

Bruno Rombi's Environmental Poetry Sardegna, an Island and a Metaphor

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Bruno Rombi, born in Cagliari, Sardegna, in 1931, and living since many years in Genoa, managed to attain recognition on a really wide scale in Italy, as well as in numerous other countries, because he detected the risk of isolating poetry from the rest of human experiences. His major works are perhaps *Canti per un'isola*, *Oltre la memoria*, *L'attesa del tempo*, but even *Riti e miti*, *L'arcano universo*, *Otto tempi per un presagio* and *A Costantino Nivola* are quite important. Though mainly acclaimed as a refined lyrical poet, he is also known as narrator and literary critic, and is active with RAI and as a cultural correspondent of leading papers like 'Il Sabato'. He may still be remembered for having prepared for RAI a series of programmes on twentieth century poets like Montale, Sbarbaro, Barile and Novaro. His complete poetical works have been published in volume format in 2011 by Le Mani of Genoa under the title *Il viaggio della vita*, which also includes a detail critical introduction by Professor Francesco De Nicola.

In general terms, Bruno Rombi may be described as a conscientious integralist, identifying the 'missing link' between literary form and all the other manifestations of daily life, especially those related to nature in its purest, primeval condition. The landscape plays a significant role in his work not simply because it is still so eminently present and intact in his native Sardegna, but also because he himself believe in the healthy force exerted on all beings by nature. His poetry abounds with such implications, and are all pretexts for a conclusion of an existential character. Essentially, he is an artist in search of the poetic element underlying existence, and existence is conceived in terms which are only to be expected in the case of an island poet.

This implies that poetry (or form) is not necessarily detached from experience (or matter). Equally interested in politics, he goes beyond the irrelevant details of daily routine to be able to identify whatever is immanent and inalienable. This leads to frequent references to particular places, all conceived as sources of beauty and truth. A constant feature of his poetic output has been the philosophical approach to whatever seems even trivial and inconsequential. There he typically finds his own point of departure and moves ahead on his own sort of spiritual journey. Perhaps this is why he is frequently discussed by critics and journalists alike. Reversing the process, one can suggest that here lies the crisis of poetry nowadays, detached as it seems to be from the unpoetic, itself the inspiration of poetry. Hence Bruno Rombi can be also looked at as an artist seeking to rehabilitate poetry and to make it more relevant. An authentic return to nature, namely to a space and a form which have been least touched and remoulded by human intervention, is thus conceived as both a willful choice and a basic need.

Poetry as an existential approach

I met the poet for the first time in Cremona, Italy, in one of his most inquisitive moods. He convinced the poets and critics attending that congress that there is no future for poetry if it is going to further convey the idea that it is a mere verbal exposition of things, and not a really different approach to things themselves. An analysis of his work immediately shows that he is basically motivated by a constant search for meaning. "My poetry takes the shape of a trip through the seas of awareness, and there is always the risk of an imminent shipwreck," he claims. Such a statement is also faithful to the choices he makes in the field of figurative language.

Since Bruno Rombi was born on an island, he transforms this fact into a symbol of solitude and exclusion. On the other hand, he has long become accustomed to living in the continent, and this enables him to detect both the differences and the similarities related to both situations. Geography plays a strong role in the evolution of the poetic act, and Rombi's works are a clear indication of this. The feeling of belonging to a much wider space, both physical and cultural, has left an indelible mark on his sensibility, and indeed fostered in him a real passion for travelling. He is nostalgic about the loss of direct contact with his own Sardegna, especially with the remotes parts, such as those related to his own Calasetta, and this feeling is frequently present in his poetry, both through subtle metaphorical understatements and direct affirmations. On the other hand, this is in itself his major source of inspiration. The island is equally an image of the land, the mother and the lover. The seascape as much as the landscape, flora and fauna, are all fused together almost to constitute a sort of a paradise, lost long ago along the journey towards development, but still insistently present in memory. The poet and the narrator will definitely not be able to exist if such a dimension went missing.

Nature is sense itself. He himself claims that life is undergone through the double sensation of Eros and Thanatos, and both form one unique paradox. He looks ahead towards the discovery of an innocent world. "There is an innocence which was lost in me, a child undergoing the violence of World War II," he says, thus justifying himself in believing that poetry must mean the disclosure of the beauty of nature, the attainment of fraternity amongst men, and ultimately the reception of divine grace. As he plods his way through various experiences, "from the known to the unknown", he seeks to establish a dialogue with other beings, namely with otherness in all its variations. Thus he asserts he can eventually explore the hidden meaning of existence. Nowhere is the essential significance of his work so clear and distinct as in the following statement: "We must strive towards the reconstruction of the ideal city."

Rombi's poetry gives equal importance to the metaphorical and the spiritual aspects of being, on the one hand, and to the particular and concrete dimension of common experience, on the other. He is a poet fully aware of his duty to play the role of a 'journalist' of the spirit; as a journalist he strives to associate facts and impressions with universal principles and truths. This is his reaction to such an interpretation: "Without losing sight of reality in which I am immersed and of which I form an integral part, I try to go beyond what is phenomenological to follow those ideals which Bergson calls 'elan vital'. That is not easy at all."

Most of Bruno Rombi's lyrics have the structure of a normal letter and follow the pattern of a dialogue. Is it all the result of an imaginative strategy or the sublimation of real experience? This is how he resolves such a dilemma: "The dialogue form, according to the Platonic model, provides a person with the opportunity of giving an answer, and enables the other person always to revise statements. The dialogue form is basically the only one which simultaneously guarantees the rehabilitation and the sublimation of experience."

Awareness of being and profound sentiment are, according to Rombi, the two basic features of poetic intuition. In order to put this into practice, man, a planet in himself, has to rotate around himself and all the others surrounding him. It would be a purely narcissistic exercise to rotate in a vacuum, ignoring the rest. Hence the poetic act must be an effort in the direction of whatever is not the self.

Mediterranean sensibility

Rombi's poetic work is an authentic example of Mediterranean sensibility put into shape, given a definition based on experience rather than on abstractions. He actually thinks that what inspires him is essentially the fact that such an ancient culture has influenced the whole world. "It is certain that search, adventure, faith are the salient constituent elements of all great poets born on the shores of our region. Even nowadays poetic production has remained faithful to the classical patterns, notwithstanding formal renewal. A mere glance at contemporary anthologies can easily bear this out." In these unequivocal terms the poet from Sardegna is defining himself as an artist related to the sea, since an island has this intriguing contact with an element different from itself. Again, examples of such an awareness abound in the work of Rombi, in any phase of his long and consistent poetic journey.

Awareness of the regional identity can be easily overshadowed by influences which are essentially alien to the region's age-long definition. The cultures of islands are frequently the offshoot of a typical regional blending of diverse cultures. Thus being an islander and being also a poet seem to be somehow coextensive. *Un anno a Calasetta* (2006) and *Sardegna madre di pietra* (2000), prose works essentially sustained through a pervading sense of lyricism, are examples of this deep relationship between the poet and his land. Bruno In his efforts to reach out and to widen the scope of his interests, Rombi has dedicated much of his time to discover and practically to unearth and to reveal to the Italian public the works of Enrico Morovich, born in Fiumo in 1907, but who has been living in Italy since 1958. His book *Piccoli amanti* has been one of the finalists in an edition of the Premio Strega. This is how Rombi recalls his efforts to reconstruct the literary image and personality of Morovich: "It is all part of the belief I have in the real values of art. As soon as I became acquainted with Morovich and became aware of his greatness, I tried to present him to the Italian public. In the course of my work I found the help of well-known scholars like Giuliano Manacorda, Francesco De Nicola, Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, Leonardo Sciascia, Paolo Santarcangelli, Patrizia C. Hanse, Tonko Maroivic and Jolka Milic. I am now very happy that Morovich is well known and has been included among the candidates for the Premio Strega." *Piccoli amanti* was published by Rusconi, with an introduction by Rombi himself, in 1990. So far as such activity is concerned, Rombi's output is quite vast. He has translated numerous works into Italian and has written a great number of critical introductions to works by individual authors. His contribution to literary journalism is even wider.

A compromise between poetry and journalism

Rombi fails to detach his poetic activity from his contribution to journalism. "I write literary criticism for the Italian papers, and frequently dwell on cultural matters. The relationship must be pretty obvious. Apart from that, songs do not earn you a living," he added, "and therefore journalism is my proper job." These comments are relevant here to the degree that this type of conception of poetry is in actual fact a sort of extension of the idea that life is not only meant to be lived but also to be observed. This approach seems to be partly due to his rural origins, which he has always exploited in his search for images, perceptions and contexts. Since contemporary life is so prominent in Rombi's work, it is quite important to note that a story on a newspaper and a poem in a book are therefore not essentially distinct from each other. The form of the latter renders more impressive the content of the former. In any case, it is quite obvious that Bruno Rombi retains a high dose of lyricism throughout his prose, both narrative and argumentative.

Rombi has participated in numerous congresses on the Mediterranean. He likes to reflect on the complex identity of the region, itself a sort of nation made up of so many diverse nations. He believes that "the Mediterranean ideal" can be said to be reached when all the people forming the region will feel themselves somehow identical in the context of a supernational mothercountry. The coherent regional atmosphere as much as the natural heritage are much stronger than all the difference accumulated throughout history. This unity can be defined in terms of a definite geographical demarcation, different though it be on all sides, but deeply rooted in the fact that all people share an originally common heritage. In this sense, Bruno Rombi manifests his real poetic richness as an interpreter of this ancient soul, the singer of a culture long rooted in the soil of many countries.

The Mediterranean within the European context

A poet who is sufficiently concerned nowadays with his own survival as well as with the survival of his own species cannot think otherwise. Poetry faces the risk of fading into oblivion, only if integration and adaptation are overlooked and underestimated. Twentieth century poetry has reached high peaks, and real appreciation and recognition of poets are forthcoming from all quarters, not in the least political. Europe seems to be striving towards unity as much as it is striving to revalue its cultural uniqueness, which is basically artistic, and eminently literary. Little has to be said to stress to what extent the Mediterranean has contributed to the wealth which is now the possession of the whole continent. The spiritual dimension still surviving in postmodernism owes quite a lot to early Mediterranean civilization. Bruno Rombi, a true son of Sardegna, has travelled far mainly to become more aware of his own initial identity as an islander. Perhaps this is the best perspective an island poet can project for himself. His deep environmental awareness is equally due to the land he knows as much as to the poetic belief he upholds. Both in *Riti e miti* (1991) and in *Otto tempi per un presagio* (1998) the poet evokes ancient traditions in order to discover the path to be followed if postmodernism is to retain the contents humanity cannot do without any time. Resorting to nature is to him a fundamental mode of being, and poetry is largely justifiable now if fulfills this function. Here the poet and the journalist closely resemble each

other and frequently exchange roles, language and messages. The ecologist is partly a journalist and partly a poet.

Rombi profoundly feels the call of the open seas, which equally enclose the island and introduce it to the wide spaces ahead. His poetry seeks to bridge the gap, and naturally so: the island is not a mere territory of land; it is also an image of being in terms of its various connotations. One can easily agree with him in believing that poetry, apparently useless though profound and truthful, is giving a most valuable share in the construction of a new era. At least, the downfall of ideologies and the triumph of democracy throughout Europe have proved poets like Rombi right. The history of literary dissidents still has to be written, but the fruits of the great sacrifice undergone by so many poets and intellectuals in recent decades is easily recognizable. Such poetry, standing somewhere midway between the uncertainties of individual life and the dictates of collective conviviality, is meant to make a statement as much as it aims at transforming a statement into an intense emotion. Bruno is equally cerebral and emotional; he is a thinker and a sentimentalist at the same time. Both components contribute towards the formation of a sort of poetry which provides food for thought as much as it provokes deep feelings. His poetry is thought and felt in order to move, although the didactic element is quite strong.

Bruno Rombi immediately recalls the role played by intellectuals in his country. The definition of a new era is in fact being delineated in terms of a synthesis: a democratic tradition has survived because it has been sustained through art, and mainly through literature.

The literary features of a spiritual journey

The consistency with which poets of a certain standing go on writing is indicative of a major characteristic of the age: poetry is still a fundamental need, encountered on the individual and the collective levels, and its apparent absence in public life is only the symptom of a crisis which lies elsewhere, somewhere quite deep. The truthfulness of literature is part of its own definition, independently of the prominence or otherwise it enjoys. What the identifiable main trends in poetry are proposing nowadays is a sort of reaction to what seems to be the dominant aspect of contemporary experience, namely impersonalisation. Thus poetry, like any other genre, is regaining prerogatives it has been deprived of for a number of decades.

Against the loss of individualism poetry presents itself as the standard source of inspiration, the secure point of reference enabling man to rediscover himself and to survive as such. Bruno Rombi has been dwelling on this essential theme at least since the publication of his *Enigmi animi* in 1980. That was followed by *L'attesa del tempo* (1983), *Riti e miti* (1991), *Un amore* (1992), and *L'arcano universo* (1995). Since then, some of Italy's more prominent literary scholars and critics have repeatedly stressed this feature of Rombi's vision of life. The list includes Clara Rubbi, Neria de Giovanni, Vittorio Messori, Francesco De Nicola, Elio Andriuoli, Marco A. Aimo, Elio Gioanola and Carlo Bo. They all somehow point out this inherent readiness to transcend the unbearable confines of post-modernism and to acquire a deeper interpretation of what it means to be a human being in a highly technologized environment.

Rombi is fully aware that poetry does not provide solutions, nor could it ever do so, but it forms and matures awareness of a distinct type. It couples knowledge with feeling, al-

ways considered as the supreme source of poetry. Luigi Surdich hints at this salient point in his introduction to *Il battello fantasma* (2001). In one of his more delicate lyrics, “Piu in là”, Bruno Rombi formulates his creed quite clearly and succinctly, thus implying that any variation on this central theme has to be somehow interpreted in terms of what relates it to the dominant motive. The speaker indulges into a dialogue of an intimate nature, assuming the role of a prophet, indeed reminiscent of the image the poet enjoyed throughout tradition, especially in the Mediterranean. This excerpt somehow includes the poet's essential lexical stock and typical attitude:

Se ti inoltri nella valle grigia
 del vento senza direzione,
 se cerchi nel tempo
 il centro dell'essere
 che lentamente muore,
 se sul mare del dubbio
 guidi il tuo battello
 mira bene allo zenit
 e che la rotta sia non d'avventura.

As in previous works Bruno Rombi gives great prominence to what makes the Mediterranean unique in terms of philosophy, landscape and tradition. *Il battello fantasma* is yet another example of how a contemporary poet can convey useful messages through the rediscovery of what has been traditionally acclaimed as a constant, namely the relationship between man and nature. In this particular case, nature is synthesized in the sea, an exceptional semblance of infinity, and yet recognizable through the senses. Numerous poems derive their charm and distinctiveness from their reference to the ocean, the great wide expanse in which Rombi gets a glimpse of mystery, immutability and meaningfulness.

The key metaphor is obviously the “battello”, an object as well as an image which pervades many poems, and relates it to what must be the most indomitable wish of the poet: to come to terms with what is so near and yet so remote. Visibly it all simply refers to the sea, but poetically it evokes the inner world. A sensory perception grows into a metaphysical experience. His essential phraseology is all derived from one unique environment, and man is once again conceived as a traveller, actually a sailor never sure of himself, and still keen to arrive at a secure point and stop and rest. That may not be possible but art transforms it into a process heading towards self-accomplishment. Even postmodern poetry relies on the strength of illusion.

The sense of expectation is in fact a pervading component of Rombi's constant poetic mood. In *L'attesa del tempo* (1983), perhaps Rombi's most significant contribution to Italian poetry, he had already made full use of the journey archetypal pattern and enriched it with spiritual implication. The real protagonist is here his dead mother, and his sentiments only evoke a past which can never be recaptured, not even in terms of emotions. That made poetry itself look quite different from itself. Carlo Bo had then spoken of “memorie eterne”, almost figments of a certain type which somehow survive, motionless and equally useless, in some remote recess of memory.

Against all this background, which Rombi has managed to construct in the past two decades, he now sets his most recent scenario: the boat is also a dream, the figurative expression of a need which not even poetry can adequately convey through words and rhythms. *Il battello fantasma* is essentially a reflection on this belief.

Silence ("Il nuovo giorno"), memory ("Ridesto all'incanto"), solitude ("Il senso della solitudine"), childhood ("Là, dove ancora..."), nature ("Nostalgia della natura") and various other motives are all intertwined in a manner that once again transforms different poems into sections constituting one long work, phases of one weary journey. Rombi has a tendency to convert separate lyrics into segments of a sort of a transparent novel. The narrative mood prevails, as it does in other instances in his career, but it is the construction of a spiritual autobiography that ultimately concerns him. This is evinced both stylistically (words, phrases, rhythmic patterns, syntactic structures) and thematically (the choice of metaphors, the insistence on a definite set of symbols).

The most important feature of the book is perhaps the emotional intensity with which the poet gives shape to his innermost experiences. He is quite at ease to relate contemporary history to his own feelings, and is equally calm and serene in expressing sadness and thoughtfulness. This may be partly due to his technical ability in handling words but it also emanates from the conviction that in the meantime, along this troubled process, something permanent and unique has been conclusively acquired.

The opening lines of "Il senso della solitudine" somehow sum up the whole meaning of the poet's long search. Timelessness, immobility and certitude are somehow here referred to as inexpressible feelings, and the underlying sense of acceptance is a final stage:

Che poi il senso di questa solitudine
sia comprensione dell'essenza estrema;
che il confronto con l'essere che assume
ogni uomo a specchio della vita
sia poi la verità che in fin si scopre...

It seems that such a condition may be considered as Bruno Rombi's ultimate point of arrival. His religious belief and his existential approach to facts do not in any way exclude each other. Both are acquisitions, to which his poetic output has given ample proof along the years.

Rombi seeks to attain profundity through the adoperation of elementary, basic language. His essential words, phrases and structures are relatively simple, though pregnant with meaning throughout. Their place in the script renders them different. Such is his manner in attaining universal significance, and in transforming biographical data into moments of collective relevance. Equally detached from whatever is immediate and personal, and relateable to what is basically relevant, his poems are an authentic indication of where contemporary poetry stands.

Universal meaning, indeed present directly or as a hugely loaded understatement, is an integral part of Rombi's formula of composition. No poem of his can actually exist and be appreciated for what it really is without a reference to something outside, infinitely wider, and more far-reaching, much larger than itself. He is always seeking to transform an event, a feeling, a relationship, into a paradigm of absolute proportions. The best example of this

attitude is provided by *Tsunami*, a landmark in Rombi's long poetic career, a remarkable achievement in terms of conceptualisation and technique. Here the poet who thinks and the poet who feels meet somewhere, to interrogate, perhaps to challenge, each other. The final outcome is a synthetic integration of both attitudes. *Tsunami* evokes a specific historical event, but it also unfolds itself into a sort of manifestation of what human sensibility, in all times and under any other unfavourable circumstance, is capable of thinking and concluding. A tragic natural event of unprecedented gigantic proportions is initially described in terms of drama and force, and in the span of a few lines the poet ably succeeds in constructing the required environment. It is required not simply because a story has to be told, but also because an inner experience, highly disturbing and incomprehensible, has to be somehow narrated and justified.

Is this actually possible? That is where history and intuition, fact and thought, events and sense, come to terms, also to contradict each other, or hopefully to coincide. There then comes the poet with his metaphysical reflections on this event, now reduced to a mere symbol of the conflict between unpredictable forces of nature and humanity's eternal quest for happiness and security. As in other instances, Rombi does not fail to include the Theological dimension in the complex definition of his poetry. *Tsunami* is a long poem which integrates various cultural and literary elements typical of a whole era. Here mother nature is seen in its unpredictably sombre, mysterious dimension, and tragic experience leads to conclusions which again have nothing to do with what is presumably an ecological consideration. His *Tsunami* somehow makes use of description so as to transcend the significance of what seems to be merely physical. In such points environmental poetry is indeed seen for what it really is: an approach to truth and beauty as felt, perennially and beyond any given place, within the human soul.

The gap between intimacy and politics

The complexity of a highly prolific poet can be best analysed through the recognition of what makes him different even to himself. Bruno Rombi vividly comes forth as an intriguing interpreter of humankind in the light of various typical situations which are frequently treated as unique moments of one wholesome, though contrasting, spiritual voyage. Poetry of a distinctive nature is once more justified critically for complementing life, translating words into action.

As Professor Liliana Porro Andriuoli points out in her *Poesia intimistica e civile in Bruno Rombi* (1999), there are two unmistakable aspects constituting his strong personality: the intimistic and the political. The essential poet is perhaps the first one, since Rombi's social commitment is frequently expressed through outbursts of anger and protest. There is consistency in his judgement, and nowhere does it seem that he modifies his attitude throughout the whole span of his poetic life, since 1956. His political disdain, however, still betrays the classical and equally prevalent idea that a poet is essentially the interpreter of the sense of being rather than the reformer of systems of living.

His treatment of politics is more existential than factual. This belief involves a particular approach to language, even though the poet consistently resorts to simple and clear diction and is never superficially refined or too literary. Rombi naturally keeps his justifiable degree of distance from the familiar forms of prose, and is never easily predictable or plati-

tudinous. His superb use of Italian goes far beyond the normal limits of idiomatic correctness.

In his *I poemi del silenzio*, published in 1956, consisting of three relatively long poems of an intimately personal character, he already provides a quite clear view of his lyrical identity. In *I poemi dell'anima* (1962) he makes a great effort to widen the scope of his inspiration and to treat universal themes, such as solitude, certitude, suffering and faith.

Rombi's profound attachment to his island of birth, Sardegna, comes to the fore in *Canti per un'isola* (1965), to which Liliana Porro Andriuoli duly gives great importance. She detects the poet's most decisive moment of political commitment, a trend which will somehow attain higher significance and greater intensity in later works. But the existential character of Rombi's real concern with life immediately regains priority in his next collection of verse, *Oltre la memoria*, launched in 1975. The fundamental aspect is a sort of rediscovery of what is actually the poet's authentic source of creative activity: the identification of the relationship between experience and sensibility. In various poems departing from an autobiographical standpoint, Bruno manages to attain universal significance without becoming too detached from an identifiable given situation.

Other books by Bruno Rombi may be referred to chronologically and carefully analysed in terms of their fundamental thematic content. The principle that unity underlies real art is quite important and can be evoked here to explain most of the poet's characteristics. Through the identification of major motives underpinning *Forse qualcosa* (1980), *Enigmi animi* (1980), *L'attesa del tempo* (1983), *Riti e miti* (1991), *Un amore* (1992), *L'arcano universo* (1995) and *Otto tempi per un presagio* (1998), the poet's identity is duly exemplified as dualistic. It never reaches the point of integrating the two extremes if not in moments when the socio-political context is strongly condemned for what is essentially antithetic to human integrity. Liliana Porro Andriuoli speaks of the "two hearts of Rombi", one being projected towards the external world, the other one keen on discovering the real meaning of being. What actually distances the two extremities constitutes the essence of Bruno Rombi's better known works. Again, the natural environment within which he sets his own proposal of life seems to embody the compromise between the two; it stands for permanency. The cycle of life, as evinced in vegetative and sensitive life, can be thus better perceived in its mystery by humankind, since it is objectivised. As Sardegna relies greatly on tourism for economic purposes, so does the observation of nature and its eventual transformation into poetic feeling transform the ecological poet into a sort of spiritual tourist. Mobility is quite prominent in Bruno's verse, as the islander is mainly a discoverer of otherness in all its forms.

The bibliography of the critical works which have been written on the poet since 1963 is long indeed and amply manifests the distinct recognition Rombi has acquired as a prominent poet in both his country and abroad. If many scholars have given their share in making this prominent poet known to the world of literature and to the general public at large, that is only due to the fact that he manages to transform the futile instances of daily life into symbols which are both timeless and superior to whatever is local and immediate. In the light of this the relationship between the two extremities of intimacy and politics attains its full significance.