

APPENDIX B

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE WORK OF MENOTTI LERRO

Francesco D'Episcopo, preface to *My Child [Il Mio Bambino]*

Menotti Lerro is a promising new gift to our literature. A voice that resonates from our south, boundless and wild, and which extends towards unlimited horizons, and is fitting for a poetry which helps us to live.

And this latest work allows us to penetrate the labyrinth of words in which our poet loves getting lost and in finding himself again, using an alternation of forms and stylistic registers, moving from the most basic and essential story, the one told in front of the fireplace during the long winter evenings, to another story more exemplary and manifestly hematic because of a frequent game of synesthesia – a game in which the poet reveals steady consciousness and surprising certainty.

The style of a poet always, or almost always, reveals the seasons of his soul, which generally yield to the persistence of a view of the world that is not always harmonious. [...]

These poems show awareness of the madness that enshrouds every day survival, to which the poet superimposes and contrasts his own madness. It is a madness that hurts nobody, as Erasmus of Rotterdam noted splendidly, and that, at worst, can harm the poet himself, as he becomes conscious of a destiny that does not always correspond to that of others. The *resistance* to the homologating instrumentation of the world's business remains the fundamental objective of a poem, which claims a structuring solemnity, even in the games of metrical form that are offered, which, however, are never an end in themselves but functional to an expressive and existential compactness, of which physicality becomes apparent with declared insistence.

And one can just agree with the struggle that poetry always establishes with itself, going across itself, getting lost in the veins of a word whose ebb and flow regulate our alternating actions, thoughts, and feelings among escapes into the future and returns to a past burdened with

memories. And love remains perhaps the highest proof or counter check of bodies attempting to merge while remaining divided.

Beyond all that, however, there is the inevitable, unfathomable sententiousness of our South, but also the acrobatic will involved in imagining settings sometimes horrible, ruthless absurd and cruel, to which there corresponds an unexpected, aching tenderness entrusted to an unlikely dawn of the life.

Lerro's poetry is, therefore, prophetic and autumnal. He is clever in knowing that poetry is useless but also sensitive to the perception that it remains a superfluous good, a kind that one cannot live without.

Robert Carifi, from the Introduction to *My Child* [*Il Mio Bambino*]

Menotti Lerro walks the streets of a cemetery and transforms them, making them become barren lands and then, suddenly ... the slow tears of the dead. Because the dead cry, they grieve for their loves, for their whores, walking "the paths of the night" alone. And it does not matter that they are alive because they are dead, they have the same tears as the dead, sometimes they also have the same smile as the dead – a smile that communicates with the afterworld, that forms a whole with the heavenly feasts, those that we cannot see, we cannot hear, but Lerro makes them dance a heavenly dance, he dances with his dead people, smiles with his dead people, cries with the dead and the living. There is a kind of transcendence in Lerro's poems from which he views the world, a spirituality in which he is able to sublimate this land dominated by evil and death, even though evil and death have won the game. This wounded angel, who at times asks poetry for more than it can give, fights against life and death, offering us a sad and sublime poetry.

Giuseppe Lupo, from the Introduction to *My Child* [*Il Mio Bambino*]

Dear Menotti,

That your poetry was born in the territories of moral ambiguity was already perceptible in reading your previous collection. Compared to those verses that are not much older than this one, *My Child* [*Il Mio Bambino*] reinforces the sensation that you are an author dedicated to building a path of wisdom – a compact and coherent path, like each new work must be; a path chained to the previous one, but having more progressive and

convincing results. The perception of a geographical area arranged to the memorial transfiguration, a family structure made mythical by the distance of time, a gentle coming and going between the “cognition of pain” and the slightly mysterious sense of the waiting that becomes chronic, that is to say continuous: these are the main themes about *My Child* [*Il Mio Bambino*]. Not surprisingly, the sixty-three poems inaugurate a route that begins with the father figure (I think he is your father, who then also becomes your child) and concludes with the great theme of vanity, of “running after the wind [...] or of “embracing the wind” [...].

Fitfully you make us feel the sense of belonging to all creation; [...] but you also convey the idea of events that happened before your pen was put in contact with paper and of which only an echo remains: “Do you remember some hail upon the windowpanes? / [...] It has been a special day”. Sometimes it seems that you want to remain on the threshold of this event, you want to intrigue us like readers by telling us a pre-history (more than just a story) of your consciousness and then, perhaps for lack of courage for going to the end, you enjoy hiding, eclipsing. I quote a quatrain that has struck me more than others: “We do not love anything, but the body / that contains us / we forget the names / of those who tighten our hands”. The danger that all will be forgotten lies in wait around the corner, ready to strike at our imperfect nature. And in this acknowledgement of our imperfection, dear Menotti, I think we see the secret of your poetry: the oldest sense of perceiving the world and of telling it in verse.

Yours affectionately,

Giuseppe Lupo.

Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, preface to *The Eyes upon the Time* [*Gli Occhi sul Tempo*]

The poetry of Menotti Lerro is proof of the infinite predictability of poetry, in the sense that it [...] is quickly materialized in sentences, in sudden patches, in dramatic and painful judgements, rigorously drained until it becomes the proclamation of a desperate tragedy. There is very little around: landscapes, emotions, visions are burned suddenly in the verse so that very soon the speech reaches the essence of the concept and the reality, always sullen, of the existence of the world. Lerro’s speech always has something feverish which allows the verse to arrive at

explanation and judgement promptly. Lerro catches about time the speed of its passing, and the sense of loss – almost instantaneous – of joy, depth of existence [...]. Everything falls to attrition. Life is painful; it is often tragic; no more than an image that runs away, a split-second reflex, like a series of reflexes in the mirror of time [...]. And the space is illusory too, as the first poem of the collection reveals in an exemplary way: “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”. Time has no memory, and the river of Heraclitus does not see the plunging of the man in the passing of his existence, but only an image, infinitely weak and very pale. Everything can be unmade, including dreams that are the reflex of a reflex of the mind, not a vision and not an invention: “Nothing belongs to us / but dreams / confused images of the night, / voices that we do not distinguish anymore”. The same possession of dreams is, however, fleeting and dreams get confused and lost in time without insight. Lerro, in fact, repeats until he verifies the impossibility of memory and of every commemoration and experience and meeting: “If I had to describe just one face, / one, just one, / among the many faces met along my way / I could not do it. / [...] I am assailed by a fatal crumbling of lines / and in this head / just a shadow remains of each body, darkened shadow, / without any face or voice”. [...]

The sense of the disappearing of everything always remains real: I think, as a very significant example, we may look at this marvellous rewriting and reinvention of the *Dames du Temps Jadis* by Villon:

What about that altar boy
 about games with cats in the sun?
 Where now are the prayers confided to marbles,
 the hosts dissolved with penitence?
 Everything is fog enveloping bones.

Everything that has existed gets lost irreparably. Lerro’s poetry constantly proposes the tragic disappearance of everything in the wealth of changeable occasions and in the method of describing things, events, people and actions. Moreover, some fragments of memory heighten the dissolution of the pronounced word even further (as is also shown by the commemoration of the father, a carpenter, and by childhood games). A text like the one that starts *torn clothing* is the most effective pattern of representing the world as consumption and dissolution of things and bodies). It is a representation of things that passes from the indication of simpler and more common news to metaphysical configurations, with an

overall result that typically summarizes the sense of the world as Lerro perceives it and describes it. The spring itself is translated from the joy of the flights and of dreams into a breaking of the impulse towards future and adventures [...]. The childhood of nature and of existence lasts for too little a time: Lerro renews the proclamation of *Alexandros* by Pascoli: “*Il sogno è l’infinita ombra del vero*”; but even the dream appears to him ephemeral and fragile. It is, of course, the alternation compared to cancellation of time and of too quick a conquest of novelty and of the vital joy of childhood, but it is a desire in danger, it is an aspiration; it does not guarantee anything because it is revealed to be contradictory and dubious (“Now we can only cling to dreams, / to the unknown”).

The few narrative texts tell (in the most essential and painful way) the reality of the cruelty of the chronicles of our world, or rather of the whole event of the whole human story:

The little, punished, infected dog
shouted:
“Shame has no name...” repeated
“...just smells, colours, pains”.
In a desert of red flowers she sought a precipice,
a ground to dig in order to bury the body.

There is, in this poem, a quite evident obsession with the decay of the body: in comparison there is no soul, but only the precarious dream. Read, for instance, the rapid and precise sentence: “Poetry, Love: signifiers / of bodies that don’t know that they are dead”. The mirror is the shadow of shadows; the bodies are appearances; words that were meticulous and sacred have been defeated. I conclude my remarks by concentrating on a longer narrative poem as a signifier of a different style of writing in terms of constancy of tragedy of speech: “The Story of Alessia In-verse”. It has the structure of a ballad. The story of the life of Alessia summarizes the whole series of errors and horrors, of despair and madness, of dreams and defeats. The protagonist is caught by the smallest events, small but shocking and exemplary, and soon after she is caught in actions and in situations of terrible pain and agony. It is a further example of the significance of the poetry of Lerro: a lesson in the despair of life made into words, a life without illusions and without comfort.

Carla Perugini, preface to *Poesía Elegidas*

Among the manifestations that literature has invented over time, the poetic one maybe requires the highest degree of complicity between author and reader, for that which is implicit, in other words, not said and unable *to be* said, the verse relies on its addressee to fathom. [...] Each text begins to really exist only in the act of receiving, when, from the hand of he who has written, it passes into the hands, the eyes, and ears of he who reads it (or listens to it being read, as has happened for centuries). It is a munificent exchange of gifts, from the generosity of the poet to the hospitality of reader. It is like inhabiting the same house for a period, gazing at its furniture [...], discovering the taste of those who lived there before us; still smelling previous odours, guessing previous tracks. We are not, necessarily, willing guests of this house: sometimes inhabiting poetry is hard and sad, going out from this is almost a liberation, like someone who leaves behind unwanted pains, no shared experience. But always, always, if it is true poetry that we have experienced, we will remain permanent guests: something of the text will remain attached to us, and will resurface over time, leaving upon our face the sign of a smile or a painful grimace. So, what remains inside me from reading the selected poems of Menotti Lerro? The vision of a gloomy home, inhabited by shadows of the living and the dead because we that are alive “Soon [...] will be as the dead” and, who knows whether, among the many confused lines followed and glimpsed, we can draw the unique design that has guided our days. It is a plot, that of the existence of the poet, made more of shadows than of light; in which the *chiaroscuro* tends irreparably towards the second half of the syntagm. The night prevails over the day, not only in a metaphorical sense in these verses, but also as frequency, and it is perhaps, also in its disconsolate unavoidability, more reassuring and cosy than the day, in which the blinding sun is always connoted by images of piercing, of perverse cutting of the flesh (“and we will see nothing but defenseless matter crumbling among the knives of the sun”; “the sun that smells every dead thing / and seeks it by knocking in places where it cannot see, / wishing to devour its flesh, its flesh! / Tomorrow it will devour even this”; “Where does the sun disappear, now? / Which flesh will it infect with its false light? / What carcass will it devour, mercilessly, / before inserting / again its swords in the night?”) or it is replaced by a grey light in which the contours and the meanings of people and things lose visibility, till they fade. Because everything fades; this is the bitter observation of one who has seen the disappearance of the father figure, by definition a permanent support, a comforting embrace, a daily example,

and then only an absence to be recomposed by rearranging the shared objects (“Nowadays I take no cover / but in his eyes / (in the calm before the storm); / piece by piece I tidy up /our carpentry”). There is no comfort, even in the memory of childhood, completely peppered as it is with a highly evocative vocabulary of isolation, silence and loss, [...] as embodied in that intense and mysterious image of an attic of straw and bones: “Here, a hermetically-sealed attic of straw and bones where / it is possible to fly or disappear without the fears of the day”; “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”. Bones, ultimate truths, remind us of the mortal nature to which all of us are subjected: men, animals and things beyond a horizon that the narrator’s mother points out to us, looking up from her work:

In the burning summer night
 from a little window in the heart of Cilento,
 my mother seeks the horizon,
 she points it out to those who listen.
 The finger that tastes sauce,
 that dries eyes,
 pricked with needles kept on the spool.

In the short anthology presented here, there are two types of selected poetry that demonstrate, once again, how lyricism is never self-referential, but lives, and finds its key to the reading, in the historicity of which is expression. Here, then, the strictly subjective compositions alternate with long “narrations” in verse, where the lived experiences of the poet interweave with those of others, chosen once more on the basis of loss and death. These are the stories of Alessia, Maria, the grandmother, the playmate, the never born baby and of another father disappeared too soon; stories of defeats to which the dream provides a fragile method of escape. But is the dream a shelter, or a further lie? The composition that closes the book does not seem give many illusions (“Now we can only cling to dreams, / to the unknown”). We are made of this same intangible material, perhaps we should remember it more often, in order to catch a bit of happiness:

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.

A final note on the volume: Lerro has chosen to present his poems also in Spanish, the language of his university studies. The translation faithfully follows the original text, with attention and punctuality, once again disproving the cliché that poetry cannot be translated. In fact, reading is always a translation, from the universe of the poet to that of the reader: as the etymology of the word reminds us, it is a carrying from one bank to another, [...] mutual glances towards the ambiguous river of words that is poetic invention.

Alessandro Serpieri, preface to *Poesías Elegidas*

This selection of poems by Menotti Lerro [...] expresses the central theme of a creative, feverish imagination, according to which the spectacle of the world is just illusory phenomenology of reflexes, illusions, nightmares. The continuity, and the sense of suffering subjectivity, should rely on the apparent evidence of the day and on the scattered traces of memories; to these the dense or hollow intensity of the night responds and, therefore, testifies to the defeat of a mystery that cannot be revealed because it does not exist. Upon the black curtain studded with fragments, the abyss of a past of dead people, figures and stories of childhood emerge: here, and elsewhere, the figure of the father that, with a symbolic gesture, would like to convey to the son the secret of life and death; and in other poems that of the mother who, among household chores, seeks to open the horizon (poem 25). These are two tensions towards a *beyond*, but both of them are in vain because, by remembering them, the poet desperately disavows them with the horror of atomic or molecular physicality of the human bodies destined for breaking up (unless, maybe, a quiet decanting into a solid and eternal container can be found (poem 3). Another, and more frequent, construction and constriction of redemption is the writing itself, but not as a celebration of the self and of the world, but as a disaster-struck witness, on black paper, bleeding, burning from the absence of God – in the solitude of the ego [...]. The sun itself deceives with murderous light [...]. Finally, there is the mask, or the endless masks that do not certify the identity of the self, apart from the final one: the mortuary one “that summarizes them all” (poem 24). Here and there, the desolation of the poem alternates with narrative ballads on the slope of disillusionment: examples of aching and senseless lives (as the poem “The

Story of Alessia In-verse”), or accumulations of the tender memories of childhood where, however, “the reason” was not found for the death of his loved people, or the death of a dog, and for the existential disorientation that only the account of fairy tales to a little girl can exorcize (as in the poem “The Reason We Did Not Find”).

The seal of this collection is based on this last theme: the illusion of dreams, the search for God and regret for the lost vibrancy of childhood – the living *beyond* the words and *before* of the great disenchantment. Between despair and dreaming, the poetic voice of Lerro shows a peculiar, expressive power modulated with images (that are often surprising) and a techniques in rhyme and metre that is often masterful.

Giancarlo Pontiggia, review of *Spring* [Primavera].

Menotti Lerro, born in 1980, currently a PhD student at the Department of English Studies of the University of Salerno – where he graduated with a dissertation about the poetry of Eliot and Montale, has published a very extensive volume, *Spring*. It aims to be a sort of anthological compendium of all his previous literary works. The title alludes to the first season of life, seen with the eyes of one who has experienced it, and feels the need to summarize it, giving it some order that will be, first of all – as it is inevitable –, the order of time and of seasons. And, in fact, the book is divided into four sections, which stretch out from *Childhood*, through *Adolescence* and *Youth*, to the conquered *Maturity*, foreseeing, within each section, a sort of progression of thought and of emotion, marked also numerically [...] and chronologically [...]. Titles, expressing an anxious and anguished sensibility, accompany each section, partly recovered from previous collections [...]. A path of life and of knowledge that is astonishing in so young a poet, both for the richness of existential themes (which extend also to the great religious questions), and for the tragic tension of the speech, over which the traumatic perception (almost primordial, at the bottom) of a world that has lost, indistinctly, even the idea of *sky* (recurrent subject of the third section) hangs, like the weight of a great disaster:

Dublin is without sky like Omignano and Milan,
Oxford and London, Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao,
like Prague and Budapest, Frankfurt and Monaco...
There is no home.

Many of these pages go to compose a sort of private diary, committed to a language with strong emotional impact, often woven with *tòpoi* that are more conspicuous of the poetic imagery of Post-Romanticism (with unique accents of the *Scapigliatura*) [...]. Lerro, it is understood, is a poet who needs to lie in vast spaces, to appeal to a wider repertoire of figures (himself he confesses in a note to have loved “metaphors, syntactic inversions, oxymoron, metonymy, the search words, rhyme, assonance, anaphora”), to seek forms of expression with a strong communicative tension [...].

If, on the one hand, the quality and the rhetoric of this poetry are striking, on the other hand, the excess of ease with which the author uses his materials, both biographical and literary, as well as his tendency to abuse images of abjection and desolation perplexes us [...]. But, as for other poets born in the Seventies and Eighties, and it is certainly a merit compared to prevailing minimalism in previous generations, literature appears to Menotti Lerro as a space of truth to which he gives himself up without hesitations and distrusts a repertory of styles and symbols that continue to burn on the page, to nourish the bleeding and wounded “self” on myths and reason. Among the many styles that characterize the book, we prefer the Bachelardian poet who writes: “I have extinguished the candle in the night / the shadows remain on the walls of the mind”.