

the poetry of Luciano Erba

The first words of any poem by Luciano Erba that I read were in one by Vittorio Sereni—who had, I later discovered, been his teacher for a year of high school in 1939. “The Alibi and the Benefit,” a poem set inside a fog-bound Milanese tram whose doors open onto nothingness, cites lines 1–2 and 4–5 of Erba’s early poem “Tabula rasa?”: “It’s any evening / crossed by half-empty trams” and “You see me advance as you know / in districts without memory?” Sereni sets these as two linked phrases in italics. He leaves out the question mark and adds: “never seen a district so rich in memories / as these so-called ‘without’ in the young Erba’s lines.” The young Erba doesn’t in fact say that the districts are without memory, he wonders if they are. The difference may seem slight, but is underlined by the different directions taken by the two poems containing these words. In his own 1985 rereading of Sereni’s poem, “Mixing Memory and Desire,” Erba referred to the quotation of his own early lines as a barrier or obstacle that the poem has to overcome so as to reach its destination. Sereni’s goes on to emphasize the fog’s ambivalence: it is both a way of avoiding noticing the world’s possibilities and the place where they remain with their potentials hidden. His is a poem of self-criticism and tentative cultural optimism.

“The Alibi and the Benefit” was inspired by a moment experienced on Sereni’s journey home one evening in 1950. Erba’s poem was published in his first collection, *Linea K* (1951):

It’s any evening
crossed by half-empty trams
moving to quench their thirst for wind.
You see me advance as you know
in districts without memory?
I’ve a cream tie, an old
weight of desires
I await only the death
of every thing that had to touch me.

Sereni's comment on the quoted lines serves to indicate the ambivalence about memory half-concealed in Erba's question marks—the ones in the title and at the end of line 5. Is Erba's poem upset by the possibility that the districts may be without memory? Or does the close of his poem reveal that it is inspired by the further desire to see the slate wiped clean? Sereni's poem is set to accuse its poet of being evasive about the roots of the past, of using the fog as his alibi, while simultaneously underlining the hidden benefit in the flourishing of a possible different future. Erba's is poised between the need for a clean start and such a start's potentially alarming emptiness.

Signaling the point of equilibrium between possibilities canvassed by his question marks, there appears, as if a non sequitur, one of Erba's signature details: "I've a cream tie." Italian critics have dwelt upon how often these poems turn to seemingly casual details of wardrobe. Such details too are precisely located between the haphazard and the symbolic, neither one nor the other—as in "La Grande Jeanne," whose desire to rise from poor prostitute to great lady is manifested in her having "a hat already / broad, blue, and with three turns of tulle." The poet's interest in clothes and social ambitions forms part of a much older theme through which settled values are poetically destabilized. The simultaneous fullness and emptiness of our vanities and wishes, revealed by the poems' delicate ironies, is what makes them human. The pathos of unreflected-upon desire and ambition produces instant instances of *carpe diem* and *memento mori*.

Luciano Erba first came to prominence in 1952 when his work was associated with the so-called "Linea Lombarda," thanks to Luciano Anceschi's anthology of that name. Anceschi identified and presented a grouping of poets based in or around Milan with roots in the Luino-Como-Varese "Lake District" of northern Italy. He saw them as sharing a poetry of objects, of understatement, irony, and self-criticism, which included social commentary and cultural commitment—but only if mediated through a skeptical grid of humanistic intelligence and aesthetic detachment. The most senior member of this "line" was Vittorio Sereni (who was among the first to write about his one-time pupil in a 1951 article for *Milano Sera*). Among the other poets anthologized were Erba's contemporary Nelo Risi and Giorgio Orelli. Notwithstanding the reasonable accuracy of this identification, and, what's more, in accord with the assigned characteristics of the group, Erba's short poem "Linea Lombarda" quietly mocks the group's

name as yet another commonplace—one that is a little too conveniently true to be more than a misleading pigeonhole.

This helps to explain why his poetry was so largely not to the taste of the postwar neorealists and their theoretically *engagé* successors. In a cultural context where all is “political,” detachment of a French nineteenth-century bohemian kind, of a Gautier or Baudelaire, can be crudely construed as reactionary. So Erba, whose poetry is of no convenient party, and who speaks by means of a wry intimacy for the survival of neglected and unconsidered ways of life (ones either not yet quite come into existence, or on the way to extinction), has been seen as an apologist for a Catholic conservatism. It’s as if he were naturally inclined to side with Giovannino Guareschi’s local priest, Don Camillo, in his cold war games of ingenuity and trickery played with the Communist mayor of a village not far from Parma. Yet Erba’s approach to the loss-of-faith theme is also distinctly “homemade”:

At waking there comes back the ancient doubt
if this life weren’t a chance event
and our own just a poor monologue
of homemade questions and answers.
I believe, don’t believe, when believing I’d like
to take to the beyond with me a bit of the here
even the scar that marks my leg
and keeps me company.

The world and the afterlife are turned inside out. In his later poems, especially, what had seemed a world of solid objects becomes a Cézanne-like mapping of spaces and relations, while the absent and the void is to be furnished with some substance from the here and now. Thus attentive readers of these poems will notice that they are no more in thrall to the Catholic Church than they are to a Communist mayor.

Most of Erba’s poetry is situated, in one way or another, at points of transit between indeterminate states. These can be geographical, historical, social, political, cultural, and metaphysical. Evident examples in the selection appearing below would be two of the poems from “Railway Suite,” which derive from Erba’s flight to Switzerland to escape conscription into the forces of Mussolini’s Salò Republic, or “The Young Couples,” a poem

presenting the encounter of a guest and his hosts with their different socio-economic evolutions:

The young couples of the postwar years
would lunch in triangular spaces
of apartments near the fair
the windows had rings on their curtains
the furniture was linear, with hardly any books
the guest who brought Chianti
we drank from green glass tumblers
was the first Sicilian I'd ever met
us, we were his model of development.

What provides this poem with its particular savor is the barely implied mockery of “us,” even us, being someone’s vision of a better future. Yet it’s the presence of just this corrosive perspective that grants pathos to the Sicilian’s aspirations. The encounter is decisive for all concerned, but not quite perhaps in the ways they were imagining. Among the many functions of these delicately sketched transitional states is the preservation of a cultural space where the knowledge that poetry is uniquely able to deliver can be brought to life within the course of even so short a poem.

In his editor’s introduction to *Poesie 1951–2001*, Stefano Prandi notes that Erba’s poems contain the Italian word for “if” 89 times. This word can be used not only to project a space for imaginary possibilities; it may also help maintain an air of skepticism and uncertainty. “The Mirage,” for example, flourishes within the vagaries and limits of childhood memory. Such indeterminacy and fluidity of image allow the poetry to do its work independently of those fixities and definites of opinion and ideology that appear to form the unbroken surface of everyday life. Part of Erba’s cunning is to achieve his revival of classical epigram by means of a childlike simplicity. Frequently these poems actively promulgate a child’s own view of the world, one notoriously subject to the breaking of spells and disillusionment—as in the boys gone fishing in “The Yellow Orris.” So the presence of the childlike view keeps the world fresh, while the gentle irony shows it impacted with a more mature knowledge of how things fall out. Similarly, Erba turns history into a kind of child’s play. By this means he can contemplate it with detachment and intervene in it ideally. The poet’s

describing himself as no more than a *chasseur d'images* also points to the seeming paradox that poetry must frequent the apparently insignificant for its sources of fresh meaning. So too, it is only within experiences of the transitorily quotidian that what can stay may be intuited and rendered even as it disappears.

Erba's lifelong skepticism about large systems of thought and explain-all theories appears over the last decade or so to have come into its own. His doubts about psychoanalysis, for example, can be read in the intermittent series of poems concerning Doctor K, the earliest of which dates back half a century or more. Similarly, his apparent portrait of himself as "*petit bourgeois*" in "Without a Compass" subjects various grand designs to a quiet debunking:

According to Darwin I'd not be of the fittest
according to Malthus not even born
according to Lombroso I'll end bad anyway
and not to mention Marx, me, *petit bourgeois*
running for it, therefore, running for it
forward backward sideways
(as in nineteen-forty when everyone) but
there remain personal perplexities
am I to the east of my wound
or to the south of my death?

The poem outflanks the sorts of class-based political criticism that Erba's work had received at the hands of Franco Fortini and others. Yet, nevertheless, "*petit bourgeois*" is exactly the experience with which Erba's poetry might fictively identify itself, because that is a class in ambivalent transit between two more unequivocally valorized social positions. Something similar could be said for the attribution of essential function to such bit-part players as those from *Hamlet* in "The Circus Hypothesis": "Extras, unmeaning interludes / it's thanks to you perhaps / that the Tightrope walker doesn't fall."

I say "fictively identifies itself" because there has also been a tendency among Italian critics to see Erba's poetry as essentially autobiographical. Again, there is sufficient truth in such a notion for it to be plausible, but not quite enough. After all, there is nothing "confessional" about this poetry,

which appears to have few wells of guilt or shame or bad faith to empty out. Here too we can see a difference between his and Sereni's poetry. Erba has said of Fortini's importance in Sereni's life and art that he played the role of a necessary accuser and tormentor. Yet in Erba the autobiography is too close up and too intentionally "inconsequential" to figure as the material of such cultural dramas. Even when he treats of his flight to Switzerland, there is little sense that Erba is narrating an explanatory story that gives shape to his life. He appears rather to be following a vein of reflection or responding to a recurrent impulse. If the mother who makes a number of appearances in these poems appears to be a source of anxiety, the "socialist grandfather" who figures in "Implosion" may be no more nor less than a typical character borrowed, perhaps, from Victor Hugo's *L'Art d'être grand-père*. Similarly, there is no gain in assuming that "The Young Couples" is a poem actually about the poet's life in postwar Milan. It's a representative encounter. For Erba, the minute autobiographical-seeming detail is his quickest means for accessing an experience of life itself.

His work's uniqueness, some might say eccentricity, can be attributed to the poet's being so casually centered upon his own impulse, his own response to the world. It's by no means an unusual condition among distinctively good poets. I'm reminded of Sereni's phrase describing Attilio Bertolucci as a "divino egoista," or that other lake poet Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime." Erba's strategy may have been to seem like a minor epigone of Montale's high cultural snobbism, crossed with a quotidian Milanese adaptation of Jules Laforgue's or Guido Gozzano's irony. But, as P. V. Mengaldo has noted, the epigone's self-proclaimed minor status allows for a wide field of divergence and of camouflaged originality. His work has also been compared to that of a Jacques Prévert—and there is a curious similarity between the informality of means which Erba deploys and that of such Beat poets as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, one of Prévert's most distinguished translators, and just three years older than Erba. Quietly going his own way, borrowing hints for what he has needed from whoever and wherever he likes, while nevertheless sticking to the task of exploring the confines of his own inspiration, Luciano Erba has over more than half a century gone about producing one of the most unusual and original bodies of work in contemporary Italian poetry.