativa vociana che tenda decisamente al di là del frammentismo), e poi *Gli indifferenti* (1929) e *Agostino* (1944) di Moravia, *Rubé* di Borgese (1921), e i romanzi e le novelle di Bontempelli, Palazzeschi, Savinio, Bilenci, del primo Vittorini, e **le poesie di Penna**, Bertolucci, Caproni, Gatto, del primo Sereni e degli ermetici più vicini al surrealismo (Gatto più che il primo Luzi o Quasimodo)”. *Ibidem*.

As for Italian critics, I have already discussed (chapter two) criticism of Penna's oeuvre that refer - in different ways and context and to different degrees of importance - to Penna's modernity and modernist features of his poetry. Some quotes need to be stressed again here as they are particularly relevant for this chapter on Modernism. Di Fonzo, for example, explains how Penna's use of myth is in accordance with the twentieth century poetic canon. Referring to the 'fragmentation' of modern life and the poets' doubt in dealing with it, he writes: "The poet [Penna] is upset by the doubt, typical of twentieth century writers, about the inability and the precariousness of the 'word' to express and contain only a fragment of that vital fluid."<sup>228</sup> Let us read again for example these verses: "Amavo ogni cosa nel mondo. E non avevo/ che il mio bianco taccuino sotto il sole"<sup>229</sup> 'I loved everything in the world. And all I had was/ my notebook, blank under the sun.' And the verses:

Venne la guerra poi o, nella vita,  
non salirono più lente le sere.  
Polverosi i tramonti. Ed infinita  
la noia fitta delle primavere.<sup>230</sup>

Then came the war oh, no more in life  
would evenings rise slowly.  
Dusty sunsets. And the endless  
dense boredom in spring.

Elsewhere the critic points out how Penna used archetypical images in the attempt to give a meaning to his personal chaos - in the same way Eliot and Joyce did:

Penna is a man of the twentieth century therefore his use of myth comes

---

<sup>228</sup> "Il poeta [Penna] è colto dal dubbio, tipicamente novecentesco, dell'incapacità, della precarietà della parola nell'esprimere e contenere anche un solo frammento di quel fluido vitale." Di Fonzo, G., p.77.

<sup>229</sup> In *Appunti* (1950).

<sup>230</sup> In *Il viaggiatore insonne* (1977).

from . . . a solitary elaboration of a private mythology. What is amazing is that a poetry marked by such an extremely private matter/content, is also able to express something so universal. . . . The personal myth catches the primordial images: the poet retrieves the archetypal images which are common property of mankind.<sup>231</sup>

The following poem can better explain what is meant by “private mythology”:

Il mio Amore era nudo  
in riva a un mare sonoro  
Gli stavamo d'accanto  
-favorevoli e calmi -  
io e il tempo.<sup>232</sup>

My Love was bare  
on the shore of a resounding Sea.  
Next to him  
-favourable and calm-  
Time and I.

In these lines the archetypal images of the ‘resounding Sea’ and the ‘Time’ coexist with the more personal/private ‘my love’ and ‘I’, the words that open and close the poem.

\*

In Gurrieri’s essay, Modernist features such as ‘epiphanies’ and the ‘objective correlative’ are also underlined (75), while Luti focuses on the use of vers libre, the Imagist, pictorial quality of Penna’s verse and his *orientalism*. The twentieth century Bergsonian view of “Time” is detected in Penna by Cascio (29), while Bruni acknowledges structural elements in Penna’s verse that are close to American language (see Literature Review). Finally, to the accusation that Penna is not innovative enough to be associated with Modernism, major Italian critic Raboni replies that although Penna

---

<sup>231</sup>“Penna è un uomo del Novecento, il suo mito è nato perciò . . . dall’elaborazione solitaria di una privata mitologia. Ciò che è appunto stupefacente è che una poesia contrassegnata da un contenuto così privato ed estremo, possa dire qualcosa di così universal . . . il mito personale aggancia le immagini primordiali: il poeta ha recuperate le immagini archetipiche che sono proprietà comune dell’umanità.” *Ibidem*, p.113.

<sup>232</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

is far from the most significant example of Italian Modernism - namely the extreme linguistic experimentation of Futurism - “the hendecasyllable used by Penna is a real transgression, subversive of the traditional poetic code”.<sup>233</sup>

In the final section of this chapter I will discuss these features by analysing Penna’s poems and comparing them to Modernist works, whereas in this section I focus on Penna’s notes and archives in order to point out some of the poet’s considerations and thoughts that can be related to relevant themes and ideas by which Penna was influenced. We will notice that they are the same poetic principles and practices which paved the way to Modernism and Imagism and eventually became *tenets* of those movements.

### ***Penna’s ‘archives’ and French Symbolism***

The term *archives* is quite misleading when referring to the paper material found in Penna’s apartment after the poet’s sudden death. Notes, documents, letters, fragments of a journal and drafts of poems (discovered by Penna’s biographer, Elio Pecora) were, as a matter of fact, not meant by Penna for publication. The poet used to write on the most diverse pieces of paper, anything from newspaper borders to the reverse sides of envelopes and letters. This material had no classification, no structured order, but was scattered around Penna’s home; the correspondence between the poet and Montale - for instance- was purposely hidden behind furniture, as Montale had requested to keep it private. Although most documents and papers have no date or specific references, they contain autobiographical notes - criticism, opinions about art, literature and Penna’s diverse readings - which help us to understand Penna’s poetics. A first provisional classification by Pecora has divided the material into three sections: A. drafts of poems, B. scattered notes and fragments of a diary, and finally C. the letters (the whole

---

<sup>233</sup> “... l’endecasillabo usato da Penna una vera e propria trasgressione avente una carica eversiva del codice poetico tradizionale” Raboni, G., in Di Fonzo, G., work cited, p.65.

correspondence with Eugenio Montale has been published and some letters will be quoted). Recently Roberto Didier had the fortunate opportunity to examine and study the original material found in Penna's apartment. The outcome of his research - published in Didier's book often quoted in this study, is of the utmost importance in unveiling and understanding Penna's thoughts, beliefs and influences. This section of my study will rely on Didier's essay and comments when quoting from Penna's archives.

Many personal notes refer to French Symbolist poets. Although Modernism was one of the major artistic and cultural movements which - at the beginning of the twentieth century - transformed every aspect of art with a new aesthetic, forcing western civilization to see things from a different viewpoint, an artistic revolution in Literature had already begun in the later part of the nineteenth century, with the Symbolist Poets in France. In England modernist Symbolism, with W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and E. Pound, had its root in French Symbolism and its major representatives, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmè and eventually Valéry and Claudel.

One of these poets' aims - in addition to fostering a new way of understanding human nature and society - was to liberate the techniques of versification. They were sympathetic of the trend toward free verse, and to achieve this goal symbolic imagery was used to signify the state of the poet's soul. These were principles to which both Eliot and Pound subscribed: *The Waste Land*, for instance, represents a remarkable example of symbolist imagery and Pound's Imagism echoed many symbolist features. Symbolist poets believed in formal experimentation as opposed to traditional academic art. Alienation from society, emphasis on individual sensibility and rejection of conventional religious, social, and moral values - together with individualism and freedom in literature - were all modernist poets' ideals. This chapter proposes that they were also shared - to a considerable extent - by Penna. Although Symbolism has always been considered by

critics to be one of the major influences on Penna's oeuvre, no emphasis has been given to the fact that most of the reference points and tenets of Symbolism shared by Penna are the same as those shared by the major representatives of English Modernism.

We find in Penna's notes the same concern with the expression of transient sensations and the rejection of a poetry made of statements. He shared with the Symbolists the same need to escape dull reality into a transcendental 'realm of being' in order to get to the essence of life. Like the Symbolists his poetry is nostalgic for the spiritual homeland of innocence and beauty that exists beyond and before the visible world.

Un altro mondo si dischiude: un sogno  
fanciulla mia beata sotto il sole  
medesimo (oh gli antichi  
e dorati fanciulli). Un lieve sogno  
la vita ...  
Ricordati di me dio dell'amore.<sup>234</sup>

Another world there unfolds: a dream  
my own blessed girl, beneath the  
same sun (oh the golden lads of then). A light dream  
life ...  
Remember me god of love.

Penna started to read the French Symbolists as a teenager and translated the French Symbolist poet Paul Claudel<sup>235</sup> into Italian. Even though he eventually denied these influences, writing the famous lines: "Addio Wilde, Poe, Baudelaire" 'Farewell Wilde, Poe, Baudelaire' (Penna, *Confuso sogno* 1980) and "Ero una volta Hölderlin... Rimbaud" 'I was once Hölderlin ... Rimbaud' (Penna, *Poesie* 1939), his poetry still complies with many of the Symbolists' reference points. Let's read, for instance, his consideration of

---

<sup>234</sup> In *Stranezze* (1977).

<sup>235</sup> Penna's translations from French include: Mèrimée, P., *Carmen e altri racconti*, Turin: Einaudi, 1943, and Claudel, P., *Presenza e profezia*, Rome: Edizioni di Comunità, 1947.



the concept of 'illumination' and 'intuition':

Roma 16 ottobre '30

. . . Poesia, per me, è insomma questa illuminazione inconfondibile con altri stati d'animo di qualsiasi sorta, sentimentali o passionali, o intellettuali. Si chiami poi intuizione, o in altra maniera, quel che è certo è che essa è sempre inconfondibile e cioè sempre riconoscibile, sia in sè - quando si possiede- sia nell'opera di altri poeti.<sup>236</sup>

. . . Poetry, for me, is in fact this unique illumination/revelation, not to be confused with other moods of any kind, romantic or passionate, or intellectual. We can call it intuition, or in any other way, what is certain is that it is always unique and that is always recognizable, either in yourself -when you have it- or in the work of other poets.

Here is Deidier's comment on the above passage:

'Illumination' in Penna is not evocative . . . but it basically corresponds to 'a state of mind', neither intellectual nor emotional nor passionate. It could also be called 'intuition' . . . intuition as a revelation of things in their essence, communion with the world. Ardor and perception at the same time . . . to build a poem that is 'great': 'the strength to live', 'arrogance'. That 'bold' character, which is already present in the founding of modernity.<sup>237</sup>

A cross-reference to Bergson's theories are of use when trying to understand the concept of 'intuition' in Penna's diary and the peculiar idea and use of the category of 'Time' in his poetry. Bergson convinced many thinkers that immediate experience and intuition are more significant than rationalism and science for understanding reality. He argued that one cannot understand his revolutionary ideas about "Time" as "Duration" through scientific analysis, but only through experiential, first-person intuition. Only intuition has the ability to grasp the absolute. The method of intuition, then, is that of

---

<sup>236</sup>Penna, in Deidier, pp. 26-27.

<sup>237</sup>“ 'Illuminazione' in Penna non ha nulla di evocativo . . . ma risponde essenzialmente a uno 'stato d'animo', nè intellettuale nè sentimentale o passionale. La si potrebbe anche chiamare 'intuizione' . . . intuizione come rivelazione delle cose nella loro essenza, comunione col mondo. Ardore e percezione al contempo . . . per costruirsi una poesia che sia 'grande': la 'forza di vivere', la prepotenza. Quel carattere 'gagliardo' che si ritrova già alla fondazione del moderno.” Deidier, p.29.

getting back to things themselves.

Deidier detects Penna's modernity since his first volume of verse: "The first season of Penna's poetry, which . . . ends with the publication of *Poems* in 1939, was already born under the name of modernity, as some fragments of the 1930 diary confirm."<sup>238</sup> Deidier here refers to Penna's notes (quoted earlier in this work) where the poet writes: "Basta con gli affannosi romanticismi e le ingenuità stilistiche. Ma il problema capitale è quello della mia stessa vita. Quello di conservare, anzi far rinascere la mia poesia"<sup>239</sup> 'No more frantic romanticism and stylistic naïveté. The major problem here is that of my own life. To preserve, indeed revive my poetry'.

Penna shows here his rejection of a romantic and sentimental expression of the "self" in poetry. The importance of human sense perceptions as the only means to grasp reality and 'truth' is also well underlined by Penna, showing how the poet was influenced by Nietzsche and Freud. The desire for rebirth, "far rinascere la mia poesia" to use Penna's words, and the symbolic character of the Child - the *fanciullo* in all of Penna's poems - are also modernist topics. The literature of the Modernists identifies in childhood and innocence the symbols of rebirth and regeneration, as argued by Sica in her *Modernist forms of Rejuvenation*- quoted previously. Depth and clarity become the binomial under whose sign, at the turn of the decade, Penna's lyrical writing takes its recognizable and original appearance.

All critics agree with the identification of Penna's concept and use of a 'circular' not linear Time in his poems, a concept aligned with Henry Bergson's theories. Penna escapes and ignores a macro-History in favour of an everyday ordinary chronicle. I have already quoted Cascio's article about time and space in Penna and Deidier too confirms

---

<sup>238</sup> "La prima stagione della poesia Penniana, quella che . . . si conclude con le *Poesie* del 1939, nasce già all'insegna del moderno, come ci confermano alcuni frammenti di diario del 1930" Deidier, p.24.

<sup>239</sup> Penna, in Deidier p.24.

that Penna's idea of Time is the same as that in modernist literature: "Penna actually stands alone to represent a distant space-time that leads to a theme which appears staggeringly modern . . . the search for a primeval/pristine condition before 'culture' and the tragedies of History".<sup>240</sup> The same concept is expressed by Natalia Ginzburg: "His poetry reflects altogether the infinity of the universe and the time while we live in: broken, discordant and incoherent."<sup>241</sup>

#### **5.4 The correspondence with Montale**

The friendship between Penna and Montale has been extensively proved by their correspondence, which went on for six years and was published in 1995 with a preface by Elio Pecora and a concluding note by Deidier. The two poets did not have many chances to meet: Montale lived in Genoa and later on in Florence, Penna in Rome, but their financial problems made it difficult for them to travel. In each letter they express a strong desire to have more opportunities to talk in person about their personal lives, poetry and the contemporary literary scene. The tone in the letters often shifts from general statements about fellow poets, literary magazines and the issues caused by censorship, to more personal concerns about their own literary careers, their health problems and their intimate feelings about life and human existence. The correspondence was meant to be kept secret. Montale often recommends Penna not talk about it to anyone, in fact Penna himself hid the letters in his bedroom and they were found only after his death behind a chest of drawers.

---

<sup>240</sup>"Penna è rimasto davvero solo a rappresentarsi una lontananza spazio temporale che sfocia in una tematica sconcertantemente moderna . . . ricerca di uno stato precedente le strettoie della cultura e i drammi della Storia. Deidier, p.68.

<sup>241</sup>"Nella sua poesia, si riflette insieme l'infinità dell'universo e il tempo in cui viviamo, rotto e discorde e incoerente" Ginzburg, N., in Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore insonne*, p.10.

Penna's friendship with Montale proves relevant for this thesis for several reasons. First of all the letters between the two poets clearly show that Penna was not - as he himself wanted to be considered - working independently on his poetry in splendid isolation devoid of influences. In actuality Penna attended, when his health and his mood allowed him to, the literary circles of his time, and knew all the major poets and writers of his time, personally, but especially for having read them. There are many literary personalities mentioned in the correspondence: from Ungaretti to Umberto Saba, Salvatore Quasimodo (Nobel Prize in Literature in 1959), C.E. Gadda, A. Gatto, E. Cacciatore, Palazzeschi, Svevo, and many others. Most of these intellectuals appreciated Penna's work, an example above all being Ungaretti (extremely influential at the time) who helped Penna publish two of his poems in the *Gazzetta del Popolo*.

If Penna then decided to isolate himself more and more from the world, the reasons are to be found in his physical and nervous ill health, in his depression, in the financial problems which troubled his life, but above all in the rejection of the ideological, moral, political, social and intellectual world in which he lived, and in the problems of censorship that his poetry met in the years of the Fascist regime. Despite his determination to deny any influence on his poetry, behind the purity and originality of his poetry "lies, however, a consummate artist who knows the tricks of the trade . . . having gone through schools and systems".<sup>242</sup>

Another interesting detail that emerges from the correspondence with Montale is that Penna's readings and knowledge is not confined to a merely national horizon. Penna proves to know European literature quite well; for instance there is a quote from Keats in letter VI: ". . . this posthumous life of mine", while many European and American poets are quoted in his conversations with Giannelli, mentioned previously. In

---

<sup>242</sup> " . . . si cela comunque un artista consumato che conosce i trucchi del mestiere . . . avendo attraversato scuole e sistemi". Barbeti, Grasso, Peronaci. "Introduzione" *La vita è ricordarsi*, Chieti: Solfanelli 2010.

letter XIV Penna recommends to Montale his friend poet Edoardo Cacciatore, a representative of the Italian avant-garde, and quotes Palazzeschi e Svevo with admiration, two writers who are considered among the most important Italian modernist authors (Sica 1).

It should also be emphasized how seriously Penna took into account Montale's opinions and his critical and aesthetic judgments. On the other hand Montale regrets not having been the first one to discover and appreciate Penna's poetry - letter II: "ti abbraccia il tuo, ahimè, non scopritore" 'a hug from the one who - alas - was not the one to discover your talent'. Penna recognizes in Montale his only mentor and critic in letter XLIII: "Ripeto: a me sembra che il tuo parere sarebbe l'unico infallibile" 'I state it again: it seems to me that your judgement/opinion is unique and infallible'. Montale wants to be the first to read every new poem Penna writes, and there is a continuous exchange of new material between the poets. In letter XL Penna has just received *Mottetti* from Montale and replies to his friend enthusiastically, describing the poems as "meravigliosi!" 'wonderful!'. It is interesting to note that recent critical developments, when comparing the oeuvre of the two poets, suggest that the influence worked in both directions so that Montale also acknowledged the power and merit of Penna's poetry, as pointed out by Didier in regard to Montale's *Mottetti* : "Recent criticism has started a comparative inquiry into the influence of Penna's poetry on the Petrarchan phase in the writing of *Mottetti*".<sup>243</sup> Both poets complain about the hypocrisy of their fellow writers/poets. Penna seeks advice about whether or not to participate to literary awards and, in a letter dated 17-2-1937, he expresses his dissatisfaction with 'academic' literature with words that again echo the modernist call for a re-founding of art and

---

<sup>243</sup>“La critica più recente è stimolata ad avviare [...] un'indagine comparativa sull'influenza della poesia penniana nella fase petrarchesca della composizione di *Mottetti*”. Didier in Montale, Penna, *Lettere*, p.99-100.

aesthetics:

Caro Eusebio<sup>244</sup> . . . sono diventato assai cattivo con la letteratura... Non so parlare delle cose dell'arte ma sento, sono sicuro di sentire con precisione il valore - la poesia e la non poesia. Per questo - dicevo - sono cattivo con la letteratura. E' diventata una fobia in me quella della letteratura: la sento puzzare dappertutto; ... e nei miei versi? Vorrei da te tanti consigli. Perchè solo tu potresti darmeli . . . Io ti abbraccio col solitoaffetto Tuo Piuma. (58-59).

Dear Eusebio . . . I have become very hard on Literature. I am not an art expert, but I am sure I have a very precise feeling for what is valuable, for what is poetry and what is not. That is why I grew so hostile towards Literature. It has almost become a phobia: I feel the smell of it everywhere ... even in my lines? I would like lots of advice from you. As only you can advise me . . . With my usual hug and affection, yours Piuma. (Montale, Penna 58-59).

In her essay about Modernism Paola Sica describes Modernism as:

. . . a movement stemming from a disenchanted age, from a sense of historical decay and an excess of emphasis on intellect. But Modernism can also - and as fairly - be defined as a movement originating from a strong desire for sensual revival, historical renaissance and a provocative aesthetic renewal. In literature, this aspiration gives life to different forms of rejuvenation, suggesting the possibility of a lost fullness of experience. At the root of these forms lies a myth of perpetual vitality. This myth prefigures redemption; it implies the sacralization of every kind of beginning, both personal and cultural.(2)

As noted above, Sica's essay deals with Eliot and Montale, champions of Modernism in their respective countries. Themes and aspirations proposed by Sica as pertaining to Modernism and shared by the two poets are also easy to detect in Penna's work - themes such as a disenchanted view of their time, dissatisfaction with the contemporary literary scene and the search for a renewal in poetry; a strong desire for sensual revival and a provocative aesthetic attitude; rejection of the rules and rituals of human society at the time and the search for salvation in an ideal youth/state of innocence; pessimism and

---

<sup>244</sup> In *Lettere e minute*, Both poets address each other with the names *Eusebio* instead of Eugenio and *Piuma* for Penna.

anguish in considering the human condition. All these themes can be traced in Penna's oeuvre, not only in terms of "concepts" but also in his poetic and stylistic choices, and they provide links and connection not only with Montale (the resemblances of their personal lives are, for example, stunning) but also with the tenets and practice of Eliot and other Moderns and Imagists.

The link with Montale is significant for this study because Montale's oeuvre established his position as one of the major and most authoritative Italian experts on American and English literature and poetry. Poet, prose writer, editor and translator who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1975, Montale made his breakthrough as one of the chief architects of modern Italian poetry in the 1920s. He spent many years translating into Italian such writers as William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Herman Melville, Eugene O'Neill, and others. As a critic, he helped, together with James Joyce, the writer Italo Svevo (one of the Italian representatives of European Modernism) to gain critical attention. He wrote among others about W.H. Auden, and Emily Dickinson.<sup>245</sup>

Montale was especially impressed by Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Eliot knew Montale's work and published in 1928, a translation of Montale's poem *Arsenio* in an early number of *The Criterion*. About the relationship between Montale and Eliot, Claire Huffman writes: "Literary critics have tended to argue that the relation between the work of T.S.Eliot and that of Eugenio Montale is one of direct influence . . . This idea has become axiomatic in the Italian criticism of Montale, see for example Gianfranco Contini<sup>246</sup>. There are many other works on the relationship between the works of Eliot

---

<sup>245</sup> Incidentally it is worth noting that critics Riviere and Fontanella quoted in chapter two, referred to Auden and Dickinson in their papers on Penna.

<sup>246</sup> Claire De C. L. Huffman, "T.S.Eliot, Eugenio Montale, and the Vagaries of Influence" later in *Montale and the Occasions of Poetry*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983, p.193. As for Gianfranco Contini and Montale see: Contini, G., *Letteratura dell'Italia unita* (1861-1968), Florence, 1968, p.814.

and that of Montale<sup>247</sup> - here I need to stress that it is quite unlikely that Penna, despite his friendship with Montale, could have completely ignored Eliot's poetry. Montale was the champion of Italian Hermeticism and Penna vigorously rejected any affiliation with *Ermetismo* - nevertheless he was affected by the hermetic tradition. The use of epigram, the need for a personal tone of voice avoiding affectation and the richness of imagery shown in Penna's oeuvre, are all recognisable features and tenets of Hermeticism. Unlike the Hermetics, the substance of Penna's poetry is humble everyday life and the language is never obscure, but a clear, immediate representation of reality. George Singh emphasizes Penna's ability to look outwards, towards everyday objects and events with a modernist objectivity:

Penna's celebration of love and its inevitable concomitant melancholy, as well as of certain innocence has a supremely poetic delicacy about it. . . . His strength - which is also his uniqueness - lies in this that he can contemplate both the inner world of his passions and sentiments and the outer and impersonal world of objects around him with the same intensity and pathos, and depict them as being wedded together without any one of them sacrificing its autonomy and its individuality.(463)

## 5.5 Comparing poets and poems

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
. . .  
And seeing that it was a soft October night . . .  
(T.S. Eliot)<sup>248</sup>

\*

Andiamo, andiamo disperatamente  
ancora insieme nella notte fonda

---

<sup>247</sup> An example is "Two Kindred Spirits: Eugenio Montale and T.s. Eliot" by Patricia M. Gathercole in *Italica*, Vol.32, No. 3, (Sept., 1955), pp.170-179.

<sup>248</sup> "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1920.



e lieve e vellutata dell'estate.  
(*S. Penna*)<sup>249</sup>  
Let's go, let's go, desperately  
still together, into the depth  
of the tender, velvety summer's night.

A comparison of Penna's poetry and the work of the most representative poet of Modernism might appear daring and bold as no actual evidence has been found which can link the two poets. In the literature review section of this study I have introduced the works of a few critics who have pointed out similarities of themes, images and language choices between Penna and the Moderns. My argument, at this point, takes into consideration the close friendship between Montale and Penna and the closeness of poetic style and technique between Montale and Eliot, extensively proved in Sica's essay. In the "Introduction" to her study Sica remarks the affinities between Eliot and Montale, quoting critic Mario Praz, major Italian expert in English literature, who maintains that between the two wars two poets have arisen in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Italy, whose outlooks show remarkable affinities: Montale's poetry in fact shows the assimilation of strategies devised by Eliot, mainly the technique of the objective correlative (Praz 246). Sica concludes the "Introduction" by stating that Montale's poetics coincides with the modernist tendency to embrace multifarious languages and styles: "A comparison of the writers' work in a cultural context, finally, allows for a remapping of those poetic influences in which Modernist Italian poetry reveals its role in shaping a specific transnational cultural panorama" (11). The two poets, Montale and Penna, knew and appreciated each other's work, it is unrealistic to believe that Penna would ignore Eliot's influence on Montale, the man who was not only Penna's friend

---

<sup>249</sup> In *Poesie* (ed. 2000), work cited, p. 273.

but also his mentor and editor.

Sandro Penna and his poetry were not unknown to English-language critics. To support my argument I have quoted Australian author Peter Robb and the passage in his article about Penna's depiction of the urban world and the references to T.S. Eliot, J. Joyce and Montale.<sup>250</sup>

### ***Preludes***

In this section I will compare themes and images from Eliot's *Preludes*<sup>251</sup> to similar themes and images in a selection of verse from Penna's *Poesie*<sup>252</sup>.

Eliot's poetry appears to be obsessed with incurable sadness, desolation, decay and most of the time, despair. The desolate landscape of his early poetry with its themes of hopelessness and aridity, does not change in his masterpiece *The Waste Land*, though his poetry has also been seen as a personal search for the hope of salvation which will eventually lead to a religious faith.

*Preludes* has several main themes all underlining and expanding the hopelessness of modern suburban life and its inhabitants. The landscape, the streets - but above all the people and even their souls - are dirty, soiled and somehow dark and obscured even in the morning light. Different moments of the day are introduced in the stanzas, but *Time* just seems to repeat a sad and useless routine, devoid of meaning; nothing really changes and everything is just a 'masquerade'. We are never introduced to a whole person as

---

<sup>250</sup> "The intent and self-absorbed figure who inhabits this Early Modern landscape belongs to the same urban world as Joyce and the early Eliot. Sometimes Penna, who has been described as a man from the Mediterranean's pagan past, seems more modern than Montale".

<sup>251</sup> Quoted from: *Prufrock and Other Observations*. London: Egoist 1917.

<sup>252</sup> As most of Penna's poems have no title I will provide the number of the pages as in the 2000 Garzanti publication of the volume *Poesie*, reprint 2010.

Eliot only focuses on and describes feet, eyes and hands. The characters seem to be waiting for something (salvation, change?) that never comes or happens. This combination of disillusionment and pessimism in relation to the world and the human condition and “fate”, can be found, very much alike, in Penna’s poetry as well, together with the quest for some kind of salvation and escape from the aridity and squalor of contemporary reality. What we hardly, if ever, find in Penna’s work is despair. The squalor and the desolation of modern suburban life, the sordidness and the injustice of the world are, most of the time, rescued and transformed by epiphanic moments which reflect the joy and beauty of life, brought about by the godlike apparition of some beautiful *fanciullo* ‘lad’ - a messenger of hope. Penna describes common ordinary people, workers, humble characters, but though depicted against a poor, sometimes miserable and dirty suburban background, the atmosphere is still lively and colourful, melancholy is there most of the time, but not despair. The similarities found in the choice of modern themes and landscapes in the poets’ work, are nevertheless opposed by a different attitude, a different approach and different conclusions.

\*

*Preludes* Part I opens on a grim winter evening.<sup>253</sup> Although the first two lines (the evening “settles down” and “smells of steaks in passageways”) might suggest a sense of security or cosiness, the end of the day is not peaceful as the day itself has been “burnt out”. Nature itself is not comforting - the leaves are dead and dirty, the shower is

---

<sup>253</sup> The winter evening settles down  
 With smell of steaks in passageways.  
 Six o'clock.  
 The burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
 And now a gusty shower wraps  
 The grimy scraps  
 Of withered leaves about your feet  
 And newspapers from vacant lots;  
 The showers beat  
 On broken blinds and chimney-pots,  
 And at the corner of the street  
 A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.  
 And then the lighting of the lamps.

“gusty” and the only thing alive seems to be a lonely and miserable horse; as for people, we can only see their feet. Descriptions of the end of a winter day in a suburban environment, using similar images and style, are not lacking in Penna’s poems and they can also be sad and hopeless like this lonely workman on a winter evening with a bad cough:

. . . Mia vita, è stolta  
la tua fame testarda. E’ solo, e svolta  
nella strada notturna l’operaio  
con la sua tosse a fine di febbraio.(Penna, *Poesie* 99)

. . . Oh my life, how foolish  
is your stubborn hunger. Lonely he turns  
into the nocturnal street the workman  
coughing, at the end of February.

Another city evening of melancholy is found in the following verse:

. . . La mia vita si appanna, e poi che piove  
scelgo il passaggio sotto il tunnel dove  
tutto è molliccio, ma però non piove.  
Qui tra la gente solita, che muove  
il passo verso le solite cose  
anch’io mi muovo tra cose non nuove.  
Più comune degli altri, non so dove  
muove il mio passo stanco... (167).

. . . My life gets blurred, and as it rains  
I turn into the passageway under the tunnel  
where everything is mushy, but it doesn’t rain.  
Here the usual people move their steps toward the usual things  
so too I move among things not new.  
More ordinary than the others,  
I don’t know where my weary stride will lead....

The rain surrounds the poet who looks for shelter in a tunnel. His life is dimmed, dull and he moves his steps among old things, not knowing where to go. Reality, as in *Preludes*, is misleading (*vita appannata* in Penna *smoky days* in Eliot); the passageway

which offers a shelter from the rain is soggy and probably smelly: in both poems the same ordinary people move toward an ordinary, weary routine. Natural elements such as the rain, the light and animals - the *horse* in both Eliot and Penna - are usually, positive symbols of hope and comfort in Penna's "scialbo mondo" 'bland world', but in the following two poems (the first one has no title, the second entitled "Mattino") the same natural elements suggest desolation and hopelessness as in *Preludes* where the *light* is never joyful or comforting:

. . . La luce  
non sa della pioggia. La pioggia  
non sa della luce. Le porte  
le porte del mondo son chiuse:  
serrate alla pioggia,  
serrate alla luce. (77).

. . . Light  
doesn't know rain. Rain doesn't  
know light. The doors,  
the doors of the world are shut:  
locked to rain  
locked to light.

"Mattino" starts with images of darkness and aridity almost more typical in Eliot than in Penna (*grigiastro, secco*). It does not bring new life but death (*il paziente moriva*), the horse is tied to a dirty rope and the Italian word *vinto* suggests more the idea of 'defeated' than tired. Like the horse in *Preludes* Part I the animal is miserable, oblivious of a time when the meadows were green.

"Mattino"  
Grigiastro e secco. Ad una sporca corda  
Vinto è un cavallo – e non sa più se c'era  
Verde sui prati.  
. . .  
Il malato moriva (282).

"Morning"

Greyish and dry. To a dirty rope  
a horse is tied – oblivious that once  
the meadows were green.

. . .

The sick man was dying.

Yet Penna's nocturnal cities, although sad and desolate, are still "dear" and never  
frightful because more often than not the epiphanic entry of an anonymous youth or lad,  
most of the time a worker or an apprentice, casts a ray of light even into the darkest  
alley:

Qui e' la cara citta' dove la notte  
alta non ti spaura. Amici  
solitari qui passano e ti danno  
uno sguardo d'amore. O tu lo credi...(*dots in the original*). (205).

Here is the dear city where the late night  
never frightens you. Lone friends  
walk by and send you  
looks of love. Or so you think ...

The final line though, brings back a sort of "Eliot touch", that being disillusionment, as  
the love in the eyes of these anonymous people is more the poet's attempt to modify or  
escape a grim reality by deceiving himself. In *Preludes* the city goes to sleep without  
hope, expecting no change, nothing new from the day to come. In the following lines by  
Penna the same working-class block goes to sleep with the noise of night trains. It is not  
going to be a long sleep as everybody has to go to work early. But the morning will  
bring the sound of lively bells with the wind and the promise of recovery "*guarirai*" to  
the sick person that in the previous poem "Mattino" was doomed to die:

Guarirai. Si odono I treni  
lontani, - e la citta' notturna  
perde la tramontana operosa, e si addorme  
un attimo in attesa  
di un vento di campane (256).

You'll get better. You can hear the trains  
far away, - and the nocturnal city  
drops the industrious north wind, and falls asleep  
for a while, awaiting  
a breeze of bells.

\*

The arrival of the morning in the second stanza of *Preludes*<sup>254</sup> does not bring any light. Eliot again avoids describing whole individuals, just hands raising stained shades in a furnished room. The new day brings “masquerades” which are meant to hide the true meaning of reality. Mornings and dawns in Penna’s suburban landscapes can bring similar images of desolation:

Ma poi nella città tutto è sommerso.  
E la mia stella è quella stella scialba  
mia lenta morte senza disperazione. (221)

But then everything in the city is submerged.  
And my star is that dull star  
my slow death without despair.

It is worth noticing how in the same poem - as in every section of *Preludes*- the street and the day are made more of “things” like smells and noises than of people and individuals:

Come è forte il rumore dell'alba  
fatto di cose più che di persone (221).

How strong is the noise of daybreak  
made more of things than of people.

Sometimes it seems that Penna’s world, like Eliot’s, is without hope of salvation as in

---

<sup>254</sup> The morning comes to consciousness  
Of faint stale smells of beer  
From the sawdust-trampled street  
With all its muddy feet that press  
To early coffee-stands.  
With the other masquerades  
That time resumes,  
One thinks of all the hands  
That are raising dingy shades  
In a thousand furnished rooms.

the beginning of this poem:

Livida alba, io sono senza dio.  
Visi assonnati vanno per le vie  
sepolti sotto fasci d'erbe diacce.  
Gridano al freddo vuoto i venditori...(20).

Ashy dawn, I have no god.  
Sleepy faces walk the streets  
buried under bundles of icy grass.  
Vendors yell at the empty cold.

But at the end of the same poem a glimpse of salvation - or perhaps another attempt by the poet to deceive himself- is found in the human faces of the anonymous folk: "Mi abbandono all'amore di quei visi" (20) 'I lose myself in the love of those faces'.

\*

*Preludes* Part III is still set in the first hours of the morning.<sup>255</sup> The tone becomes more personal and individual, using the personal pronoun "you". Striking - in this regard- is the difference with Penna who puts himself in the first person, as a poet and a man, in almost all his verse. The small, drab city sparrows singing in the squalor of the gutter in Eliot are sad and pitiable like Penna's swallows in another 'dawn poem':

Oh desolato all'alba  
volo basso di rondini  
sulla città deserta (42).

Oh how full of sorrow at dawn  
is the low flight of the swallows

---

<sup>255</sup> You tossed a blanket from the bed,  
You lay upon your back, and waited;  
You dozed, and watched the night revealing  
The thousand sordid images  
Of which your soul was constituted;  
They flickered against the ceiling.  
And when all the world came back  
And the light crept up between the shutters,  
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,  
You had such a vision of the street  
As the street hardly understands;  
Sitting along the bed's edge, where  
You curled the papers from your hair,  
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet  
In the palms of both soiled hands.



over the deserted city.

The “you” of *Preludes* lies in bed dozing between slumber and wakefulness , perceiving neither dreams nor full reality. This peculiar way of being in the world, half awake and half asleep, as in a dreamlike existence, is one of the most typical features of Penna’s poetry as it is his favourite attitude and feeling about reality. The best example of this feeling is the well- known two-line poem “Io vivere vorrei addormentato/entro il dolce rumore della vita” (59) ‘I’d like to live falling asleep/ inside the sweet noise of life’, and in these lines set at day-break:

Nel sonno incerto sogno ancora un poco.  
E forse è giorno  
io sogno ancora un poco (7).

In my uncertain sleep I dream a little longer.  
Maybe it’s day already  
I dream a little longer.

Furnished rooms - often dirty and grim- and unmade beds, are a recurring setting also in Penna’s poetry, but can be totally transfigured by the beauty and innocence of a youth and his kitten as in the last lines of the poem “Interno” ‘Interior’: “Uscì dale sue bracciaannuvolate,/ esitando, un gattino.” (45) ‘From his cloudy arms,/ hesitating, a kitten leapt away’.

Although in another furnished room, Penna’s unsolvable, painful dilemma is demonstrated -anguish and pleasure are tied in a tight knot:

La camera mobiliata nel vicoletto. Il  
campanile su dai piedi del letto.  
Non è forse l'amore un nodo stretto  
fra l'angoscia e il diletto?<sup>256</sup>

The furnished room in the alley. A  
bell tower view at the foot of the bed.

---

<sup>256</sup>In *Poesie* (1939).

Isn't love a knot  
tying together anguish and delight?

*Preludes* Part IV goes back to the evening.<sup>257</sup> Time is mentioned again, but it no longer matters exactly what time it is as the same things happen each day. The character's eyes think they can discern reality and certainty, but they cannot, because reality is obscured, only, in this final section of *Preludes*, the narrator is, for the first time, speaking directly about himself. There is a brief glimpse of hope that something positive can come out of all this desolation and squalor, a something "infinitely gentle/infinitely suffering thing" that can rescue the protagonist. However, it does not go any further, and we are plunged back into the usual urban desolation.

One of the most striking differences between the two poets, despite the similarities of themes, images and language choices, is the approach and treatment of corporeity, the physical body and 'Eros'. As David Ayers points out in his essay discussing the relevance of the *physical body* in Eliot, "despite the rejection of erotic love and the quest for salvation through Myth and Religion ... it is completely clear that erotic love is the focus of Eliot's poems (*Preludes*, *Prufrock*, *Waste Land*) as a whole" (Ayers 28). Eliot's view as expressed in his poetry is that "human beings are confined to an existence given over to reproduction and death. It is a torment to be caught in such a cycle, since our sexuality is something which possesses us and causes us to live

---

<sup>257</sup> His soul stretched tight across the skies  
That fade behind a city block,  
Or trampled by insistent feet  
At four and five and six o'clock  
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,  
And evening newspapers, and eyes  
Assured of certain certainties,  
The conscience of a blackened street  
Impatient to assume the world.  
I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling:  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.  
Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;  
The worlds revolve like ancient women  
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

unhappy and distorted lives. This is so whether one is a queen or a prostitute” (29). And I would add, thinking of Penna, no matter what your sexual orientation is. For Eliot the only possible salvation from erotic love, from life’s cycle and death’s necessity, seems to be the liberation from sex and from the body possibly through faith and religion, while for Penna the only possible salvation from erotic love seems to ‘give in’ to it even with the unavoidable sorrow that it brings: “E un’angoscia brilla/piena di gioia in me” (401) “And anguish shines/ full of joy in me’. Eventually Penna finds himself still in love with Life (*life* being a word that recurs in Penna’s oeuvre more often the word *love* itself), accepting its combination of bliss and sorrow. Erotic love and corporeity seem to be a burden and a curse in the suburban world of *Preludes*, whereas in Penna the appearance of the same anonymous boy is an epiphanic moment that rescues the world from misery and sorrow. The myth that in Eliot and Joyce can give shape and meaning to the world is, for the Italian poet, the myth of *Eros*, the only light in Penna’s ‘bland world’ that gives back to the poet ‘a strange joy of life’:

Cercando del mio male la radice  
 ho corso l’intera città  
 . . .  
 Ma Sandro Penna è intriso di una strana  
 gioia di vivere anche nel dolore.(217).

Searching the roots of my illness  
 I’ve been running through the whole city  
 . . .  
 But Sandro Penna is permeated by a strange  
 Joy of life, even in pain.

### ***Conclusion***

As Penna never signed any “manifesto”, his *affiliation* - strictly in terms of literary/poetic forms and content- to any group of artists and poets looking for the “new” and “modern” in literature, has not yet been completely recognised. We have seen,

nevertheless, in this chapter, how Italian and English critics have noticed undeniable affinities between Penna's poetry and poetic practice and the themes, language choices, features and poetic ideal of modernist and imagist poets. Affinities and similarities have been also pointed out by comparing and analysing poems by Penna and some of the most representative modernist/imagist poets.

Even in his claimed isolation outside history Penna is working in the present; following and absorbing the poetic tradition from Greek and Alexandrian poetry through Petrarca, the Romantics (English, German and Italian), Poe and Shelley, to the French Symbolists (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Valery), Eliot and Pound, and his contemporary hermetic poets (Montale and Saba), Italian modernists (Montale again and Palazzeschi) and Futurists

All peculiar 'signs' of Penna's poetry - the city, the suburbs, the bicycles, the workers in the construction sites, the trains and even the public urinals- go beyond any cheap 'realism' towards a lyric sublimation of the ordinary and the trivial. The peculiar modernist disagreement and conflict between the dream of innocence and pristine bliss opposed to modern-world physical and cultural degradation pervade Penna's verse. Penna leaves us with the accomplished perfect 'images' of the moments of epiphany which eventually will still be able to rescue Penna's 'bland' world, like the 'fragments' Eliot has shored against his ruins.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**AN “IMAGIST SANS *LE SAVOIR*”**

<b>6.1</b>	<b>Imagism</b>	<b>181</b>
	<i>Imagist Classicism</i>	<b>182</b>
	<i>Penna and Sappho</i>	<b>186</b>
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Some Imagist Poets</b>	<b>189</b>
	<i>T.E.Hulme</i>	<b>189</b>
	<i>W.B. Yeats</i>	<b>191</b>
	<i>Richard Aldington</i>	<b>193</b>
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>197</b>



## 6.1 Imagism

The importance of Ezra Pound's contributions to the Arts and to the revitalization of poetry, early in this century, has been widely acknowledged - even though Pound aroused controversy because of his aesthetic views and later because of his political views.

However, for the greater part of his life Pound devoted his energies to advancing the art of poetry and explored poetic traditions from different cultures ranging from ancient Greece and China to Europe and America. Re-establishing a poetic tradition traced from Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Pound included in his oeuvre fragments of many cultures and many languages, creating a powerful image of the modern world in all its complex diversity.

It was from Pound's association with T.E. Hulme and others, around 1910, that the poetic style known as Imagism came about. Hulme tried, in his very short poems, to catch in a concrete image some brief, fleeting aspect of existence. An important theorist of Modernism, he was particularly interested in the work of the French philosopher Henry Bergson.<sup>258</sup> Hulme's essay, *Romanticism and Classicism*, may be read in part as a manifesto for Imagism, especially in its recommending a "dry, hard" poetic style, a modernist poetics based on a preference for classical over romantic values. Around 1912 Pound helped to create the movement he called *Imagisme*. In remarks first recorded in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry* and later collected in his *Literary Essays* as "A Retrospect", Pound explained his new literary direction. Imagism combined the creation of an "image" (what he defined as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" or an "interpretative metaphor") with rigorous requirements for writing.

---

<sup>258</sup> Hulme published a translation of the Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics* in 1913.

### *Imagist Classicism*

Harry Levin writes in his essay on Ezra Pound:

. . . he [Pound] had entitled his anthology *Des Imagistes*. Did the indefinite French article imply that there were un-included others, fellow travellers, *Imagistes avant la lettre* or *Imagistes sans le savoir*? Pound was not categorical at this stage . . . (2).

Although there is little evidence that Penna had contact with the Imagist movement or Pound, it is worth noticing that Pasolini (Penna's best friend, critic and admirer) personally knew and interviewed<sup>259</sup> Pound several times on subjects such as *avant-gardes* and innovation in poetry; while Montale - the other influential personality in Penna's life - wrote about Imagism: "His [Pound's] Imagism was culturally richer than Futurism or contemporaneous European schools."<sup>260</sup> As already suggested in relation to Eliot's Modernism, it is unrealistic to assume that Penna was totally ignorant of what his closest friends and fellow poets were reading and studying and what was going on in the literary scene of his time. Finally if we agree with Pound that there is no need for an artist to sign a *manifesto* - and we can never expect Penna to acknowledge any influences as he rejected all labels, insisting on his individual, original poetry - the imagist quality of Penna's verse has to be searched for in his poems.

I have already quoted Bruni's criticism that Penna's poetry is beyond time and geographical boundaries; Bruni also hinted at the "American flavour" in Penna's language and the "haiku quality" of his verse. These observations match Levin's passage about Pound: "The ultimate criterion, in Pound's judgement, became an immediate one; 'a universal standard which pays no attention to time or country' - a

---

<sup>259</sup> "Pasolini intervista Ezra Pound" TV movie (1967), TG1- RAI (1968) web source, available in DVD or "youtube".

<sup>260</sup> Montale, E., "Uncle Ez", *Italian Quarterly*, LVI, (64) Spring 1973, p.25.



Weltliteratur standard” (11). The theory of Imagism was in some respects more interesting and important than its actual poetic practice in developing a modernist aesthetics. The imagist emphasis is not abstract but down-to-earth, the focus is on the neat *image*, “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” as Pound put it. The Imagists were influenced by French Symbolism, by Japanese poetry and art and by the Greek lyric - the same influences that I have discussed in Penna’s work in chapter four. Here are again some of the commonly recognised features and tenets of Imagism: use of simple language, lyrical but not obscure, innovative and free in its technique; a dry poetic style closer to classical balance rather than romantic uncontrolled sentimentalism; focus on the image and its epiphanic moment; interest in everyday life and objects of the modern world. To demonstrate Penna’s closeness to these imagist tenets, I will compare his poems to some works of Hulme, W.B. Yeats and Richard Aldington, but before analysing the texts, it is useful to again recall Penna’s statement on writing poetry: “Turn everything into poetry . . . The light and the movement, the city . . . a flower vase on the table in a living room . . . The above image: so revealing in “its own” *momentum*!”<sup>261</sup>

That is: to make a poem from everyday life and objects, to elevate the trivial to the sublime level of ‘real’ poetry were Penna’s plans for his poems. The ‘time span’ is limited to the revealing experience of the moment - of the epiphany - caught in an ‘image’. The world appears ‘bland’ to the poet, but the same world could be rescued by the intensity of a poem. It is worth noting - from an imagist point of view - the stress on the ‘image’ revealing the *momentum* or epiphany. In the same folder containing *Diario 1930* we find a note - dated the same day- about what poetry should be, then a criticism

---

<sup>261</sup> “Far poesia di tutto . . . La luce e il movimento . . . Un vaso da fiori sul tavolo di un salotto . . . L’immagine di sopra così rivelativa nel “suo” momento!” Penna, in Deidier, p. 25

lodged against the uncontrolled romantic outburst of personal moods/feelings, a passage<sup>262</sup> that I have already quoted and translated in chapter five. We find in Penna the same objections to romantic excesses in poetry expressed by Eliot, Pound and the Imagists, and the dislike of poems that are just “the moaning or whining about something or other” as Hulme put it. Also for Penna the expression of the personal moods of the ‘man’ (as opposed to the ‘poet’) does not make great poetry.

Analysing Penna’s Hellenism I have compared his poems to the Cavafy’s work. Penna denied this affiliation in the same way he rejected any comparison to fellow poets or influences. Nevertheless the lyrical quality of his verse does have its roots in the Greek lyric tradition and represents a ‘further link’ to Imagism if we read this passage by Ayers:

Pound wrote to Monroe (editor of the Chicago-based journal *Poetry* where imagist poems were published) about H.D.’s and Aldington’s poems bringing modern speech into poetry: “Objective- no slither; direct- no excessive use of adjectives; it is straight talk, straight as the Greek!” H.D. and Aldington shared an interest in classical poetry; they found (especially in Sappho’s poems) the directness they wanted to recreate as the basis of a new modern poetic idiom, providing at the same time an important feature of Modernism: that is neo-classicism. Eventually ‘classicism’ became a key element also in Eliot’s and Pound’s projects. (2)

Eliot’s ideas and theories about tradition and originality in poetry were followed in poetic practice by the Imagists. Classical lyric poetry and the ancient Greek and Alexandrian poets are all detected influences in the work of Pound, Hilda Doolittle and Aldington, and also in Penna’s oeuvre. A similar concept about tradition and “comparative values in letters” is recalled by Levin who quotes Pound: “. . . all poets are related to one another through their craft . . . Each generation must face its task of

---

<sup>262</sup>“ . . . E’ giusto, anche per me, che non sia poesia lo sfogo romantico, l’autobiografismo, sia lirico che analitico, ecc., perchè poesia è sì la personalità del poeta, ma proprio la sua personalità ‘poetica’, cioè quel mondo indefinibile proprio – unico . . . ” Penna, in Deidier, p. 26.

reviewing and revisiting ‘the Tradition’, which may involve rediscoveries or importations” (13,14). The Imagist model was based on the features, rhythms and clarity of common speech, and freedom to choose themes and subjects according to the writer’s taste and need. That is why Pound called for a return (“back to the Greek!”) to what were seen as desirable classical values such as directness of presentation and economy of language. A brief overview of Imagism has been already presented above, but it is worth recalling a few points connected to the revival of Classicism.

The Imagist movement included English and American poets and Pound introduced in the group, among others, his former fiancée Hilda Doolittle (who signed her work H.D.) and her future husband Richard Aldington. Both of them were interested in exploring Greek poetic models, especially Sappho, an interest that Pound shared. The clarity and compression of expression that they desired was achieved in their work by following the Greek example with the use of free verse to create precise visual images, all in accordance with the imagist programme for a return to what they saw as the best poetic practice of the past. As we know, H.D. and Aldington were published in the anthologies *Des Imagistes* and *Some Imagist Poets*.

As the poetry by H.D. reflected her deep interest in Ancient Greek literature with frequent borrowings from Greek mythology, Pound was impressed by the closeness of these poems to the ideas and principles he had been discussing with Aldington, with whom he had shared plans to reform contemporary poetry through free verse and the tightness and conciseness of the *haiku*. Borrowings and even translations from past writers had been a major commitment for Pound from the beginning. According to Levin he re-created or adapted foreign and ancient poetry “not by close translation but by imaginative transposition.” (Levin 16). The musicality of the verse was the other common feature shared by the Imagists and the Greek lyric: Pound’s interest in poems

written to be sung to music, such as those by the troubadours and the Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti, is well known:

I believe in an ultimate and absolute rhythm [...] the perception of the intellect is given in the word, that of the emotions in the cadence. [...] The rhythm of any poetic line corresponds to emotion. It is the poet's business that this correspondence be exact.<sup>263</sup>

Pound believed that the metric organization of *free verse* must be as strict as in formal rhymed verse, only: the rules are not given by the verse pattern adopted, but by the content itself, the movement of the verse will suggest the emotion. Pound gave so much importance to the organization of sound in poetry, as Ayers puts it “the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property” (6).

Penna's poems have always been recognised to possess extreme musicality and rhythm (see chapter two), some of them can actually be sung. The musicality of the verse is also a characteristic of the Japanese haiku. I will discuss Penna's *orientalism* and the haiku quality of his poems in the next chapter.

### ***Penna and Sappho***

Muovonsi come fregi antichi  
sotto il cielo nuovo  
di stelle.<sup>264</sup>  
(*S. Penna*)  
Stirring like an ancient  
frieze under a sky fresh  
with stars.

---

<sup>263</sup> In Kenner, H., pp.23-24.

<sup>264</sup> In *Appunti* (1950).

The work of the Greek poetess was much admired by the Imagists, and although I have already discussed Penna's Hellenism, I have saved a direct comparison between some of Penna's poems and the work of the iconic poetry of Sappho for to this chapter which aims to point out similarities between the Italian poet and the Imagists.

Sappho's poetry centres on passion, infatuations and feelings of love - sometimes reciprocated sometimes not - providing a simple but passionate picture of the lyrical self, both balanced and captivating. Love is the protagonist with a whole series of psychological reflections, while the memory and analysis of past emotions raise new strong physical consequences of the feeling of love. The qualities of Sappho's poetry so admired by the imagist poets are the clarity and simplicity of language and the immediacy of thought, everywhere evident in Sappho's fragments. The images in her verse are sharp and definite; she uses direct words drawn from the authentic language of conversations. Even with a subject such as the turbulence of love and emotions, the language is always under control, and the musicality of the verses is also well known.

So many of Penna's verses comply with the classical features pointed out above, and his language presents such similar qualities that the following poems by Penna without knowledge of the author, could arguably be ascribed indifferently to a contemporary of Sappho or a twentieth-century Imagist. The following comparisons of Sappho's fragments with Penna's lines will show how much Penna retained from the classical lyric tradition: themes, immediacy of the images, clarity of the language, musicality<sup>265</sup>:

The Moon is down  
and the Pleiades. It's midnight,

---

<sup>265</sup> Translations in this paragraph are mine. Only in this section I present the English translation of Penna's poems before the original in Italian, as, using the English for both poets, similarities are highlighted.

The hours flow on,  
I lie, alone.  
(*Sappho*)

\*

Già declina l'estate e il plenilunio  
porta vigore nuovo.  
Ed io son solo.<sup>266</sup>  
(*Penna*)  
The Summer is down  
and the harvest moon  
brings new strength.  
I am alone.

The same full moon of the Autumn Equinox provides the background for the lonesome feelings of both poets, which turns into melancholic despair in the next comparison:

Lord  
by the blessed Goddess I swear  
I no longer want to live on Earth.  
(*Sappho*)

\*

O gentle sky  
before dawn, hear me.  
perhaps I was not born  
to live on Earth.  
  
Oh cielo delicato  
prima dell'alba ascoltami.  
Forse io non sono nato  
per vivere quaggiù.<sup>267</sup>  
(*Penna*)

---

<sup>266</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

<sup>267</sup> In *Stranezze* (1976).

## 6.2 Some Imagist Poets

### *T.E.Hulme*

The origins of Imagism are usually found in two poems, “Autumn” and “City Sunset” by Hulme. Pound added five of Hulme’s poems to his book *Ripostes* in a section titled “The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme”, frequently referred to as the formal initiation of the imagist movement into twentieth century poetry. “Autumn” is perhaps one of the most quoted imagist poems, together with Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”: both poems witness the poets’ taste for common city life and everyday happenings. Here I consider “Autumn” by Hulme alongside one of the many poems by Penna involving nature, seasons and landscape:

“Autumn”

A touch of cold in the Autumn night —  
I walked abroad,  
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge  
Like a red-faced farmer.  
I did not stop to speak, but nodded;  
And round about were the wistful stars  
With white faces like town children.<sup>268</sup>  
(Hulme)

\*

La luna di settembre  
sulla buia valle  
addormenta ai contadini il canto.  
Una cadenza insiste: quasi lento, respiro di animale,  
nel silenzio, salpa la valle se la luna sale.  
...  
Altro respira qui, dolce animale  
anch’egli silenzioso....<sup>269</sup>

---

<sup>268</sup> Hulme, T.E., *Poems*, in *Ripostes*, by Ezra Pound, Swift, 1912.

<sup>269</sup> In *Poesie*, (7<sup>th</sup> edition, 2000), work cited, p.87, vv.1-7.

The September moon  
over the dark vale  
puts the farmers' singing to sleep.  
A cadence insists: a slow animal breathing,  
in the silence, sails the vale if the moon arises.  
...  
Another breathes here, mild animal  
quiet as well.

The similarities between the poems are striking and start from the setting: a valley, the countryside; the season and the time of the day are the same and so are the characters: the moon, the farmers. Also similar is the connection between the natural elements (moon, animals) and the human characters, both symbols of innocence. Language and style in both poems comply with the imagist tenets as Pound defined them: free verse, choice of simple words, the direct treatment of the 'thing' with no use of excessive words which do not contribute to the presentation of the image/moment. Finally in this other poem – which is specifically entitled “Autunno” “Autumn”, we find directness, use of a simple language that is highly lyrical but never obscure and always easily understandable by any reader, lack of rhetoric and the honest presentation of what Pound defines as: “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”:

“Autunno”

Il vento ti ha lasciato un'eco chiara  
nei sensi delle cose c'hai veduto  
– confuse- il giorno. All'apparir del sonno  
difenderti non sai: un crisantemo  
un lago tremulo e una esigua fila  
d'alberi gialloverdi sotto il sole.<sup>270</sup>

The wind left you with a clear echo  
into the meaning of the things you have seen  
- confused- in the morning. As sleep appears

---

<sup>270</sup> In *Poesie*, (1939).



you have no defence: a chrysanthemum  
a tremulous lake and a slender row  
of yellow-green trees under the sun.

The last lines of Penna's poem show an extremely delicate treatment of images and feelings; the neat, precise use of adjectives and the employment of the exact word: all tenets and recommendations set down in the "Preface" to the anthology *Some Imagist Poets* (1916) and bearing a manifest resemblance to the features we expect in an imagist poem.

**W.B. Yeats<sup>271</sup>**

The following poem was written by Penna at the age of 24, after his first year in Rome during which he was amazed by the beauty and magnificence of the "Eternal City" and fell in love with it, a love that would endure to the end of Penna's life. Despite his young age he was quite mature as a poet and had already sent his poems to major Italian poet Umberto Saba, receiving a very positive feedback:

"Favola"  
In un salone in cui gridano gli ori  
sorpresi dalla luce dell'Aprile  
Il re ascolta cento e cento principi.  
...  
Cadono voci e luci al vespro  
... Il re si perde  
dietro un lontano battere di ali.<sup>272</sup>

"Fable"  
In the hall the fine gold screams

---

<sup>271</sup> W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), though not strictly an Imagist, was a symbolist poet interested in far eastern religion and art. It is worth noticing that Pound acted as a kind of secretary to Yeats in 1912-13.

<sup>272</sup> In *Poesie* (1939).

- surprised by the April light -  
a King listens to hundreds and hundreds of Princes.

...  
Voices and lights fade away at twilight  
... The King is lost  
after a flap of wings, far away.

The imagery and the style of this poem evoke a setting and an atmosphere which reminded me of one of the most quoted of Yeats' poems: *Sailing to Byzantium*, particularly Part IV:

...  
Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.<sup>273</sup>

Byzantium is for Yeats more than a city: it is a place of the mind, a product of Art and Eternity – like Rome was for Penna. The drowsy Emperor in *Byzantium*, fascinated by the artificial singing of the golden bird, becomes in Penna's lines the "King lost after a flap of wings". The lord and ladies in the first poem are the hundreds and hundreds of Princes in the latter. The hammered gold shining in *Byzantium* "screams" under the April light in the King's hall of the Italian poem. Both poets in their work explore the harsh reality of death and aging opposed to the transcendence of artistic expression, sharing common themes such as the craving for immortality, as well as the imperishable beauty of art over the transient and ephemeral human beauty and sensuality.

---

<sup>273</sup> In the volume *The Tower*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1928.

### ***Richard Aldington***

Aldington was an English writer and poet. Best known for his World War I poetry, his work was also associated with the Imagist group and was included in the anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914) - Ezra Pound had in fact coined the term “*imagistes*” for H.D. and Aldington, in 1912<sup>274</sup>. Aldington shared Hulme’s ideas about experimentation as a way forward for avant-garde literature in English; he knew Wyndham Lewis and all the modernists of his time - Eliot, Pound, Ford Madox Ford, Flint - and married H.D. in 1911. Aldington was interested in French literature (like Penna), knew Italian Futurism<sup>275</sup>, and travelled to Italy in order to visit William Butler Yeats who was staying with Pound in Rapallo. But any attempt to compare two authors such as the British Modernist/Imagist Aldington and the Italian lyric poet Penna might sound preposterous and unadvisable because of the many obvious differences in culture, language, background and personality.

Nevertheless if we limit our analysis to some common themes in their poetry (the approach to childhood and nature for instance), it is still possible to highlight the imagist features they both share. The aim is, as always in this study, to overcome differences and emphasize affinities from a literary/poetic point of view.

Childhood was certainly a dreadful time for Aldington if it compelled him to write these lines:

The bitterness, the misery, the wretchedness of childhood  
Put me out of love with God.  
I can't believe in God's goodness;  
I can believe  
In many avenging gods.

---

<sup>274</sup>In Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984), p. 69.

<sup>275</sup> See Aldington's critical disapproval of the poetry of Filippo Marinetti in Robert H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt* (1967), p. 71.

Most of all I believe  
In gods of bitter dullness,  
Cruel local gods  
Who seared my childhood.  
(in *Childhood*, I)

But his painful experience did not prevent the poet from idealizing that age of life as the time and place where everything happens, beauty is revealed and knowledge as well:

. . .  
Because the beauty a child has,  
And the beautiful things it learns before its birth,  
. . .  
I think I never saw the sun until I was nine—  
And then it was too late;  
Everything's too late after the first seven years.  
(*Childhood* II)

In Penna's poetic world childhood is also idealized as the age of innocence but also of wisdom, when the only possible truth is revealed. But if Penna's boys are always luminous and angelic, Penna, as their pursuer sometimes uses images of unsavoury animals such as *mosca* (fly), *ramarro* (green lizard), or *lucertola* (lizard) to symbolize himself. Thus the poet is the fly caught in honey, or the helpless lizard crushed between idle boyish hands for fun as in these lines:

. . . quando il sole  
sorprende e lascia immobile nel tempo  
il batticuore alla tenera lucertola  
perduta tra due mani in un dolce far niente?  
Anche a me batte il cuore, e pur non sono  
io del fanciullo vittima innocente.<sup>276</sup>  
  
. . . when the sun  
surprises and suspends in time  
the heartbeat of a tender lizard  
lost between two hands idly playing?  
My heart too starts beating, even though I'm not  
that boy's innocent victim.

---

<sup>276</sup> In *Poesie*, Garzanti re-print 2010, p.157.

Or in the two-line poem:

E poi come una mosca  
impigliata nel miele ... .<sup>277</sup>

And then like a fly  
stuck in honey ... .

We find the same feelings of helplessness and anguish captured in a similar direct and simple “image” in the following verse by Aldington:

I've seen people put  
a chrysalis in a match-box,  
“To see,” they told me, “what sort of moth would come.”  
...  
That's how I was.  
Somebody found my chrysalis  
and shut it in a match-box.  
My shrivelled wings were beaten,  
shed their colours in dusty scales  
...  
I was like a moth.  
(*Childhood*, II)

Despite the presumably different natural environment which inspired the two poets, it seems that both loved to talk to the trees, specifically poplars, in a very similar way. Here is Aldington:

“The poplar”  
  
Why do you always stand there shivering  
between the white stream and the road?  
...  
Stir from your roots, walk, poplar!  
You are more beautiful than they are.  
  
I know that the white wind loves you,  
is always kissing you and turning up  
the white lining of your green petticoat.  
The sky darts through you like blue rain,

---

<sup>277</sup>*Ibidem*, p.307.

and the grey rain drips on your flanks  
and loves you.  
And I have seen the moon  
slip his silver penny into your pocket  
as you straightened your hair;  
and the white mist curling and hesitating  
like a bashful lover about your knees.

. . .

There are beautiful beeches down beyond the hill.  
Will you always stand there shivering?

And here are Penna's poplars:

Mi avevano lasciato solo  
nella campagna, sotto  
la pioggia fina, solo.  
Mi guardavano muti  
meravigliati  
i nudi pioppi: soffrivano  
della mia pena: pena  
di non saper chiaramente ...<sup>278</sup>

They'd left me alone  
in the country, alone  
in the misty rain.  
The naked poplars, mute  
and amazed,  
watched me, suffered  
my pain, this pain.  
of not knowing clearly ...

And the solitary pines of another poem:

I pini solitari lungo il mare  
desolato non sanno del mio amore.  
Li sveglia il vento , la pioggia  
dolce li bacia, il tuono  
lontano li addormenta.  
Ma i pini solitari non sapranno  
mai del mio amore, mai della mia gioia.<sup>279</sup>

---

<sup>278</sup>In *Poesie* (1939).

The solitary pines along the empty sea  
know nothing of my love. The wind  
wakes them, the soft rain kisses them,  
the distant thunder lulls them to sleep.  
But the solitary pines will never know  
about my love, never know my joy.

### 6.3 Conclusion

Both poets in these verses comply with Pound's requirements for writing "Imagist poetry". They treat the "thing" directly without unnecessary words, they describe phenomena, whether emotions, sensations, or concrete entities, with no vague abstractions and with simple words, avoiding obscurity. Finally, in the poems presented above, there is a remarkable resemblance of *images*. In Penna the trees are caressed by the wind, kissed and licked by a soft rain; in a similar way Aldington's poplars are loved and kissed by the white wind while the rain loves them, dripping on their flanks. While Penna's poplars understand and share the poet's sorrow, the pines are 'solitary', they do not want to mix with other species just like the poplars in Aldington poem which don't want to "walk" and meet the beautiful beeches.

We might speculate that the poems may reflect some aspects of the poets' lives as both had strong, controversial personalities and found it difficult to maintain friendship and literary relationships; if that is the case the subjectivity of their feelings is completely resolved in *modernist* objectivity.

---

<sup>279</sup> In *Poesie*, Garzanti re-print 2010, p.78.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

### EAST OF PENNA: THE HAIKU STYLE

	<i>Introduction</i>	201
Section 1:	7.1 Haiku: canon and features, the form of haiku	203
	<i>Japanese haiku</i>	205
	<i>Kigo and Kireji</i>	206
	<i>Zen, wabisabi and the art of haiku</i>	209
	7.2 Western poetry's fascination with haiku	210
	7.3 Ezra Pound and haiku	213
	<i>The one-image poem</i>	215
Section 2:	7.4 Orientalism in the Italian Novecento	217
	<i>Gabriele D'Annunzio</i>	218
	<i>Giuseppe Ungaretti</i>	219
	<i>Umberto Saba</i>	223
	7.5 Penna's orientalism	225
	<i>Beyond the "anxiety of influence"</i>	227
	<i>Penna's metaphysics and "religion"</i>	232
	<i>Loneliness and Poverty</i>	235

	<i>Love and Nature</i>	239
<b>7.6</b>	<b>The poetic form: haiku features in Penna: language and the ‘concret object’</b>	<b>248</b>
	<i>Wordless poetry, seasonal words and pictorial style</i>	252
	<i>Conclusion</i>	255

**Introduction:** Lost in translation.

The winds of autumn  
Blow: yet still green  
The chestnut husks.  
(*Matsuo Basho*)<sup>280</sup>

\*

Già mi parla l'autunno. Al davanzale  
buio, tacendo, ascolto i miei pensieri  
piegarsi sotto il vento occidentale ...  
(*Sandro Penna*)<sup>281</sup>  
Autumn speaks to me already. At the dark  
windowsill, quiet, I listen to my thoughts  
bending under the west wind...

The extreme brevity of his verses, and the almost mystical intensity they sometimes attain, seem not only very un-English but hardly European at all, and some Italian readers have reached out and back for their descriptive analogies to the Greek Anthology, Omar Khayyam, haiku and the Sufi mystical poets.  
(*Peter Robb*).<sup>282</sup>

In this chapter I will be dealing with poetry in different languages, most of it being actually a translation from the original, thus the problem of translating poetry arises in this chapter more than in the others. Italian has a saying: “*traduttore-traditore*” (translator-betrayer). The phrase reveals at once the problem of all translators - words don't have literal equivalents in different languages and there are many that say poetry

---

<sup>280</sup> NOTE: All quotations of Japanese poems, unless otherwise advised, are from: *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, transl. by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite, Penguin Classics, London 2009.

<sup>281</sup> NOTE: Only in this final chapter 7 all quotations of Penna's poems are from: Penna, S., *Poesie*, Garzanti, Milan 2000, re-print 2010 unless otherwise advised. All translations from Italian (poetry and criticism) are mine unless otherwise advised.

<sup>282</sup> Work cited, n.p.

defies translation, but there are luckily also scholars who defend the translation of poetry:

Translation is the art of revelation. It makes the unknown known. The translator artist has the fever and craft to recognize, re-create, and reveal the work of the other artist . . . Yet translation of poetry is conceivable. A translation dwells in imperfection, using equivalents and shunning mechanical replicas . . . It gives us the other. Or under another name it gives us itself. . . A translation is never an exact copy. It is different.<sup>283</sup>

In the previous chapters, following the principal argument of this thesis that Penna's poetry is a 'flower' with many stems still lacking study and investigation (according to Didier, De Santi, Lagazzi, Garboli and others), I have considered some of the literary and cultural influences and affinities which most critics have acknowledged in Penna, such as Hellenism, European Romanticism and French Symbolism. In this chapter, I will consider Penna's *orientalism* and specifically the affinity of his poetry – in terms of language choices, themes and poetic forms – with the Japanese haiku. Although this affinity has been hinted at by various scholars, only Italian critics Giulio Di Fonzo and Giorgio Sica have gone beyond a simple mention. Di Fonzo often compares Penna's ideas about Time, Religion - specifically pantheism - the *impermanence* of Life and the human condition, to the principles of main oriental philosophies; while Sica - in a wider thesis focusing on haiku poetry - includes Penna, together with Saba and Ungaretti, among the Italian poets most affected by the Japanese poetic forms; both critics, though, do not develop this affinity through a consistent text analysis.

In section one, I will begin with a brief overview of some general features of the Japanese verse form commonly called haiku, its diffusion and appreciation in Western

---

<sup>283</sup> Bernstone, W., *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*, Yale University Press, pp. 265-271.

culture (with specific references to Ezra Pound and the Imagist movement), selecting the characteristics of this verse form which are most evident in Penna's oeuvre, as well as themes shared by the Italian poet. In section two, I will focus on the reception and influence of the haiku style among twentieth century Italian poets, analysing Penna's *orientalism* and the likeness of his poetry to haiku.

## Section 1:

### 7.1 Haiku: its canon and features, the form of haiku.

Spring:  
A hill without a name  
Veiled in morning mist.  
(*Matsuo Basho*)

Ride su me la primavera. Tornano  
le rondini, si sa. volano via  
via le parole degli amici stolti.  
(*Sandro Penna*)<sup>284</sup>  
Springtime is mocking me. The swallows  
return of course, and the dense friends' words  
fly far, far away.<sup>285</sup>

Gudrun M. Grabher defined haiku as: "This shortest, seemingly simplest, and most precise form in world literature"<sup>286</sup>(136).

---

<sup>284</sup> "Giovanili ritrovate" in *Poesie*, Garzanti re-print 2010, p.100.

<sup>285</sup> Translation by Robinson, B., work cited, p.27.

<sup>286</sup> Grabher, Gudrun M., "In Search of words for "moon-viewing": the Japanese haiku and the scepticism towards language", in Perloff, M., et al. *Modernism Revisited. Transgressing Boundaries and Strategies of Renewal in American Poetry*. Edited by Viorica Patea and Paul Scott Derrick. Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam

Haiku is a Japanese verse form which finds its antecedents in old Chinese poetry.<sup>287</sup> Haiku started out as a popular writing activity called “tanka” during the 9th to 12th centuries in Japan. Tanka was a progressive poem, where one person would write the first three lines with a 5-7-5 structure, and the next person would add to it a section with a 7-7 structure. The chain would continue in this fashion. The first verse was called a “hokku” and set the mood for the rest of the verses. In the 19th century, the “hokku” took on a life of its own and began to be written and read as an individual poem. The word “haiku” is derived from “hokku”, and, developed in Japan through the patronage of Matsuo Basho, became a delicate and noble verse form. A haiku poem consists of three lines, with the first and last line having 5 *moras*, and the middle line having 7. A *mora* is a sound unit, much like a syllable, but is not identical to it. Since the *moras* do not translate well into English, it has been adapted and syllables are used as *moras*. The sequence of 5-7-5 syllables can be seen therefore as a mixture of old Chinese poetry and Japanese influences, being some of the characteristics of haiku reflected in the early poets of China and its poetic forms being found in the early verse of Japanese Court poetry. Although the convention of the three lines best displays and gives a distinct flavour to this poetic style, a haiku poem is not always defined by a three line stanza form: many translations of haiku before Reginald Horace Blyth<sup>288</sup> were single lines, matching the Japanese verse form, that, while consisting of three parts, is written on one

---

- New York, NY 2007.

<sup>287</sup> As exemplified in the work of Chinese poets Li Po and Tu Fu. Li Po is well translated into English, the most famous example being Ezra Pound’s *Cathay*.

<sup>288</sup> Blyth, R.H., *Haiku*, Hokuseido Press, Tokyo 1952. The great translator and teacher of haiku Reginald Horace Blyth, between 1949 and 1952 produced *Haiku*, perhaps his most famous work. It is divided into four volumes: *Eastern Culture*, *Spring*, *Summer/Autumn*, *Autumn/Winter*. It details a huge variety of poems and has had an enormous influence in haiku translation. Most of the information for this chapter comes from Blyth’s work.

single line of script. European languages such as English and Italian do not lend themselves to the 5-7-5 syllabic count as well as Japanese words do. I need to point it out here because we will see how many of Penna's verses consist of just one line and nevertheless fully comply, in my opinion, with the 'spirit' of haiku.

### *Japanese haiku*

In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, Anthony Thwaite wrote:

Poetry is, in a real sense, a living part of the culture of Japan today. Most Japanese, without much effort, can – and many do – compose poems . . . and Nature, with its season, the Moon, birds and trees, is the most important inspiration. Some characteristics and themes of Japanese poetry remain the same over the ages: gentle melancholy, the sorrows more than the joys of love, acceptance of the transience of life and loneliness.<sup>289</sup>

The three masters of "hokku" from the 17th century were Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson and Kobayashi Issa. Their work is still the model of haiku writing today. They were poets who wandered the countryside, experiencing life and observing nature, and spent years perfecting their craft. To the modern haiku scholar these artists represent different facets of haiku writing but also different ways of viewing the world. This is, of course a simplistic view, but one that is very widely held, even by the great R.H. Blyth, who generalising somewhat about the great poets of Japanese literature, defined in his work Basho as the religious man, Buson as the artist and Issa as the humanist. In addition to these three poets, Masaoka Shiki is seen as the great moderniser of haiku. He is the objective poet of the eye and the physical impression. Before Basho, scholars and wordsmiths saw the haiku as a trivial game played at court. It was a playful form of

---

<sup>289</sup> Various Authors, work cited, xxxvii

poetry, full of clever puns and sly observations. Basho elevated it into the realm of high poetry.

Basho's most famous poem is probably *Old Pond*, the English translations of this poem are countless, the following two are among the most reliable:

Into the ancient pond  
A frog jumps  
Water's sound!  
(Translated by D.T. Suzuki)

The old pond:  
A frog jumps in —  
The sound of the water.  
(Translated by R.H. Blyth)

Translated into many other languages, this poem represents not only the best of haiku but also the flexibility and the complexity of this poetic form. All the many elements, which make up the poem, are joined together with lightness of touch: the frog, the pond (and its ancient quality), the sound of the frog jumping in, the sudden action that breaks the stillness of the moment in time. Some have seen this poem as a metaphor for Buddhist enlightenment, some have seen it as a playful experimentation of time and action in haiku and some have seen it as a comment on the nature of reality - a moment of simple, everyday experience made intense and unique by the poet. I will quote more poems by Buson and Issa in section two where I focus on Penna's oeuvre, showing affinities and analogies through text comparison.

### ***Kigo and Kireji.***

As we have seen, common definitions of haiku suggest that it must concern itself with nature, it should contain a "*kigo*" or "seasonal word", and that it must come out of Zen meditation. The seasonal word was very important to haiku historically, but



is now somewhat ignored. Japanese haiku poets would select from a lexicon of seasonal words, placing their work immediately in a time of year and suggesting all the emotions and inherent connotations accompanying the season:

Cold spring day:  
Above the fields  
Rootless clouds.  
(K. Hekigoto)

Autumn wind  
Everything I see  
Is *haiku*.  
(Takahama Kyoshi)

Many haiku, however, though not containing a specific reference to the season may still suggest it, as in this poem by Issa:

By lake Haruna:  
The smell of chrysanthemums  
Is the smell of impossible longing.

The image of the chrysanthemums centres the poem in Autumn, thus creates tension between what has gone, Summer, and what the poet knows will come, the long dark, cold days of winter. We will see how Penna uses the image of the chrysanthemum in a similar way, in spite of the fact that the flower is not a popular one in Italian poetry. Like most things in Japanese literature and Art, sometimes the artists' aim is to suggest and leave the issue open, the ultimate point being not to reduce but to allow the ambiguity. The other intrinsic technical feature of a haiku that is often mentioned is the "*keriji*". The *keriji* is a "cutting word", or a word that separates the two facets of a haiku and is often translated as a dash "-". We can see in this poem by Buson how there is a break between the two sections:

White chrysanthemums –  
For a while  
The scissors hesitate.

The two distinct parts of the poem are separated by the dash, creating juxtaposition and contrast, but also connecting in some way, so we can see them as two parts of a whole.

The *keriji* can vary from a dash, to a comma, to a period, to an exclamation mark.

Italian critic Giorgio Sica, who in his work also analyses haiku poems written in Italian, defines the *kireji* as:

[I]literally ‘word that cuts’, although they are not actual words, we could define the *kireji* as the use of words without a real meaning, a kind of connective used by the poet to create a suspension, a pause or a final exclamation. Words such as *kana*, *kamo*, *ya* introduce a break not only in metre, but also in the dynamics of the images. Let’s read to exemplify two famous haiku by Bashō: *fuyugare ya* / Winter desolate - *yo hito wa-iro ni* / in the world of one color *kaze no oto* / sound of the wind.<sup>290</sup>

The critic also refers to a characteristic of haiku mentioned before: the aim of haiku poets to use the minimum amount of words to convey the image and the experience and to leave the work ‘open’. A certain level of ‘ambiguity’, or choice of meanings, is a peculiarity of Japanese poetry and Haiku in particular, a choice that meets the need to force the language to express extremely subtle perceptions with the fewest possible words/signs. Later Sica concludes: “A true *image* needs no comment, a golden rule of which the entire canon of Western poetry of the twentieth century will treasure, thanks to, in the first place, the mediation of Pound and the Imagists.”<sup>291</sup>

---

<sup>290</sup> “‘*Kireji*’, letteralmente ‘parola che taglia’, anche se non di vere e proprie parole si tratta. Potremmo definire il *kireji* come l’uso di parole prive di un vero e proprio significato, una sorta di connettivi utilizzati dal poeta per creare una sospensione, una pausa o un’esclamazione finale. Parole come *kana*, *kamo*, *ya* introducono una pausa non solo a livello metrico, ma anche a livello di dinamica delle immagini. Leggiamo per esemplificare due celebri *haiku* di Bashō: *fuyugare ya* / Inverno desolato - *yo wa hito-iro ni* / nel mondo d’un solo colore *kaze no oto* / il suono del vento.” Sica, G., work cited, p. 16.

<sup>291</sup> “Una vera immagine non ha bisogno di commento, una regola aurea di cui l’intera poesia occidentale del XX secolo farà tesoro, grazie, in primo luogo, alla mediazione di Pound e degli Imagisti” *Ibidem*, p18.

### *Zen, wabisabi and the art of haiku*

Zen and other Japanese arts have inspired and altered haiku. As D.T. Suzuki says in his essay<sup>292</sup>, it is sometimes difficult to know where Zen ends and haiku begins because they are so much intertwined. Intrinsic to Zen is the notion of (as Suzuki calls it) “eternal loneliness”, or “*sabi*”. *Sabi*, which can mean many different things, is basically the contented loneliness of the Zen monk, meditating in the mountains; it is the natural order of existence; the idea that we are all born alone and must face life accordingly. There is no sadness in this, merely acceptance. The other key word is “*wabi*”. I need to quote Suzuki words here as I will refer to this passage as a quite important one when it comes to Penna’s affinity with oriental philosophies and views about life and the human condition.

*Wabi* really means “poverty” or, negatively, “not to be in the fashionable society of the time”. To be poor, that is, not to be dependent on things worldly – wealth, power and reputation – and yet to feel inwardly the presence of something of the highest value, above time and social position: this is what essentially constitutes *wabi*. Stated in terms of practical everyday life, *wabi* is to be satisfied with a little hut, a room of two or three tatami (mats), like the cabin of Thoreau, and with a dish of vegetables picked in the neighbouring fields, and perhaps to be listening to the pattering of a gentle spring rainfall. (43)

Taken together, these two concepts form what is known as *Wabisabi* and provide the cornerstone of Japanese aesthetics. The concept/principle of Wabisabi is derived from the Buddhist view of *impermanence*: everything is subject to the law of constant transformation, and it is therefore necessary that art creates a beauty that can harmonize with this insight about the true nature of phenomena.

Although all these features can certainly apply to most classic haiku, nowadays haiku has been adopted by so many countries as a poetic style and there are so many

---

<sup>292</sup> Suzuki, D. T., p.23.

forms of this Japanese poetry that is impossible to give definitions that are too strict or exclusive. At their best, haiku poems - or poems inspired by this poetics, regardless of the language - are light, ethereal poetry which can also be solid, full of meaning, open to close examination and contain a world of wisdom. This is a poetry which should give the reader a real sense of a moment straight from the writer's life, where action is always occurring and images are in a sort of eternal present.

## 7.2 Western poetry's fascination with haiku

Although we usually associate the interest of the Western world for Far Eastern literature and art primarily with Pound and the Imagists, Gudrun M. Grabher reminds us that: "The haiku had first entered Europe through France, where the first haiku translations into French by Paul Louis Couchoud appeared in 1906 in the magazine *Les Lettres*, accompanied by the author's article "Les Épigrammes lyriques du Japon" (147). As for the Anglo-Saxon scene:

The introduction of the haiku conveniently met the Americans' desire for a reform of poetry, in particular against the Genteel tradition, and for an internationalization of literature. . . . So when the Imagist movement began to take shape, in its three stages, the first (1909- 1911) marked by T. E. Hulme, the second (1912-1914) by Pound, and the third (1915- 1917) by Amy Lowell, this was to become the cornerstone of Modernist poetry in general. As T.S. Eliot would observe in retrospect: 'The *point de repère* usually and conveniently taken, as the starting-point of modern poetry, is the group denominated 'imagists' in London about 1910'.  
(147)

On the Italian side, in the introduction to his work on the complex phenomenon of the reception of Japanese poetry in Western culture which took place in the early decades of the twentieth century, Giorgio Sica writes:

. . . In 1853, more than two centuries after the formal proclamation of interdiction to foreigners, the Japanese oligarchy was forced to bend to the arrogance of the American and the charm of their “black ships”. The Japanese people opened themselves, in a quick and agonizing process to Modernization . . . and the western world discovered the last of the great unknown cultural foreign traditions . . . Japan would penetrate quickly into the European consciousness, primarily, if not exclusively, through art.<sup>293</sup>

Sica goes on to investigate this aesthetic movement composed by a rather homogeneous group of western painters, engravers, decorative artists and art critics, united by the desire to renew traditional aesthetics. They were artists and writers who had a profound influence on the dynamics of art and Western thought itself, an influence called - by the French critic Philippe Burty - *Japonism*.<sup>294</sup>

This interest in oriental art came with the interest in Chinese and Japanese literature, specifically the main poetic forms of “haiku” and “tanka”, which deeply influenced European and American poets who fostered the innovation of the Western poetic canon of the time. The interest in Japanese art coincided in fact with the well-known crisis of aesthetic values and the rethinking of the means of artistic expression which marked the beginning of the twentieth century in Western culture. We can therefore say that the writers and poets interested in and influenced by these poetic forms of the Far East were the ones looking for renewal and open to experimentation in poetry.

The name of the great popularizer of Japanese art in the Western world, Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, must be mentioned here. Fenollosa’s unpublished notes on Chinese

---

<sup>293</sup> “ . . . nel 1853, oltre due secoli dopo la proclamazione formale dell’interdizione agli stranieri, l’oligarchia nipponica fu costretta a piegarsi alla prepotenza degli americani e al fascino delle loro “navi nere”. Il popolo giapponese si aprì, così, a un rapido e lacerante processo di Ammodernamento . . . e il mondo occidentale si trovò a scoprire l’ultima delle grandi tradizioni culturali che gli erano estranee . . . Il Giappone penetrerà rapidamente nelle coscienze europee, soprattutto, se non esclusivamente, attraverso l’arte.” p.6.

<sup>294</sup> Ibidem, p.7.

poetry and Japanese Noh drama were edited and published in 1918 by Ezra Pound with the title *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*<sup>295</sup> and Pound, with W.B. Yeats, used them to solidify the growing interest in Far Eastern literature among modernist writers who would have a decisive impact on the renewal of English poetry. Although haiku was adopted, adapted and translated in the West through modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell; it was R.H. Blyth, the great translator and teacher of haiku, who first defined the ideals of the Western haiku, and this has come to represent, for most people, what a haiku is. In *Haiku*<sup>296</sup> - produced between 1949 and 1952 and divided into four books: *Eastern Culture*, *Spring*, *Summer/Autumn*, *Autumn/Winter* - Blyth detailed a huge variety of poems and had an enormous influence on haiku translation in the English language. The following passage is a description of haiku by Blyth:

A haiku is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things. Each thing is preaching the law [Dharma] incessantly, but this law is not something different from the thing itself. Haiku is the revealing of this preaching by presenting us with the thing devoid of all our mental twisting and emotional discoloration; or rather, it shows the thing as it exists at one and the same time outside and inside the mind, perfectly subjective, ourselves undivided from the object, the object in its original unity with ourselves . . . It is a way of returning to nature, to our moon nature, our cherry-blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, to our Buddha nature. It is a way in which the cold winter rain, the swallows of evening, even the very day in its hotness and the length of the night become truly alive, share in our humanity, speak their own silent and expressive language.<sup>297</sup>

It was Blyth who first popularised the three-line stanza and who first gave the notion of haiku as “a single thought”, a clear picture of a moment frozen in time, together with the

---

<sup>295</sup> Fenollosa, E., *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: an Ars Poetica. With a foreword and notes by Ezra Pound*, London: Stanley Nott 1936.

<sup>296</sup> Work cited.

<sup>297</sup> R.H. Blyth, work cited, vol I, p. 270.

notions of the world-weariness, impermanence and the appreciation of the beauty of small events. Through Blyth Western haiku has evolved into something other than its Japanese counterpart, for it is in many ways more ‘concrete’; concentrating on meaning and image, modern Western haiku attempts to transfer, in as direct a manner as possible, the one to the other. The affinity between Haiku and Modernism, for instance, is based on the similarity of their basic principles: the modernist/imagist poet, just like the haiku poet, needs to be in touch with the world, must be able to see and understand moments of ordinary life, common, simple, everyday things and events as belonging to a whole and finally catch these “moments of being” with simple, precise, and concise words to share with others. As Grabher points out quoting Eliot’s words<sup>298</sup>:

. . . This is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s concept of the ‘objective correlative’: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked”. (140-141)

### 7.3 Ezra Pound and “hokku”<sup>299</sup>

In 1913, in the April issue of *Poetry* magazine Ezra Pound printed his poem “In a Station of the Metro”, which has been called “the first published hokku in English”<sup>300</sup>. As we have seen in the previous chapter Pound was perhaps more than any other man responsible for the emergence of an authentically modernist literature in England during

---

<sup>298</sup>T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet”, in *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1969, p.145.

<sup>299</sup> Hokku (which means starting verse) is the opening stanza of a Japanese poem written by more than one author. In the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the hokku began to appear as an independent poem, and finally in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was renamed to haiku by Japanese poet Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902).

<sup>300</sup>Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook*, p.51.

his time. In this chapter, which focuses on haiku poetry, I will consider specifically Pound's interest in Far Eastern literature. Pound was one of the earliest Western personalities to be influenced by Japanese and Chinese literature. After reading the work of the translator Ernest Fenollosa<sup>301</sup>, Pound used those translations as a basis for his work *Cathay*. Many critics have, in fact, suggested that it was Pound's *Cathay* that provided the basis for the study of Chinese and Japanese literature in the West. While this may well be an over-statement, it is certainly true that Pound's interest in the form introduced many of the poets we now take for granted, such as Li Po and Matsuo Basho, to a Western audience.

Pound, who had already been translated into both French and Italian in the first half of the twenties, studying the classic haiku poets, realized the revolutionary possibilities inherent in the structure of haiku, removing some sentimentality which did not comply with his modernist view of dryness and irony. In this regard his meeting with others who were fighting the same battle such as T. E. Hulme, was of fundamental importance. Meeting Hulme represented a crucial moment in Pound's life. From Hulme's writings - which ranged from poetry to literary criticism, to philosophy - and, above all, from frequent conversations with him - Pound had drawn that idea and that word, *Image*, which would change the history of poetry in English. Another member of the *Poets' Club*, F.S. Flint, also played an important role initiating Pound into the secrets of Japanese poetry. The common goal was to renew English verse in the manner of the French Symbolist, the common key-word was *vers libre*, and the haiku poetic form was one of the tools used to rejuvenate English poetry.

### ***The one-Image Poem***

---

<sup>301</sup> Work cited.



The “one image poem” is a form of superposition, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the *impasse* in which I had been left by my metro emotion.<sup>302</sup>

The following poem “In a Station of the Metro” appeared in Pound’s important collection of the Great War period, *Lustra* (1916):

“In a Station of the Metro”  
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

“In a Station of the Metro” is Pound's most famous imagist poem but also possibly the most quoted example of Western haiku. The best description of the poem was provided by Pound himself in the *Fortnightly Review* of the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1914<sup>303</sup>:

Three years ago in Paris I go out of a “metro” train at *La Concorde*, and saw suddenly a beautiful face and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely at that sudden emotion.

It took Pound more than one year to solve this “dilemma”:

I wrote a thirty-line poem and destroyed it because it was what we call “work of second intensity”. Six months later, I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence: ‘*The apparition of these faces in a crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.*’ . . . In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.

Pound's Imagist poems are concentrated and exquisite and the subject-matter reflects his developing interest in Chinese poetry and civilization — later to be a major theme in the

---

<sup>302</sup>Pound, E., “Vorticism”, in *The Fortnightly Review*, CII (1/9/1914).

<sup>303</sup> Pound, E., “Vorticism”, in *The Fortnightly Review*, CII (1/9/1914); reprinted in Pound, E., *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir Including the Published Writings of the Sculptor and a Selection from His Letters*, pp. 81-94.

*Cantos*. The form of two of these poems, *Fan-piece* and *Alba*, is the Japanese three-line model of the haiku. In March 1913, Pound wrote about the brevity of Japanese poetry, advising not to use “superfluous words, no adjective which does not mean something” and later:

The Japanese have had the sense of exploration. They have understood the beauty of this sort of knowing. A Chinaman said a long time ago that if a man can't say what he has to say in twelve lines he had better keep quiet. The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the hokku. . . . Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.<sup>304</sup>

What Pound takes from the Japanese is brevity, the ‘wordlessness’ quality of haiku, the juxtaposition of lightness and wisdom: Pound’s haiku adheres to the same verse form and single image pattern. In his search for preciseness and clarity, the quality that Pound disregarded - according to most critics- was the “ambiguity” and vagueness, a trait of most Japanese literature and Art, which sometimes suggests and leaves the issue open. The ultimate point was not about reducing but allowing the ambiguity. The ‘unresolved’ is found to be more beautiful, as we saw with the concept of *Wabisabi*. The stress on the importance of the *image* is ever present in Pound, as it is in haiku and – as we will see later in the chapter – in all Penna’s *oeuvre* with the acknowledged and undisputed pictorial quality and the musicality of his verse.

## Section 2

### 7.4 Orientalism in the Italian Novecento

---

<sup>304</sup> From : Pound, E., “Don’t’s for those beginning to write Verse”s and “A Few Dont’s By an Imagiste” in *Poetry*, March 1913.

In 1900 American theatrical producer, director and playwright David Belasco, premiered in New York his one-act play *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan*. In the summer of the same year famous Italian composer Giacomo Puccini saw Belasco's play in London. Four years later Puccini's work, *Madama Butterfly* an opera totally immersed in Japanese atmosphere and culture, premiered in Italy with huge success. *Madama Butterfly* was performed in the United States in 1906, first in Washington, then at the *Metropolitan Opera* in New York and in 1907 in Paris, marking an important moment in the fortune of Japanese cultural influence – at least at a musical level - in the Western world.

Before this Italian Opera, Japanese culture and literature had already raised some interest among Italian artists and writers, though a quite belated interest - compared to the US and France - a delay due to the issues and obstacles that Italian culture was still experiencing in the process of renewing itself. Giorgio Sica suggests the name of D'Annunzio as the first poet seriously interested in Japanese literature, though adding a merciless thrust at Italy: "In Italy, where at the time it was difficult to find someone who knew how to distinguish between China and Japan, D'Annunzio deserves more credit for his early sensitivity in appreciating the Japanese art."<sup>305</sup>

In addition to D'Annunzio, among the poets most affected and therefore influenced by Japanese literature and in particular the poetic form of haiku, we find Ungaretti and Saba. I need to spend some time on these poets as we have seen (in chapter 2) how D'Annunzio, and above all Saba, are among the most acknowledged influences ascribed to Penna, and how much Ungaretti admired Penna and helped him publish his first poems (in chapter 1). The fact that these three poets, who have had some

---

<sup>305</sup> "In un'Italia in cui era difficile trovare qualcuno che sapesse distinguere tra Cina e Giappone, D'Annunzio merita ancora più credito per la sua precoce sensibilità nell'apprezzare l'arte giapponese." p.78.

influence on Penna's poetics and style, have been, in turn, in a certain way and for a certain period of time, affected and influenced by Japanese art, cannot be considered just a coincidence, for this association strengthens and highlights more patterns and evidence of Penna's affinity to the themes, style and language of haiku.

***Gabriele D'Annunzio* (1863-1938)**

The young D'Annunzio, always keen on innovation and experimentation in poetry, had already published some Japanese-style poems as early as 1882. These poems were mainly inspired by the readings of anthologies of Chinese poetry translated into French. D'Annunzio even wrote a novel – *Mandarina* - which appeared in 1884, inspired by the “myth” of the fairy-tale world of Japan.<sup>306</sup> But the turning point for the widespread availability of Japanese poetry in Italy must be credited to the Naples literary magazine *Diana*, where, in 1917, the first worthy Italian translation of Japanese poetry appeared, later published with the title *Lirici Giapponesi scelti e tradotti da Gherardo Marone e Harukichi Shimoi*.<sup>307</sup> These translations of the best Japanese poets of the time, made directly from the original by Professor Harukichi Shimoi<sup>308</sup> and edited by Gerardo Marone director of *Diana*, marked a key moment in the fortune of “Japonism”, understood as the influence of Japanese art, culture, and aesthetics in Italy.<sup>309</sup>

---

<sup>306</sup> See Sica, G., work cited, p.78.

<sup>307</sup> Various Authors, *Lirici giapponesi scelti e tradotti da Gherardo Marone e Harukichi Shimoi*, Lanciano: Carabba 1927.

<sup>308</sup> Japanese poet Harukichi Shimoi was professor at the University of Oriental Studies in Naples. His first translations of Japanese poetry appeared in literary journal *La Diana* issue 5, year II, May 1916.

<sup>309</sup> Sica, G., work cited, p.138.

**Giuseppe Ungaretti**(1888-1970)

The second poet I will consider (after D'Annunzio and before Saba) who showed an affinity of style with the Japanese lyric poets is Giuseppe Ungaretti. There is a link<sup>310</sup> between Marone and Ungaretti according to Giorgio Sica:

Maroni believed unconditionally in the talent of Giuseppe Ungaretti then still a little-known poet. . . . Speaking of him in the latest issue of *Diana*, Gherardo Marone wrote: "The poetry of Ungaretti is new because it is only poetry: his peculiar feature is the extreme brevity that brings him very close to the imaginative, great Japanese poetry, especially the poetry of the greatest Suikei Maeta".<sup>311</sup>

Ungaretti's oeuvre is an unmatched example, in Italian twentieth century poetry, of intuitions and epiphanies distilled in luminous, striking images, worthy of the best haiku masters. Here is Ungaretti's "Universe"<sup>312</sup>

Col mare  
mi sono fatto  
una bara  
di freschezza

From the sea  
I made myself  
a grave  
of freshness

next to one of Basho's haiku

---

<sup>310</sup> *La Diana*, III, 1-2 (March 1917).

<sup>311</sup> "A Marone si deve la fiducia incondizionata nel talento di un allora ancora semisconosciuto Giuseppe Ungaretti. . . . Parlando del suo amico sull'ultimo numero della *Diana*, Gherardo Marone scriveva: 'La poesia di Ungaretti è nuova in Italia perché è soltanto poesia: la sua estensione caratteristica è l'estrema brevità che la rende fortemente prossima alla fantasiosa e grande poesia giapponese, specialmente dell'immenso Suikei Maeta' "pp.326-334.

<sup>312</sup> Ungaretti, G., *Vita d'un uomo*, p.49.

From freshness  
I made myself a home-  
I fall asleep<sup>313</sup>

Among the huge production of poems by Ungaretti, here is one which, in my opinion,  
best exemplifies his affinity with the haiku ideals in poetry:

“Il porto sepolto” Mariano il 29 giugno 1916.

Vi arriva il poeta  
e poi torna alla luce con i suoi canti  
e li disperde

Di questa poesia  
mi resta  
quel nulla  
di inesauribile segreto.

“The buried harbour”

There arrives the poet  
and then back to the light with his songs  
he scatters them

of this poetry  
what is left to me  
is nothing  
of that inexhaustible secret.

The poem tells us about the author's life and the city where he was born - Alexandria, Egypt. The 'harbour' in the poem is the goal of his introspective journey, defined by Ungaretti as 'buried'; it is an image full of symbolism, the adjective buried in fact carries with it the idea of an underworld, pristine and mysterious. The 'secret' of the last lines is what poetry is able to bring to light with its verse. The poet then disperses his lines, offering them to the readers and the world. Poetry, for Ungaretti, is thus a means of self-knowledge, something through which we explore the unknown that lives within

---

<sup>313</sup> In: Various Authors, *Il muschio e la rugiada*, work cited, p.110. Translations are mine.

each of us. The poem itself can be divided into three stages: a metaphorical immersion - the buried harbour in which the poet sinks is the innermost self; the return to the light - the poet comes back from this journey with his songs, and, as a sort of rebirth, brings fragments of the very essence of life; finally the gift - the 'songs' are scattered, offered to the reader.

The second stanza focuses around the oxymoron "nothing /inexhaustible", for the words drawn from the immersion in the port/underworld/soul are something unspeakable, inadequate to express the inexhaustible secret, the deep mystery of life. The deepest reality is thus "unspeakable" - the words of the poet are "nothing" and "inadequate". The same idea about poetic language and its function can be found in Grabher's essay which refers to the haiku principles and practice: "Language is no adequate means to capture reality; it is merely a means to lead us towards recognition of it."<sup>314</sup>

Not only critics such as Sica and Marone were convinced of the closeness between Ungaretti and Far East literature, also Giovanni Papini<sup>315</sup> who wrote in a fundamental work on Ungaretti's oeuvre: "It seems that the ancient poetry of China is reborn in this western poet".<sup>316</sup> All these critics thus agreed that the relationship between the innovative quality of Ungaretti's poetry and the simultaneous spread of Far-East literature in Italy cannot be casual or accidental. Moreover, Ungaretti was a cosmopolitan poet engaged in continuous research and innovation which included foreign literature - his translations of William Blake are well known.<sup>317</sup> Published in a

---

<sup>314</sup> Gudrun M. Grabher, in Perloff et al., p.138.

<sup>315</sup> Giovanni Papini (1881-1956), was an Italian journalist, essayist, literary critic, poet, and novelist.

<sup>316</sup> In: Rebay, L., *Le origini della poesia di Giuseppe Ungaretti*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 1962, p.62.

<sup>317</sup> Blake, W., Ungaretti, G., *Visioni*, trans. by Ungaretti, G., Milan: Mondadori, 1965.

volume in 1965, these translations would appear for the first time in 1930 in the Italian magazine *Tevere*. Therefore it is hard to believe that Ungaretti could ignore the spread of and interest in Japanese literature and art all over Europe, especially because he used to live in Paris, where Japanese poetry had been well known and widely translated for years.

“Il porto sepolto” is emblematic of Ungaretti's poetry and was regarded as definitively innovative in Italian twentieth century poetry for its brevity and the choice of *vers libre* interspersed with frequent breaks. The protagonist is always the single word/image and punctuation is completely, deliberately missing. The use of *vers libre* and simple, clear words, the intensity of the image, the symbolism, the use of ‘cutting words’ (*kireji*) which break and connect the poem, all comply with the tenets of modern poetry; showing at the same time affinities with haiku as acknowledged by the Italian critics quoted above. Also an affinity, not accidental or groundless, between Ungaretti, Pound and the Imagist movement, has been in fact investigated by George Singh in his essay *Ungaretti e Pound*.<sup>318</sup>

Consonances and congruities between Ungaretti and Pound are many and strong: both re-invented the music of their language, refusing to write with the metronome, proving capable of dissecting and reassembling in new ‘living’ combinations the meter of their own poetic traditions. Indeed the influence of Pound as a critic goes beyond English Literature, for Pound spent many years of his life in Italy and many young artists - of different nationalities and languages - travelled to Rapallo to learn from the American poet. Ungaretti defined the poetic act as something that:

“[w]hen accomplished, will produce and release, no matter at what cost, the feeling that

---

<sup>318</sup>Singh, G., Barfoot, G., *Il Novecento inglese e italiano. Saggi critici e comparativi*, Udine: Campanotto, 1998, pp.261-266.



only in poetry we can search and find freedom.”<sup>319</sup> Here, too, we seem to hear an echo of Pound when, defining his idea of *image*, he says that its direct, immediate presentation “[g]ives us that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits”.<sup>320</sup>

***Umberto Saba***(1883-1957)

Saba’s strong interest in Japanese poetry was part of his search for innovation in style and poetic form, very much in line with the trend of his European and American fellow-poets who found a new model of inspiration in Japanese literature and the haiku. Saba’s interest is documented by the same poet in this letter to Aldo Fontana:

I have just finished my “Japanese Poems”. There are about forty of them, (each made up of three or four lines). . . . When you read them (after the second or third reading, as the first reading will give the impression of something silly) you will understand them, because I think they are my artistic legacy.<sup>321</sup>

These Japanese poems by Saba (including some unpublished) have recently been republished in a volume with the title: *Intermezzo quasi giapponese* (Interlude, nearly of Japanese quality/style)<sup>322</sup> with illustrations by the renowned Italian modernist painter Fillipo de Pisis, a very close friend of Penna’s. In these verses, an intense power of

---

<sup>319</sup> “. . . nel compiersi, provoca e libera, qualsiasi prezzo possa costare, il sentire che solo in poesia si può cercare e trovare libertà.” Ungaretti, G., Note a “L’Allegria” in: *Vita d’un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, Milan: Mondadori 1969, p.505.

<sup>320</sup> Pound, E., *A Retrospect, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, p.4.

<sup>321</sup> “Io ho finito in questi giorni le mie Poesie Giapponesi, sono circa quaranta di una strofa (tre o quattro versi) ciascuna (...). Quando le avrai lette capirai (alla seconda o terza lettura: alla prima ti faranno l’impressione di cosa sciocca) perché io credo che esse sono il mio testamento artistico” The letter is quoted in: Sica, G., work cited, p.154.

<sup>322</sup> Saba, U., *Intermezzo quasi giapponese*, with illustration by F. de Pisis, Parma: Monte Università 2007.

suggestion is enhanced by the use of a technique that is often reminiscent of the

Imagists. Here is an example:

Ma qui giunti ove ancor cantano i grilli,  
quanto silenzio sotto questa luna.<sup>323</sup>

Here, where we come still the crickets sing,  
what a silence under this moon.

The influence that Saba, at the time one of the most established poets in Italy, had on the young Penna, has been widely investigated by all major critics and documented by the copious correspondence between the two poets that continued until Saba's death. We have read about that influence in the first two chapters of this thesis; I just need to reiterate here that Saba was the first poet and critic to read Penna's verses, personally editing in 1932 an anthology circulated only in a few typewritten copies, which a few months later would be published in the literary journal *L'Italia Letteraria*. The enthusiasm of the older poet for the young Penna becomes evident when reading their correspondence, as exemplified by this letter from Saba:

I copied your new poems in a booklet that now goes through the hands of my friends. All those who read it, Stuparic, Giotti and others, who you do not know, are thrilled . . . I see you, always with your small case, your wonderful nine poems, and little (not much) neurosis. O light Penna, you do not know how I envy thee!<sup>324</sup>

If appreciation and admiration between the two poets were mutual, so was the influence: the older and more famous Saba acknowledged to be inspired by the originality, the basic incisiveness and the modernity of the younger poet. Di Fonzo

---

<sup>323</sup> Saba, U., work cited, 467.

<sup>324</sup> "Ho copiato le tue nuove poesie in un fascicoletto che ora gira per le mani dei miei amici. Tutti quelli che l'hanno letto, Stuparic, Giotti e altri che non conosci, sono rimasti entusiasti. [...] Ti vedo sempre con la tua valigetta, le tue nove meravigliose poesie, e poca (non molta) nevrosi. O leggero Penna, tu non quanto ti invidio" Saba, U., Penna, S., Deidier, R., *Lettere a Sandro Penna 1929-1940* Milan: Archinto, 1997, dated 23-11-1932.

points out that Penna's poetry can be at the same time more modern and more traditional than Saba: "Finally . . . Penna is on the one hand more a 'twentieth-century' poet . . . on the other hand more a classical one, opting for simpler clearer, shorter archetypal poetic forms."<sup>325</sup> Moreover, about this reciprocal influence, Giorgio Sica suggests that Saba's interest in Japanese poetry was inspired not only by Ungaretti and the Hermetics but also by reading Penna, whose verses, in their brevity and "basic simplicity" harked back to the poetic form of haiku.(492)

In conclusion, what Saba seems to "steal" from the younger poet is the 'haiku-like' ability to synthesize and present an image or a simple everyday event with the minimum amount of words that still convey the whole meaning of the experience.

### 7.5 Penna's "orientalism"

Se l'inverno comincia sulle calde  
e sporche mani un odore di arance  
al quieto sole della festa arde  
nell'aria come qualcosa che piange.<sup>326</sup>

If winter begins on warm and dirty hands  
a smell of oranges in the calm holiday sun  
burns in the air like something crying.

\*

The young Penna is already a poet capable of sudden intuitions and gives us his amazing verses, worthy, as Paolo Lagazzi wrote, of some ancient and legendary Japanese wandering monk. Verses . . . genuinely worthy of a master of Haiku.<sup>327</sup>

---

<sup>325</sup> Di Fonzo, G., work cited, p.71.

<sup>326</sup> In *Poesie*, Garzanti re-print 2010, p.218.

<sup>327</sup> "Il giovane Penna è già un poeta capace di illuminazioni fulminee, tali da donarci versi sorprendenti,

Italian critic and poet Paolo Lagazzi is just the latest in a long line of critics who confirm that they see a link between Penna and Japanese haiku. In a paper for a symposium on the influence of Japanese poetry in Italy<sup>328</sup>, Lagazzi pointed out how an investigation of the relationship between Penna and Japanese poetry has not yet been seriously undertaken, but, for his part, he wishes for an in depth analysis of the topic, suggesting that Ungaretti may be a plausible link. (47) In this regard I have already cited, among others, Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo who hints at Penna's affinity with haiku but also with the Indonesian *pantun*: the critic compared the structure of Penna's poems to "the Indonesian *pantun*, based on the combination, by analogy, of two pairs of couplets"<sup>329</sup>; while for Gilberto Finzi Penna's verse evokes old Chinese poems (104). Di Fonzo was also strongly convinced of Penna's affinity with the oriental culture writing: ". . . but when considering the [Penna's] poetic form, the link with oriental culture comes out as decisive."<sup>330</sup> This critic argues that Penna's poetry and Far Eastern poetry such as haiku "are all based on ancient, archetypical poetic forms, grounded on the following stylistic features: brevity, basic clarity, repetition, symmetry. They convey, in a classical form, the sameness between the self and Nature."<sup>331</sup>

---

degni, come ha scritto Paolo Lagazzi, di qualche antico e leggendario monaco Pellegrino giapponese. Versi . . . veramenti degni di un maestro dell'Haiku" Sica, G., work cited, p.156

<sup>328</sup>Lagazzi, P., *L'arabesco e il vuoto. Fili giapponesi nella poesia italiana contemporanea*, later in: *Elpidio Jenco e la cultura del primo Novecento - Atti dell'omonimo convegno di studio*, a cura di M. Lami, Viareggio, Pezzini, 1989

<sup>329</sup> ". . . il pantom indonesiano, giocato sull'accostamento analogico di due coppie di distici" p.735.

<sup>330</sup>"Ma anche da un punto di vista di forma poetica il legame con la cultura orientale risulta decisivo" p.116.

<sup>331</sup> "Esse esprimono una poetica classica di comunicazione, anzi di identità tra io e natura, una poetica sintetizzabile nella formula della semplicità fanciullesca e mitica" *Ibidem*, p.116.

### ***Beyond the “anxiety of influence”***

As we have seen previously in this section, some of the Italian poets interested in and eventually influenced by *orientalism*, were either Penna's close friends or acknowledged by critics as major influences on Penna's poetry and poetic style. The whole decade between 1910 and 1920 was particularly rich in works that testify to the accrued acquisition of Japanese poetic techniques and cultural awareness. Among the many, even Rilke, Cummings, Eluard, Claudel, and the Italians Govoni and Saba will be affected in different ways by the influence of Japanese poetry. While all the critics cited so far agree on the names of D'Annunzio, Ungaretti and Saba as the poets responsible for inspiring Penna in his interest and appreciation of oriental poetry, they miss, in my opinion, three important names that represent likewise relevant links: Paul Claudel, Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde.

How French Symbolism influenced Penna has already been discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover, to support the evidence of Penna's deep knowledge and appreciation of Baudelaire's and Wilde's work, we have the poet's own words: “Addio Wilde, Poe, Baudelaire ...”<sup>332</sup> ‘Farewell Wilde, Poe, Baudelaire ...’ - lines in which Penna bids farewell to a decadent and *maudit* idea of literature which had “troubled, tortured” but also inspired and influenced his youth. These three authors, who deeply influenced Penna, were in their turn and in different ways, interested and influenced by oriental literature.

It was in fact with Baudelaire's “Harmonie du soir” from *Fleurs du Mal*, that the *pantun* (or *pantoum* according to the French spelling) - a poetic form of interlocking repeated lines - cemented its place in Western literature; the same poetic form which, according to Mengaldo, as we have just seen, is mirrored in so many of Penna's poems.

---

<sup>332</sup> Penna, S., *Confuso sogno*, p.117.

Wilde's fascination with Japan is revealed by the same writer in this passage from *The English Renaissance*:

While the Western world has been laying on art an intolerable burden of its own intellectual doubts and the spiritual tragedy of its own sorrows, the East has always kept true to art's primary and pictorial conditions.<sup>333</sup>

Wilde's idealization of Eastern civilization as opposed to the decadence of the Western world, was sustained, a few years later, by Fenollosa, Pound and Blyth. The pictorial quality of a group of Wilde's poems with the significant title of *Impressions*<sup>334</sup>, suggests a classical oriental taste and at the same time resembles impressionist paintings. Let's read these lines from "Impression du Matin", also quoted by Sica(70):

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold  
Changed to a Harmony in grey:  
A barge with ochre-coloured hay  
Dropt from the wharf . . .

References to Japan also abound in other poems such as "Le Jardin"<sup>335</sup> in which the life of a blooming garden is described; or in "The Dame Jaune"<sup>336</sup> - a celebration of the lovely Eastern elegance of a lady – and finally in "The Panneau"<sup>337</sup> whose original title was "Impression Japonaise".

Penna's interest in and appreciation of Paul Claudel (1868-1955), can be seen in his (Penna's) official translation of Claudel's last work *Presenza e Profezia*, previously

---

<sup>333</sup>Wilde, O., *The English Renaissance of Art*, Reprinted from *Essays and Lectures by Oscar Wilde*, London: Methuen and Co., 1908, p.139, quoted in: Sica, G., p.73.

<sup>334</sup>Wilde, O., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. I, *Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed.by B. Fong and K. Beckson, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, p.153.

<sup>335</sup>Wilde, O., work cited, p.158.

<sup>336</sup>*Ibidem*, p.168.

<sup>337</sup>*Ibidem*, p.162.

quoted. Claudel was deeply attracted to Far Eastern culture and spirituality, repeatedly travelling to China and Japan, where he lived for more than fifteen years - he was French consul in China from 1895 to 1909 and ambassador in Tokyo from 1922 to 1928. During his years in the Far East he also wrote essays on Japanese drama and poetry.

In his youth Claudel was heavily influenced by the poetry of the French Symbolists and horrified, like most of them, by materialist views of life and the commodification of art. His response to 'modern world' decadence was to embrace Catholicism, in a very similar way to Eliot. Claudel also rejected the idea of a mechanical universe as he was always sustained by his faith in the "oneness" of Creation and the possibility for Man to participate in its infinite beauty. Let us compare Claudel's words about the 'world' and 'poetry': "Le monde est une immense matière qui attende le poète pour en dégager le sens et pour le transformer en action de grâce"<sup>338</sup>, with these lines by Penna:

Il mondo che vi pare di catene  
tutto è tessuto d'armonie profonde. (304)

The world you see in chains  
is woven throughout with profound harmonies.

\*

Amavo ogni cosa nel mondo. E non avevo  
che il mio bianco taccuino sotto il sole. (151)

I loved everything in the world. And all I had  
was my notebook, blank under the sun.

\*

La mia poesia lancerà la sua forza

---

<sup>338</sup> "The world is an immense material which the poet is expected to clearing the meaning and transform into an act of thanksgiving" Claudel, P., "Art Poétique", in *Oeuvres Poétiques*, edit by S. Fumet, Paris: Gallimard, 1957, pp.121-217.

A perdersi nell'infinito. (271)

My poetry will launch its strength  
and lose itself in the infinite.

The two poets appear to share the same unconditional love for the world in all its manifestations, even painful, and the same idea of the function of the poet as discoverer of this truth “the grace of the universe” - which will be disclosed to the reader. It is the same concept conveyed by Ungaretti in “Il Porto sepolto” that we read before, but expressed in a more peaceful, simpler and less ‘hermetic’ way.

Claudel’s *weltaunshaung* was based on the mutual connection of all life events to “epiphanies”. In Claudel’s oeuvre each individual is unique, and there is an unbreakable bond that connects individual beings to the whole. So much of Penna’s view of the world and the human condition resembles these principles, which, by the way, are also so close to the core concepts of Zen and Buddhist belief that inspire the haiku poet. As a lyric poet Claudel wrote in a unique style of verse. Rejecting traditional poetic forms metrics in favor of unrhymed lines of free verse, his work *Presenza e Profezia* ‘Presence and Prophecy’ - translated by Penna - appears as his spiritual legacy, deeply influenced by his religious belief but also inspired by oriental spirituality.

\*

Penna’s ‘premeditated’ decision to conceal all possible external influences in his poetry appears more and more obvious; for in spite of the poet’s desire to appear unique and original, it is hard to believe, for instance, that Umberto Saba’s interest in Japanese poetry was completely unknown or ignored by Penna, especially when we take into account their friendship, the deep psychological closeness and the continuous exchange of views between the two poets. As for Baudelaire, the French Symbolists and Wilde, they all left a visible mark in Penna’s poetic choices. Finally, Penna’s translation of



Claudel's work could not have been achieved without a deep knowledge of the French author, his insights about and interest in Japan. We know from Elio Pecora - Penna's biographer - how Penna was an avid reader, he denied any influence of his readings on his poetry; but at least on one occasion - in his short stories - Penna revealed his interest in oriental literature, as pointed out by Di Fonzo:

. . . Penna himself has left an enlightening mark in his short stories: on a page, he, who was always so shy of any cultural recall, expressed the deep impression he received from reading Tagore, the great Indian poet: "Tagore helps me to believe in the birth of a religion".<sup>339</sup>

Nevertheless, we would look to no avail in Penna's notes for any acknowledged influences or any admission of being inspired by other poets' work. Whether or not Penna read, studied, and drew inspiration from oriental poetry or Japanese haiku, it has been kept hidden by the poet. But we can say with certainty that Penna had all the opportunities to come into contact with Far Eastern literature in a variety of ways, as *Japanism* was definitely in fashion in Penna's time and highly considered and appreciated by all Penna's close friends, fellow poets and favourite writers such as Baudelaire and Wilde. Penna's "anxiety of influence" is a feature of his personality which I would define as quite 'modernist', in the sense of always wanting to reiterate the statement that he was making something new and unique.

In order to continue the research and disclosure of another 'stem' of Penna's poetry, we must do so by adhering to the text, to his work. Penna's affinities with haiku must be sought and investigated in his poetic practice, and also in the extraordinary coincidence of Penna's 'philosophy of life' and 'metaphysics' with haiku poets. The view of the world and the human condition, the acceptance of sorrow and loneliness in

---

<sup>339</sup> "... lo stesso Penna ha lasciato nei suoi racconti un segno illuminante: in una pagina, egli sempre così restio ad ogni richiamo o peso di cultura, esprime l'impressione profonda ricevuta dalla lettura di Tagore, il grande poeta indiano: "Tagore mi aiuta a credere alla nascita di una religione." Di Fonzo, p.116.

life, the desire to feel as one with the whole universe as the only way to overcome the transience of human life, the possibility of grasping reality only through our senses - these are all concepts, principles, beliefs which Penna shared with oriental culture and poetry, offsetting the differences of nationality, cultural background and language; showing Penna to be a poet, who, as claimed by Lagazzi, can sit with the best haiku masters.

### ***Penna's metaphysics and "religion".***

As to his (Penna's) metaphysics, it is more properly a pantheistic religiosity, that is an immanentistic belief, more Eastern than Western.<sup>340</sup>

In *Una storia mitica* 'A mythical story' - a chapter of his essay on Penna - Di Fonzo underlines more than once Penna's affinity with oriental philosophies and beliefs. Stressing Penna's originality and referring to Western culture, the critic claim his poetry reveals "a view of the world and an ideology among the most original and unusual, related to mythical oriental themes."<sup>341</sup> Penna's poetry moves towards a simple, ancient, mythical dimension, showing a complete awareness - on the poet's side - of the rejection of western culture and beliefs, in favour of a non-moralistic, immanent religion and a pantheistic spirituality.<sup>342</sup> As in haiku poetry inspired by Zen principles, the world-weariness, the impermanence of life and the appreciation of the beauty of small events go together, as indicated in the title of Penna's volume of verse *Croce e delizia*

---

<sup>340</sup> " . . . quanto alla metafisica (di Penna) si tratta più correttamente di una religiosità panteistica, quindi immanentistica, più orientale che occidentale" Di Fonzo, G., p.15.

<sup>341</sup> " . . . una visione del mondo e un'ideologia tra le più originali ed inconsuete, affini a tematiche mitiche ed orientali" *Ibidem*, p.13.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibidem*, p.114.

‘Sorrow and bliss’, or in the already quoted poem - “The world you see in chains/ is instead woven in profound harmonies” - and in this 2-line poem:

Dacci la gioia di conoscere bene  
Le nostre gioie, con le nostre pene.(217)

Give us the joy to know well  
Our joys with our sorrow.

The basic theme behind Penna’s oeuvre is the alternation and reversibility of joy and sorrow, which is a dialectical principle in accordance with Buddhist beliefs and Hinduism, and is consistent with the antithetical Taoist pair of *yin* and *yang*, with the theme of our origin and our return to the cosmic entirety and the dissolution of the finite into the infinite as in:

Mi adagio nel mattino  
di primavera. Sento  
nascere in me scomposte  
aurore. Io non so più  
se muoio o pur nasco. (277)

I lay down in the spring  
Morning, feel  
unruly dawns rising  
in me. I don’t know anymore  
if I am dying or being born again.

Here death and birth are likewise dissolved in the timeless beauty of a spring dawn.

Sorrow and joy are again inexplicably united in these lines:

E’ tempo. Forse aggiorna  
e la mente vacilla.  
Ecco. E un’angoscia brilla  
piena di gioia in me. (401)

Time has come. Maybe it dawns,  
my mind might waver.  
So now – within me  
this anguish is shining,

full of joy.

In haiku the acceptance of the impermanence of life and body decay can be painful, as in these verses by Okura:

We are helpless in this world.  
The years and months slip past  
Like a swift stream, which grasp and drags us down.<sup>343</sup>

There is no such despair in Penna, where salvation is possible by a return to the infinite vastness of Nature: the poet and the boy will die: “Tu morirai fanciullo ed io ugualmente”, but only to be reunited with the eternity of the sea and the sun, to be born again: “. . . più belli di te ragazzi ancora/ dormiranno nel sole in riva al mare./ Ma non saremo che noi stessi ancora.”<sup>344</sup> There is a clear allusion here to the religious and philosophical concept of reincarnation, a basic belief of most Oriental religions. In Penna’s verse the omnipresent image of the *fanciullo* - an anonymous archetypical lad, always different but always the same - points to an archetypical, mythical age of innocence and bliss, as in this poem:

. . .  
hanno posto gli dei per la mia gioia  
un fanciullo che giuoca con la noia. (37)

. . .  
gods for my joy have set a boy  
playing with boredom.

Likewise at the beginning of this poem:

Il cielo è vuoto. Ma negli occhi neri

---

<sup>343</sup> In *The Penguin book of Japanese verse*, p.40.

<sup>344</sup> ‘Lad, you’ll die, and I the same./ But boys more handsome yet than you/ will sleep in the sun by the sea./ But we’ll only be ourselves again’. In *Poesie*, Garzanti re-print 2010, p.315.

di quel fanciullo io pregherò il mio dio ... (64)

Empty is the sky. But in that boy's  
dark eyes I will pray to my god.

Terms such as 'god' or 'gods' - that are not uncommon in Penna's poetry - refer to a mythical, archaic deity, who can turn everyday occurrences into timeless epiphanies.

Penna's *fanciulli* are eventually emissaries of the god of Love as in the ultimate prayer before the final farewell:

Un altro mondo si dischiude: un sogno  
fanciulla mia beata sotto il sole  
medesimo (oh gli antichi  
e dorati fanciulli). Un lieve sogno  
la vita ...  
Ricordati di me dio dell'amore. (436)

Another world there unfolds: a dream  
my own blessed girl, beneath the  
same sun (oh the golden lads of then). A light dream  
life ...  
Remember me god of love.

Life is a dream, a light dream though, not a nightmare, another world is waiting for the poet, the memories of the young lovers are nostalgic but not sad, the same sun will shine again.

### ***Loneliness and Poverty***

Ero solo al mondo, o il mondo aveva  
un segreto per me?(154)

I was alone in the world, or did the world  
hold some secret for me?

We have seen in section one of this chapter how Zen principles have always affected the writing of haiku. Intrinsic to Zen is the notion of "eternal loneliness" - the

idea that we are all born alone and must face life accordingly. There is no sadness in this, merely acceptance. This loneliness is expressed time and time again in haiku, here in Basho:

A flash of lighting:  
Into the gloom  
Goes the heron's cry.<sup>345</sup>

And in Bokusui

How forlorn  
Is the white bird  
Sky and sea both  
Blue: yet untinged  
He hovers there.<sup>346</sup>

The loneliness of the birds in both poems, crying in the night or alone in the vast sky, is felt by the poets and translated into the universal, hinting at the detachment of all things. It is a loneliness born out of faith - a faith in the nature of the universe, revolving as it should, is not cause for concern, and there is no attempt to change the unchangeable. Penna lived most of his life in loneliness and he seemed to accept it, as suggested by this three-line accomplished haiku:

E poi son solo. Resta  
la dolce compagnia  
di luminose ingénue bugie. (176)

And then I am alone. Only  
the gentle company  
of luminous ingenuous lies remains.

---

<sup>345</sup> In *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.113.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibidem*, 163.

The small ingenuous lies are perhaps of a lover who broke a promise, but also the “big lie”, the world’s deceit, the broken promise of an impossible happiness. Many haiku poets reflect this world-weary attitude and outlook, this attitude of resigned sadness, of an appreciation of the world’s pain, an acceptance of parting and of separateness. Sometimes both Penna and the haiku poet might indulge in a sort of romantic self-absorption and pity, as in this comparison:

A chilling moon  
As I walk alone:  
Clatter of the bridge.  
(Tan Taigi)<sup>347</sup>

Già declina l’estate e il plenilunio  
porta vigore nuovo.  
Ed io son solo.(33)

Summer is down already  
and the harvest moon  
brings new strength. I am alone.

Consistent in Penna is his dialogue with Nature, which seems to participate, even if in silence, in the poet’s loneliness:

Mi avevano lasciato solo  
nella campagna, sotto  
la pioggia fina, solo.  
Mi guardavano muti  
meravigliati  
i nudi pioppi: soffrivano  
della mia pena: pena  
di non saper chiaramente ...(4)

They’d left me alone  
in the country, alone  
in the misty rain.  
The naked poplars, mute  
and amazed,  
watched me, suffered

---

<sup>347</sup>*Ibidem*, p.118.

my pain, this pain  
of not knowing clearly ...

\*

I have already mentioned the Zen “key word” *wabi*. To quote Suzuki’s words again: “*Wabi* really means ‘poverty’ . . . ‘not to be in the fashionable society of the time’ . . . not to be dependent on worldly things– wealth, power and reputation –”(23). As a man and as a poet Penna undeniably complied with these Zen insights: he treasured solitude, opted for freedom over fame and rejected the fashionable literary society as something petty and vulgar. Sometimes both the haiku poet and Penna share a universal vision of poverty as a romantic state, reminiscent of Wordsworth or Keats; an appreciation for the humble condition of peasants - in the work of the English Romantics - or the working class lads in the work of Penna. We find dignified poverty, for instance, in the poems of Kobayashi Issa:

In a remote village  
They’re used to poverty...  
Evening’s cool .  
(*Trans. Daniel Lanoue*)

As we do in these two poems by Penna:

. . .  
Ma supremo fra tutto era l’odore  
casto e gentile della povertà. (52)

. . .  
But highest above everything  
lingered the innocent and gentle scent  
of poverty.

\*



Lungo il vecchio sobborgo  
Non vive malinconia.  
Vivono gli stracci di una vita gentile  
Indorati dal sole. E così sia. (55)

Down along the old village  
melancholy does not live.  
Rags live there a gentle life  
gilded by the sun. Amen.

Poverty in Penna is a gentle human condition, it smells of “chastity” – poverty and chastity are here associated with the vows of a Christian monk – there is no misery in the humble clothes drying on the line. The final “Amen” seals it as a natural, universal way of being under the sun. In a similar way the Zen concept of *wabi* in haiku poetry does not imply an actual, financial poverty – though that was Penna’s case – it has more to do with the acceptance of the notion of ‘non-attachment’ that is being unconcerned with the material world and being unattached to the transitory notion of things and objects. In the final lines of his poem “Dialogue on poverty”, Okura writes:

. . .  
Is this the way things go?  
Must it go on and on?  
Yes. We are on earth.<sup>348</sup>

### ***Love and Nature***

Sole con luna, mare con foreste  
tutt’insieme baciare in una bocca.( 235)

Sun and moon, sea and forest  
kissing all together in one mouth.

---

<sup>348</sup> In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.39.

In the poem just quoted, in just two lines, Penna brings together and summarises - with the minimum amount of words - the passions of a lifetime: his love for nature and his consuming, bitter-sweet craving for his lads. A haiku can be a love poem, and certainly it was originally, as in this Japanese old folk song:

Handsome boy!  
O for a thread  
To haul him over  
To my side!<sup>349</sup>

As Sica points out: “Another feature of this court poetry, which differs in haiku from Chinese poetry, is the prominence of the theme of love. While in China most parts of what we consider literature (drama, romance, love poetry) was deemed inappropriate to the dignity of a learned writer, in Japan even the emperors were dedicated to love poetry.”<sup>350</sup> Melancholy and beauty seem to dominate the landscape of haiku dedicated to love, poems which often suggest failure, incompleteness, separation:

The autumn moon  
We saw last year  
Shines again: but she  
Who was with me then  
The years separate forever.  
(K.Hitomaro)<sup>351</sup>

It is rare that Japanese poets celebrate the happiness of loving relationships - on the contrary, love is often seen as a blind force that pushes towards an inescapable destiny of loneliness and suffering:

---

<sup>349</sup>In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.150.

<sup>350</sup> “Altra caratteristica di questa poesia di corte, che la differenzia dalla poesia cinese, è la preminenza del tema amoroso. Mentre in Cina buona parte di quella che noi consideriamo letteratura (il dramma, il romanzo, la poesia amorosa) era ritenuto inadeguato alla dignità di uno scrittore colto, in Giappone persino gli imperatori si dedicavano alla poesia d'amore.” Sica, G., p.22.

<sup>351</sup>In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.26.

No! I would not live,  
Longing for you.  
On the mountain crag, rather,  
Rock-root as my pillow,  
Dead would I lie.  
(Empress Iwa No Hime)<sup>352</sup>

\*

Over the rice ears,  
The morning mist trails,  
Vanishing somewhere...  
Can my love fade too?  
(Empress Iwa No Hime)<sup>353</sup>

The same themes of loving detachment and pain of abandonment are found in Penna; themes also typical of Greek love poetry, by which Penna was also influenced. Here the lover, hidden in the bush spies, hopelessly in love, the window of the loved one who belongs to someone else:

Alta estate notturna.  
Le tue finestre colme  
di vita familiare. Il mio silenzio  
contro il buio fogliame. (321)

High summer night.  
Your windows filled  
with domestic life. My silence  
amid dark leafage.

Penna's poems showcase the tension between desire and pain. The poet has the ability, in describing it, to use either irony or images of deep sweetness, to explore love in all its variations without hesitation or false hypocrisy. Here is a perfect example of a "one-image poem" and an accomplished haiku:

---

<sup>352</sup>*Ibidem*, p.6.

<sup>353</sup>*Ibidem*, p.7.

Malinconia d'amore, dove resta  
bianco il sorriso del fanciullo come  
un ultimo gabbiano alla tempesta.(137)

Love's sadness, where the boy's  
smile remains white as  
the last gull in a storm.

Brevity, ambiguity and the painful feeling of abandonment: all these haiku poetic features are 'condensed' in another "one-image-poem" by Penna, where even the 'sweetest' of loves can turn into a cruel prison. Penna's poetic skill manages to express a whole world of feelings in two lines and leave the poem open to more interpretations:

E poi come una mosca  
impigliata nel miele ...(307)

And then like a fly  
stuck in honey ...

Penna will never stop believing in love as the only chance of salvation and, as we have seen, his love songs are always matched with a strong feeling for nature, the only true companion of his lonely life:

. . . Di primavera  
Mi svegliavo a un monotono accordo  
e il canto di un amore mi pareva.  
Il canto di un amore che premeva  
con gli occhi di quel cielo puro e fermo. (154)

. . . In spring  
I woke to a single monotonous note  
that seemed to me a song of love.  
The song of a love pressing down  
with the eyes of that pure, still sky.

Love and nature seem to be Penna's recipe for life, healing the pain and sorrow of love with the timeless beauty of nature and enduring life's impermanence and the unavoidable sadness of aging with the hope of love:

Forse è meglio soffrire che godere.  
O forse è tutto uguale. Anche la neve  
è più bella del sole. Ma l'amore ... (378)

Maybe suffering is better than delight.  
Or maybe it's all the same. Even snow  
can be more beautiful than the sun, But love ...

What we find in Penna, which most of the time haiku *love* poems lack, in my opinion, is the *modernist* taste for irony in unveiling love's inconstancy:

Durato è un grande amore  
solo una settimana.  
Oh come si allontana  
il tempo dell'errore. (325)

A great love lasted  
no more than a week.  
Oh how far the time of mistakes  
draws away.

\*

I have already pointed out how basic and predominant is the presence of nature in Penna's oeuvre, and these lines reveal almost an infatuation:

Quanto più mi sentivo a te legato  
la natura adoravo  
come da una prigioniera. (448)

The tighter to you I felt tied  
I idolized Nature  
as if from a prison.

What I am going to stress in the following paragraphs are the analogies between Penna's peculiar feeling for nature and haiku. I have already quoted in this chapter Blyth's definition of haiku, what is interesting here are the words and the images used by Blyth to define the relationship between haiku and nature: "[h]aiku. . . is a way of returning to nature . . . , to our moon nature . . . winter rain, the swallows of evening . . . the length of the night . . . speak their own silent language."<sup>354</sup> Let's focus on some key words from the above citation: "moon nature"; "winter rain"; "swallows of the evening"; "length of the night"; "silence" and see how they become truly alive and bound to human nature in Penna's poetry as much as in haiku.

"In Search of words for "moon-viewing" is the title of Grabher's contribution in an interesting essay on Modernism: "Moon-viewing is a central motif in Japanese haiku poetry, charged with numerous meanings and implications."<sup>355</sup> Here are some examples of such a "moon-viewing" haiku, the first written by the famous Matsuo Basho:

The moon swiftly fleeting,  
Branches still holding  
The raindrops.<sup>356</sup>

\*

Painting pines  
On the blue sky  
The moon tonight.  
(H.Ransetsu)<sup>357</sup>

\*

Harvest moon  
On the bamboo mat  
Pine-trees shadows.  
(E.Kikaku)<sup>358</sup>

---

<sup>354</sup> R.H.Blyth, work cited, vol I, p.270.

<sup>355</sup> In: Perloff et al., p.137.

<sup>356</sup> Basho, M., *The Way of Silence: The Prose and Poetry of Basho*, ed. Richard Lewis, New York: The Dial Press, 1970, p.33.

<sup>357</sup> In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.114.

Moon and pine-trees are major sources of inspiration in Penna as well. The relationship between Penna and the natural elements, as in haiku poetry and tradition, goes beyond the simple realization of pictorial poetry and carries emotional insight and specific associations. In the poem beginning with “La luna ci guardava assai tranquilla” (216) ‘The moon, very calm, was watching us’, the moon appears as a benign deity protecting the poet and his lover from above. “Moon-viewing” poems are incredibly numerous in Penna’s oeuvre. Most of the time the poet talks to the moon as if he were talking to a friend who, though silent, understands and sometimes gently laughs at human idle turmoil. In this accomplished 4-line *tanka*-like poem the image of the moon in the first two lines disappears to re-appear in the final one, the third line introduces the trains. In closing the poem resolves the contrast between the two antithetical images/symbols of timelessness and modernity:

Come è bella la luna di dicembre  
che guarda calma tramontare l’anno.  
Mentre i treni si affannano si affannano  
a quei fuochi stranissimi ella sorride. (220)

How beautiful this December moon  
that quietly watches as the year comes to an end.  
While trains frantically rush on and on  
she smiles at such odd fires.

A protective maternal moon is looking over a humble countryside setting in:

La luna di settembre sulla buia  
valle addormenta ai contadini il canto.  
... (87)

The September moon above the dark valley  
lulls to sleep the peasants' song.  
...

---

<sup>358</sup> Ibidem, p.114.

Finally, in one of his few poems bearing a title - “Alla luna” ‘To the moon’ - Penna brings together some of his most felt and dear motifs: the consolation of a compassionate nature symbolized by the clear moon and the large tree, the inseparable dichotomy of sorrow and bliss and the primeval state of innocence of the dog and the boy, that is soon doomed to be lost:

A te che chiaro hai il volto il mio nascondo.  
All’ombra di un grande albero che appena  
mi copre, appena copre il mio tumulto.  
Felicità o dolore, o forse solo  
l’ombra di un cane o di un fanciullo ancora  
che restare non vogliono animali. (313)

From your bright face I hide my own.  
In the shade of a great tree that barely  
covers me, barely covers my torment.  
Happiness or sorrow, or maybe just  
the shadow of a dog or yet another boy who  
want no more to be animals.

Autumn wind and chrysanthemums, swallows, cicadas and long evocative nights complete this poetic landscape, where the verse of the Italian poet seems almost indistinguishable from the Japanese haiku masters’. Here are Penna’s and haiku poems next to each other. Let us start with “Autunno” ‘Autumn’:

Già mi parla l'autunno. Al davanzale  
buio, tacendo, ascolto i miei pensieri  
piegarsi sotto il vento occidentale ...(34)

Autumn speaks to me already. At the dark  
windowsill, quiet, I listen to my thoughts  
bending under the west wind...

\*

Ah  
Autumn wind



If you have any compassion  
Go and tell her  
. . . (S. Haruo)<sup>359</sup>

Then Penna's chrysanthemum:

. . . un crisantemo,  
un lago tremulo e una esigua fila d'alberi  
gialloverdi sotto il sole.(5)

. . . a chrysanthemum,  
a quivering lake, a line of trees  
yellow-green under the sun.

and Oemaru's:

Fall on, frost!  
After the chrysanthemum  
No more flowers.  
(O. Oemaru)<sup>360</sup>

Swallows and cicadas in this two-line *imagist*-like poem by Penna, and in Japanese haiku

L'insonnia delle rondini. L'amico  
quieto a salutarmi alla stazione.(138)

The swallows' insomnia. My quiet  
friend greeting me at the station.

\*

So few the cicadas  
This morning after  
The autumn storm.  
(M. Shiki)<sup>361</sup>

\*

Ditemi grandi alberi sognanti,

---

<sup>359</sup> In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.194.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibidem*, p.122.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibidem* p.166.

A voi non batte il cuore quando amore  
Fa cantar la cicala . . . (157)

Tell me, you great dreaming trees, doesn't  
your heart beat when love  
makes the cicada sing  
...

Finally the night:

Nella notte profonda  
Si consumano le stelle.  
Un dolore mi inonda:  
un amor di cose belle. (276)

In the depths of the night  
stars wear out.  
A pain floods into me:  
a love of beauty.

\*

On a winter night  
My heart is sad  
Sad for no reason  
...  
(N. Chuya)<sup>362</sup>

### **7.6 The poetic form: haiku features in Penna. Language and the 'concrete object'**

For the haiku poet, the frog is a frog, the moon is the moon, rain is rain, and a bird is a bird; the thing is what it is, and it is named. The target of haiku language is the concrete object, which is nothing but what it is.  
(Gudrun M. Grabher)<sup>363</sup>

The following paragraph from Penna's archives - classified by Deidier under the heading "Diario 1930" - has already been quoted in this study, but I need to quote some

---

<sup>362</sup>*Ibidem*, p.222.

<sup>363</sup>Grabher. G.M., in Perloff et al., pp.138-139.

lines from it again to reveal Penna's idea about the importance of a poetry made of 'objects/things':

Turn everything into poetry: looking at a wall - the inside of the train-  
the night . . . The light and the movement . . . A flower vase on the table  
in a living room tidy and empty . . . The above image: so revealing in 'its  
own' moment.<sup>364</sup>

Let's compare these "tenets" by Penna to Grabher's advice for writing a good haiku:

In order for a haiku to come into being, the poet must be in touch with  
the world, through common, simple, small, everyday things and  
occurrences, must be able to see and understand them in the context of  
the whole, be able to capture them in simple, precise, and concise words,  
in order to share with others the feelings that have been evoked in him by  
this dramatic moment of the ordinary.(140)

The key words: conciseness, the simple but evocative beauty of everyday events, the  
metaphysical dimension of the ordinary, the stress on the 'image' are very much the  
same. When associating Penna with Japanese poets, maybe Masaoka Shiki is the one  
who shows more similarities. Shiki, traditionally considered the last great haiku poet,  
changed the word *hokku* into haiku and he was in many ways the first modern exponent  
of the verse form in Japan. His style is objective and un-sentimental; his poems deal  
with concrete things: objects, images, colours, shapes, and their interaction. He  
provided much of the inspiration for Pound and the Imagists and – from a personal point  
of view – like Penna he spent most of his life in ill health. I have already mentioned  
some of Shiki's poems (about "cicadas" and "wind") and compared them to Penna's.  
Here are two more examples, the first suggesting the same desire to escape the  
weariness of life turning into a sleep-mode:

---

<sup>364</sup>"Far poesia di tutto: guardare un muro - l'interno del treno - la sera . . . La luce e il movimento . . . Un  
vaso da fiori sul tavolo di un salotto in ordine e deserto . . . L'immagine di sopra così rivelativa nel 'suo'  
momento!" In Didier. R., p. 25.

I want to sleep:  
Go gently, won't you  
When you swat the flies.<sup>365</sup>

and Penna:

Io vivere vorrei addormentato  
entro il dolce rumore della vita. (59)

I want to live sleeping  
inside the sweet noise of life.

The next set of poems shows the same sensitivity for colours and shapes, and the ability to craft delicate sketches, watercolours for the eye, focusing on a single poetic picture, the first is by Penna:

Già fiammeggia il cocomero. La sera  
cade più densa ormai.  
. . . (104)

Already the watermelon is shooting  
flames. Now a denser night falls.  
. . .

\*

A crimson berry  
Splattering down on  
The frost white garden  
(M.Shiki)<sup>366</sup>

Harry Clifton pointed out: "Penna, characteristically, never stated an aesthetic, but if he had he would probably have been 'No ideas but in things'. Like William Carlos Williams in America, his poems and lyric segments accumulate to a composite picture of mid-century Italy, its sundrenched countryside, crowded beaches, cinema, city trams . . .

---

<sup>365</sup> In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.166.

<sup>366</sup> In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.165.

18). Although Penna's poetry is most of the time "a poetry of things", we must not forget that Penna is the poet of love, as he reminds us in this line: "Poeta esclusivo dell'amore/ m'hanno chiamato. E forse era vero" 'A love poet exclusively/ They called me. And perhaps it was true' (344). In the following poem Penna has the ability - in a very *modernist* way, I think - to elevate the banal or the prosaic (a glass, a *piazza*, hands) into the universal feeling for a new love, making us see the "stuff of life" fresh - as if for the first time:

Un bicchiere di latte ed una piazza  
col monumento. Un bicchiere di latte  
dalle tue dolci sporche nuove mani. (94)

A glass of milk and a *piazza*  
with a monument. A glass of milk  
from your sweet dirty new hands.

\*

Also, Clifton's statement: "Penna, characteristically, never stated an aesthetic" is not completely true. It is true that Penna over and over again refused to write articles, reviews or essays on poetry, poets and literature, nevertheless some of his notes actually deal with poetry and literary criticism. I have already considered the stress on "making poetry of everything" contained in some notes, let us focus here on the concept/word "intuition" used by Penna when writing about his "aesthetic":

Rome 16 October '30

Poetry, for me, is in fact this unique illumination/revelation, not to be confused with other moods of any kind, romantic or passionate, or intellectual. We can call it intuition, or in any other way, what is certain is that it is always unique and that it is always recognizable, either in yourself -when you have it- or in the work of other poets.<sup>367</sup>

---

<sup>367</sup>“Poesia, per me, è insomma questa illuminazione inconfondibile con altri stati d'animo di qualsiasi

The same understanding of poetry as “intuition” - which has already revealed the relationship between Penna and the French Symbolists in the previous chapter of this thesis - will here associate the Italian poet with haiku after reading this passage by Grabher:

When Suzuki agrees with the general opinion that the Western mind tends more towards logical, discursive, analytical thinking, whereas the Eastern mind seeks to find truth intuitively, he argues that “intuition” can have various shades of meaning. Ontologically speaking, its most fundamental quality is to come directly in touch with Reality.(141)

### ***Wordless poetry, seasonal words and pictorial style***

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention again to some features in the poetic form of haiku demonstrably present in Penna’s verse. We have seen that an important Zen concept and ideal within haiku is that of *wordlessness*. Haiku’s short length is a reflection of the Zen respect for silence, considering that silence and sound are merely two sides of the same thing, and it represents an attempt to encapsulate an idea or an emotion in ‘one breath’.

In his essay on Penna, Di Fonzo considered the idea of an “almost silent” poetry as one of the most significant ideas in Penna. The title given to the book *La luce e il silenzio* ‘Light and Silence’, is therefore not casual. Just to do some statistics: if we take Penna’s *Appunti* - a volume of 37 poems written from 1938 to 1949 - we can count eight 2-line poems; six 3-line ones; and thirteen made up of 4 lines for a total of twenty-seven poems; only ten poems are longer – and not much longer than 4 lines. Sometimes there are two versions of the same poem, where the latest is the shortest, as if with

---

sorta, sentimentali o passionali, o intellettuali. Si chiami poi intuizione, o in altra maniera, quel che è certo è che essa è sempre inconfondibile e cioè sempre riconoscibile, sia in sè - quando si possiede- sia nell’opera di altri poeti”. In Didier, R., pp.26-27.

maturity and experience Penna's poetry became more concise and essential. In these two poems on 'waiting rooms' the first presents three lines, the later version only one:

Il caldo, il freddo delle sale d'aspetto.  
Il mondo mi pareva un chiaro sogno,  
la vita d'ogni giorno una leggenda. (371)

The warm, the cold of the waiting rooms.  
The world appeared to me like a clear dream  
everyday life like a legend.

\*

Il bene e il male delle sale d'aspetto. (369)

The good and the bad of the waiting rooms.

As in many haiku poets, also in Penna sometimes the variety of words used in a poem is minimal and repetition becomes a remarkable poetic tool to convey the experience: the words travel beyond the bounds of normal language into a pure expression of the poet's emotion. At its best, haiku transcends the expressible into wordlessness, as in these two haiku, the first by Chiyo:

Cuckoo  
Again cuckoo!  
Again the daylight too!  
(trans. Curtis Hidden)

the second by Y. Teishitsu:

Oh! oh! Is all I can say  
For the cherries that grow  
On mount Yoshino.<sup>368</sup>

The same amazement in the presence of the grandiosity of the sea leaves Penna almost speechless:

---

<sup>368</sup> In: *The Penguin book of Japanese Verse*, p.111.

Il mare è tutto azzurro.  
Il mare è tutto calmo.  
Nel cuore è quasi un urlo  
di gioia. E tutto è calmo. (12)

The sea is all blue.  
The sea is all calm.  
In my heart almost a cry  
of joy. And all is calm.

Finally the almost untranslatable gentleness of this 2-line poem:

La tenerezza tenerezza è detta  
se tenerezza nuove cose detta. (211)

Tenderness, tenderness is said  
if tenderness new things says.

\*

Although a great amount of Penna's work deals with Baudelaire's *modernité* - where the term *modernity* designates the frantic and fast experience of life in an urban setting with trains and cars – Penna manages to keep the old connection, typical of haiku, between the seasons and our perceptions of the world, by placing his work within a specific time of year that enables the reader to immediately grasp its references even in a urban landscape. Sometimes it seems that Penna complies with the 'seasonal word' tenet more than modern western haiku writers. These are just a few samples of 'seasonal' poems which abound in Penna's verse, most of the time - just as in haiku - in the opening lines:

Sotto il cielo d'aprile la mia pace è incerta (29)  
'Under the April sky the peace I feel is shaky'

La luna di settembre sulla buia valle (87)  
'The September moon over the dark valley'

Di febbraio a Milano non c'erano le nebbie (291)  
'That February in Milan there wasn't any fog'



L'estate se ne andò senza rumore (160)  
'Summer left without a sound'

Viene l'autunno sonnolento (179)  
'Drowsy Autumn is here'

Come il vento d'aprile è il mio fanciullo (83)  
'Like the April wind is my boy'

### ***Conclusion***

When they opened Penna's home after his death, a treasure-trove of paintings and drawings was found - mostly presents from his artist friends. These art works from some of the most important Italian painters of the twentieth century were not hung on the walls, but gathered together on the floor or against the walls of a small messy room. For a while, after the war, Penna tried to earn a living as an art dealer, becoming a real expert in the trade. Penna's sensitivity for visual art is clearly shown in his poems and wholly acknowledged by critics such as Di Fonzo:

Penna constantly emphasizes the function of sight and of the eye; everything in his poetry has a figurative relief, an enhanced pictorial quality. And more than by shapes and lines the poet is attracted by the bright colors which cover the surfaces of things like marquetry.<sup>369</sup>

Cesare Garboli compares Penna's volumes of verse to 'exhibitions': "Penna is the only poet, to my knowledge, who treats his poems as if they were paintings . . . Every now and then Penna comes out with an exhibition: which may include oils on canvas, watercolors, gouaches, *tempera* paintings etc."<sup>370</sup> The pictorial quality of Penna's poetry

---

<sup>369</sup> "Penna mette costantemente in risalto la funzione della vista, dell'occhio, dello sguardo; tutto nella sua poesia ha un rilievo figurativo, una pittoricità esaltata. E più che le forme e le linee attraggono il poeta i colori vivaci che campiscono come tarsie le superfici delle cose." Di Fonzo, G., p.31.

<sup>370</sup> "Penna è il solo poeta, a mia conoscenza, che tratti le sue poesie come fossero dei quadri . . . Ogni tanto Penna fa delle mostre: raggruppa oli, acquerelli, guaches, sanguigne, tempere ecc." Garboli, C., pp.33-41.

is another feature that links and associates his work to haiku. In this respect, it is worth remembering how poetry and pictures go together in haiku: both the great haiku poets Buson and Basho were well known for their use of imagery and colour and considered painting and poetry as two forms of the same activity, as pointed out also by Grabher:

It has been argued that the most important key concept to an understanding of the spiritual attitude of the haiku poet is the concept of *shasei*, which originally derives from Chinese painting and means to depict the exterior world such as it is, without adding ornaments. Masaoko Shiki, one of the great theoreticians of the haiku, adopted this concept from Chinese painting and made it central to his theory of haiku poetry. Like the painter, the poet photographically paints a picture of reality as he has seen, felt, touched, smelled, heard, that is, perceived it through his senses; and he paints this picture by means of his words (140).

Penna's passion and interest for imagery and colour shine in all the poems quoted so far. Here is just a final example, an evocative 'snapshot' of Venice:

La veneta piazzetta,  
antica e mesta, accoglie  
odor di mare. E voli  
di colombi.  
. . . (58)

The small Venetian *piazza*,  
old and mournful, welcomes  
the sea-smell. And flights  
of pigeons.  
. . .

Penna's poems are like still life paintings, but rather than a simple 'background' image, they are more an objective transposition of the emotional world of the poet. As we have seen several times in the course of this chapter, such a skill is also a prerogative of Japanese poetry and an ability that many Western poets quickly acquired. Moreover, as in haiku poems, Penna also reveals a capacity for expressing experiences and feelings

with the minimum necessary amount of words, leaving space for allusion and suggestion. Penna's poetic gift, which allows him to summarize in a few brushstrokes his tormented universe, brings him close to the Japanese classical masters.



## CONCLUSION

Ed io non mi ricordo più chi sono.  
Allora di morire mi dispiace.  
Di morire mi pare troppo ingiusto.  
Anche se non ricordo più chi sono.<sup>371</sup>

And I can't recall who I am.  
Then I feel sorry I have to die.  
To die is so unfair, I think.  
Although I don't recall who I am.

*(Sandro Penna)*

Interest and appreciation of Sandro Penna's poetry have steadily increased since his death (1977) both in Italy and abroad, with a number of translations in many languages - Japanese and Chinese included. Although Penna is now considered among the finest Italian poets of the twentieth century, his literary fame remains for the most part confined to the Italian national scene and there are still very few extended accounts of his poetry in the English language.

In discussing Sandro Penna's oeuvre my principal goal was to demonstrate that Penna's poetry, despite its uniqueness, is not an isolated or marginal 'incident' of the Italian *Novecento*: Penna, with his personal and original synthesis of tradition and innovation, deserves a place in the wider, international literary scene of twentieth century poetry. This research, challenging and overcoming the well-known definition that Penna's poetry is "a flower with no visible stem", investigates and analyses cultural and

---

<sup>371</sup> "A Eugenio Montale" in *Il viaggiatore insonne* (1977).

literary influences of Penna's work, highlighting those aspects that have been so far overlooked or completely disregarded.

In Part One of this thesis, I have examined the difficult life of the poet and his controversial choice of refusing ordinary jobs and living in poverty, a choice which - despite the admiration of many fellow writers of his time - caused loneliness, misunderstanding and sorrow. Chapter one focused on Penna's problematic literary fame. The widespread opinion of critics is that the reason for the delayed recognition of Penna's work in Italy was due to the controversial content of his poems and the obstacle of the Fascist regime's censorship. I have identified and discussed further reasons such as the controversial personality of the poet, his strong individualism and his rejection of the commodification of art. Penna chose to live a bohemian life, believing he needed absolute freedom in order to express himself in his writing; he was not inclined to accept the compromises that are sometimes necessary in order to achieve notoriety and awards; and he had problems in maintaining literary friendships.

In chapter two I dealt with Penna criticism in Italy and abroad. Following a thematic and chronological presentation, I have considered a number of critical works (from 1939, the year of Penna's first publication, to date), highlighting the few critics who pointed out Penna's modernity and drive for innovation or hinted at the international influences detectable in his works. Chapter three opened up the question of Penna's "anxiety of influence" which, to my knowledge, has never been raised before. My analysis, based on the ideas expressed by Harold Bloom, represents only an attempt, the beginning of a study into this aspect of Penna's personality which needs to be further investigated.

Part Two of this study began with an extended discussion of Penna's influences. I took into consideration the influences already acknowledged by traditional criticism of

Penna such as Hellenism and Romanticism - European influences which, according to prominent critics such as Robert Deidier and Gualtiero De Santi, are particularly evident in Penna's oeuvre, but that have not been sufficiently investigated. Through comparisons between Penna's poems and the works of Cavafy, Sappho and English Romantic P.B. Shelley, I have shown the hidden borrowing and allusions that Penna drew from the European lyric tradition.

Chapters five, six and seven represent the core of this research and the first annotated attempt to associate Penna with the international twentieth century literary movements of French Symbolism, English Modernism, Imagism and the Far East poetic styles. In chapter five I have accounted for the circulation and the translations of Modernist works in Italy and their influence on the Italian avant-gardes, underlying Penna's friendship with Eugenio Montale. These associations have only been incidentally mentioned by Italian critics when referring to Penna's use of modernist features such as "epiphanies" or the "objective correlative", the only author who has indicated a direct connection to Modernism being the Australian Peter Robb in referring to Penna's urban world and characters in his poems. I have developed this connection in depth through a comparison of Penna's texts with Eliot's *Preludes*, pointing out similarities of themes and images.

Chapter six focused on Imagism. Most of the commonly recognised features and tenets of Imagism - use of simple language that is lyrical but not obscure, innovative and free in its technique; a dry poetic style closer to classical balance rather than romantic uncontrolled sentimentalism; focus on the image and its epiphanic moment; interest in everyday life and objects of modern world - are all shared by Penna and apparent in his work. To demonstrate Penna's closeness to these Imagist tenets I have compared his poems to some works of Hulme, W.B. Yeats and Richard Aldington.

In the closing chapter I dealt with Penna's *orientalism*. The affinity of Penna's verse with Japanese haiku, although suggested and hinted at by various critics, has never been investigated in depth. In "East of Penna" I introduced an overview of the influence of Japanese poetry both internationally (France, England and the US) and in Italy, drawing information from Giorgio Sica's doctoral dissertation that highlights the vast influence of the haiku style on European literature. I have carried out a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the haiku poetic style, followed by a close examination of haiku poems next to Penna's poems, in order to demonstrate affinities of themes and poetic style.

This thesis, written in the English language, is also an invitation to consider and view Penna's work beyond its national boundaries, addressed to readers who manage to enjoy in Penna's verse suggestions and echoes of an international poetry. Sandro Penna's poetry may be challenging as it offers an unusual insight into the complex world of feelings and emotional experience of the poet, but with its freshness, its modern format and its suggestive imagery has the quality of imperishable art:

Resta sul cielo chiaro  
d'un eroe s'un cavallo  
incisa macchia muta  
sotto la prima stella. (22)

What is left is  
the silent smudge of a hero on a horse  
engraved on the bright sky  
under the first star.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anceschi, Luciano. *Saggi di poetica e poesia*. Florence: Parenti, 1942. Print.
- Andrea Barbetti, Giuseppe Grasso, Silvia Peronaci. *La vita è ricordarsi. Note su una poesia di Sandro Penna*. Chieti: Solfanelli, 2010. Print.
- Authors, Various. *Il muschio e la rugiada. Antologia di poesia giapponese*, edited by P.Lagazzi and M.Riccò. Milan: Rizzoli, 1986. Print.
- . *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, transl. by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite. London: Penguin Classics, 2009. Print.
- Ayers, David. *Modernism, a short introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Print.
- Bartellini, Francesca. *Ma come il vento muove il mare. Un ritratto del poeta Sandro Penna*. Rome: Casini, 2008. DVD.
- Bellezza, Dario. "Penna poeta scandaloso". *Paese Sera*, 5 December, 1980. Print.
- Bellezza, Dario. "Ma io non posso cantarvi Opere Pie". *L'Espresso* XVII, 9-10, 7 March, 1971. Print.
- . "Sandro Penna: scandalo e libertà". *Paese Sera*, 26 June, 1970. Print.
- Bigongiari, Piero. *Il senso della lirica italiana e altri studi*. Florence: Sansoni, 1952. Print.
- . "Per una sistemazione poetica". *Paragone*, I, 10 October, 1950. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Print.
- Bo, Carlo. "Vento di poesia." *Corriere della Sera* 18 June 1970: 11. Print.
- Boccolini, Maria Grazia. *Sandro Penna: il cosmo, il fanciullo, il kouros e il cinema dell'Eros*. Rome: Il Ventaglio, 1985. Print.
- Borlenghi, Aldo. "Sandro Penna e la poesia dei giovani". *Corriere Emiliano*, XVII, August 5., 1939. Print.
- Braudy, Leo. *The Frenzy of Renown*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.
- Bruni, Pierfranco. *La poetica e il linguaggio di Sandro Penna*. Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2008. Print.
- Bruni, Pierfranco. Neria De Giovanni et al., *L'inquietudine Del Vivere: Sandro Penna, la sua fortuna all'estero e la poesia del XX secolo*. Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2007. Print.
- Butcher, John. "Eros, Enigma and Euphemism in the poetry of Sandro Penna". *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, volume XXIII, No. 1., 2002. Print.
- Caretti, Lanfranco. "Sandro Penna." *Il Corriere Padano* 18 November 1939. print.

- Cascio, Gandolfo. "La cognizione dello spazio e del tempo nell'opera poetica di Sandro Penna", in *Variazioni romane. Studi su Penna, Morante, Wilcock e Pecora*. Amstelveen: Uitgave Volksuniversiteit Amslelland, 2011.
- Cavallina, Paolo. "Note su Penna". *Il Frontespizio*, 12., 1939. Print.
- Cimatti, Piero. *Oscure trame*. Rome: Lucarini, 1980. Print.
- Clifton, Harry. "The Poet Sandro Penna, in Old Age." *Poetry Ireland No. 35* Summer 1992: 14-18. Print.
- Cusatelli, Giorgio. "Sandro Penna." *Rassegna* September 1957. Print.
- David, Michel. *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*. Turin: Boringhieri, 1970. Print.
- De Riccardis, Gianmarino. *Sandro Penna: Un poeta oltre*. Lecce: Milella, 1997. Print.
- De Robertis, Giuseppe. "Passato e presente di un poeta." *Tempo Illustrato* 14 September 1957. Print.
- De Santi, Gualtiero. *Sandro Penna*. Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1982. Print.
- Debenedetti, Giacomo. *Poesia italiana del Novecento*. Milan: Garzanti, 1974. Print.
- Deidier, Roberto. *Le parole nascoste, le carte ritrovate di Sandro Penna*. Palermo: Sellerio, 2008. Print.
- Delia, Mazzei et al. *Solo uno sguardo io vidi*. Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2007. Print.
- Di Fonzo, Giulio. *Sandro Penna, la luce e il silenzio*. Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1981. Print.
- Di Piero W.S., Trans. *This Strange Joy. Selected Poems of Sandro Penna*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen & CO LTD, 1964. Print.
- Fenollosa, Ernest Francisco. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: an Ars Poetica. With a foreword and notes by Ezra Pound*. London: Stanley Nott, 1918. Print.
- Fernandez, Dominique. *Il viaggiatore amoroso*. Milan: Rizzoli, 1982. Print.
- Finzi, Gilberto. *Poesia Italiana*. Milan: Mursia, 1979. Print.
- Fontanella, Luigi. *La parola aleatoria: avanguardia e sperimentalismo nel novecento italiano*. Florence: Le Lettere, 1992. Print.
- Francesco Binni, Mario Domenichelli. *History and Anthology of English Literature*. Bari: Editori Laterza, 1986.
- Garboli, Cesare. *Penna Papers*. Milan: Garzanti, 1984. Print.
- George Singh, Gabrielle Barfoot. *Il Novecento inglese e italiano. Saggi critici e comparativi*. Udine: Campanotto, Udine, 1998, 1998. Print.

- Giacalone, Giuseppe. *La poesia di Sandro Penna*. Perugia: Umbria Editrice, 1979. Print.
- Giannelli, Enzo. *L'uomo che sognava i cavalli. La leggenda di Sandro Penna*. Rome: Armando Curcio Editore, 2007. Print.
- Ginzburg, Natalia. "Introduzione". in Penna, S., *Il Viaggiatore Insonne*. Genoa: Edizioni San Marco dei Giustiniani, 2002. Print.
- Giuliani, Alfredo. "Sandro Penna: Poesie", *Il Verri*, II, 1, 1958; later in *Immagini e maniere*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1958. Print .
- Guarnieri, Alberico. *La strada per il mare. Saggio antologico dedicato a Sandro Penna*. Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2007. Print.
- Guglielmi, Guido. *L'invenzione della letteratura: modernismo e avanguardia*. Naples: Liguori, 2001. Print.
- Guidi, Anna Maria. *La carità erotica nell'edonismo geoestetico della poesia di Sandro Penna: un approccio psicocritico*. Foggia: Bastogi, 2010. Print.
- Gurrieri, Elena. *Quel che resta del sogno*. Florence: Pagliai/Polistampa, 2010. Print.
- Hulme, T.H. *The New Philosophy*. in *The New Age* V (19-08-1909), 1909.
- Iacopetta, Antonio. *Sandro Penna "il fanciullo con lo specchio"*. Rome: Bonacci, 1983. Print.
- Keene, Donald. *Anthology of Japanese Literature*. New York: Tuttle, 1955. Print.
- Kenner, Hugh. *The Pound Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. Print.
- . *The Translation of Ezra Pound*. London: Faber&Faber, 1970. Print.
- Lagazzi, Paolo. "L'arabesco e il vuoto." *L'ozio* V(8) January-June 1990. Print.
- Levin, Harry. *Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot and the European horizon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. Print.
- Lewis, Wyndham. "I." *Blast* June 1914: 7,8. Print.
- Luti, Giorgio et al. *L'Epifania del Desiderio. Atti del Convegno nazionale su Sandro Penna*. Perugia: Provincia di Perugia Editori, 1992. Print.
- Macrì, Oreste. "Il Folle Desio di Sandro Penna" in *Nevrosi e follia nella letteratura moderna, ed.A.Dolfi*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1993. Print.
- Malcom Bradbury, James Mc Farlane. *Modernism: A guide to European lieterature: 1890-1930*. Ed. Bradbury &McFarlane. England: Penguin Books, 1991. Print.
- Manacorda, Giuliano. *Storia della letteratura italiana tra le due guerre, 1919-1943*. Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1980. Print.
- Marcheschi, Daniela. *Sandro Penna. Corpo, Tempo e Narratività*. Rome: Avagliano, 2007. Print.

- Mariani, Gaetano. *Sandro Penna in Novecento, IX*. Milan: Marzorati, 1979. Print.
- Marvardi, Umberto. "La poesia di Sandro Penna." *Persona* March-April 1971: 26-27. Print.
- McLaughlin, Martin. *McLaughlin, M., Britain and Italy: from Romanticism to Modernism*. Oxford: Legenda, 2000. Print.
- Mengaldo, Pier Vincenzo. *Poeti Italiani del Novecento*. Milan: Mondadori, 1990. Print.
- Montale, Eugenio. Sandro, Penna. *Lettere e minute 1932-1938*. Milan: Archinto, 1995. Print.
- Napoletano, Pecora et al. *Una diversa modernità*. Rome: Fahrenheit 451, 2000. Print.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Passione e Ideologia*. Turin: Einaudi, 1985. Print.
- . *Scritti corsari*. Milan: Garzanti, 1975. Print.
- Pecora, Elio. *Sandro Penna, Una cheta follia*. Milan: Frassinelli, 1984. Print.
- Penna, Sandro. *Appunti*. Milan: La Meridiana, 1950. Print.
- . *Arrivo al mare*. Rome: De Luca, 1955. Print.
- . *Autobiografia al magnetofono*. Genoa: Edizioni San Marco dei Giustiniani, 2006. Print.
- . *Confuso sogno*. Milan: Garzanti, 1980. Print.
- . *Croce e Delizia*. Milan: Longanesi, 1958. Print.
- . *Il viaggiatore insonne*. Genoa: San Marco dei Giustiniani, 2002. Print.
- . *Poesie*. Florence: Parenti, 1939. Print.
- . *Poesie*. Preface by Cesare Garboli. Milan: Garzanti, 1973. Seventh Edition February 2000 re-print 2010. Print.
- . *Presenza e Profezia*. Translation from the French of *Paul Claudel's Prèsence et Prophétie*. Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1947. Print.
- . *Stranezze*. Milan: Garzanti, 1976. Print.
- . *Tutte le poesie*. Milan: Garzanti, 1970. Print.
- . *Una strana gioia di vivere*. Milan: Scheiwiller, 1956. Print.
- Perloff, M., et al. *Modernism Revisited. Transgressing Boundaries and Strategies of Renewal in American Poetry*. Edited by Viorica Patea and Paul Scott Derrick. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi BV, 2007. Print.
- Pinchera, Antonio. "Alle origini della poesia di Sandro Penna" *Rapporti*, V, n. 12-13. March-June 1977. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. *Des Imagiste. An Anthology*. New York: Boni, 1916. Print.

- . "Vorticism", in *The Fortnightly Review*, CII (1-9-1914) reprinted in Gaudier-Brzeska: *A Memoir Including the Published Writings of the Sculptor and a Selection from His Letters*. New York : John Lane, 1916. Print.
- Pozzi, Gianni. *La Poesia Italiana del Novecento da Gozzano agli Ermetici*. Turin: Einaudi, 6th ed. 1970. Print.
- Praz, Mario. "T.S.Eliot and Eugenio Montale", in *T.S.Eliot: A Symposium*, Ed. R. March and M.J. Tambimuttu. London: PL Edition Poetry, 1948. Print.
- Quadrozzì, Gianni. "Stranezze: 'quasi' una conclusione." *Dismisura XI No. 61-62* September-December 1982: 22. Print.
- Raboni, Giovanni. *Novecento*. Milan: Marzorati, 1979. Print.
- Raffaelli, Massimo. "Sei nella voce di un treno lontano nella notte." *Il Manifesto* 30 December 1980. Print.
- Robb, Peter. "Poise of the powerless." *The Times Literary Supplement* March 1990. Print.
- Robinson, Blake. *Remember Me, God of Love. Sandro Penna translated by B.R.* Manchester: Carcanet, 1993. Print.
- Rosselli, Amelia. "Per Sandro Penna." *Nuovi Argomenti* October-December 1970: 249. Print.
- Saba, Umberto. *Tutte le poesie*. Milan: Mondadori, 1988. Print.
- Salveti, Gaetano. *Linea umbra*. Rome: Carucci, 1961. Print.
- Sanguineti, Edoardo. ed. *Poesia Italiana del Novecento*. Turin: Einaudi, 1971. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Poetical Works*. Oxford University Press, 1970. Print.
- Sica, Giorgio. *Il vuoto e la bellezza. La ricezione della poesia giapponese nella cultura occidentale*. Università Federico II, Naples: Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 2009. e-source.
- Sica, Paola. *Modernist Forms of Rejuvenation. Eugenio Montale and T.S.Eliot*. Florence: Olschki, 2003. Print.
- Singh, George. "Sandro Penna: Tutte le poesie." *Forum Italicum* (6, 1982). Print.
- Solmi, Sergio. "La poesia italiana contemporanea". *Circoli*, VIII, 1., 1939. Print.
- Spagnoletti, Giacinto. ed. *Poeti del '900*. Milan: Mondadori, 1973. Print.
- Squarotti, Giorgio Barberi. *Poesia e narrativa del secondo Novecento*. Milan: Mursia, 1961. Print.
- Sullam, Sara. "Le traduzioni di letteratura inglese in Italia dal 1943 ai primi anni sessanta. Una ricognizione preliminare." *Enthymema*, VII (2012). Print.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. *Il risveglio dello Zen*. Rome: Ubaldini-Astrolabio, 1987. Print.

—. *Zen and Japanese culture*. New York: Pantheon, 1959. Print.

Tassoni, Luigi. *L'angelo e il suo doppio. Sulla poesia di Sandro Penna*. Trento: Legoprint, Gedit editions, 2004. Print.

Vaglio, Anna. *Invito alla lettura di Penna*. Milan: Mursia, 1993. Print.

Vigilante, Magda. "Il mito del fanciullo e la poesia di Sandro Penna." *La rassegna della Letteratura Italiana* No. 2-3 May-December 1987: 469. Print.

Westland, Peter. *The teach yourself history of English literature, the Romantic revival, 1780-1830*. London: E.U.P., 1950. Print.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. I, Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. by B. Fongand K. Beckson. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, 1993. Print.