

Meeting Pontiggia

How did I happen to meet Giuseppe Pontiggia and interview him for three years in a row? It all began with the dispatch of a book. I had just published *La musica dell'uomo solo. Saggi su Luigi Pirandello, Primo Levi, Leonardo Sciascia e Giovanni Orelli* (The Music of the Lone Man. Essays on Luigi Pirandello, Primo Levi, Leonardo Sciascia and Giovanni Orelli), published by Polistampa, Florence in 2000 and I thought about sending it to a number of critics and writers. And so I sent it and thought no more about the matter.

At that time I was living Aarau, a Swiss town not far from Zurich and at weekends I often went to Varzo in the Valdossola region. One day in June of 2001, shortly before taking the train to Domodossola, I decided to go and pick up a package from the post office in Aarau, which is just opposite the station. Lost in thinking about my imminent departure I tore open the envelope and saw that it contained a book. It was *Nati due volte* (Born Twice) by Giuseppe Pontiggia. I noticed the author's dedication immediately. It was wonderful. I was so moved that I took the book, but forgot my backpack at the post office but did not notice until I was on the train and had to run to recover it.

I wrote to thank him and told him about the emotion which caused me to forget my bag and miss the train. He replied by sending his number and telling me I could call. And so I called at once and asked if I could pay him a visit. He said I could visit him in July when he would be alone in Milan, since his wife and son were going to the island of Elba for the summer. I could choose the date.

I arrived in Milan on a hot summer's day, I rang the doorbell on Via Farneti and Pontiggia himself opened the door. He was very tall, well-built, with a big smile. He showed me into the living room-cum-library of his early twentieth century apartment.

There I was, finally sitting in front of him and the volumes in his library. Seeing all the books on the shelves reaching up to the high ceiling as well as those stacked in several rows on the table, one of the first things I asked him was how, in the midst of the so many volumes he had received, he had managed to choose to read mine. He replied by saying that the ability of the reader lies in being able to recognize the right book from among many. And so we began to talk.

I asked permission to use a small video camera that I had brought along. He agreed and even helped me to solve a technical problem: I did not have a tripod which would ensure a less shaky recording, so in order to keep the camera at the right level and, more importantly, steady, he told me to place the video camera on one of the steps of a ladder that he evidently used to reach the top shelves. After a while, thinking about the monotony of the unchanging image, I decided to take the small camera and filmed the table with the recently arrived books. Later I filmed the volumes on the library shelves and the long endless row of *Meridiani Mondadori*. So began our first interview: it was the date of the storming of the Bastille: the 14th of July.

After the interview, I turned off the camera and we continued to discuss on a wide range of topics. I even discovered that Pontiggia was very curious about me and wanted to know about my training as a Jungian psychoanalyst in Zurich and my work as a researcher at the Scuola Normale in Pisa. I explained that the interview would be used for my lectures at the Scuola Normale, where I had chosen him as a writer to present to my students.

Then he took me to see his library downstairs. An entire apartment was occupied by his books and he explained how he had decided to arrange them on the shelves. In the

placement of the books he had followed a system of his own devising: beside a volume of one author he placed the related critical essays; alternatively, authors that went well together were placed according to affinity. In short, the volumes were not aligned in a single row in alphabetical order, behind continuous long rows of new books arranged according to a critical interpretation that could take off in different directions. Who knows why, and perhaps memory serves me ill, but Dickens and Nabokov were neighbours.

He asked me what I was writing. He knew that in addition to Pirandello, Primo Levi, Sciascia and Orelli, I was working on the poetry of Vivian Lamarque. I told him jokingly that I was perhaps the first literary critic to literally put herself in the clothes of the author. Once I went to visit Vivian at her home in Celle Ligure and since I had come from a very cold Zurich, I arrived dressed in heavy black clothes little suited to the summer weather that could already be felt in Liguria. She immediately lent me one of her light skirts and I found myself redressed in vivid colours. Pontiggia gave a great laugh at this.

I explained that at that time I was taken up with my work on Collodi and Pinocchio. In fact, I told him that his introduction to Collodi's translation of the French fairy tales had been lent to me by Vivian because that edition, published by Adelphi, had not yet been reissued and was difficult to find. Reading his introduction of the copy in which he had written a dedication signing himself Peppo had already brought me close to him. He also underlined this coincidence with a laugh. We left each other with a promise to meet again.

From the Preface by Rossana Dedola, Giuseppe Pontiggia. La letteratura e le cose essenziali che si riguardano, Avagliano, Rome 2013.

Once, while I was in Strasbourg for a literary event, I asked the poet Josef Brodsky for an interview but he declined. Fixing me with his gaze he added a phrase that I found striking: "There are writers who write and writers who talk. I am a writer who writes." I assumed that the first category automatically excluded the second. But years later, when I first met Giuseppe Pontiggia, I realised that such a belief was mistaken. Pontiggia turned out to be not only a great writer who writes but also a great writer who talks. The first had a poet-like relationship with writing, and the second would never tire of listening to the first. And when he was not speaking, there formed around him a joyful expectation of his words capable of combining together humour and moral, wisdom and wit. This expectation never led to disappointment, as had happened a few years earlier to readers of Leonardo Sciascia.

The conversations with Giuseppe Pontiggia published here are an opportunity to listen once again to his voice and his fascinating way of conversing which can take us from a reflexion on literature to a self-reflexion on the essential things of life. Pontiggia's reflections on language shed light on the distortions of Italy, the Italians and their language, they reveal the irrelevance of the classics projected into the future and also become an uninterrupted lesson on writing and on life. The writer who talks always questions the writer who writes, retracing some fundamental steps of his literary experience, starting from his first appearance with the new avant-garde from which he distanced himself being more interested in the construction of sense than in the destruction of the sign. Then there is Pontiggia the student of Taoism, absorbed in a thought he feels his own and which allows his research on the word to be opened up to unexpected reversals; we see him in the role of translator of classics, of reader at publishing houses, of psychoanalyst and of traveller in the maze of normality and of disability, of exacting cultivator of great passions and subtle sentiments. And above all, we see him as an insatiable devourer of books. (...)

The struggle that the character invented by Pontiggia engages in is primarily with himself. Drawing on the experience of Italo Svevo, Pontiggia's protagonist also shows an

extraordinary inability to understand and see things happening around him, things which he will only understand “after”. In *La morte in banca* (Death in the Bank), the novel that marked his debut as a young writer, that “after” offers a glimpse of an awareness that allows life to escape a form of survival that is very similar to death. But this is also what happens to the protagonist of *Il giocatore invisibile* (The Invisible Player), who doggedly pursues the culprit and the pawns that make up the game in which he is involved, without realizing that the game is against himself and that he has already been checkmated by fate.

By rotating existence and the fate of the characters around an empty centre the same theme is re-examined in *Il raggio d’ombra* (The Ray of Shadow) and *La grande sera* (The Big Evening) where the idea of betrayal leads to a questioning of religion, and loss and abandonment mark not only an ending but also a new beginning. Meanwhile the lives described in *Vite di uomini non illustri* (Lives of Non-Illustrious Men) throw a ray of light and a metaphysical beam on the individual paths mired in the everyday.

In his fiction, as in his criticism, through the combination of fragments, aphorisms, sentences and essays, as well as in the pauses and silences of white space, and through a perspective which he himself he has termed “kaleidoscopic”, the writer traces a design which immediately decomposes to be replaced by another completely new and unexpected design. The result is neither chaotic nor meaningless, but breathes life into a narrative in which the individual fragments participate in multiplying their meanings.

The last novel *Nati due volte* (Born Twice) addresses the theme of disability in a surprisingly original way and returns to a theme that is also central to the earlier novels: to be in the world does not automatically mean living; in order to feel alive a new birth is necessary. If the previous novels arrive at a point of understanding the “after”; there is revealed here, in contrast, a capacity to “understand beforehand” in relation to the weak and the disabled, making possible an examination of the concept of normality under a new light.

In this game of light and shadow, of moves on a chessboard, of reflections and reversals, of ironic reshapings and shared smiles and cosmic expansions, the author constantly challenges the reader, forcing a change of point of view and a questioning of everything in order to concentrate on the “essentials” which literature also allows one to discover. With readers there is not only a relationship of reading but of rereading, which transforms them, following in the wake Vladimir Nabokov, into a great “re-readers”. They are constantly called on to use all their creativity, urged on by the process of writing and rewriting to which the author submits his work in order to allow each sentence to have a sense and common language to express great truths.

The author speaks to the reader in the first person. He shows his weaknesses, his idiosyncrasies, and does not hold back when it comes to creating a warts-and-all portrait of the artist and tourist among the many tourists in this globalized world. He is still capable of looking through a window, through Kafka’s window, and to see there the infinite. The author sits on *Pickwick’s* carriage, creaking over the cobbles or lifts himself up onto *Swift’s* floating island to transport us to other worlds reminding us that it is in the dimension of the present that tragedy and comedy meet, and reverse each other and that heaven and earth are forever joined.

Rossana Dedola in conversation with Giuseppe Pontiggia, July 14, 2001

Rossana Dedola: In addition to psychoanalysis what were your other interests at the time?

Giuseppe Pontiggia: I had a great interest in Taoism; for example, I recall that I turned reading the Tao Te King (in the Castellani translation) into a personal experience. I knew it by heart, and believed I applied it in practice. I don't know to what degree I was a serious student of Taoism but for me it was the revelation of a thought of radical depth, perhaps the highest speculative point outside of religious experience in the strict sense, which is not comparable to speculative experience.

And I am convinced that Eastern philosophy has acted on my poetics, on my work, even on my way of conceiving writing. This is not spoken about because I myself do not talk about it, and also because most readers are not familiar with Eastern thought.

And speaking of the East, an author who has had a great influence on me was René Daumal, who was a heretic surrealist with great interest in Eastern thought. *Le mont analogue* (Mount Analogue), *La grande beuverie* (A Night of Serious Drinking) are books that can only be understood by reading them against the backdrop of Eastern thought. He was also an experienced scholar of Sanskrit. Daumal said, for example: "Each sentence must have a sense, each word must have a sense, each word is a universe."

This highly detailed concentration on the multiple meanings of a word, on the verbal short-circuits that can arise from combinations of words is one of the aims of his teaching. Reading Daumal was one of the most important mental experiences I had even as a young man.

I think that even adjectivization and the refusal to speak in order to allow the empty spaces to speak are routes and processes which owe much to the theories and intuitions of Taoism, to non-action, to postponement in order to advance, to hiding in order to free one's self. These are all modalities that have had a decisive influence on me.