Interview with Pietro Roversi

Hi Pietro,

First of all, thank you for agreeing to this interview. How about starting it off by telling us a bit about yourself and your job?

Thank you for this opportunity! I was born in Novara (Italy) by accident, in 1968, my family are from Modena, and when I was 6 we moved to Verona, where I grew up. I went to University in Milano and after my chemistry degree I decided I had no interest in making new molecules, rather I wanted to look at existing ones. This, and a passion for living cells, made me choose protein science. During my doctorate I moved to England, where protein structural science was born in the XX century, and here I have become a structural biologist. Mostly, I work as a protein chemist and an X-ray crystallographer: we isolate proteins and make them into crystals (think of these crystals as a magnifying lenses for the proteins they contain). We then shine X-rays on the crystals and interpret those X-ray images to obtain 3D models of the proteins. These 3D models inform on the functions of the proteins and assists drug design. At the moment we are trying to understand how UGGT (the enzyme responsible for the quality control of all proteins secreted by eukaryotic cells) can do its job at all: imagine a single molecule in charge of checking on hundreds of differently shaped molecules, and being able to flag them for retention in the cell if they are incorrectly folded. A molecular mystery! That, or the current model about UGGT needs improving. My colleagues and I think we should find a drug to inhibit UGGT in individuals suffering from certain genetic diseases. We hope to be able to prove this idea right or wrong.

At what age did you start writing poetry? What were your favourite poets then? How has your poetry evolved over the years?

I started writing poetry around the age of 14. My favourite poets then were Catullus, Ariosto, Gianni Rodari, Dino Campana and Eugenio Montale. All I wrote till the age of 21 has either been lost or destroyed (although I suppose a copy of some latin hexameters of mine may survive among the records of the 1986 Certamen catullianum (a yearly latin writing contest for schoolchildren) in their archives in Lazise).

The first surviving manuscript of mine is a book I wrote in 1989-1991, still unpublished, although the poems are online – together with the entirety of my unpublished texts to date. Whenever I publish a book I remove the poems from the web, but the rest is all there: individual texts online do not give a true sense of the manuscript they belong to, but they can still be appreciated individually before they appear in a printed book.

A second book of poetry, also unpublished, was written during the years 1993-1994: at the time, I was serving as a conscientious objector in a community hosting a dozen of psychiatric patients in Sesto San Giovanni, between Monza and Milano. Earlier in 2014 I took some of those poems out of the drawer and submitted them to a small poetry competition in Rimini, and I have been awarded the first prize: http://farapoesia.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/vincitori-del-concorso-in-sana-mente.html

Since moving to England, I developed a taste for American poetry (Marianne Moore, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens), while among italian poets I came to appreciate Aldo Palazzeschi, Giampiero Bona, Guido Gozzano, Giorgio Caproni, Bartolo Cattafi, and Toti Scialoja. Perhaps not surprisingly. Alongside these readings, my poetry has become increasingly sound- and rhyme-based. Among living italian I especially love Cristina Annino and Giuseppe Caracausi. From them I am learning to cut out the inessential and the redundant, and to trust my own text without worrying too much about the reception on the part of the reader. My recent texts have benefitted from their help and example.
How many languages can you speak? What do you like about each one? How does language affect your poetry?

I can speak Italian of course, although these days I sometimes come up with rather anglicised turns of phrase. I like Italian when it is terse and concise, because of its simplicity. Its roots stretching back to Latin carry for me the past into the present. My English can be good at times: I love this language's immense lexicon, which allows its speakers to be very accurate if they choose to be so; and the almost complete absence of gender in it, which in turn allows vagueness when needed. My Spanish is basic but I find that it stirs very strong emotions in me, the way what is familiar and yet exotic at the same time does. My French sounds horrendous, and yet I admire its subtle vocalic sounds I cannot reproduce, and its ability to pass for sophisticated even when it’s rather coarse. I am fortunate enough to have read many great books written in one or another of these languages, and it gives me a great joy to be able to read something very good in the original. All these languages affect my poetry because they remind me that a poem can only be justified if it is the best (if not the only) way of saying what it says. So other languages I know in the background serve as it were as a selection/control ground for my texts in Italian. Last but not least, I think that today the future of all languages is in their coevolution and reciprocal contamination. I am especially excited about what is happening and will happen to Italian in the wake of the more recent waves of immigration to Italy.

Tell us a bit about the two poetry books of yours that have been published and your electronically available poems. What poetry websites do you regularly publish your poems on? Are you in touch with stimulating online communities?

“My crisi creativa” (Puntoacapo, 2010) is – as the title suggests – the result of a year of furious writing, which I would liken now to the bursting of a suppurating wound or an infected spot. It contains rough, coarse, inflated writing, with the rage and the exhilaration of middle age in it. Its texts went through none of the painstaking polishing I used to carry out on my writings before. Perhaps in spite of this, or perhaps precisely because writing the book was such a liberating experience, when I finished it, for the first time in my life I thought I should try and publish it. I had always taken writing seriously but I never craved readers; with these poems I did, and I remain very grateful to Mauro Ferrari who gave me the opportunity to find some. I am still rather inclined to forgive the book's weaknesses, although now that I think I may have readers, I have become much more strict with myself when it comes to working on a poem.

My second published book “Vamosaver” (Gaittomerlino/Superstripes, 2014) was written during my 2012-2013 stay in the Basque Country. It retains the irony and the invective of the first book in places, but it also relishes shorter, more controlled forms, and it is more experimental in its attempt to grapple with the language, with foreign languages darting to the foreground from time to time where the Italian needs them. I am not sure if I can continue writing like this but I am very pleased with the editing Piera Mattei did on the book, with the watercolour that my friend and colleague Daniel Badia Martinez drew for it, and with the many memories that these texts capture and I hope reverberate around.

For my online publishing, I have chosen a low-brow, open-to-all website, http://pietroroversi.scrivere.info/. They maintain my texts in good order and they provide space for my readers to comment. I can link to those pages when I need it. While the people in charge of the website hold very different views on poetry to mine, and we have often clashed, I enjoy the company of many other people who publish their writing in there, and I have found as many good writers among that community as in the official world of Italian published poetry. In some sense the website is below the radar of the professional literary critics, so I am really hiding my texts in full view, which I enjoy: it helps me focussing on the writing without taking myself too seriously. I regularly put my texts on Facebook as Notes, for my friends to read. I have occasionally published texts in online poetry magazines, poetry blogs or friend’s webpages.

In your poems, a scientific, supposedly objective language is used to dissect humankind and its fallibility. The discourse is steered by witty puns based on collocations, assonances and semantic affinities (I can't help but think of the metaphysical poets and their notion of wit.) Often such a semantic and thematic turn is realized in the enjambement. Another relevant matter is the bodily dimension and the meticulous description of acts, in short, concrete imagery realizing poetical immateriality (a contradiction in terms!) What do you start with when writing poems and how long does it take you for the polishing work?

I am especially fond of John Donne’s poetry, so I am delighted (if rather humbled) by the comparison with the metaphysical poets. And I certainly strive for texts that carry or embody the complexity and the ambiguity of the world, including human contradictions. In this context, the language for me becomes the network that keeps things together. Hence perhaps the interconnecting sounds and the skeleton of connected words that often traverses the text, as you point out. References to different parts of the same semantic field and broken down
chains of associations serve the same purpose. In a nutshell, good poetry for me must contain hidden persuasive devices, and anything giving cohesion to the text gives it plausibility and helps manipulating the attention of the reader.

As to their genesis, the poems are born in a number of ways, but two of the most frequent ones seem to be: I hear somebody speaking a phrase or sentence, and then I feel compelled to write it down, stealing it, I suppose; or when a syllable presents itself repeated in a sentence, either mine or somebody else’s, and it triggers more instances of itself to follow. The poem then unfolds or wraps around these germs. A single word seldom calls for a poem and indeed I am not a great fan of single words in isolation. I especially hate verse without verbs and just nouns stated as if they were magical or evocative or "poetic". We do not speak like this in everyday life. I am more interested in grey, neutral parts of speech, stock phrases, proverbs, adages, the commonplace, the banal. Perhaps in my middle age so much of my thinking is either prejudicial or stereotypical, that these parts of the language suit me best.

As to the work on a text after its genesis, most poems are finished in half an hour or so. Others take longer, days perhaps, but I do not work on them all the time. I leave them, forget them for a little while, then go back and delete or add and fix until I do not know what to do anymore or they look the way they should. Deep down, I almost always know the weaker bits, but it is not always easy to find the courage to cut them or know how to improve things. Sometimes letting somebody else edit a text of mine or give me their opinion on it has helped me immensely, although there are parts that I would never accept to change, because they are what they should be (typically because of their sound, the way they scan, or their interrelation to the rest) and I do not care if somebody else thinks otherwise.

I’d like to conclude this interview asking you to share two poems of yours with me and the readers of this blog so that they can have a sample of your work.

_Dates for my diary_

_During the Napoleonic wars_

_Britain was isolated_

_from mainland Europe:_

_people became collectors_

_of seaweed and root vegetables,_

_and this tradition,_

_seems to have continued_

_well beyond the scope_

_of that need. Laver bread, sea kale, black salsify are just examples of near-inedibles that could feed the starved in a time of dearth. Back then,_

_that kind of knack for tasteless hope could be excused._

_But what a palaver now to insist that it still be of use._

_On another matter, you teach, you would not spell "lose" "loose", but I wouldn’t put past you the belief that the Barnacle Goose was born from a mussel on the beach, such is your virginity in all matters._
exact (microbiology, anatomy or humanist
church-going are examples), not to mention
any fact to do with movement in space, or with the sense
of what makes one handsome and what does not.

Not that it matters much. Much to my chagrin,
the Key of Joy may be the sin of disobedience, but
I'll stick with the dates for my diary,
with the compere on the show, as I want his
company, companionship, comradeship
beyond compare. Like in the old days,
this is a case of
kelp for ash, and cash for kelp.
One helps oneself to what is in one's dish.
One learns to relish help when one is famished.

The funny thing is though, all considered:
I am continental. I can shop. I know better.

From now on, I vow to reintroduce
some of the good produce, stop being a schlepper.

[28082009]

Swag, loot & contraband

Look at how the shiny orange leaves
tumble down to the floor,
carrot cake pieces that cavort
in the stomach! I ate my slice and more.

If hunting pink is red,
is a hunting pavillion
vermillion? As if I had qualms
about appropriating the verse in a million
that fell off the back of a lorry.
I stole these from you, sorry, Juliet!
And yet and yet and yet ...

[31/10/2009]

Thank you again for your time, Pietro, and until next time, goodbye!

Other links on Pietro Roversi and his work:

http://www.pietroroversi.org/
http://www.superstripes.net/gattomerlino/9788886839324.htm
http://pietroroversi.scrivere.info/
http://www.poetidelparco.it/9_1037_Vamosaver-di-Pietro-Roversi.html
http://golfedombre.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05/cristina-amino-legge-pietro-roversi.html

Posted by Maurizio Brancaleoni at 02:22
Labels: biology, free poems, italian poetry, italian poets, literature, pietro roversi, poesia, poetry, vamosaver

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http://golfedombre.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05/cristina-amino-legge-pietro-roversi.html

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* Writer and translator, some of my poems and short stories have appeared in manifold collections and magazines. * Scrittore e traduttore, finora ho pubblicato racconti e poesie in svariate raccolte e riviste.

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Commenta come: Maurizio Branc

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