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A Mythical Lawmaker Myth, Narcissism and 'Anxiety of Influence' of Italian Poet Sandro Penna

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A Mythical Lawmaker Myth, Narcissism and 'Anxiety of Influence' of Italian Poet Sandro Penna

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I. Introduction

anroPenna's myth of "uniqueness" was possibly started by Piero Bigongiari, one of the first Italian critics to write a review of Penna's verse. Bigongiari defined Penna's poetry as "impressionista" but acknowledged its originality and uniqueness, devoid of any visible influence. Around the figure of Sandro Penna, aided by his own admirers Saba, Montale, Pasolini and Natalia Ginzburg, the myth of the poet's "holiness" and pure lyric grace, isolated from society and time, grew throughout the years, nourished by Penna himself and his lifestyle. Ginzburg, for instance, celebrated the poet as to be one among humans freer than ever existed, maintaining that the poet never let himself be affected by other people's ideas; never he bent or thought according to a model given to him by others, or found floating in the air².

Contemporary fellow writers considered Sandro Penna (1906-1977) "a peer" and for some critics the Italian lyric is one of the best poets of his generation and an unique literary phenomenon. Penna wrote mainly, though not only, dreamy and delicate homoerotic lyrics. A couple of lines in a simple, direct but precise language, never obscure or "hermetic", an epigram recalling the Haiku style, is a typical Penna poem:

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viverevorreiaddormentato entroil dolce rumoredella vita (Penna 59)3

I'd like to live falling to sleep / amid the sweet roar of

Longer poems often show an imagist touch presenting a vivid image revealing an intense moment of experience in the manner of a Joycean epiphany, usually involving a young man as a sort of godlike apparition.

La vita ... è ricordarsi di un risveglio triste in un trenoall'alba: aver veduto fuori la luceincerta: aver sentito nelcorporotto la malinconia vergineedaspradell'ariapungente. Ma ricordarsi la liberazione improvvisa è più dolce: a me vicino un marinaiogiovane: l'azzurro e ilbiancodellasuadivisa, e fuori un mare tutto fresco di colore. (3). Life...is remembering a sad awakening in a train at dawn, seeing the hesitant light outside, feeling in the broken body the virgin and bittersadness of the biting air. But remembering the sudden release is sweeter, next to me a young sailor: the blue and white of his uniform, and outside a sea all fresh with colour.

Penna's poetry may appear as almost monothematic, revolving principally around his love for young men, but he actually devoted large space to the natural world as well, with a sort of pantheistic feeling for Nature.

Penna was unwell all his life, suffering from psychological and physical illnesses since his teenage years: bronchitis, neurosis, insomnia and a heart condition. A self-taught person, he was an

avid reader, quite familiar not only with the Italian literature and poetry of his times, but also with the French symbolists (whom he could read in the original language), Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud (whom he called 'my god'). He was familiar with the German romantics, English and American literature (Shelley, Wilde, E. A. Poe and Jack London), the European avant-garde, and quite an expert on Modernist and Futurist art. To cure his depression and neurosis, Penna underwent psychoanalytical treatment, and read Freud's works, which he often discussed - and criticised - with his friends, as recorded in his short autobiography dictated to a tape recorder.

Once Penna's work became known and studied beyond the intellectual elites, some alternative voices made themselves heard challenging the myth of uniqueness of his poetry, the 'immaculate conception of his verse and the complete lack of identifiable roots and influences. According to Italian critic Antonio Pinchera, for instance, everything has been said about Penna, but still only a little is known. Critics, Pinchera added, have always expressed, from the beginning, ultimate judgments; a myth was created, the myth of Sandro Penna, and we approached it as if it were "a beautiful and shocking prototype of the most advanced technology finally installed under glass in a museum, made taboo."4

Italian poet Alfredo Giuliani, who knew Penna personally, described him as an intelligent man, but in some ways primitive and impulsive, cunning and innocent, extremely selfish and in love with himself and the world.⁵ This narcissistic side was also observed by Pasolini who was certainly the biggest supporter of Penna's myth. When Mengaldo (in the epigraph to this section) speaks of someone to whom Penna's poetry represented a "religion", he was actually referring to Pasolini, who identified in Penna a protest against social conformity and called him "the best poet of his generation", "a saint" and claimed that his poetry is "my religion".6 But from a critical point of view Pasolini questioned the innocence of Penna's inspiration and, although identifying in Penna a kind of mysticism, also underlined Penna's "narcissism". Analysing the sorrow of Penna's persona in his oeuvre, Pasolini identified the trauma of Penna's exclusion from normal society as a crucial wound to the poet's narcissism.7 While subsequent critics tend to agree with Pasolini's identification of Penna's narcissism, many have reacted violently to Pasolini's interpretation of Penna's sorrow as the product of the trauma of being an outsider (e.g. De Riccardis). But all the controversy, in some way, ended up fuelling Penna's myth.

Penna's narcissism coexisted with his insecurity and helped the growth of his own myth; we find the best witness of it in Giannelli. Italian writer Enzo Giannelli who

lived next to the poet in the last years of Penna's life, replying to a reporter's question: "Why did you want to meet Sandro Penna?" wrote: "Man needs myths and Sandro Penna was a myth. After meeting him, I realized that myths do not exist. It was only fascination. But that remained."8 Giannelli also pointed out how Penna, despite his insecurities, was actually fully aware of the value of his poetry: "Penna knew he was a great poet and expected laurels and praise, but he lacked that 'footman attitude' - an indispensable requisite according to La Bruyère - to succeed in attracting luck in life."9 Penna was never completely joking when, discussing poetry with Giannelli, he used to say he was, together with Dylan Thomas the best poet of this generation, or that he himself, Penna, and not Quasimodo, should have been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1959 for his lyrical poetry. 10

a) The "mythical lawmaker"

Italian essayist Cesare Garboli was one of the leading critics of Italian culture in the second half of the twentieth century and a poet himself. An admirers and a close friend of the poet, in 1984 he published Penna Papers - an essay but also a diary, a journey and a long, uninterrupted dialogue with the poet. Garboli defines Penna's poetry as "extraordinary", his verse "memorable" and the poet himself as a "mythical lawmaker".11 It was to Garboli that Penna finally spoke out his concern about and his annoyance at for being constantly associated with the Alexandrian poets or any other movement/poet of the past, asking to be defined just as "poet of the mystery" 12, thereby almost dictating his epitaph to posterity. But there is more, for, suggesting for himself the definition of 'poet of the mystery' Penna reveals, in my opinion, the way in which he built up his myth of uniqueness out of his narcissism.

Penna was a sophisticated writer and had an intuitive intelligence and the word suggested by Penna, 'mystery', is here connected to 'divination' which is the accepted origin of all poetry (Bloom 59). Perhaps Penna wanted to suggest that he never needed any 'influence' as his poetry was a 'divine gift' a 'grace' (the word "grazia" is often used by critics to define the peculiarity of Penna's poetry and I have just quoted Pasolini worshipping this poetry as a religion). The association of poets and poetry to Divinity is of course not new. Since Greek civilization and up until the 19th century artists were considered to have magical powers connected to religion and divinity; they acted as a medium between Divinity and humans. Similar to the artist of ancient Greece (with whom Penna was associated by critics). Penna felta profound sense of responsibility toward his gift and toward poetry in general. Poetry is not something light that can be taken up or put down at will; it is not just a game - as he stated in this early poem written in his twenties:

La miapoesia non sarà un gioco leggero fatto con parole delicate e malate

La miapoesialancerà la suaforza a perdersinell'infinito.13

My poetry won't be a light game made of fragile sickly words

. . .

My poetry will launch its strength to lose itself in the infinite.

In the lines that follow from a letter to his friend Vitali (13th February 1928) we find the evidence of Penna's 'lack of hunger' for literary fame: he was obsessed by poetry as only Poetry allowed him the directness of personal assertion because only there could he describe himself.

. . . non amo più che pochi poeti ma il mio amore per la Poesia credo sia ora cosi forte che mi stia tutto trasformando e non mi lasci più! . . . non sono, come credevi, lontano dalla poesia, e mai lo potrò più essere, poiché in me la passione è allo stato puro ne è imbevuta tutta la mia anima e non mira alla, ahimè comune, mania letteraria . . . amo soprattutto i poeti che non hanno voluto fare del loro nome una parola universale, amo i poeti che nessuno conosce." 14

I love not more than a few poets, but my love for Poetry is now so strong I think it is changing me and will never leave me! . . . I am not, as you expected, away from poetry, and never more shall I be, because my passion is pure, my whole soul is soaked with it, and does not aspire to the, now alas, very common literary craze . . . I love above all poets who have not wanted to make their name a 'universal word' I love the poets that nobody knows.

Roberto Didier recognizes Penna's uniqueness and how he represents a mythical figure in the Italian literary scene, his "mitografia" 'mythography' of loneliness and alienation being so widespread among his audience and readers.15 Deidier goes so far to compare Penna's uniqueness to Emily Dickinson's and W.H. Auden's:

These poems [Penna's] constitute, in their confused combination, a case similar to Emily Dickinson's or Cavafy's texts; as well as, in times closer to ours, to Pavese or W.H. Auden. The first two achieved that extraordinary isolation of individual texts which refuse to accept any constraint or hierarchy or editorial position, they are offered in all their dazzling uniqueness.

Questepoesieconfigurano, nelloroconfusoinsieme, unasituazionetestualeanaloga a quella di Emily Dickinson o di Kavafis, nonchè, in tempi piuvicini a noi, di Pavese o di W.H. Auden. Neiprimi due sirealizzavagiàquellostraordinarioisolamentodeising quellororifiutarequalsiasicostrizione gerarchia o collocazioneeditoriale, per porsi in tutta la lorofolgoranteunicità. 16

But in Deidier we also find an authoritative and definitive refutation of the alleged complete uniqueness and originality of Penna's poetry, untouched and unaffected, according to the poet and some critics, by any influence. Deidier acknowledges that beyond the originality, antecedents and influences are clear in this poetry. The critic also reveals how Penna deliberately hides his readings and knowledge of earlier poets' work. Too many times - according to the critic - we accepted without questioning this 'brand of originality'. Analysing Penna's poetic imagery, Deidier points out how from the 'images' of Penna's verse "[a] substratum of meditations emerges, together with long disowned readings. We know that every author has to metabolize their sources, and tries to camouflage their apprenticeship."17 In the case of Penna, the critic concludes, the cult that has been created around his person somehow prevented a complete investigation of his influences.18

Major critic Carlo Bo, in 1970, also objected to the so called natural and effortless 'grace' of Penna's poetry, claiming for the poet 'awareness' of his art and arguing that being natural for Penna should not be understood as the absence of a specific critical awareness: Penna seems to make poetry with nothing but his being natural is the result of a precise and hard work on language and themes. 19 Also Elena Vaglio insists on Penna's contribution in creating a myth of himself as a sort of defensive way (typical of the poet's personality) to protect himself and his poetic world from the moral disapproval of the external world and society, and building: "[a]n inaccessible poetic world closed in his own myth."20 Later Vaglio, commenting on Penna's volume Tutte le Poesie (1957), concludes: "Penna reveals his way of writing, which is also a revelation of how he consciously builds his myth."21 We have already seen how Natalia Ginzburg had revealed something about Penna's supposed ignorance of the literary scene of his time, noting that in his room - among piles of papers, books, paintings and drawings - there were so many books. But still Penna used to repeat he never felt like reading anything, though, Ginzburg concludes, he knows of a world of things, when he read or studied it all no one knows.22

All these remarks and opinions - coming for the poet's critics and friends - along with Penna's strong individualism, confirm the cult which surrounded the poet over the years and lead to presume a supposed "anxiety of influence" in Penna, in the manner theorized by Harold Bloom.

b) The "anxiety of influence"

Esistnichtnötig, nichteinmalerwünscht,

Parteifürmichzunehmen: imGegenteil,

eineDosisNeugierde,

wievoreinemfremdenGewächs,

miteinemironischen Widerstande,

schienemireineunvergleichlichintelligentereStellungz umir.

(Friedrich Nietzsche)²³

Bloom's argument is that all strong poets have suffered, in one way or another, from the anxiety of influence. Some of them saw influence as something positive some rejected the notion of influence as a limitation to the originality of their poetry. Penna belongs to the latter group in his rejecting any comparison to other fellow poets.

In his essay Bloom often quotes the works and ideas of Nietzsche and Freud. Both thinkers/writers had some influence on Penna. As Deidier points put in analysing Penna's diary and scattered notes:

The temporal dimension [in Penna] is reduced to the experience of the moment . . . it aims, in these itself 'willpower' notes. make 'possession/mastery'. Again Schopenhauer and Nietzsche here . . . inspiration . . . in Penna, is nothing but 'love and faith in himself'.

La dimensionetemporalesiriduceall'esperienzadell' attimo . . . ambisce in questiappunti a farsi 'volontà e 'possessione'. Ancora Schopenhauer e Nietzsche . . . l'ispirazione, a suavolta, in Penna altro non è che 'amore', 'fede in se stesso'. (25)

Deidier is here referring to Nietzsche's principle of "will to power", which in Penna leads to a desire to believe in himself (fede in se stesso). Penna had read Nietzsche, specifically Thus Spoke Zarathustra, as noted by Deidier (38). What Deidier missed, in my opinion, is the connection, or better the contradiction, between Penna's attraction to Nietzsche's ideas of power and self-confidence and the poet's "anxiety of influence". From his reading of Nietzsche, Penna drew some basic principles which inspired him and are shown in his poems. For instance the line "Livida alba, iosono senza dio" 'Ashen dawn, I am without god'24 clearly echoes Nietzsche's "Death of God". The death of God is a way of saying that humans are no longer able to believe in any cosmic order since they themselves no longer recognize it. The death of God will lead, Nietzsche says, not only to the rejection of a belief in cosmic or physical

order but also to a rejection of absolute values, to the rejection of belief in an objective and universal moral law, which applies to all individuals. Another attribute of Nietzsche's 'death of God' is the tendency to unmask the hypocrisies and illusion of outworn value systems. All these ideas were deeply felt by Penna, who also embraced the concept of the eternal return, or 'eternal recurrence', the belief that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur an infinite number of times across infinite time and space, as in Penna's following lines, quoted earlier: ". . . ragazziancora/ dormirannonel sole in riva al mare./ nonsaremochenoistessiancora"25 '. . . otherboys/ will sleep in the sun by the sea./ But we'll only be ourselves again'.

This concept of the eternal recurrence is maintained by Indian philosophy (Penna expressed the deep impression he received from reading Tagore, the great Indian poet: "Tagore helps me to believe in the birth of a religion"26), and is later found in Greek philosophers and poets, another of Penna's major influences. Although Penna, in other poems, refers to the gods or the god of love and even speaks of a bad god who, with a single gesture, petrified an entire landscape that seemed to share the poet's pain²⁷, the God of Christianity is never invoked.

Finally, Nietzsche's principle simultaneous presence of good and evil, joy and pain in our lives and the universe is also part of Penna's thought (see the title of Penna's volume of verse Croce e delizia, 'Sorrow and bliss') as noted also by Didier: "[a] fundamental part of the Penna's psychology, addressed, from Nietzsche's perspective, to the acceptance of a coexistence of good and evil, of pain and joy that simultaneously mark each experience."28

But of particular interest to this study is Nietzsche's theory on the topic of influence as reported by Bloom:

Nietzsche is one of the great deniers of anxiety-asinfluence . . . Nietzsche was the heir of Goethe in his strangely optimistic refusal to regard the poetical past as primarily an obstacle to fresh creation . . . he did not feel the chill of being darkened by a precursor's shadow. Influence, to Nietzsche, meant vitalization. (50)

According to Nietzsche thus, a great poet, like a great man, is someone who has a tremendous force stored up, which is actually what his precursors have created for him to use and develop; so a strong artist should not be bothered by any comparison to previous 'models'. But at this point Bloom quotes Goethe's remarks in Theory of Colour about models: "even perfect models have a disturbing effect in that they lead us to skip necessary stages in our Bildung" and further, "everything great moulds us from the moment we become aware of it."(51) In the same page Blooms

adds that although these statements would discourage most poets and artists, Goethe elsewhere still believes influence is not a threat to the great artist, stating that models are anyway only mirrors for the 'self', and what the *latecomer* loves in his precursors is only what they lend him, their own selves, a version of him. This argument supports the idea that poets in general do not actually "read" other poets, but only see, in the other poets' work, what can be understood as a reflection of themselves - to quote Penna: "Ero una volta Holderlin... Rimbaud...". Bloom also reports another of Goethe's statements which shows how self-confidence can overcome this sort of anxiety:

Do not all achievements of a poet's predecessors and contemporaries rightfully belong to him? Why should he shrink from picking flowers where he finds them? Only by making the riches of the others our own do we bring anything great into being. (52)

Thus, according to Goethe, the world will influence us from the moment we come into it till we die; originality lies only in our own energy and will and what we are able to do with it. But Penna - despite his strong individualism, his independent lifestyle and strong-willed personality - was not self-confident at all, neither was he 'energetic'- previous quotes from his letters, diary and poems have shown all his doubts and insecurity each time the moment comes to publish his work.

The great theorist of the anxiety of influence in the twentieth century was Freud. Freud's work was well known to Penna, as the poet admits in his *Autobiografia*:

Anch'ioavevocreduto di esserel'esempiotipicodellapsicanalisi, di unoches'identifica con la madre e cerca un ragazzo da amare, come la madre lo amava. Oggi devo dire . . . cheavevogiàripudiato la psicoanalisi. Fuitraiprimiadandaredallopsicanalista. . . Avevoletto le 'Trente lections de psicanalisme par Freud'. Era un volume molto divertente, Freud è unoscrittore molto divertente."³⁰

I had also believed myself to be a typical example of psychoanalysis, one that identifies with the mother and look for a boy to love, like mother loved him. Today I have to say . . . I had already repudiated psychoanalysis. I was among the first to go to a psychoanalyst . . . I had read the 'Trente lections de psicanalisme par Freud'. It was a very funny book, Freud is a very funny writer.

Freud located the origin of the "anxiety of influence" in the "family romance" and defines anxiety as a mode of expectation, like desire. Penna underwent psychoanalytic treatment for years with one of Freud's disciples because of his neurosis and depression. Penna's mother abandoned him and the family when Penna was a teenager and Penna's relationship with his father was problematic - to use a euphemism.

According to Freud we all suffer from this type of anxiety, whether we are poets or not. Anxiety is a state of 'un-pleasure' different from sorrow and grief; it is a response to a situation of 'danger' and reminds us of the universal fear of domination, of the 'trap' and 'dungeon' that our body can turn out to be for us all. Freud connects this anxiety to the birth trauma, the separation from the mother and the non-gratification of needs, the fear of exclusion and finally the fear of death. Poets incarnate all these anxieties in their 'melancholy', whose final outcome is the 'poem'.

There are of course for Bloom a number of analogies between these human anxieties and the poets' anxiety of influence, as, for Bloom, the poet's precursors represent the father figure every poet fears and has to fight in order to become 'adult', and every poem already written can be a 'danger' for the latecomer, an obstacle to the gratification of his needs, that being to see his originality and greatness acknowledged. It would appear that, in rejecting any connections to other poets and suggesting for himself the definition of 'poet of the mystery', Penna was, in a way, trying to by-pass his literary 'parents/ancestors' and claim for himself the grace of divine inspiration. Moreover, the words of the Australian author and critic Peter Robb "... his attention is directed exclusively at a figure poised uncertainly between childhood and manhood, pre-eminently the being without power" perfectly summarize what Penna was actually rejecting: "power". The power that fame and money can bring would have come together with acceptance of compromise, and sacrifice of part of his freedom; the freedom to not 'become adult' ".31

Notes

- ¹ "Un fioresenzagambovisibile . . . uno di quegliintensifiori di lagochesembranogalleggiaresull'acqua." Bigongiari, P., p.47.
- ² ". . . egli è unofragliesseriumanipiùliberichesianomaiesistiti. Mai si è lasciatodominare da un'ideaaltrui; mai è diventato servo di un'ideachecircolasseall'intorno; maisi è piegato a essere o a pensare secondo un modellofornitogli da altri o fluttuantenell'aria."Ginzburg, N., in: Penna, S., *Il viaggiatore*, p.10.
- ³ All quotations of Penna's poems are from *Poesie*. Milan: Garzanti, 2000. Print. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
- ⁴ "unosplendido e scioccanteprototipodellapiùavanzatatecnologia, infineinstallato sotto vetro in un museo . . . , fattotabu" Pinchera, A., "Alle origini della poesia di Sandro Penna", in *Rapporti*, V, n. 12-13, March-June 1977, p.817.
- ⁵ Giuliani, A., "Sandro Penna: Poesie", in *II Verri,* II, 1, 1958; later in *Immagini* e *maniere*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965, p. 293.

- ⁶ Pasolini, P.P., *Passione e ideologia*, pp.345-346.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 345-346.
- 8 "Perchèhaivolutoconoscere Sandro Penna?" "L'uomo ha bisogno di miti e Sandro Penna era un mito. Conoscendolo mi sonoresocontocheimiti non esistono. Esiste solo l'incanto. E quello è rimasto" Giannelli, E., p. 212.
- "Penna sapeva di essere un grande pretendevaincensi e allori, ma non avevaquell'animo di lacchè, requisitoindispensabile, secondo La Bruyère, per riuscire a conquistare la fortunanella vita" lbidem, p. 213.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.57.
- ¹¹ Garboli, C., p. 26, p.31.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, p.33.
- ¹³ In "Giovaniliritrovate" *Poesie* (re-print 2010), p.271.
- ¹⁴ Penna, S., in Pecora, E., pp.141-142.
- ¹⁵ The actual sentence reads: "la stessaimmaginevulgatadal poeta, con la mitografiadellasolitudine e delladisappartenenza alia societaletteraria e artistica" in Deidier, R., p. 84.
- ¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 114.
- "[...] riaffiora un sostrato di meditazioni е letturelungamentesconfessate.
- Ogniautoresisametabolizza lepropriefonti, di mimetizzarel'apprendistato [...]" Ibidem, p.23.
- ¹⁸ "unaformazioneautodidattaedeterogenea, con visibileascendenzeeuropee, tutt'altrocheindagata" Deidier, R., p.18.
- ¹⁹ Bo, C., "Vento di poesia", in Corriere della Sera, 18 June 1970, p.11.
- ²⁰ Vaglio, E., p.11.
- ²¹ "Penna rivelailsuomodo di scriverechepero ancheunarivelazione di come luiconsapevolmentecostruisceilsuomito" Ibidem, p.28.
- ²² Ginzburg, N., inPenna, *Il Viaggiatore*, p.8.
- ²³ "It is not necessary, nor even desirable, to take my part: on the contrary, a dose of curiosity - as with an unknown plant - with an ironic resistance, would seem to me an incomparably more intelligent attitude toward me." Nietzsche, F., in a letter to Carl Fuchs, 29 July 1888, 1888, KSB 8: 1075.
- ²⁴ "Città' in Poesie (1939).
- ²⁵ "Guardando un ragazzodormire" in Stranezze (1976).
- ²⁶ Di Fonzo, p.116.
- ²⁷ "sembrava/ che un diocattivo/avesse con un sol gesto/tuttopietrificato" in Poesie (1939).
- ²⁸ ". . . un fondamentaletrattodellapsicologiapenniana, indirizzata, secondo la prospettiva di Nietzsche, versol'accettazione di unacompresenza del male e del

bene, del dolore e dellagioiachecontemporanamentescandisconoogniesperienza." Didier, R., p.38.

- ²⁹ "Letteratura" in Stranezze (1976).
- ³⁰ In *Autobiografia al magnetofono*, work cited, pp. 35-36.
- ³¹ Robb, P., work cited, n.p.

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- 8. Di Piero W.S., T. (1982). This Strange Joy. By Sandro Penna. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
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