

The Poetry of Menotti Lerro

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P U B L I S H I N G

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“To live without sky...”
—Joseph Joubert (1798)

“We must stand in the shadows in order to see the light”
—A.S. Ghamman (2010)

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PREFACE

MENOTTI LERRO

If I read again the poems collected in this volume, I see the images – usually confused – about my life and, for a moment, the picture of my spring filled with summer scents, appears in its entirety. If I were dead, and climbing the sky, about to turn back in order to discover the image created by my steps, I believe that I would see the shape of a wolf, one that isn't usually dangerous, restlessly wondering in the night, never going far from its home in case it needs to rush to its family's aid.

I think, in fact, that there really exists something that is worth struggling for, worth living for and, if necessary, worth dying for. Poetry has been for me the nursery rhyme to repeat in order to remember my way, an invisible steel thread made of notes and passion, of games and tortures; a thread that could not break and that could not betray.

In these last months, that have brought me back in this "Sceptred Isle", I discovered lots of new colours to my soul, or so let's call it. To begin with, I have understood that it is possible to die because of solitude, but that it is possible to live through it, to live through shutting the eyes and seeing the universe that nourishes itself. So, after spending two months of absolute grey in Oxford, I discovered, escaping for the second time in my life to Reading, that, in this land, there are lawns of perpetual green – where it is possible to hide from the fears of the day; it only needs careful attention to those sudden gusts of wind that can be dangerous to those who, like me, have got a heart that has beaten in unison with the waves on the coast of Acciaroli during childhood.

When I think of poetry, I like to think of it as follows: as the echo of a splash of the sea upon the shadows of those thousand-year-old rocks, that remember – after the continuous modeling of the wind and water – the shadows of the bodies of human beings. A splash capable of emitting a redeeming scent that, once smelt, we cannot live without.

In these first years in which I bound myself to poetry, I was often required to describe it: I discussed it as a message perfectly made by a child who notices his broken toy and, stunned by this tragic event, finds a new method of expression which allows him to cry out his pain, in order

that someone springs to his aid. Consequently, he needs to build this new message in the way best suited to be understood. Other times, I have discussed poetry as something that comes in useful for nothing and nobody because it is only capable of beating down, so to speak, doors that are already open, bodies that are already on their last legs, those, in other words, for whom poetry is not a necessity and, on the other hand, it is not capable of reaching the “resolved” and arid hearts of those that could benefit from it the most. On reflecting upon the word “Poetry”, as well as upon the word “Love”, or upon any other word, I have thought that, after all, they are only signifiers of bodies that don’t know that they are dead, and I will let you imagine the countless reasons for this affirmation. Poetry is also for me something that cannot be summed up because it is itself a summary; it derives from the essential, from the draining. Moreover poetry is something that is useful to define us and the universe because it is quintessence. I believe, then, that poetry needs ambiguity: the higher the ambiguity, the higher the temperature of the text. Poetry is also that text which can give one or more solutions to a determinate problem; and, if it is possible, it may also improve the spirit’s sorrows and pains. Poetry is many things, among them my mother, my father, my sisters, our madness...

An artist is he who is able to release, from his own supreme instrument (the human body) the notes that are capable of twanging the instruments nearby: those that are similar and those that appear dead and unable to play.

And if even just one of these inefficient instruments will twang slightly under the artistic influence, then the artwork will have had a purpose; indeed, it will have one even if it twangs the instruments that are already predisposed to do so.

If in this volume there is *real* poetry (a term that contains a critical judgment of absolute beauty) I cannot say. What I can affirm is that you will be able to find my real essence here and that – in accordance with the wishes of every man – I hope it will remain as a reminiscence of me after the sun has devoured my flesh.

I hope that God, if He exists, takes pity on me and forgives me, even if I am still unable to forgive Him.

PREMESSA

MENOTTI LERRO

Rileggendo le poesie raccolte in questo volume rivedo improvvisamente le immagini – di solito confuse – della mia esistenza e per un attimo il quadro della mia primavera, inondato da profumi d'estate, mi appare nella sua interezza. Se fossi morto, e scalando il cielo mi stessi voltando indietro per scoprire l'immagine lasciata sulla terra dai miei passi, credo che vedrei la sagoma di un lupo, di quelli per lo più innocui, che vagano irrequieti nella notte senza mai allontanarsi dalla propria dimora d'origine, così da poter, se necessario, correre in soccorso della propria famiglia.

Credo, infatti, che esista realmente qualcosa per cui vale la pena lottare, per cui restare vivi e all'occorrenza morire. La poesia è stata per me la filastrocca da ripetere per non perdere la via, un filo d'acciaio invisibile fatto di note e passione, di giochi e torture; un filo che non potrebbe spezzarsi e che non potrebbe tradire.

In questi ultimi mesi che mi hanno riportato in questa "Sceptred Isle" ho scoperto tanti nuovi colori della mia – chiamiamola così – anima. In *primis* ho capito che di solitudine si può anche morire, ma che è possibile sopravvivervi, magari chiudendo gli occhi e guardandosi dentro dove l'universo si nutre di se stesso. Così, dopo aver trascorso due mesi di assoluto grigiore ad Oxford, scoprii, fuggendo per la seconda volta in vita mia a Reading, che esistono in questa terra prati sempre verdi dove potersi perdere senza le paure del giorno; bisogna solo stare attenti ai colpi di freddo improvvisi che, per chi come me ha un cuore che ha battuto all'unisono con le onde sulle coste di Acciaroli nei giorni dell'infanzia, possono essere pericolosi.

Quando penso alla poesia, mi piace pensarla così: come l'eco di un tonfo di mare sulle ombre di quegli scogli millenari, che ricordano – dopo le continue modellature dell'acqua e del vento – le ombre dei corpi degli esseri umani. Un tonfo capace di sprigionare un profumo salvifico del quale, una volta sentito, non si potrà più fare a meno.

In questi primi anni in cui mi sono legato alla poesia, mi è capitato spesso di descriverla: ne ho parlato come del messaggio perfettamente costruito da parte di un bambino che nota il suo giocattolo rotto e che,

ammutilato dal tragico evento, scopre un nuovo metodo per lanciare il suo grido di dolore, affinché qualcuno accorra a soccorrerlo. Di conseguenza, egli necessita di costruire questo nuovo messaggio nel miglior modo possibile per essere inteso. Altre volte, ho parlato della poesia come qualcosa che non serve a niente e a nessuno in quanto capace solamente di sfondare, per così dire, porte già aperte, corpi già allo stremo, quelli che, in altre parole, non avrebbero realmente bisogno della poesia e, tuttavia essa non riesce ad arrivare nei cuori “risoluti” e aridi i quali potrebbero trarne giovamento. Riflettendo sulla parola “Poesia”, così come sulla parola “Amore” o su qualsiasi altra parola, ho pensato che in fondo esse sono esclusivamente significanti di corpi che non sanno di essere morti, e lascio a voi immaginare le innumerevoli ragioni di questa affermazione. La poesia è ancora per me qualcosa che non può essere riassunta perché è essa stessa un riassunto; deriva dall’essenziale, dal prosciugamento. Inoltre la poesia è un qualcosa che serve a definire noi e l’universo in quanto quintessenza. Credo, poi, che la poesia necessiti ambiguità: più alta sarà l’ambiguità, più alta sarà la temperatura del testo. La poesia è, ancora, quel testo che riesce a dare una o più soluzioni ad un determinato problema; magari riuscendo anche a risollevare pene e dolori dello spirito. Poesia è tante cose, tra cui mia madre, mio padre, le mie sorelle, la nostra pazzia...

Artista è colui capace di far sprigionare dal proprio sommo strumento, il corpo umano, le note capaci di far vibrare gli strumenti vicini, quelli simili e quelli che appaiono morti e non capaci di suonare.

E, se anche uno solo di questi strumenti inefficienti vibrerà lievemente sotto l’influenza artistica, allora l’arte avrà avuto uno scopo, in verità ne avrà uno anche se farà vibrare gli strumenti già predisposti.

Se in questo volume ci sia *vera* poesia (termine che trattiene anche un giudizio critico di assoluta bellezza) non sta a me dirlo. Ciò che posso affermare è che qui troverete la mia vera essenza che – come desiderano tutti gli uomini – spero possa rimanere qui in mio ricordo quando il sole divorerà le mie carni.

Dio, se esiste, abbia pietà di me e mi perdoni, anche se ancora non riesco a perdonarlo.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Menotti Lerro is one of the most interesting poets in modern-day Europe. Born in a small village just outside of Salerno, Southern Italy, in 1980, he has produced an impressive range of publications, including essays, poetry, fiction, autobiography, and drama. His first book of poetry, *Uncertain Stumps*, was published in 2003, when Lerro was still a student at the University of Salerno. In the journal *Poesia*, Roberto Carifi recognized, soon afterwards, that Lerro

redeems in the brightness of his verses, of course flourished and characterized by shadows of solitude, the dramatic nature of events hanging over memory and time. The history of his events is narrated through words which are able to translate and communicate hells otherwise inexpressible. The book by Lerro is similar to the stumps evoked in the title, it is a patchwork of embers and ashes, of fires and glares that catch fire in the “dark house” as the last meaning of life lights up itself in the certain and indelible truth of the pain.¹

Lerro’s next book was *Steps of Silent Freedoms* (2005) in which he assembled all of his works from the period in which he was a student, including poems, short stories, two epistolary novels and around one hundred aphorisms. Lerro published in 2006 another collection of poems *Without Sky*. This book achieved cult status for many poets and a number of the same decided to be identified as “Poets without Sky” in a two-volume Anthology edited by Lerro in 2007. In this book, Lerro aimed to present a wide range of poets, some famous, some otherwise, as having a relevant point in common: namely the feeling of being “without sky”, without hope.

In that year Lerro published many books, among them his first work of aphorisms (*Aphorisms*, 2007). This was followed up, in 2008, with an important collection of around three hundred poems entitled *Spring*. The volume aims to identify the first “season” of Lerro’s life, both as a writer and as a man. The book features a preface by Roberto Carifi and a revealing introduction from Lerro himself:

¹ Roberto Carifi, Review of Menotti Lerro, *Uncertain Stumps*, *Poesia* (2003).

Feelings, in fact, in poetry (as in life) sometimes can be “dangerous”, because, in their will of expression and fulfillment, they go as far as ruining the verse, giving it a pathetic and clumsy air. Unfortunately even I – as maybe happens to every aspiring writer – have been a victim of an almost unrestrained sentimentalism [...]. The desire of telling my feelings and my personal story, in fact, has marked my output (even if I have always tried to give to my private emotions some features that could render them universal because I was certain that this was the only way to give artistic dignity to my feelings). [...] I realize, moreover, that in some poems of mine I discover Shakespeare, Dante, maybe Petrarca, Leopardi ... the poets of my spring are many. Their poetry has nourished my poetry and I am not ashamed of it [...]. Art, therefore, runs parallel to the growth of the body, nourishing itself and developing itself in these fundamental years. [...] I would say, leaving the season of feelings [Spring], the eyes start to see and it is possible to notice that the world is darker than we believed; we realize that, moreover, rules and norms, imprisoning and classifying words which are more or less adapted in poetry or in life, do not exist. Yet every word can give an artistic effect if it relates well to others. Today I understand that summer is arrived and the soul is not anymore the absolute truth. The soul, if it exists, is just a part of the body.²

Running throughout this useful outline of the author’s literary vision are the sorts of preoccupations that we see influencing much of the poetry: disappointed searches for meaning and truth; the sovereignty of the body; the influence of classic poets. This extract also reveals how Lerro perceives one season of his life to be over and a new one about to begin. In his new volume *Scents of Summer* (2010) he affirms:

I think this collection marks the beginning of the new and expected season. Summer, it appears, is arrived in a winter day, while I was huddled up under the blankets watching the ceiling and valuing the worries of my thoughts. [...] As concerns my new verses, I can say that they are less dreamy and more boring perhaps; they are written with more haste and with less palpitation; they do not have the same desire to exhibit and to describe themselves like the previous verses.

Maybe summer has brought me the aridity of my verses and my heart.³

Lerro’s most recent book, to date, is *My Child* (2010), a book in which he attempts to deal with the problems raised by his father who “with the time and with continuous health problems has become more and more my son, my child”.⁴ The book continues a Lerroean tradition of looking closely

² Menotti Lerro, *Primavera* [Spring] (Rome: Il Filo, 2008).

³ Menotti Lerro, *Profumi d’estate* [Scents of Summer] (Arezzo: Zona, 2009).

⁴ Menotti Lerro, Interview with Maria Pina Ciancio, *Pomezia Notizie* (2010).

at the author's relationship with his father and allowing that bond to influence the shape and texture of his work.

INTRODUCTION

ANDREW MANGHAM

Poetry cannot be imprisoned in one definition and therefore I myself would have a lot of them, yet no definite and certain definition. I will define, consequently, this literary genre in a different way in comparison with my previous definitions. To being with, I would say that poetry itself is a tool that defines us and the universe, because it is quintessence.

* * *

Tonight my cat and I made our confessions. I told him I would like he were a man in order that I might speak to him. He told me that he would like I were a mouse in order that he might eat me.

—Menotti Lerro.

In 2009, Menotti Lerro was described by one of Italy's most influential critics, Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, as a writer of no insignificant importance:

[Lerro's] new collection in verse, so dense and vigorous in the essential lucidity of images, memories, adventures of the senses and of the thought. His poetry has become rich, vital, always persuasive and forceful, often brilliant.¹

One of Lerro's main strengths, as a poet, is his dedication to the phenomenological nature of human existence. His is a poetry concerned with powerful imagery, the physicality and vulnerability of the body, the meaning of objects, the interpretation of memories, and the philosophical importance of identity. For the first time, the rich colours and textures of Lerro's verse are available in English. This volume presents the power of the poet's voice in all its aching magnificence and demonstrates how it reverberates with the sounds and rhythms of a new generation.

In introducing the context to Lerro's *Selected Poems*, one can do no better than to begin with the author's semi-autobiographical novel *Augusto*

¹ Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, letter to Menotti Lerro, collection of Menotti Lerro (October 2009).

Orrel: Memories of Horror and Poetry (2007). In this text, the author describes young Orrel's experiences of becoming a man. The latter (whose name is "Lerro" spelt backwards) is a character that the author admits to having based on himself. Orrel's family, who are restaurateurs by trade, experience a horrible sequence of events that begin with the father's ill-judged decision to sympathise with a political movement that none of his neighbours choose to support. In-keeping with small-village mentality, the family's restaurant is boycotted and the Orrels are forced to live in abject poverty – poverty that destroys the father and, soon after the birth of Augusto, drives him mad.

In Augusto Orrel we find a modern manifestation of Goethe's Werther: a melancholy and passionate young man whose sorrows are outlined in a language that is both striking and raw. Lerro describes how Augusto is forced to play the role of father to his own father due to the latter's increasing level of psychological delusion. Unsurprisingly, the protagonist begins to feel an enormous and disproportionate amount of responsibility on his young shoulders. Indeed, the idea of a difficult and unconventional childhood is a force that drives much of Lerro's poetry – especially those pieces featuring recollections of the father. Among these is poem 13 which takes a snapshot of a memory as it passes through the mind of the narrator:

The carpentry smelt of trees and incense.
 My father spread white Vinavil in grooves,
 inserted steel nails with two short, intense blows.
 I imitated him, little hammer, between my hands, his tools in miniature...
 I dreamt about the Trojan horse.
 Then in the evening I hid myself
 among sawdust: *There is no safer place*
in the world he said, with open arms.
 Nowadays I take no cover
 but in his eyes
 (in the calm before the storm);
 piece by piece I tidy up
 our carpentry.

What is worth noting here is the richness of the poem's sensorial descriptions: as the reminiscence floats momentarily across the page, so too does the smell of wood and Vinavil; we feel with the poet, the small tools in his hands and the touch of sawdust perhaps, against his face. But this poem also makes clear the entire collection's preoccupation with the relationship between father and son; the carpentry of the two characters echoes the Biblical description of a shared moment between Joseph and Christ. This is a poem about male bonding and reveals how memory,

fatherhood, and comfort are all tied together in the complex vision of the poet: when the eyes of the narrator's father are serene, they offer the comfort that he felt in his early years. In-keeping with the psychoanalytical teachings of Freud, the poem indicates how, for Lerro, happy memories of a father's love offer crucial comforts in adulthood – they allow the boy to tidy away the carpentry and to become a man.

However, in a number of the poems included here, we observe how this process of growing is blighted by the role reversal experienced by father and son. For instance, poem 47 features a number of images of the poem's narrator parenting and comforting his father and concludes with the touching question, addressed to the father, "will you still be my child" when in heaven?

Will you still have a badly-shaved beard
and crooked nails bitten off in the heaven for the wise?
There, dad, my hands will not be there to hold your forehead and your thoughts
when you wake up, prey to monsters, in the night.

Will you remember my dark eyes among those bright crowns
and that funny name you gave me when I was a babe in arms?
Will you efface from your mind the time when I locked you in a toilet
(forgive me)
when you shouted and cried and how, in the light, you held me closely,
bursting into a horrific laughter of joy,
to be in my arms still: *I was afraid of not being able
to see you anymore,*
you said running towards me.

Will you remember, dad, the nights spent by the fireplace
repeating *Spigolatrice di Sapri* and the story of your imprisonment?
These were the only obsessions of yours that I would tolerate,
poems learnt during childhood,
now you think you are grown up
yet you play at smoothing the rough edges off chairs
and making the flint of a lighter spark in the crest of a flame.
Dad, when I will remember the present moment
in order to know what really happened,
will you still be my child?

What this last question signals is that, alongside the loss of the father, the speaker suffers from the loss of God. The sky, he tells us, is empty, and Heaven can offer no home for a man whose faith is gone. "Man is alone", says one of the author's aphorisms, "when he is without God". Poem 47 offers a poignant indication that father and son are separated by their

shared experiences of sorrow: the parent's experience of being locked inside a toilet door and worrying about never seeing his son again is a metaphor for how – in terms of the “normality” that may be expected from the father-son relationship – the doors between these men are closed and double-bolted. Such is clear from poem 5, which suggests that, in order for the speaker to function as his own man, he needs to separate himself from his father:

The last open suitcase
of tremulous uncertainty.
My father is in the darkness of his sleep,
close to me,
and I already hear him crying
about what he perceives in the air of September.

Oh, how many times I will glance at
the past, which sees you still
alone, next to those embers
waiting for me.

In this extract we see the energies of the father working against those of the son: the speaker must leave his parent in order to pursue his dreams, and here he becomes aware that, only when his father's crying becomes a memory, will he be able to forge an identity and a destiny of his own.

In *Augusto Orrel*, a confessional description of the protagonist's feelings during childhood is detailed, painful and affecting:

My youth was followed by uncontrollable fears. I was a victim of an absolute hypochondria. I was obsessed by the fear of becoming insane, of getting sick physically and I used to somatize every little ailment of the body and the mind. I used to repeat to myself: “If I get sick... not only will nobody be able to help me, but I won't be able to remain close to my family and to give them a hand!”

Nobody, or almost nobody, was aware of this because I contrasted my interior states of mind with an incredible resoluteness when it came to being in contact with people; thanks to this resolve I could conceal and compensate for my internal unease. In short, behind that apparent strength there was the most obscure and inexpressible void.

My teenage years passed in this way, without sky, without any hope in the future, waiting for the horrifying fairy-tale of my father to repeat itself.²

² Menotti Lerro, *Augusto Orrel* (Novi Ligure: Joker, 2007).

This is an important passage for a number of reasons. Firstly, notice the simplicity and the candidness of its style; as children do, the narrator lays bare his soul – he exhibits his greatest fears, and explores his most torturous sufferings using language that is uncomplicated and direct. On the page Orrel's pain is hidden behind no obscure sophistries and rhetorical devices. Indeed, as Squarotti noted, Lerro's poetry has a "lucidity of images" – a poetic clarity that, rather than marring the emotional power and philosophical significance of the text, follows the example of Wordsworth in producing power and sublimity by using the language of common men. Observe, for instance, the opening of poem 28: "I feel lonely! / I refuse to use roundabout expressions, ever again".

The above quotation from *Augusto Orrel*, particularly the narrator's acknowledgment of his tendency to "somatize" everything, unveils one of Lerro's other poetic preoccupations: the physical and metaphorical power of the body. This is a theme that also connects to the role of the father. Take, for instance, the superb imagery contained in the ninth poem:

Madmen's sons were born among white walls without doors,
they play and nourish with oblique syllables.

Madmen's sons hate people,
they are stupid, evil, listless, bored, sick.

Madmen's sons do not love
and if they run along lawns, they do it in order to destroy flowers.

Madmen's sons do not sleep at night,
they wander drunkenly with broken shoes.

Madmen's sons lie, betray!
If they smile at you and hug you, it is because they kill you.

Madmen's sons do not have colour
they are pale and filthy, they stink.

Madmen's sons are only crazy
and if they die in their sleep, nobody cries.

Written into this poem is the old myth that madness may be passed from one generation to another; the sins of the father visited upon the children. We must not, of course, be comfortable with any association between sin and psychological unsoundness, yet the pejorative images used throughout this poem signal that, in the mind of some at least, that

link is firmly in place. As with the old mindset which believed in the powers of psychosomatic heredity, this poem forwards the notion that madness may be, for the son, a traitor in his own camp; a hidden taint in his blood. Such constructions make the poem's attachment to the image of whiteness all the more striking. To begin with, madmen's sons are versions of the Lockean *tabula rasa* – a blank page waiting to be written upon by the experiences of life. As the poem develops, it becomes apparent that this blankness signals vulnerability – a “vulnerability” to the staining powers of the father's blood. There is little wonder, then, that the poetry in this collection makes what seems to be a constant attempt to rediscover whiteness: In “Poem from Heaven to a Lover”, it is described how “The wind stole our breath in order to paint / some whiteness under the cars and under eyelids”. Lerro's search for whiteness represents a modern version of Blake's fantasy of “stain[ing] the water clear” in *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* (1794): experience and adulthood bring terrors, black melancholies and obscure symbols of struggle.³ Poetry for both Blake and Lerro offers a chance to recapture the innocence of youth – to remember those clear and unstained years before the soul was blighted by the blood-red energies of experience and the past. One gets the impression that, in the alleged childishness of the father, the poet sees pictures of his own lost childhood.

Corporeality offers, in Lerro's work, the speaker's strongest connection to childhood. It is, generally speaking, the one and only thing that we are sure to take from our earliest years into our last; it is also the essence of what is most important to us, as children, and the thing that defines us. If we were to follow the patterns of thought mapped out by Jacques Lacan, we could also state that, before that phase of life in which we recognize both the law of the father and our own distinctness from the real world, namely “the mirror stage”, we have a connection with the world that exists through only our bodies only. In the passage from *Augusto Orrel* that I quoted above, notice how this dependency and vital connection to the body is something that Orrel is never able to abandon. Due to the “madness” of his father, the channels between the child and his self-development are blocked: in other words, the Name of the Father is absent and – without it – Orrel himself remains a child. As we shall see, Lerro's poetry is full of mirrors and reflections. Denied the seminal moment of the mirror stage, the speaker of these poems appears to be in constant search for his identity and for the distinctness possible in his own reflection. “The

³ William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* (1794; New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1992), p.3.

mirror of water is mud”, goes poem 41, “and there I madly seek my eyes”. In the twelfth poem, we see how, for the poet, the mirror image offers only a grotesque distortion and a disappointing indication that the poet is growing old without ever having found himself truly:

We grow old in people’s eyes
 or when, opening a wardrobe,
 the mirror takes us by surprise.
 We grow old, half- plunged
 in our rivers
 seeing portraits reflected when images flow among a thousand folds;
 we grow old
 in twisted reflections of cutlery
 and glasses.

And, in the fifteenth poem, we see, writ large, both the speaker’s search for his identity, and his discovery, in the looking-glass, that he is a “statue of salt” – a temporary and transient shadow:

It is in the mirror that you notice your thinning hair,
 your dried mouth and your broken eyes.
 I remain firm, looking at myself.
 I do not belong to me, I am a statue of salt.

What is fascinating about the representation of the body, in Lerro’s poetry, is that corporeality becomes conspicuous through absence, indeterminacy or vulnerability only. Take, for instance, the transvestite poem, number 14:

I am neither a man nor a woman,
 a hook between my legs.
 I have transplanted my hair, breast, lips,
 I have trimmed my hips,
 covered my skin, tattoos and piercings
 in order to hang umbrellas.
 I talk with a mother voice
tra-vestito e l’anima le ossa.

Here indicators of gender identity are made arbitrary: hair, breast, lips, hips, among other things, are characteristics that may be modified. The third poem highlights, also, that bodies are mere pillars of sand: transient and adrift:

If we understood that we are sand
 we would firmly shut the windows and the doors
 in order to avoid being dismembered by the wind.
 Then we would roll around on the beach
 on sunny days
 in order to patch the holes in the body;
 we would happily merge into every container
 in order to steal its shape and its smells.

This poem's savage dehumanization of the body reminds us, as the transvestite poem does, that, while we mould ourselves into a variety of shapes, we cannot change the fact that we are essentially vulnerable to the winds of experience: that we lack any form of selfhood that may be described as objective.

Lerro's *Selected Poems* continues a tradition of seeing each man's life as

... but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more. [A] tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.⁴

As in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1849), the march of time is "red in tooth and claw" in Lerro's work, and the poet wonders, along with his great forbears in the art of poetry, whether life can be "as futile, then, as frail!"⁵. What follows is the seventh poem of this collection:

If life is a mixture of drained rivers
 which carry to the sea echoes of water,
 we are nothing but shadows –
 reflected lights of dead bodies
 without no possible outlet or shore.

Poem 22, moreover, contains the same sort of urgency and exasperation contained in *In Memoriam*:

And yet in no time they disappear,
 perhaps to reappear in a dream...
 But now they are dead,
 deleted without having lived

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.24-28.

⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, (part 56).

because each man exists just for himself
and when he dies (did he live?) nobody knows
that once he breathed.

In spite of such philosophical crises, the poetry of Menotti Lerro offers hope through two channels: poetry and love. To begin with a point that involves both these forces, the collection reveals an almost-Romantic faith in the existence of the sublime; Lerro believes that his poetry can invest banal, mundane objects with new life and that this offers some level of sublimity through the powerful workings of the imagination. In “The Reason We Did Not Find”, for instance, the narrator outlines a series of macabre objects that have specific value for him. Along these are the false teeth of his dead grandmother, and some old skull bones:

The false teeth that kissed me
remained here
after you went away.
I sometimes look at them
and see you cleaning them again with string,
with a twig from the field
and then blow on them, patiently, with love.
One day, maybe, I will give them to my jaws.

In the attic you could find some straw
and sheep’s skull bones
that the butcher imprisoned.
I dusted them off with my t-shirt
and the imagined eye was sublime.
In that moment, that was happiness.

As in Eavan Boland’s collection of poems, *Object Lessons* (1995), things, in Lerro’s poetry, become charged with great meaning – “meaning” that is the product of imagination and memory. In reinvigorating the dead with his mind’s eye, the speaker of this poem is granted access to the sort of sublime happiness that the rest of his poem reveals him to have been excluded from. Poem 23, a verse that outlines a series of memories from what is clearly a trip to Barcelona, betrays a Christian-like preoccupation with symbols:

I remember the terror of the *Sagrada Família*, the twelve spires,
the marks of cement on our faces when we awoke in the station,
the women had in warm, improbable corners,
the roar returned to the ocean.

References to the twelve spires of the *Sagrada Familia* highlight how, like the basilica, these poems have a dedication to the value of symbolism. The twelve spires represent, of course, the twelve apostles and, shortly following their mention, we have marks on faces that become a sort of stigmata – bodily scars that speak volumes about larger questions of spirituality and faith. The earlier poem, number 20, anticipates this link between the physical and the metaphysical:

Soon we will be as the dead
 who, climbing the skies,
 look at the fluorescent map
 left upon the earth: the steps, their steps...
 Will we discover, then, any design to our life?
 Flower, fruit, bird, jewel...
 or perhaps nothing... confused lines,
 a crazy, unique sketch.

The image of men and women looking down upon the tracks of their lives, as if those lives left a network of markings like slugs do with slime, is an extraordinary and original idea. Yet, what is also fascinating about this poem is its indication that the discovery of objects: flowers, fruits, birds, and jewels, is synonymous with the search for the “design of our life”. Objects and markings are, for Menotti Lerro, supremely important. Like Boland before him, he is a poet who takes “lessons” from the memories and the importances that attach themselves to the minutiae of everyday life.

Let me return to the point I made earlier about poetry and love offering some respite and hope in an otherwise hostile world. In 2010, Lerro contributed a definition of poetry which he called “The Compromise” to a book entitled *The Burn of Poetry*. He wrote:

A glance is enough to recognize the burnt person. The brand is impressed on the eyes and on every strip of skin. As it happens to those who discover the stigmata at one point of their life, firstly without understanding the reasons for it, poetry started to burn *my* body in the period of my youth. It happened in the streets, without a pen, and I had to run home or into a coffee bar in order to give shape to that sudden thought which I did not want to lose forever. Above all, I did not want it to have made an indelible burn. The poetry that is lost will brand you, it will engrave itself, as if by a miracle, or as punishment perhaps, on the empty spaces of your body and will cause more acute pain than, I imagine, the initial branding provokes. I believe that when the spaces of my body are filled with unwritten poetry, the ultimate brand that fails to find a position will be fatal to me. This is my recurring nightmare, my neurotic obsession. Therefore if I think about

a poet I imagine him as a wretch wanting to save his skin, to rescue it from the relentless brand, and to delay its final, fatal mark by stooping to compromise on paper.⁶

This is a beautiful description of the poet's artistry and one that touches upon a number of the preoccupations I have already discussed. Notice, once again, the interest in marks, stigmata – physical indications of the passing of a thought; we may also see the Lockean/Blakean notion of the individual as a blank page gradually marred and defiled by the workings of experience; and, finally, observe the poet's continued attention to the body. Poetry is, almost literally, written on the body by the fiery brand of genius. A true poet, it seems, has no choice but to write. Poetry becomes the proverbial "overflow of powerful feelings" and writing it down is the poet's method of dealing with the raw savagery of its energy. "I would say", Lerro suggested in a 2010 interview, "that poetry serves nothing and nobody because it breaks down doors that are already open, breaks bodies that are already on their backs".⁷ In spite of its remedial qualities, then, poetry can be damaging; in "The Compromise", Lerro's artistry is just as red in tooth and claw as the forces it attempts to chronicle.

This argument is supported and added to by the pair of love poems that we get towards the end of this collection. The first of these, "Poem from Heaven to a Lover", highlights how, like poetry, love involves attempting to unstain the waters – to reinvest the marked and maligned world with a new form of blankness/whiteness:

Finally, I will reveal, how we escaped to Berlin;
 you told me: *look, my love, the world*
disappears under the snow.
Let's hide ourselves there
for as long as we can.

The wind stole our breath in order to paint
 some whiteness under the cars and under eyelids,
 and it enveloped us in intimate silence,
 so even our hearts could not make a noise.

The white world of love, characterized by silence and intimacy, offers peace and relief from reality. Yet, over the page, we are reminded that love, like poetry, is as destructive as it is remedial:

⁶ Menotti Lerro, in: *L'Ustione della Poesia [The Burn of Poetry]* (Como: Lietocolle, 2010).

⁷ Interview in *Pomezia Notizie*, op. cit.

I kept silence and looked at you while going down the stairs
 and the banging of the door was a gunshot to my heart.
 Then I would have wished to run after you and give you a big hug,
 I wanted to tell you I would like to live you
 when this terrible death, which repeats itself like the comets of August,
 like the every-day tide of on our shores,
 will be passed.

This poem is about an argument between lovers. It reveals how love can be hurtful as well as beautiful – violent as well as nurturing. This is the power that Lerro finds in his poetry: offering some method of controlling the fiery alchemy of his aesthetic, the artform also involves the damaging processes of fixing hurt into words, branding negative thoughts deep into the skin, and allowing the savage forces of the past to become written on the body.

In the centre of this collection there pulsates, like a beating heart, a handful of poems that identify the body as their central point of focus. These begin with the *post-mortem* poem “The Dead Body”, which captures, ironically, none of the repose that one might expect in the stillness (or in the darkness) of death. Instead a body is starkly exposed to the light, which emphasizes, I think, the thematic interests of the rest of the collection. First of all, the body becomes a thing – an object that the other figures in the poem ignore, even though it (the corpse) irradiates in the light of the dead room. What is central to this dehumanization of the corpse is the curious enlightenment that we get from the beginning.

Since the eighteenth century, human bodies have had a significance more in keeping with the principles of science (anatomy, medicine, surgery) than with religion and/or spirituality. The development of post-mortem surgery, unquestionably a “progress” of the modern age, has led to the body losing much of the dignity and the gravitas it once had. The last aching image of Lerro’s “The Dead Body” represents a body that still *feels* – that has the emotions of *life* inscribed upon its dead physiognomy: “... the forehead betrays the thought / which does not vanish”. In accordance with much of the poetry’s insistence on the survival of feeling against the march of scientific insensitivity in this secular world, Lerro’s body poems seek to reinforce the lost connection between the body and emotion.

“The Naked Body” is another transvestite poem, which depicts the modifications that are required to turn a male body into a female: here the penis is represented as a crow which is wished dead. The image of the crow brings to mind the excellent collection of poems by Ted Hughes entitled *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) – a visceral volume that fully exploits the symbolic significance of the crow and the

phallus. Lerro's reference to the crow (the penis) and the potential links to Hughes highlights how the phallus is conspicuous in Lerro's work by its absence. Hughes's *Crow*, for instance, is a collection that fully exploits the symbolic significance of the phallus and its role as a personal and a cultural thing of importance; whereas, in Lerro's poetry, we have just three references to the penis – as a hook, a crow, and as an erection pointing at a mirror (which is something we will need to discuss). In two of these mentions, the penis is transformed (euphemistically) into something else – it is not wanted, it is altered, tied up, ignored. This seems rather unusual in a collection that takes masculinity and the idea of *becoming* a man as one of its central themes. Once again, Lerro's speaker finds refuge in the blank: what is unsaid is just as important (if not more so) than what *is* said. This is interesting and indicates, I argue, one more instance where the boy tries to resist growing up. I mentioned above that Lerro's speaker is a man who is constantly searching for his lost childhood in the mirror. These poems seek a paternal connection that was lost too early – for a developmental mirror stage that is simultaneously rejected and fought with each glance at the narrator's reflection. It is apposite, therefore, that the object that most represents the transition from boyhood into manhood – that part of the body which has, throughout the ages, been connected with masculinity, virility, and each man's claim to independent volition – is castrated.

In many ways, the poems in this collection present us with an emasculated text: a work in which the quintessential signifier of man's virility and volition is removed: many of the body poems represent absence or powerlessness: in "The Delirious Body" we have another transvestite who cannot stand; in poem 40 there are rotten cavities, missing teeth and the shocking subjection of rape; and "The Invisible Body" is all about loss, amputation and decomposition. But the most significant absence is the absence of the phallus: the penis is, in no uncertain terms, a shocking image that these poems have a need to disregard: sexuality is not being owned up to; it is almost as if the speaker wishes to reject his sex in order to find peace and repose in androgyny.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Lerro presents us with a poem called "The Impotent Body". This is, I think, the most powerful and the most significant of the poems in this volume. It represents a man staring at the reflection of his body and figures him rejecting the will and the independence that that body represents: the hairs and the erection signify how, bodily, this is a man ready to forge his own developments. Yet, the fact that he is described as impotent (despite not being so, physically), signals a crisis experienced at the point of becoming a man. The lips sown

together in silence (another great symbol of impotence) signifies the levels of torture felt by a man who is ready to speak, yet is unable to do so. The phallus mockingly stands erect – it points to the mirror image that simultaneously points back and represents the failure to grow. In a clever inversion of a symbol that has always been present in man’s art, the erect penis represents a lack of power, an absence of will and a psychological gridlock. This poem offers a compelling image that is full of meaning: remember how the mirror image manifests, for this poet, the relationship between father and son. In the concept of a tortured soul looking at his erect phallus in the mirror we have a reconfiguration of the representation of Adam and God in Michelangelo’s painting of the Sistine Chapel. In the latter, Adam reaches upwards towards God and the Deity, in turn, reaches down to his son. Their fingers almost touch and Michelangelo wishes to signify that that moment of contact between man and god would beget a spiritual and intellectual relationship ensuring man’s sovereignty, independence and unique relationship with Heaven. In Hughes’s poetry, this moment of creation is much more corporal and savage:

Crow laughed.
 He bit the Worm, God's only son,
 Into two writhing halves.
 He stuffed into man the tail half
 With the wounded end hanging out.⁸

And in Lerro’s “The Impotent Body”, this link between creation and the phallus continues as the young man’s paralyzed conception of himself envisions the mirror image and the real man reaching out to each other with the sex organ and failing to make contact; the moment of creation, the contact between God and man, Father and Son, is lost. “The Impotent Body” is, like much of the poetry here, a profound poem about one man’s sense of his own struggles to become a man.

⁸ Ted Hughes, “A Childish Prank”, in *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970).