

Paolo Lagazzi

La casa del poeta

(presentazione a New York)

Before saying anything about my book *La casa del poeta* [The poet's house] published by Garzanti in May 2008, I want to thank the man who has given me the opportunity to present it here: this man is Luigi Fontanella, who has done – and still does – so much to promote poetry and intercultural dialogue between Italy and the U.S.A.

The poet's house is first and foremost a book about my face-to-face encounters with one of Italy's leading 20th century poets, Attilio Bertolucci. His work is also read in Anglophone countries thanks to *Selected poems* edited by Charles Tomlinson and *Winter Journey*, translated in its entirety by Nicholas Benson; however he is undoubtedly not yet sufficiently known and appreciated. (Personally I am convinced he is a truly outstanding poet, on a par with Montale, Ungaretti, Caproni, Penna, Luzi, Rebora, Sbarbaro).

With a preface by Bernardo Bertolucci – the famous film director is Attilio's son –, the book straddles twenty-four summers. It is set essentially in Casarola, a tiny village in the Apennines not far from Parma, with no more than a hundred or so inhabitants. This is where the Bertolucci family originated from, and the house was the home of Attilio's ancestors. It is a large building and occupies the highest and most

picturesque site in the village, with a wonderful view over the valley of the river Bratica. Attilio settled in Rome in the early 1950s, and thereafter came to Casarola every summer to spend the months of July and August in the house, with his wife Ninetta; and over the course of many many years I would join them there, each time to share a week or two of peace and quiet, convivial company, conversation and walking.

The decision to write *The poet's house* did not stem from a rationally planned project. Instead, at a certain point in my life, I had this desire – I could almost call it a sense of urgency – to set down on paper my own testimony of Attilio Bertolucci's life, described through aspects of his day- to-day existence. For years I had dealt with Bertolucci's work as a critic, eventually writing two books to interpret it, editing an anthology of his verses selected for Rizzoli and the complete collection of his poetry and prose for Mondadori's "I Meridiani" series. But in 2006 I felt a strong urge to talk about Bertolucci as a man, a person, a friend and a teacher. You are surely acquainted with the "remote" debate between the greatest 19th- century critic, Sainte-Beuve, and Marcel Proust. Sainte-Beuve thought it important to explore a writer's biography because he was convinced there were always links, connections, relations of some kind between an individual's life and his work. Proust, on the other hand, believed each work was a universe per se, governed by its own laws: it could therefore not be related to the biography of its author. Among the critics who produced the best work in 20th-century Italy, and continue their work today, Pietro Citati has presented the most convincing argument on this issue: he shows us that, while it may be wrong to approach a writer's life from a determinist standpoint, seeking out the "reasons" behind his work, in no way is it inappropriate to search in his life and work for affinities, consistencies, short-circuits of sense that can prove highly enlightening.

In other words, to delve into an author's biography is always a rewarding adventure: in all sorts of ways – often mysterious and hard to nail down,

never following a rigid pattern – it can help us probe their texts in greater depth. I fully endorse Citati's opinion, which is why I felt the need to recount a part, possibly the most secret and significant part, of Bertolucci's life.

I had the privilege of getting to know him in his everyday life, and being able to read and re-read his poems right there in the midst of the countryside he so loved: side by side with the poet himself, his wife, his children when they were present, going to the same places as he used to go, staying in his home, talking with him over countless afternoons, strolling together, enjoying particular moments with him, the food prepared by Ninetta, the sense of hospitality, and all this for so many years. If I'm allowed to say this, time and again I felt about Bertolucci in the way a pupil feels about his Zen master. My encounter with him has meant so much in my life, not just because of the literary side of our relationship but on a purely human level. As a person Bertolucci was, in certain respects, inconsistent: he had an immense capacity for friendship and affection but there was also an anxiety within him that became contagious. And yet he knew how to coax light even from darkness. I could also say that he always had a kind of duality: infinite gentleness, and at the same time something shadowy. There were occasional minor skirmishes in our friendship, fleeting moments when I saw his more serious, almost hard side, directed not so much at me as at life, things, reality. But all this quickly faded to become beauty, benevolence: he had a

profound sense of integrity, always accompanied by an amazing sense of humour.

As I was writing *The poet's house*, the book gradually took on forms that even I had not anticipated: it became not just a biography but another essay, a journal, a news story, a novel, a fairy tale ... Why? I believe the reason for my book's "plural" nature lies essentially in the complexity of its subject. Basically, for me, telling the story of Bertolucci as a man meant

re-reading certain key episodes of his work, and to do this I had to explore the links between the verses and the places that inspired them. But that was not all: as I made my way around the seasons and spaces of Bertolucci's life and work I had to respond to a challenge of my own, which involved determining the very meaning of my long encounter with him, changing – as time went by – the points from which I observed his *rêveries* and his destiny, describing the brighter and darker moments of my summers at Casarola: moments of joy and melancholy, episodes that at times caused euphoria, at other times anguish, days of sun and days of rain, delight and suffering ...

My book is – I believe – difficult to define since it spans myriad experiences and diverse literary genres. In Italy it has been interpreted both as an unusual slant on narrative essay writing and as a kind of "multi-layered" story. Personally I do not want to push readers in any particular direction: it seems right that the book be considered as a work that lends itself to various "readings", as a path that can eventually lead to many interpretations and have resonance on many levels. There is one thing however that I want to make quite clear: in no way does *The poet's house* claim to say the last word on Bertolucci and his world. If a critic can aspire to anything at all, it is to make his

testimony true and faithful. The fact remains however that he always sees *only a part* of the world he describes. If a critic is honest with himself, if he does not feign a demiurgic power he does not possess (possibly by exhibiting “scientific” credentials), then he is inevitably aware that his task consists of accompanying an author for just one stretch of his journey, then leaving it to others to go the rest of the way. Because great creative destinies and great works continue to evolve, and move on through the centuries, whereas the life of each reader is relentlessly limited and brief.

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