Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XXII-No. 24 November 2024 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-236

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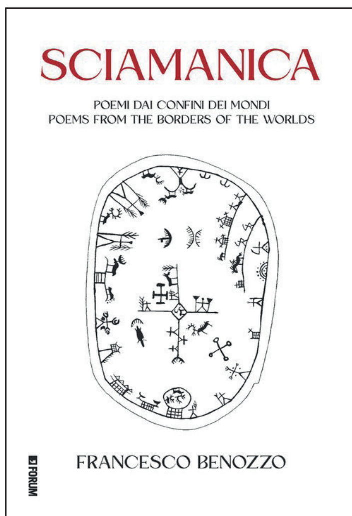
"Before Time Was": Poetry of Francesco Benozzo

Francesco Benozzo. 2023. Sciamanica: Poemi dai confini dei mondi / Poems from the Borders of the Worlds. Traduzione di / Translation by Gray Sutherland. Postfazione di / Afterword by Antonella Riem Natale. Udine: Forum, 436 pp., 23,75€, ISBN: 978-88-3283-371-3



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In section XIV of his manifesto "*Homo poeta*: Il segreto sciamanico dell'Eurasia", Francesco Benozzo states that

> The Welsh bards, the Occitan troubadours, the traditional poets, the country healers of Europe, the funeral mourners from Ireland to Magna Graecia, the interpreters in written form of the great tradition of texts linked to the oneiric journey, up to Dante and beyond Dante, *are not* "heirs" of the ancient shamans, but, like them, *the essence, the original presence, the evolution* of *Homo poeta* (Benozzo 2015: 18, my translation).

We will want to unpack what Benozzo means by *Homo poeta* shortly, but first we need to note that Benozzo sees himself as a poet of this ancient lineage, a *bard*, in fact, whose poetry aligns itself with a primordial shamanic power whereby the world is called into existence and made manifest to consciousness. "By naming the world", he says, "we become part of a creative process" (Benozzo 2022: 15). Such poetry is fundamentally dynamic, an archaic force that has, in his view, been diverted and attenuated into civilised forms, divested of its potency and forgotten as an essential source of *original presence*. Poets who should be shamans have become mere versifiers. In contradistinction, Benozzo, in *Sciamanica* (or 'Shamanic' in English), collects seven previous long poems (he calls them 'epics'), along with photographs, sketches and manuscript facsimiles, that embody – and body forth – his experience of the world from the perspective of an elemental bard. Ably translated into English by the Canadian poet Gray Sutherland, and with a helpful afterword by Antonella Riem Natale, this book of poems narrates, and seeks to show us, what it is like to encounter life when the 'veil of familiarity' (as Shelley termed it) is stripped away.

This poetic project of Benozzo's has antecedents that are worth noting, as they are not unfamiliar. It has filiations with the high Romantics, as in Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*, Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Where Shelley says "poetry is connate with the origin of man" (1977: 480), Benozzo holds that "Poetry was born in itself, it procreated itself, it was an emanation of itself" (Benozzo 2022: 17). In that sense poetry – which is to say, language – was unconscious or pre-conscious, as it "translated the world around" (17) rather than concoct arbitrary signifiers: "The world was its names; the names of the world were the world" (17). In this, and given his emphasis on the bardic, Benozzo is closer to Emerson, in both the essay "The Poet" and in a number of Emerson's poems. For Emerson, the poet is also the original Namer or 'Language-maker':

> For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius […] The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry (Emerson 1996: 457).

But the process is not simply historical; "for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop" (Emerson 1996: 461). This poetic or shamanic creation continues, "vehicular and transitive", and it "excites in the beholder an emotion of joy" (463-461) – which is why Emerson says, "The poets are thus liberating gods. The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, 'Those who are free throughout the world'. They are free, and they make free" (462). Emerson's representative figure for the bard is Merlin (or Myrddin, the 6th century Welsh poet-prophet), as in Emerson's first poem of that title, "Merlin I", where,

> The kingly bard
> Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
> As with hammer or with mace;
> That they may render back
> Artful thunder, which conveys
> Secrets of the solar track,

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Sparks of the supersolar blaze
(Emerson 1996: 1141).

Benozzo is equally attuned to dramatic manifestations of the natural world, but often in a literally grounded manner, since his is a poetry of the earth, reaching back to origins. In the "Epilogo erratico" of his initial 'epic', "Oneiric Geological", he writes:

I.
Stretched out on the grass I look at the valley move
with my ear on the folds of the land
I hold on to the genetic work of the boulder
the pre-verbal etymon of poetry.

II.
September: beginning of transhumance
the continuity of prehistoric shifts.
In the actions of a Neolithic which never died
the word of the poet takes root (52).

There, in the Northern Italian Apennines, the land he is in touch with – again, literally – retains its ontological status as the origin of language, or rather, remains indistinguishable from it. The word of the poet connects with the Neolithic period, as does the seasonal herding of animals ('transhumance') in September. But this is not just a trope for Benozzo; he argues, as a linguist and philologist building on the work of paleoanthropologists, that human language appeared much earlier than what scientists typically assume (between 50,000 to 80,000 years ago). In fact, he says, evidence suggests that well before the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, some *Australopithecus* had the physical capacity for speech and articulate language as far back as two and half million years ago. That somewhat startling claim is presented in Benozzo's article, "Origins of Human Language: Deductive Evidence for Speaking *Australopithecus*" (2016), and more fully in *Speaking Australopithecus* (2017), but other scientists have come to similar conclusions[1]. The reason this is important to Benozzo's theory of poetry is that it allows for the assertion that poetry (as the apprehension of the world) gave rise to language at our very origins as humans. Thus, "*Homo Poeta* preceded *Homo Loquens.* We were poets before being able to speak" (Benozzo 2022: 17). Poetry was the precondition for language.

Benozzo's narrative is one of decline, as we cannot go back to the conditions of post-Neolithic poetry, but it is possible to "awaken dormant qualities and forms" of it: "The poet must not reconstruct the ancient aspect of the primeval word, but awaken it, reactivate it, and reproduce its first demiurgical quality" (Benozzo 2022: 25). This is the role the shamanic bard plays in maintaining a connection to the deep sources of poetry:

[1] See Boë *et al.* (2019).

I came to regain the uncontrolled strength
in a night of infinite nudity
with its premonitions as incalculable
as birds hidden in the foliage.
I pushed myself into the heart of the world
risking my eyes, my song, my very life (256).

This process, he says elsewhere, is "the struggle of poets to redeem *Homo sapiens*" (Benozzo 2022: 20). And yet redemption is not a major theme in Benozzo's work, except for the solitary poet. He is not a humanist, in the ordinary sense of the word, nor is he religious or an idealist. At times there is an almost savage disdain for the corruptions of humanity:

I am still a poet of bones and flesh
who barely survives among his peers,
bipeds who lick crumbled plates of glass
falling in love with each other cyclically
sharing fatuous migrations together (118).

Compared to the high remote places he haunts in order to commune and compose, the "tranquillizing cities" below are where "the poet's song has died" where people lead inauthentic lives:

Down there, among the violated synclines
the accumulation of urban ballast
perpetuates the collective surrogates
of lifeless births and deaths
with no dignity, anaesthetized (218).

In this, Benozzo comes close to the "Inhumanism" of the poet Robinson Jeffers (Jeffers 1948: iv), whom Benozzo resembles in other ways as well: an environmentalist critical of society and atavistically aligned with the natural world. Jeffers famously stated in his poem "Contrast" that he would sooner "kill a man than a hawk", that although "Our people are clever and masterful", still "There is not one memorable person, there is not one mind / to stand with the trees, one life with the mountains" (Jeffers 1928: 143). For Jeffers, Inhumanism is "a shifting of emphasis from man to not man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence […] It offers a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct, instead of love, hate, and envy" (Jeffers 1948: xxi.). In Benozzo we can hear the voice of Jeffers' 'not man':

Even though Apocalypses now abound
on the lips of many, in good condition
cruel, pocket-sized, second hand,
the immaculate words of love
have shown themselves to be interchangeable

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like bitter, useless outposts
like emotions and affections that are always the same.
I have a dark, definitive piece of news:
all of you, without exception, are disappearing (226).

He goes on to characterise this as his “indifferent, rough poem” that has “abandoned you, betrayed you” (228). And yet, without contradicting the dark strain in the verse, what is far more characteristic is Benozzo’s celebratory renderings of the mountains that inhabit his poetry, from the Apennines to Wales to the Canadian Rockies to the high plateaus of the Faroe Islands, as well as of littoral zones in Galicia, Ireland and nearby Ravenna. Such landscapes always impinge upon the poet in some way; thus, in the Faroes:

Stabbed by the veracious blasts
of the stubborn wind – Stóra Dímun –
I gaze, dumbstruck, southwards to the bay.
Further away, among the ghosts of lichens
in the hallucination of other gulfs,
the tumult of twilight dissolves
beneath scorching boreal feathers (172).

Or, again, in *The Castaway’s Shack*, at the seafront, he recalls:

It was a different kind of morning: in the mist
I saw the outline of an enormous wing
rise trickling from the west.
Slanting columns of yellowish rain
marched eastward from a horizon
become less threatening and empty,
fast, noisy, uncanny columns
seaward of emerald archipelagos (142).

Though the trope of the poet’s encounter with the natural world is very much a Romantic one, there is nothing romantic about nature in Benozzo’s work. It is far too elemental, more like the “primeval, untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*” that Thoreau confronts on Mt. Ktaadn in Maine, where – finding himself stymied by something vast and inhuman – he is “more lone than you can imagine” (Thoreau 1985: 645).

One of the pleasing features of Benozzo’s book is the inclusion of photographs he has taken of the places visited in the poems. As accompaniments they are artistically and technically accomplished, whether breathtaking vistas or granular closeups of rocks. Rather than simply illustrating the text, they serve as surrogates to sensitise us to the richness of his verbal descriptions. At times, line sketches do the same, as do the pages of the original notebook draft of “Onirico geologico”. Thus, the conception of the book itself has been subtly expanded, to the publisher’s credit. Indeed, the production values overall are high.

Another unusual feature of this *en face* Italian/English edition is the inclusion of tran-

slations into Faroese of the poems in "Stóra Dímun", which are set on the Faroe Island of that name – the smallest inhabited one, with "four adults and five children" (170). It is both a gift to the people there (they get to see what the bard from Italy was doing up on those vertiginous cliffs) but it is also a device that further defamiliarises the poetry (in Viktor Shklovsky's sense of *ostranenie*, where our aesthetic perception is deepened). In fact, reading Benozzo is itself akin to a mode of defamiliarisation, since his poems present themselves as a negation of contemporary poetry, a rebuke of what is fashionable and conventional. Moreover, his public self-presentation as a bard is reinforced by his expert renditions of traditional songs and ballads, including his own compositions, on the Celtic and bardic harp (his discography runs well over a dozen CDs – perhaps among poet/musicians only Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen have more). A poet with a harp invariably reminds one of the painting, *The Bard*, by John Martin (1817) or of Philip James de Loutherbourg's illustration for Edward Jones's *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* (1784), both of which depict the imagined defiance of the last wild bard of Wales. That image is now both archaic and contemporary in its revival by Benozzo.

The first five of the seven books collected in *Sciamanica* are largely set in places or environments already mentioned and they focus on the poet's interaction with those places, including the particular effect they have on him. In that sense, they are phenomenological. Here, we are in the familiar territory of the 'lyric I' and almost all the poems in those books are short – rarely more than a page long. This is owing, in part, to the manner of composition, which is described as 'oral'; that is, the poems are first composed as speech – spoken aloud – and then transcribed into a notebook. This method probably delimits the length of the verses, but not necessarily. In English poetry we have two examples of long poems composed orally rather than at the desk, as it were. The first is John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, created when the poet was blind and accordingly dictated to amanuenses (though probably not to his daughters, as is often asserted). The second example is perhaps of more interest: William Wordsworth composed his poems during his daily walks, sometimes pacing back and forth, and only later writing them down (his sister, Dorothy, tried this method herself but found it impossible). That all of Wordsworth's poems are strictly metrical (including *The Prelude*) suggests a physical correlation between his manner of walking and the number of stresses or beats in a line. Perhaps his iambic pentameter should instead be called iambic peripatetic. In any case, Benozzo's mode of writing is similar to Wordsworth's, but without metrical regularity – which Benozzo disdains as "an artificial gimmick" though certainly with rhythms meant to work "below the level of the preconscious mind" (Benozzo 2022: 21). While the poems may have come to him spontaneously, the inclusion of the manuscript pages of "Onirico geologico" shows just how extensive a reviser Benozzo is.

The last two books of *Sciamanica* are somewhat different from the others. "Máelvarstal", subtitled *Poem of the Creation of the Worlds*, is a departure because it engages in cosmogonic world-building, imagining the creation of the universe fourteen billion years ago. Drawing on recent discoveries and theories from quantum mechanics, astrophysics and cosmology, Benozzo takes us on a tour of the very origins of space, time and causality up through the emergence of stars and planets and beyond. In another act of defamiliarisation, Benozzo

Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

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coins neologisms, such as “Retalmámor”, for the pre-cosmic matrix out of which everything proceeds, and “Máelvarstal”, for the mythological memory of all that transpires. This Adamic naming mirrors the creation myths of ancient cultures, such as the Sumerian and Australian Aboriginal, and all subsequent cosmogonic narratives. The book begins as follows:

> I.
> *Prologue.*
> *The void in which energy and matter cancel each other out.*
>
> In Retalmárnor, before every before,
> when the luminescent blue scales
> had not yet frosted over the dragon-fish
> and Ferdhenínal did not yet have a name,
> in Retalmárnor, inside every inside,
> in the world without high and without low
> Lundhái the speck of dust
> was dragged away by a sound wave
> and where it once had floated outside time
> there remained a fissure, Litalióðh,
> the scar from which song came into being
> the nostalgia from which everything drew life
> the first syllable of the entire Máelverstal (268).

This epic undertaking can be seen as the culmination of Benozzo’s bardic project: having previously rendered the primal physicality and poetic instantiations of what he calls the ‘ridges’ of the world, he now turns to etiology:

> I felt that it is now very fundamental that, as a poet of the contemporary world, I put myself in the game as a creator of myths. The alternative is the metaliterary one of merely talking about poets as creators of myths, of literature as possibilities of the imaginary, of writing as social and anthropological resistance
> (Meldolesi 2022, my translation).

While the poem can often be bewildering because it is so unfamiliar, we are, by now, used to alien universes, both ancient and contemporary, in myth, fantasy, sci-fi and mainstream fiction, from Jung to Tolkien to Le Guin to George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones*. There is something metamodern in this polymorphic, protean mobility that has emerged culturally in our time, and we might construe Benozzo’s poem as inviting us into a new universe for a new experience of our contingent existence. But Benozzo’s notion of Máelverstal as a primal poetic force (and perhaps ultimately generative of what he terms “world poetry”, which is “more like a universal poetry than a global poetry”) reminds us that, for him, *poiesis* functions beyond our categories of comprehension. This is Emerson’s view as well, “For poetry was all written before time was” (Emerson 1996: 449).

After shamanistic myth-making, the question might arise: “Where does one go from

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here?". Without acquiescing in a faux developmental narrative, we might nonetheless see the final book of *Sciamanica* as another turn – post-mythological – especially as it is the most intimate and elegiac of this poems.

"Autoktonia" (Old Greek for 'self-murder') is subtitled *Poem of the Suicide*. Rather than a palinode, this is a poem of self-assertion, very much in line with Benozzo's anarchic individuality:

> I'll decide when, the minute, the hour:
> to cut the head off time
> so I can listen knowingly to my final willing breaths
> and finally make them intentional
> the rambling beats of my heart (340).

This is a response to what he calls "the exile of having come into the world" (352), since none of us had any apparent say about being born. Dying, however, can be a conscious choice. "All I seek," he says, "is the abyss/ the vast, sincere abyss/ where you can start back" (356). This can be done gracefully and as a celebration; "The only freedom is former life/ the only free act is suicide" (378). But there is also a negativity at work as well, a recognition of the pointlessness of human activity and accomplishment, no matter how exalted, and an admission that "I have become infatuated with myself":

> These last years I have continued to write
> not so much because I like my poems
> or because I think I have great things to say
> but simply because if I had stopped
> I would have fatally reached myself (389-390).

Again, this is an *apologia*, not an apology, for there is no lessening of the transvaluation of poetry:

> It's an illusion – also for me –
> that these verses are only a poem:
> this isn't a poem, it's a blade
> it's a knife to carry on murky nights
> to grope for on the bedside table
> when sleepless and wandering underground (404).

The hint here of the poet wandering in Erebus reminds us that the mythological is never far from the surface of Benozzo's poetry: the underground is just beneath our feet. In a poem reminiscent of Jeffers' "Hurt Hawks", the book ends with an eagle:

> The eagle dies on icy cliffs
> not ill, not old, not exhausted,
> but a veteran of sun and storms.

> No-one can find an eagle's remains,
> no-one will ever be able to find mine:
> my autopsy will be carried out on my poems (416).

There is something rueful in that last line, as the examination of the poet's body of work will happen in his absence, while he, himself, will forever remain unknowable. "The death of the poet was kept from his poems" is how W. H. Auden put it in his elegy for Yeats (Auden 1976: 197). Benozzo's elegiac tone is ironically belied, of course, by his continuing to write and sing and live. And yet there is much that is moving in this poem, partly because, as readers, we feel closer to Benozzo as a person. After all, one does not befriend a shaman: they are too powerful and too otherworldly. Woven through the poem, however, is another sort of friendship, or perhaps a brotherhood. In the midst of his self-assertion of solitary autonomy, Benozzo does something unusual for him: he quotes other poets.

Among the few poets Benozzo seems to approve, he mentions Wordsworth, Whitman, Melville, Yeats, Walcott and Milosz. In each case, one can see the filiations, the breadth and depth of the work that resonates with his own. But in "Autoktonia" we get instead a much different group (in the order of appearance): Wallace Stevens ("What We See Is What We Think" and an epigram from *Opus Posthumous*); John Keats ("Ode on A Grecian Urn"); Arthur Rimbaud ("Le Mal"); the 12th century troubadour Jaufre Rudel ("Lanquan li jorn") and T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land)*. Instead of vatic presences, we get snippets of unidentified lyric poets. In what is a long poem of leave-taking, it is as if hidden presences appear to pay their respects, or vice versa. We could read it as an *askesis,* a severe emptying out of voices that have inhabited the poet. As Benozzo puts it:

> The dead never leave us in peace:
> their names are spread out everywhere
> and their faces visit our verses
> before going away, each time without eyes,
> starting to talk to themselves again
> in their own argot, their own dialect
> indecipherable but until now familiar
> like the rustling of ears in the early morning (400).

We might, however, call it, after the critic Harold Bloom, *apophrades*, the "return of the dead" (Bloom 1997: 139) – though without subscribing to Bloom's theory of influence per se). Like history, the poets of the past are present because they never were past. There is something uncanny in the way these quoted poets humanise the Inhumanism that seems to run through Benozzo's poem of death, and through his work generally. As we have seen, Benozzo is no humanist, and yet to read his poetry, and to listen to his recitals on the harp, is to realise that he is, fundamentally, deeply humane.

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