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Amelia Rosselli and Exile in the *Serie ospedaliera*

By now the historical, biographical notes of the life of poet Amelia Rosselli have been well rehearsed, and necessarily so. She was born in Paris in 1930, the direct result of her Italian father's exile as a Resistance leader. She was bereft of her father by an equally historical deed in the assassination of the Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, Amelia's father and uncle respectively. The family then moved to England, the homeland of Marion Cave, Amelia's mother, and then to the United States.

Just as she was denied a father and a fatherland, Rosselli likewise lacked a "mother tongue." Her poetic arsenal has been munitioned by the language of her birthplace, then a place of war, and next by that of her Anglo-American environs, locus of her haven-exile. In the bucolic space of Middlebury College, Amelia studied the language of her father which had also been spoken at home. It was not until 1946, however, that Rosselli reached Italian soil, a female Aeneas whose "homecoming" signaled a kind of self-exile of by then purely psychological dimensions. These life events, I maintain, become mirrored and thus regenerated in Rosselli's originally published volumes of poetry, each of which reflects a separate phase of life: *Variazioni belliche* as the war of her childhood; *Serie ospedaliera* as the exile of her adolescence; and *Documento* as the process of patriation as Rosselli entered into Italian life.

Significantly, the mirror that Rosselli holds in the form of her poems is like that of a fun house, which twists and distorts the object before it. Some features are foreshortened, magically tucked under and made to disappear. Other features, actually innocuous and invisible in their ordinariness, assume dominant and dominating proportions and thus significance. The resultant image bears very little resemblance to its original, in spite of the object's solid, physical, whole—historical—presence before the mirror. Critic Lucia Re might agree for she asserts that

an orphan, a refugee and an exile, intimately acquainted with the experience of illness, loss, pain and mourning, Amelia Rosselli is nevertheless not interested in retelling her story in verse. Yet her poems do tell a story of sorts: but it is a story of their own making. (140)

While the exploration of all three Rosselli volumes is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to begin in the middle, so to speak: with the phase I read as exile and its corresponding volume of poetry, *Serie ospedaliera*. The bellicose tactics of strict meter and the most active language skirmishes of *Variazioni belliche*¹ are in a state of withdrawal, which is not to say surrender, with *Serie ospedaliera*. The fun house mirror-reflection that these poems are, present portraits of exile as manifested in different forms of exclusion: the obvious exclusion from country—physical exile; exclusion from power and reality—psychological exile; and exclusion from love—emotional exile. Succinctly summed up: solitude, suffering and death, the death of desire (Re 147).

It is tempting to make something of the fact that the first poems of *Serie ospedaliera* date back to when Rosselli was thirty-three years old, the clichéd “mezzo cammin di nostra vita.” The possessive “nostra” finds an echo in Rosselli’s own commentary to *La libellula*: “infatti il poema ha come tema centrale la libertà, e il nostro, e mio, ‘libellarla’” (31).² Rosselli’s use of the Italianized English “to libel it,” where the pronoun refers to freedom, is consistent with her technique. With her poems she imposes sanctions of sorts on her sanctuary; in effect, she libels, that is, defames in writing, the presumed liberty of her haven-exile in the United States.

In the end, of course, the Dante analogy does not hold up, or even go very far, for many reasons, most particularly because the poet here is hardly destined for Paradise. Rather, every poem of the volume struggles to breathe through the battle-weary air of confusion, defeat, sadness and skepticism. *Serie ospedaliera* does not represent a moment of “tregua” after *Variazioni belliche*. In an interview with Giacinto Spagnoletti, Rosselli comments that “La ‘serie’ di poesia è ‘ospedaliera’ in quanto anche rassegnata a un ritornare criticamente sui propri passi, in quanto non più bellicosa nei confronti di sentimenti e intuizioni anche più rari o rarefatti” (*Antologia* 158). We can further say that the volume’s very title indicates a kind of exile from battle but significantly on account of injury. The “hospital-space” is a place of pain, “suffering and death,” where wounds are probed for shrapnel and are then cauterized, where the prognosis is bleak: “Il cielo caprino . . . / quasi vigorosamente prometteva: ignoranza / e terracotta” (3: 1-3).

Significantly, Rosselli does not inhabit this hospital space alone; her lyrics are peopled with a “you” (“tu”) whose presence ostensibly establishes the substance of the “I” and simultaneously, as we shall see, often threatens the continued existence of the “I.” This traditional poetic trope acquires a unique quality in Rosselli for “hers is an experimental (de)construction of the lyric voice

under the pressures of a language that is always dangerously divided against itself, and close to destruction and madness." (Re 140) Thus, we can say that the "I" of *Serie ospedaliera* stands in exile with an abyss on either side of her: destruction as caused by war, madness induced through patriation.

The remainder of this paper is a close textual reading of poems 2 and 3. I begin the process of analysis with a fundamental preoccupation of the exile: the questioning of her lot, her fate. Poems 2 and 3 each concern themselves with "sorte" and seem to offer the best hope of interpretation as a pair. The two poems are linked by common signifiers which just barely manage to snag their signifieds only in a cross-reading of the two. In preparation for the textual analysis, we would do well to keep in mind that

[the] *Serie ospedaliera* relies on a vertical play of sound and semantic associations across the space of the text which undermines the possibility of reading sequentially from left to right and from top to bottom. . . . The deforming logic of dreams, with its cardinal principles of displacement and condensation, seems to be the rhetorical model adopted by Rosselli in poems whose predominantly surrealistic imagery forecloses any naturalization. . . .
(Re 148)

Upon reading this "description" of Rosselli's technique, I turn to that quintessential text on dreams, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. What Freud wrote in discussing condensation coincides perfectly with "fun-house mirror" effect of Roselli's poetry which I previously mentioned. Here is Freud:

It could be seen that the elements which stand out as the principal components of the manifest content of the dream are far from playing the same part in the dream-thoughts. And, as a corollary, the converse of this assertion can be affirmed: what is clearly the essence of the dream-thoughts need not be represented in the dream at all. . . . So that only a single element of the dream-thoughts seems to have found its way into the dream-content, though that element was expanded to a disproportionate extent. (305)

In other words, Rosselli never speaks of exile in these two poems, but the notion of exile resides in the deformed logic of her images of "sorte."

Faced with such a challenge, I adopt a reasonable approach in isolating the common elements within the "grid" of the two poems:

2: 1 Sollevamento di peso e particolarità della sorte. . . ;
2: 10-11 . . . delusa di
 una così miserabile sorte. . . ;

- 3: 1-2 **Il cielo caprino** che curvava le suole
quasi vigorosamente prometteva. . . ;
- 3: 6-8 . . . presto rivedrai rivivere le lustre
piantagioni e la raccolta, **un provvisorio**
acceciamento della sorte. . . ;
- 3: 12-13 Presto
rivedrai **il cantare della sorte.** . . . (emphasis mine)

Every occurrence of “sorte” is preceded by a pertinent, contingent tag. The one exception is Rosselli’s piquant synonym “Il cielo caprino” which finds itself in a central position: the third of five occurrences and the first line of poem 3. This verse’s central significance is fortified by the fact that it represents one of only two instances of logical, nearly spoken syntax: “Il cielo caprino che curvava le suole / quasi vigorosamente prometteva: ignoranza / e terracotta.” The poem might as well read, “The mischievous newspaper boy who kicked a stone along his route almost solemnly shouted: the latest gossip and money-saving coupons.” The simple syntax and coherent message furthermore provide a straight passageway to cross over one poem from the other.

I now return to verse one of poem 2 to see what it is about “fate” that the poem is calling attention to with “particolarità della sorte:” what is particular about this life and what details compose this fate? Poem 2 immediately unleashes a flood of disparate details that pile up against one each other and fight for meaning and sense: “doves peek” just as “my strengths are snatched up by your flying away like a / candy, liquified the vocation to a semantic revision of the quarrels / and our birds.”

The reader’s own struggle to find sense, to dream-interpret, leads to the identification of the elements that are submitted to a condensation, a conflation of figures: colombelle X uccelli; le mie forze X la vocazione; sono prese X liquefatta. The specificity of doves, with their connotation of peacefulness gives way to the more general “birds.” Coupled with “beghe,” quarrels, the transformation from doves to birds suggests a transformation from placid contentment to bickering and anxiety. It is likewise possible to condense “le mie forze” with “la vocazione;” hence, the poet’s real strengths lie in her vocation. This is, presumably, her fate, destiny, as is implicit in the meaning of vocation. Yet these strengths are beyond the control of the “I” for they are snatched up, liquified. What remains then, after this condensation? The verses “Tuo volare via come una / caramella” and “una semantica revisione delle beghe.” These terms of poem 2 seek out their meaning in corresponding tropes in poem 3.

Firstly, “tuo volare via come una / caramella” finds an echo in poem 3, verses 10-11: “notte / di nuovo le caramelle una lavagna io.” “Your flying away” leaves

a darkness, it is night once again. The “lavagna” is a blackening and an erasure of the “I.” The blackboard exists in a meaningful way only by virtue of being inscribed, written upon, and through the writing it is given a temporary significance, only to be wiped out, and left bare and meaningless. As the “I” of the poem is effaced, the poet too in her vocation experiences a blackening, and erasure. The persistent sense then is a process of abandonment, cancellation, of the “I” by the “you.” But this is an abandonment that is like candy, sweet and craved, not nourishing and possibly harmful. Furthermore, the abandonment is enacted in hostility, for poem 3 further clarifies: “ti scorro nelle tue dita misogene.” The potential sensuality of “liquefatta” in poem 2 and “scorro” in poem 3 fall victim to the violence of the verse which has its psychological precedent in poem 1: “. . . una crudeltà continua, un tuo dormire nascosto / dalle mie preghiere.”

A real sense of the isolation of the “I” is revealed in the concluding verses of the first stanza of poem 2. The bleak, hollow echo of “Nessuno” names the absent subject of the other syntactically logical verse: “Nessuno dei soldati che veramente / intendeva risposarsi seppe dirmi / chi è che veramente marcia.” This apparently meaningful “sentence” implies a curious, unanswerable question: why would soldiers remarry, and most especially within the *Serie ospedaliera*? Why would they be widowers rather than deceased, abandoning husbands of widows? Whatever the possible response, the direct question nevertheless remains, “chi è che veramente marcia?” Here, once again, Rosselli evokes an image of movement, and it again seems to be movement away, a distancing, in effect, an abandonment. Indeed, the abandonment of the “I” is stated baldly after the ellipsis of the first verse of the second stanza:

. . . solitaria alle regioni didascaliche
 sorreggevo brigantella delusa di
 una così miserabile sorte, oh

The sad fate of the “I” lies in her solitude and loneliness: as Rosselli comments to Spagnoletti, “una vita sistematicamente privata, interiorizzata, privi di contatti” (*Antologia* 157).

“Didactic regions” and the second occurrence of “sorte” winds back to the remaining verse: “una semantica revisione delle beghe.” This line seems to state the underlying logic of the poems themselves. As we have begun to see, poem 3 works to effect a semantic revision of poem 2. This revision, then, is itself the quarrel, the trouble of the poet, whose power and authority to act within the didactic regions of her mind and within poetry are usurped by delusion, the result of abandonment, of exclusion, of exile.

The delusion is reiterated and thus reinforced within the framework of the second stanza of poem 3:

Credeere momentaneamente, rivedersi, pubblicare
 pentatonica delusione, il ridere è sempre
 amaro; presto rivedrai rivivere le lustre
 piantagioni e la raccolta, un provvisorio
 accecamento della sorte.

Willing herself to believe as long as is possible, the poet chooses the weightiest word to convey the duration of her belief by stretching out the syllables—*mo-men-ta-ne-a-men-te*. But then she stops short in the act of self-viewing, self-recognition. All that is possible, after all, is the publication of a five-scaled delusion, once again reinforced this time by the pairing of laughing and bitterness—“*Il ridere è sempre amaro.*” And then, tantalizingly, the poet offers the hope of new light, new life, rebirth, new growth, new stability, which last only as long as her momentary belief. “Ignorance and terracotta,” after all, for, revised, “*presto rivedrai rivivere*” transforms into “*presto/rivedrai il cantare della sorte.*” We have already learned that it is “*una così miserabile sorte,*” which permits only a temporary diminution of its powers.

The concluding lines of each poem bring about a rejoining of the “I” and the “you.” After the abandonment, the poet’s task is to revise and fine-tune her resurrected “tu,” reincarnated from images of flying to the land-bound rabbit, “*coniglio tu / ed io insieme*” (3: 13-14). With the “tu” recoupled, “*ricoppiato,*” with the “I,” the poet effects a semantic revision of “*scoppio e tu non correre:*” “*coniglio tu / ed io insieme nelle sere della morte.*” The machine guns beaten into piano keys as well bring about the obliteration of feelings, of the sensations of life. While the obvious image may be a negative one, we must recall our “hospital space.” The cessation of feelings may be the deadening of pain, the internal quiet after the tumult of battle. The “*metrò*” figures the burrows of the rabbits, site of haven, exile from the external, and literal, outside world.

The camphor denotes the sickroom of the evenings of death. But death of what? Death of desire: “*‘amour je t’ai tué.*” Desire itself is confined, exiled just as the poem’s “I,” for it exists only within the confines of an “*industriale amare,*” and inflames the “I” and “you” within a safe. In this strong-box curved red lips are transformed into brick which protects from contamination and simultaneously prohibits the balance of a healthy environment.

The rippled mirror-glass of these two poems reflect the psychological response to being physically in a foreign place out of need for safety, but a place that effectively cuts emotional ties to everything familiar. It is the experience of

the sweet freedom that exists at the cost of an erasure of all that formerly composed the personal identity. In just this one, introductory analysis of two of the poems of *Serie ospedaliera*, then, it is possible to discern an artistic reworking of an historical event: Amelia Rosselli's response to and attempted resolution of her haven-exile figured by the countries of England and the United States.

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Poem 2

5	Sollevamento di peso e particolarità della sorte sbirciavano colombe le mie forze sono prese dal tuo volare via come una caramella, liquefatta la vocazione ad una semantica revisione delle beghe ed uccelli nostri. Nessuno dei soldati che veramente intendeva sposarsi seppe dirmi chi è che veramente marcia.	5	The lifting of weight and particulars of fate doves were peeking my strengths are snatched up by your flying away like a candy, liquified the vocation to a semantic revision of the quarrels and our birds. None of the soldiers who truly intended to remarry could tell me who it is that is truly marching.
10	... solitaria alle regioni didascaliche sorreggevo brigantella delusa di una così miserabile sorte, oh vedi io scoppio e tu non correre, la mitra del pianoforte rimuove sensazioni, metro, canfora, rosse	10	... solitary in the didactic regions I used to rule little brigand deluded by a fate so miserable, oh you see I burst and you don't run, the machine gun of the piano removes sensations, subway, camphor, red
15	e curve labbra mattoni della cassaforte.	15	and curved lips bricks of the safe. 15

Poem 3

5	Il cielo caprino che curvava le suole quasi vigorosamente prometteva: ignoranza e terracotta.	5	The goatish heaven which kicked up its heels almost vigorously promised: ignorance and terracotta.
5	Credere momentaneamente, rivedersi, pubblicare pentatonica delusione il ridere è sempre amaro; presto rivedrai niverire le lustre piantagioni e la raccolta, un provvisorio accecamento della sorte.	5	To believe momentarily, re-see yourself, publish pentatonic delusion laughter is always bitter; soon you will again see living again the lustrous plantations and the harvest, a provisional blinding of fate.
10	Premi il tuo disingaggio nella notte rivedi i programmi, <i>amour je t'ai tué</i> : notte di nuovo le caramelle una lavagna io ti scorro nelle tue dita misogene. Presto rivedrai il cantare della sorte, coniglio tu ed io insieme nelle sere della morte	10	Press your disengagement in the night review the programs, <i>amour je t'ai tué</i> : night again the candies a blackboard I flow in your misogynist fingers. Soon you will see again the singing of fate, rabbit you and I together in the evenings of death
15	confinata ad un industriale amare.	15	confined to an industrial loving.

Notes

¹See Nelson Moe, "At the Margins of Dominion: The Poetry of Amelia Rosselli," particularly pp. 177-86 for a stimulating discussion of the strategies of this volume.

²All references to *La libellula* and poems from *Serie ospedaliera* are taken from the volume published by Studio Editoriale as part of their *Piccola enciclopedia* series, number 8. The poems will be referred to by number according to the order in which they appear in this volume and not in the originally published *Serie ospedaliera* (Mondadori, 1969).

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