

Ron Padgett

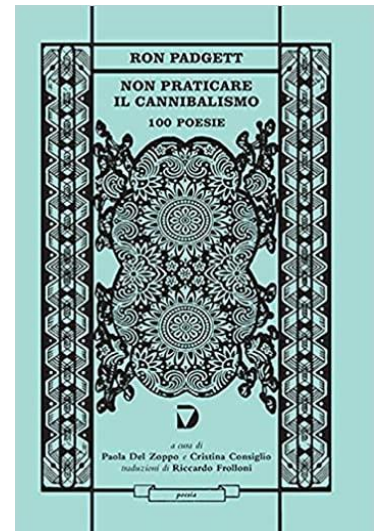
Non praticare il cannibalismo

100 poesie. Edited by Paola Del Zoppo and Cristina Consiglio. Translated by Riccardo Frolloni

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Review by Serena Demichelis

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Reading Ron Padgett puts the reader's intertextual engine at work from the very start: it is unlikely that someone choosing to approach *Do not practice cannibalism* (*Non praticare il cannibalismo*) is unfamiliar with Jim Jarmusch's 2017 movie *Paterson*, in which the mind, voice and hands behind the poems attributed to the protagonist are Padgett's own ones. The editors of the collection play on this immediate link by choosing *Love Poem* as the opening text of the volume—much like it is the first text we see Adam Driver creating on screen. The powerful operation of visualization chosen by the director (who often shows the actual words to viewers, more than simply having them listen to them) helps shaping and carving the image of the poet in the minds of readers of Padgett's collection as well—planes of sensorial perception converging to aid imagination. Visual involvement is suggested also by the choice of inserting, instead of a traditional picture, a drawing of Padgett's face in the opening pages of the volume.

That of poet is in itself an idea which has gained increased “dispersion,” to borrow the expression used by Robert Schultz, with reference to the overall situation of contemporary poetry (1984): “We no longer imagine a literary colossus—the body poetic—striding into the future. The figure does not apply.” Padgett's poetry is indeed not colossal—it is perhaps anti-colossal, which however does not mean un-sublime. The thing in its thingness (as put by Alessandro Vergari, with an inevitable philosophical echo [2021]), the ordinary in its ordinariness, inhabit and reign in much of Padgett's works:

Dinner is a damned nice thing
 as are breakfast and lunch
 when they're good and with
 the one you love.
 (*Pep Talk*, 275)

In the delightful obviousness of this statement, it would be easy to skip that fascinating and yet thoroughly designed *enjambement*, that “and with” going to its resolution in the following verse with one of the determinant poles of Padgett’s poems – people we love. If things and the ordinary occupy a special place in his *oeuvre*, in fact, the same can be said about poetry’s eternal concerns of love and mortality. The two often mingle, as in the reflection on age coming with *Anniversary Waltz*:

[...]
 I love her. What does that mean?
 It means something that you, if you're young,
 might be lucky enough to feel someday
 though you, like me, won't know
 what it is. You'll wake up and think
 Now I know what he meant
 by not knowing, and you'll feel good.
 (from *Anniversary Waltz*, 212)

While thinking about death itself becomes an opportunity to write, to exercise one’s imagination:

Ever since that moment
 when it first occurred
 to me that I would die
 (like everyone on earth!)
 I struggled against
 this eventuality, but
 never thought of
 how I'd die, exactly,
 until around thirty
 I made a mental list:
 hit by car, shot
 in head by random ricochet,
 crushed beneath boulder,
 victim of gas explosion,
 head banged hard
 in fall from ladder,
 vaporized in plane crash
 dwindling away with cancer,
 and so on. [...].
 (from *The Death Deal*, 186)

Collaboration with Jarmusch aside, Padgett remains rather unknown to the Italian reader, which is why an editorial effort like the one resulting in *Do not practice cannibalism* deserves double the praise. The volume opens with a few ‘contextualizing’ texts, among which *Perché scrivere poesia? (Why writing poetry)* is perhaps the most adequate to have a first encounter with the author; Paola Del Zoppo offers the Italian reader a translation of this ‘programmatic’ short prose, ending with a poem entitled “Whatever It Is,” in which Padgett states that

The real poem lives in its own
little house that moves along
the landscape that moves
along the mind of the reader,
and no one has ever seen it.
(from *Whatever It Is*, 20)

In a quote that has all the potential to become proverbial, Padgett answered a question by the collection’s editor Cristina Consiglio: “I don’t know how it feels to be a poet in the contemporary world. I am a man in a house” (349). The domestic space of the house (not the *home*, a difference the Italian translation cannot render because of the only option offered by the language – *casa*) relationally defines the poet, the reader and the poetry itself.

Other ‘contextualizing’ texts include an interview by Eric Lorberer (translated), critical/introductory notes by the editor Paola Del Zoppo (*L’elevazione degli ideali*), translator and poet Riccardo Frolloni (*Don’t Give Advice. Ron Padgett o della poesia assertiva, di quanto ne abbiamo bisogno*) and editor Cristina Consiglio (*A Man in a House. Ron Padgett, poeta*), as well as an essential bibliography of other works by Padgett: indeed, the volume clearly has to be meant (also) as a ‘formal introduction’ for the Italian reader. And the accurate work of translation surely does the trick.

Translating poems like Padgett’s may seem like an easy endeavor, with his love for the thingness and ordinariness; however, poets like him are, in a way, particularly risky. When translating, admiration and respect for an author mingle with the translator’s desire to do a good job, to be enjoyable once read – and this can result in an excessive outpouring of personality into someone else’s work, especially when seemingly ‘easy,’ with a final text which fails to convey the voice of the original. This risk was carefully calculated by the editors and translator of *Do not practice cannibalism*, who managed to refrain from the temptation of filling the ‘ordinary things’ of Padgett’s poems with superimposed meanings. The choice was for almost direct equivalence, with a full adherence to layout peculiarities (including capitalization), lexical and syntactic structures, a maintenance of rhetorical strategies (as the already quoted

enjambements) and graphic features (for instance the lack of punctuation to introduce direct discourse):

When my mother said Let's go down to the Rialto
it never occurred to me that the name Rialto

was odd or from anywhere else or meant anything
other than Rialto the theatre in my hometown

like the Orpheum, whose name was only a phoneme
with no trace of the god of Poetry, though

later I would learn about him and about the bridge
and realize that gods and bridges can fly invisibly

across the ocean and change their shapes and land
in one's hometown and go on living there

until it's time to fly again and start all over
as a perfectly clean phoneme in the heads

of the innocent and the open
on their way to the Ritz.
(*Rialto*, 114)

Quando mia madre diceva Andiamo al Rialto
non mi è mai venuto in mente che il nome Rialto

fosse strano o distante o volesse dire altro
che il Rialto, il teatro della mia città

come l'Orfeo, il cui nome era solo un fonema
senza traccia del dio della Poesia, ma

in seguito ho saputo di lui e del ponte e capito
che déi e ponti possono volare invisibili

sull'oceano e cambiare forme e paese e trasferirsi
nella città in cui tu vivi e restarci

finché non è tempo di volar via e ricominciare
come un fonema limpido nelle menti

degli innocenti e liberi
sulla strada verso il Ritz
(*Rialto*, 115)

The choice of having Riccardo Frolloni translate most of the poems¹ mirrors a fruitful trend of 'poets translating poets' that, in recent years, has seen more than one brilliant result among young Italian authors (we may think of Demetrio Marra's recent work on Philip Larkin for *Interno Poesia* and *LayOut*, among others). Frolloni's versions, which amount to the majority of translations, are perhaps those which more relevantly 'deviate' from the original, but nonetheless hit the target of (a much deplored) 'faithfulness' to the texts:

1) What might happen.
2) How people will behave.
3) Oh anything.
Three rules that live
in the house next door.

Along comes the big bad philosopher,
and at their door
he hurls the mighty bolts
of lightning
from his brain

the door is unimpressed.
Behind it the rules

1) Cosa potrebbe succedere.
2) Come si comporteranno le persone.
3) Oh, qualunque cosa.
Tre regole vigenti
nella casa accanto.

Arriva il grande filosofo cattivo,
e alla loro porta
scaglia i potenti
lampi
del suo cervello

La porta è impassibile.
Dietro di questa le regole

¹ A few were translated by editors Paola Del Zoppo and Cristina Consiglio.

are chuckling.

I witness this scene
through the kitchen curtains
as I rinse the dishes.
(*You Never Know*, 82)

ridacchiano.

Vedo questa scena attraverso
le tende della cucina
mentre lavo i piatti.
(*Non si sa mai*, 83)

Here, despite the choice of *vigenti* somehow dropping the prosopopoeia of rules “living” in a house (which continues in the two following stanzas and is there maintained in the translation), the adjective nonetheless rings a bell of familiarity for Italian readers, with the common collocation *regole vigenti* placing them in the realm of domesticity and ordinariness evoked and promptly defied by Padgett’s atmospheres of “mighty bolts of lightning,” *potenti lampi*.

“Non avevo mai letto poesie di una persona ancora viva. Improvvisamente avvertii una connessione – la poesia, il momento presente, e io – tutto si saldò” (“I had never read poetry by someone who was still alive. I suddenly perceived a connection – poetry, the present moment, myself – everything came together” [13, my translation into English; Italian translation by Paola Del Zoppo]): this feeling will be familiar to readers of *Non praticare il cannibalismo*. The thingness of reality becomes a nexus to make all that unbundles around us come together in the “landscape that moves along the mind of the reader” (20).

Serena Demichelis graduated in *European and American Literatures at the University of Pavia* with a thesis on the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas; she is currently attending the PhD course in *Foreign Literatures, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Verona*. Her research project focuses on a linguistic and literary analysis of characterization strategies in J.D. Salinger’s short fiction, with a particular focus on identity and character ontology. Among her research interests are short fiction studies, literary theory, Jewish-American literature, narratology and the empirical study of literature.

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