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Recensioni

REVIEW OF RICHARD AMBROSINI, *LA POESIA INGLESE. PROPOSTE DI LETTURA DALL'ETÀ DEI TUDOR A OGGI* (CAROCCI, 2025)

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ABSTRACT

Review of Richard Ambrosini, *La poesia inglese. Proposte di lettura dall'età dei Tudor a oggi* (Carocci, 2025).

Keywords — English Poetry; Poetry Criticism and Pedagogy; Literary Education in Italian Universities; Poetry Reading Strategies; Perception of Verse.

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1. OPENING

“Poems must, of course, be written in emotional freedom. Moreover, poems are not language but the content of the language. And yet, how can the content be separated from the poem’s fluid and breathing body?” (Oliver 3). I feel these words as truly encapsulating the spirit that animates the pages of this remarkable new volume by Richard Ambrosini.

La poesia inglese. Proposte di lettura dall’età dei Tudor a oggi opens by stating that “[i]l capolavoro della cultura inglese è la lingua. La bellezza di quella lingua entra in azione quando un lettore trasforma i versi sulla pagina in poesia, leggendoli ad alta voce o ascoltandoli con il suo orecchio interiore” (*La poesia inglese* 13). The author locates himself, much like Oliver and many writers before and after them, in a semiotic and pragmatic space that is both experiential and interpretive. It is a shared space between authors and readers that highlights poetry’s “fluid and breathing body” – its rhythm, meter, and sound patterns. In this interactive, vivid, embodied dimension, language serves as an experiential tool of beauty, a way to express and perceive the unity of being that exists between and beyond words and meaning, thought and emotion; here, language construes a metaphysical, otherwise inaccessible bridge between verse (words on a page) and poetry (words acting on us). This “fluid and breathing body” of poetry, this “bellezza di quella lingua [...] in azione”, is an *integral signic reality* whose expressive and contextual elements “are semantic” and, therefore, cannot be altered, otherwise the whole meaning would be lost (Lotman 22). Despite the time, space and culture differences, this signic reality intimately transforms whoever touches it, proceeding and returning to that same “emotional freedom” which authors and readers share during this conjoined, ritualistic, ever-repeated creative act of reciprocal renovation.

Furthermore, and as we will see, every page of Ambrosini’s work reflects the delightful, distinct experience of reading and teaching poetry in a foreign language, such as English, to Italian university students. This is an experience many of us have had for years; Ambrosini has successfully experienced it for over 30 years, and the pages of this book reflect this fact. In lectures, when both the teacher and students are fully engaged, an immersive experience of literature can sometimes emerge during the continuous interaction with young people who are almost adults, often coming from different preparatory backgrounds in school, prone to develop the same curiosity which we as critics have cultivated for years of study and exploration of the poetic domain. And although Italian students often excel in foreign languages, they frequently struggle with foreign literature. Nevertheless, in many cases, they gradually understand what it means to become self-aware, sensitive readers. It is appropriately in the teaching of foreign poetry at the university that, according to Ambrosini, this delicate process of assimilation and growth naturally emerges as a method and goal, emphasising the importance of the perceptual, often estranging but always self-revealing aspect of literature studied in languages other than ours. This peculiar aspect creates a complex space of negotiation in which a single, universal meaning

cannot be found and simultaneously emphasises the intimacy and distance between author and reader, text and content, and teachers and students.

Engaging with foreign literature, particularly poetry, involves acoustic, visual, and even the aural dimensions of language at the highest levels. In this context, traditional and innovative relationships of meaning, experience, and self-transformation continually evolve and intertwine, making teaching and learning a unique occasion to go beyond the use of English as a mere tool of global communication. Instead, this language becomes a gateway to get access to, as Conrad (through Marlow's voice) would term it, "Beauty itself", which, like "absolute Truth", "floats elusive, obscure, half submerged, in the silent still waters of mystery" (Conrad 216; Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction* 154). A Beauty that is familiar and unknown, near and distant, for these reasons, able to shape and reshape us as readers and individuals at every new re-reading.

2. WHAT THIS BOOK IS, AND WHAT IS NOT

What this book is. *La poesia inglese. Proposte di lettura dall'età dei Tudor a oggi* is a widely annotated anthology of eighty-four lyrics representing the variety and vividness of the poems in the English language throughout history. All primary authors are represented, from Wyatt to Blake, Shakespeare to Keats, Whitman to Yeats, and Auden to Strand.

The rich and inspiring *Preface* introduces the book by posing a series of theoretical and practical questions that draw the reader into the ongoing issues in the critical and pedagogical aspects of poetry: the boundaries and connections between poetry criticism, theory, and pedagogy; the role of the critic-teacher today; the essential elements of poetry in English; where the pleasure of reading and teaching poetry resides and how can be communicated to the public; the role of imagination and creativity in the reading and teaching of poetry in a foreign language.

The *Repertorio delle forme metriche della poesia inglese* follows the *Prefazione* and is a valuable resource for experienced and novice readers navigating the complex technical language of English poetry. It also provides a specialised and useful lexicon on metre, rhythm, genres, and sub-genres.

Lyrics are grouped by three macro-historical periods: "Da Sir Thomas Wyatt a William Blake (1537-1794)", "Da William Wordsworth a Thomas Hardy (1798-1912)", and "Da William Butler Yeats a Mark Strand (1892-2013)". The aim is to cover the most important phases of the development of English literary history in verse, from the beginnings, in which English battled fiercely to become the national language also of literature, and the course of historical and cultural development when authors worked on the margin between tradition and innovation, research on the essence of lyrical beauty and the exploration, in the alchemical laboratory of literature, of the often still unmanifested secrets of artistic English language.

Each group of lyrics and poem is preceded by a short, well-informed introduction that covers the main historical and theoretical facts, guiding the reader through the most important ele-

ments that characterise authors and works. Ambrosini has effectively avoided over-explaining by using open questions and addressing key problems to guide the reader while allowing for personal interpretation. For instance, the decision to indicate the rhythmic and metrical scansion only in the first verses of each lyric reflects this direction.

Lyrics are accompanied by an Italian translation to help readers analyse and trigger a comparative, contrastive experience of the text in the two languages. This provides numerous opportunities for reflecting on poetry, efficiently and contrastively utilising all the reader's language skills.

What this book is not. Ambrosini states that the book could not be an essay or a history of English poetry. There are numerous such works, and not all are useful for teaching or learning to appreciate poetry. Instead, the need was to write a book focused on reading and analysing English poetry for Italian readers and students. This perspective greatly enhances the work's value, making it a useful educational resource in class. The point is not of second importance; on the contrary, it is central to Ambrosini and to the pedagogy of English literature, most of all poetry, in Italy.

As Culler writes, rephrasing an idea by Amittai F. Aviram: “[t]he test of a theory of poetry should be at once the vision it gives us of poetry and its pedagogical efficacy” (Culler 167). The *pedagogical efficacy* of the teaching moment is crucial not only for assessing students' understanding but also for evaluating the knowledge and expertise of teachers themselves and the authenticity of their yearly engagement with literature. It is a shared opportunity for growth and validation on both sides of the classroom. Teachers and students can catch it as satisfaction, a *eureka* moment of understanding, or a sense of suddenly perceived togetherness with the literary community. Besides revealing Ambrosini's humility and practical wisdom as a responsible and intelligent teacher and researcher, this search for pedagogical efficacy also evidences a question that is beginning to grow under our eyes year after year. As university scholars, many of us, including the author of this review, have published essays on English poetry throughout our research careers. However, we often feel disconnected from the critical work we conduct and our teaching practices. The latter do not receive equal visibility or sufficient theoretical reflection. According to Ambrosini, research and teaching should instead interact reciprocally, allowing our deep engagement as researchers to inform and be informed by the assessment of the educational effectiveness of our findings. This method would benefit our students as young citizens and enhance the theory and pedagogy of poetry in foreign languages, especially in our country, where this discussion is just beginning.

Benjamin once said that “we should not look to research to lead a revival in teaching; instead, it is more important to strive with a certain intransigence for an – albeit very indirect – improvement in research to emerge from the teaching” (419). This idea is revolutionary and, at the same time, simple if applied to teaching poetry (and literature) at university. Instructors can create an environment where the learning process enriches the academic field by immersing students in the vibrant nuances of poetic language and literary themes. Through this teaching and learning cycle, students can foster fresh perspectives and insights that may ultimately inform and advance literary research. In this way,

the classroom becomes not just a place for disseminating knowledge but a dynamic space where teaching and research mutually reinforce and inspire one another, paving the way for new paths of innovative exploration in literature.

3. POETRY TEACHING AS TOGETHERNESS, LIBERTY AND RECITATION

Imagining a didactic of English poetry *in solitude* is thus impossible. We cannot teach it by dwelling sternly in theory or producing monologues to young passive receivers. Ambrosini is keenly aware of this pedagogical truth when he reflects on his readers. Reading English poetry should always be a matter of surprise, not recognition of literary works' known, expected textual features. An act of *active*, even *creative* reading, thus, in the sense of a dialogue, not only between me and the text but also between me, the text *and* my students. The reader should always behave as a researcher and, at the same time, as a learner without separating the two dimensions of the relationship with literature. Beauty, in English poetry, Ambrosini reminds us, is “varietà in azione” (*La poesia inglese* 14), and this truth should make all of us avoid speaking abstractly of it to re-enact, in our students and us, the miracle of creativity accompanied by imagination, which is the inherent strength of both true poets and readers.

Teaching and learning should thus be imagined in *togetherness* but also in *liberty*. It is only “quando siamo in grado di cogliere il ritmo della poesia non in metrica che possiamo dire di aver acquisito la competenza ritmica necessaria per leggere tutte le poesie in inglese” (Ambrosini, *La poesia inglese* 16). The reader should develop a rare capacity which enables him/her to perceive, with the inner ear (and eye), the euphony of the lyric beyond schemes, rules and metrics, even in poems written *without* metrics, whose rhythm is also created by silence, by “ogni interruzione a fine verso e ogni pausa all'interno del verso, non sempre accompagnata da segni di punteggiatura” (16-7). Poetry's meaning is *free* in the sense of being an experience of perception rooted only in part in historically codified traditional schemes, but in which the reader at each new reading unexpectedly discovers “un ritmo nuovo” (17).

Togetherness and liberty lead to the experience of reading poetry as *recitation*, not as mere mechanistic scansion of verses: this element is indeed methodologically functional to the exploration of the “particolare universo sonoro che è la *English poetry*” (14). Reading exercises are also a self-training process through which the ear is developed and re-construed creatively and strategically to gain a deeper understanding of the work. A model of reading poetry based on *recitation*, Ambrosini suggests, enables individuals to develop their own voice through embodied literary text experience. An experience which has the power to unveil each reader's unique way of practising the poetic language. This is an exercise which can be repeated many times as re-reading, is subject to change according to the transformations of the individual's consciousness in time and requires the wholeness of the perception of the poem, which should be read in its completeness, not through extracts which would otherwise thwart the attempt. According to

Ambrosini, this is a specific and effective method to teach poetry in English to Italian students but also to the more general and interested reader.

Finally, the dual aspects of music and speaking (15), what we perceive as melodic artistry and what feels spontaneous and unprepared, are present in poetry, especially in English verse. This creates an interplay between regularity and surprise during reading and listening. As Lotman states, this interaction between opposite and complementary poles, working through the “automatization” and “de-automatization” of perception, enhances the depth of our experience of verse, allowing it to transcend time and space, making it resonate vividly in the minds of readers beyond their different cultural backgrounds and ages (Lotman 96) and impressing them permanently.

Ambrosini rightly reminds us that the *emotional curve* (Ambrosini, *La poesia inglese* 19) is the dynamic and fluctuating wave of emotional response produced during the perception of literature, especially poetry. Here, language becomes the perfect locus for producing this effect, as its *linguistic drama* (19), that is, its authorially orchestrated scheme of formal features, is shaped (or should be shaped) to generate it at every reading/hearing. Words are things, and poetry is truly action in (progressing) variety!

4. CLOSURE

As Keats would term it, what is poetry if not a series of “Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam/ Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn” (“Ode to a Nightingale”, ll. 69-70)? Where does our control of it as researchers reside, and where does our voluntary loss begin as readers? What is the recipe for the perfect analysis of verse, and where is the efficacy of transmitting its relish to our students? And when does this relish finally arise for them as autonomous readers?

Reasoning, imagination, emotion, and sensory perception are shared experiential features connecting authors, critics, readers, teachers and learners. So are memory and tradition, innovation and experimentation. As Ambrosini proposes, a compelling reason for the complex endeavour of reading, studying, teaching and learning poetry is the attempt to evoke within us the intricate intelligence and profound emotions that authors skilfully articulated in a language that may always be distant to us in many ways. This pursuit transcends the barriers of culture and time, social role and age, allowing us to connect with an experiential reality that is deeply human and, simultaneously, absolute. The vibrant and fluid movement of verse is a bridge to essential poetry, allowing us to recognise that the beauty of expression and content resides within us as a timeless and universally resonant act of true Being.

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