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On the Work of Anna Malfaiera

Giulia Niccolai

The first step toward establishing Anna Malfaiera's place in Italian poetry of the last quarter century is to note that she is an extraordinarily good example of a "unique and isolated phenomenon." Nearly every generation of Italian poets produced its "unique and isolated phenomenon," recognized only much later by the establishment, with a "typically Italian" obsequious reverence that awkwardly conceals a profound guilt. . . . Even now in the generation of poets such as Emilio Villa and Edoardo Cacciatore approaching seventy, masters of their trade familiar only to other poets rarely appear in anthologies and remain unknown to the world at large. But I should also add that Anna Malfaiera's case is more surprising, anomalous, and therefore symbolic and optimistic, for she is female.

Born at Fabriano in 1926, Anna Malfaiera studied at the Urbino Teachers College, began to paint, but then switched to writing. Her first poems were published in *Letteratura* when she was twenty. Her first book, *Fermo davanzale (Still Window-sill)*, written between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, was published by Rebellato

[Translated from the Italian by the author; revised by Joan Esposito]

in 1961. In 1963 Rusconi and Paolazzi published the anthology of the neo-avant-garde—the five poets (Balestrini, Giuliani, Pagliarani, Porta and Sanguineti) who, under the label of *Novissimi*, changed the course of Italian poetry, opening it finally to the experiences of the historical avant-gardes after the Fascist and postwar years of autarchy, provincialism and isolationism. However, in *Fermo d'avanzale* Anna Malfaiera had already shown that she was free of the vices, the nineteenth-century affectations, the confessionism, the “pure sentiments” and the false and consolatory lyricism that had contaminated the poetry of that time. Her language, like that of the *Novissimi*, was at last a contemporary language, not one borrowed or copied from the past.

Before dwelling on *Fermo d'avanzale*, I think it is important to list her other books, because in her case *even* the titles, like links of a chain, point to a constant progression, always anticipating the times. For example, the words *Fermo d'avanzale* can be found in a poem in the book of that title: “The sun dwells on the windows/of the leaning olive-tree/and the horizon is a sour word/that escapes me and the silence interweaves/a source of the open sky/and pushed back against the still window sill/is the movement of the grass of the tall mallow and of the reeds.” The title of the second book of verse, *Il vantaggio privato*¹ (*Private Advantage*), is likewise found in one of its poems, but the same book also contains in one of its last poems the title of its successor: *Lo stato d'emergenza*² (*The State of Emergency*), which in turn contains the title of her latest book, *Verso l'imperfetto*³ (*Towards the Imperfect*).

One might say that “Fermo d'avanzale” refers metaphorically to the poet herself, before whom time passes, the four seasons follow each other, and nature changes. Immobile, still rooted in the province, she observes what moves around her: “I must persuade myself to wait.” But she already has a deep self-knowledge: “All the elements are in my heart/and I suffer if a voice is missing/at each awakening,” and she also knows that “Gone from the home I shall feel myself in the wind.” The “wind,” as in the three lines on the next page that I quote below, is not only a premonition but a precise figuration of how in the future her poetry will develop: “Soon the wind will return/faster than nostalgia/faster than the realm of fancy.” A final significant passage from this first book: “I should like to descend from a race/without emblems, to be only animal/in fate,/only interval, flame/that knows not its evil and simply burns.”

It should be noted that *Fermo d'avanzale* is the only book of Anna Malfaiera's in which the poems contain images and colors. From *Il vantaggio privato* onwards, she will choose “the relentless path of

the tenacious, prolonged, insistent conceptual declaration, without allowing herself a moment of rest, a descriptive or psychological pause, or even a polemic outburst, an explosion of anger."⁴ The "wind," then, and that "I should like to descend from a race/without emblems," are a declaration of poetic intent, an undertaking to pursue (using parataxis) a "hard conceptual reality, which appears to be abstract but is instead the concrete sense of your existing."⁵

Il vantaggio privato consists of three sections: *La prova dei giorni* (*The Trial of the Days*), composed of seven long poems, one for each day of the week; *In fase di constatazione* (*In the Phase of Ascertaining*); and *In fase di contestazione* (*In the Phase of Protesting*). It is necessary to read the title poem in order to fully understand the sarcasm which impregnates the book's title. "A place where to imagine/that the rest of life may be a surprise/where extreme patience may interrupt itself/against excessive assent/against who accepts it/against private advantage/against the stagnation of distrust/with the risk of expatriating from the earth."

Naturally, these poems published in '67 were written in the preceding years, 1963-64 (the years of the economic boom, of "private advantage" and the unrestrained luxury that transformed Italy into a consumer society), and it is important to note how *In fase di contestazione* (the title of the last section) anticipated the 1968 student protest movement and its aftermath.

This was followed by *Lo stato di emergenza* (1971) ("the ideologies support one another/in a time of insatiable injustice") which is like an alarm, a message that must be delivered before it is too late. (Here again we should bear in mind what was to happen in Italy in the 1970s.) Finally, *Verso l'imperfetto* (1984), a filtrate of awareness, is even more rational and concentrated than its predecessors. Before, we were unable to see the abyss toward which we are all moving . . . now that it is before our eyes, we look down into it, trying not to fall.

Malfaiera's poetry, an unceasing excavation of consciousness—her own and that of others—takes the form of a sort of mental dialogue between the Ego and the Id. Its tone ranges from statement to mutual advising, medical auscultation, even a splendidly biblical, liberating invective. What surprises is that it is almost impossible to detect moments of pessimism or optimism, despair or piety, irony or sarcasm, in fact any flashes in which she reveals herself. As Barberi Squarotti has pointed out, hers is "the pleasure always taut and fundamentally restless of intellectual speculation." She enlists language because only thus is she free to

think and to see things as they are. Only this awareness saves her from alienation. The Ego speaking to the Id is like a hunter stalking its prey: never in the foreground and not even "visible," it is in fact present as a consequence, conditioned by the exterior, by something that forces it to be.

Dialectician and sophist, Malfaiera has set herself the task of lighting the shadows, leaving no doubt unresolved. This is the aim of her paratactical construction. But we do not perceive her blocks of compact writing as something vertical rising up before us like a wall; on the contrary we are conscious of a horizontal expansion, and it is as if the reader, lifted up by the tension of the language, were able to look down on and understand those gigantic pre-columbian figures found on the mountains and plateaus of Peru.

I have already called Malfaiera a unique and isolated phenomenon, and this is even truer because it is impossible to pick out her formal predecessors among Italian poets. Paradoxically (I am not the first to point this out) Anna Malfaiera is *not* an Italian poet. It is as if it were only with the aid of Zen or Tao that one can explain

the effort that such determination to achieve conceptual clarification calls for today, given the state of corrosion of the logical instruments of tradition; the effort which finds appropriate expression in the length of the verses and their strong, slow rhythms: it is in short the transcription obtained through words not so much of an impletion of concepts as of the laborious and lengthy formation of the intention to conceptualize everything, moral attitudes and sentimental impulses, social situations, meetings, experiences.⁶

Visually, the poems appear on the page as compact blocks of writing, without punctuation (except for full stops) or paragraphs. The verses, hendecasyllabic, or of thirteen or more syllables (but sometimes also septenaries), are nearly always of the same length and give each poem a particular rhythm. Within a poem she often applies very unconventional caesuras, thus forming tight knots of internal rhymes and conceptual condensations which bear rereading. In this sense her style resembles that of Adriano Spatola.

The beginnings of her poems are nearly always striking, lapidary, unequivocal. They vibrate with linguistic tension, with a surprising clarity, as if she applied a strong initial impulse in order to set in motion the mechanism of her philosophical reasoning. Equally surprising and decisive are, usually, the closing lines; here the image that comes to mind is the flash of the Samurai's sword.

Each poem has its unmistakable internal rhythm, which, as in

music, is the most appropriate for its meaning. The same can be said of the objectification, the relationship between the Ego and the language: "with exasperating common sense," as Malfaiera says of herself, but also with *An Irremovable Resistance* (the title of a collection of her poems, some of which were published in *Letteratura* under the title "When we establish a relationship with someone"7).

Before dwelling at length on her last two books, I should like to draw attention to some opening and closing lines and to two poems from *Il vantaggio privato*:

I don't even bother about the vague sense
of the word happiness the last regret loses
its meaning irrevocably.

. . . it is useful to know if it is not too late to act accordingly.

The hard facts a visual angle
in which hope surrenders immediately.

In the midst of so many needs who counts is he who has
of them and satisfies them at a dearer price
those that are left over
are for those who have less claim if they are left over.

. . . with exasperating common sense
all approximation of judgment concluded
all discordance of the cells of equal reception.

In the neutral of belonging as if
contented with the taste of everyday solutions
so as to be equal to a human fact so as to attain it
in qualifications and offers so as to be here
on the terrace so as to move things on the table
so as to put on stockings shoes clothes
and then to go out without choice of place
so as to join others uneasy as myself
who speak of themselves so as not to be excluded
one can suggest going to dinner or
to the movies and together justify ourselves for
a too summary representation.

This poem is in the second section of *Il vantaggio privato* (*Private Advantage*) and it is inconceivable that language could be used more literally. Even though what the poet says is of an almost intolerable desperation, in the *tone* of the poem even despair is harnessed to pure ascertainment. It is up to the reader to despair if he has

understood. The poem is also an interesting example of the internal rhythm of Anna Malfaiera's language, of what she can achieve by the simple repetition of "so as" and the absence of punctuation. The ascertainment here is not linked to and circumscribed by a (complaining) Ego; the text, because of the perfect balance of its language, becomes a finger pointing to our common neurosis, our common alienation. In short, it acquires a universality.

The third poem of *In the Phase of Protesting* (the last section of the book) includes the title of her next book: *The State of Emergency*. I wish to quote it in full and without superfluous comment, both for the pleasure it gives and to clarify what I have been trying to say.

Too soon do we prepare to smile at deceit
 too soon do we learn to be base.
 Don't blame us for our ineptitude
 it's yours too with the addition of guilt
 for badly you have guided us.
 Nothing is more monstrous than the threat
 of a heedless destruction
 of a humanity only in small part enlightened
 that is not in charge of itself
 does not prevail with acts of will
 of lasting merit.
 For us it is havoc violence
 the state of emergency devices
 of which we know only the destructive use.

If we now consider Anna Malfaiera's last two books, *Lo stato di emergenza* (1971) and *Verso l'imperfetto* (1984), and compare the ten poems of the first with the seventy of the second, a subtle but profound difference of tone emerges. I have noted that even in *Fermo d'avanzale* she showed that she knew herself and was already "complete," perfectly balanced in her style and prophesying the evolution of her creativity. In *Il vantaggio privato*, images, colors and even metaphors have already disappeared from her verses, the essential measure of which is the sentence.

[A] sentence forming a compact line, followed immediately by other sentences having the same rhythm, the purpose of which is to produce a sort of "crescendo" that is a continuous demonstration, seeking not so much rational assent as acceptance by virtue of the impressive force of accumulation.⁸

These sentences are never "sententious," any more than Mal-faiera, though profoundly "moral," is moralistic or didactic. It is as if, being a teacher by profession, she has learned that every individual case calls for a different treatment. Because she always hits the nail on the head, her verses never sound professorial, pronounced from above by someone invested with the right to teach. But if *Lo stato di emergenza*'s tone is dialectical, an open dialogue between the *Ego* and the *You*, *Verso l'imperfetto* takes a further step in the direction of a language that has the severity of a final judgment, that recalls arrows striking the mark, moments of intensity in which the *Ego* and *Id* become one.

In *Lo stato di emergenza*'s splendid and liberating invective, it is easy to detect a biblical timbre of fury tinged with the mythical and the grandiose:

Go to hell you and you and you and you
 you with her you with him and you with the other
 and the other and you too go to hell
 and you you and you you you you you
 and again you and you and always you
 in the same way whenever
 and the repetition of the act and of the words
 and the redundancy of all the criteria
 never changing of comprehension and judgment.

As a contrast I should like to quote a poem from *Verso l'imperfetto*:

We are the secret police you can
 be sure nothing happens that we
 don't know about if someone says
 otherwise it means he is trying to lie
 and this means we shall have
 to correct him and when we have done so
 we shall say he is one to whom we shall pay no further
 attention.

When the geometrical and perfect web has been woven with a language which is precise, patient and constructive, then the language itself takes over and exposes the narrowness and vulnerability of its thwarted victims.

Another poem from *Lo stato di emergenza*, from which I have already quoted a line:

It is better thus in this way I do not equivocate
 I don't guarantee to make the thing a thing
 I place my dependence upon the panic of everyday
 gestures my self-punishing other side
 as long as I live I shall be offended by everything
 to the point of wondering whether the void is not an elevated
 form of consciousness to the point in which
 the ideologies support one another
 in a time of insatiable injustice.

The seventy poems of *Verso l'imperfetto* are subdivided into four sections, this time separated by a blank page and an asterisk instead of a title. The sections represent, in fact, four moments of a continuum: a long, painstaking exploration of the Id, a reaching down toward the unconscious. They vary in tone. The first poems are calm and cautious, slightly ironical or melancholic—the Ego listens to the Id surfacing. In the second section, the two abstract figures of the internal dialogue come closer together, treat one another with great familiarity, tease and scold one another before, in the third section, uniting indivisibly, as Thetis and Nemesis. Here we find the marvellous poem that follows:

Work work and look around
 look at the complicated system
 transmitted to us look
 at the people thought to count
 the repertory of profits the convenient
 references the atrocious news look
 at those who in life have worked hard.
 If you see that all the available
 is second-rate willing actions
 will be ever fewer. Yet
 if an unprejudiced movement making use
 of magic were to achieve the unthinkable then
 the themes of discouragement would be in vain.
 Go and list the components of refusal
 how it maintains its precedents . . .

And after solitude and suffering have provided the strength for the victorious and magical union of the Ego and the Id in the third section, in the fourth the long journey is reconsidered, the introspection resumes and, mandala-like, the millstone starts to turn anew.

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1. Salvatore Sciascia Ed., 1967 (second edition, 1970).
 2. La Nuova Foglio Editore, 1971.
 3. *Tam Tam*, 1984.
 4. Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, *Letteratura* n. 93, May-June 1968.
 5. Alfredo Giuliani, *La Repubblica*, 13 July 1984.
 6. Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, *ibid.*
 7. *Letteratura*, n. 78, November-December 1965.
 8. Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, *ibid.*