

Ida Grasso, *Un topos moderno: Il pellegrinaggio sentimentale nella poesia europea tra Otto e Novecento*, Pacini Editore, Pisa, 2013, 294 pp.

The scope of Ida Grasso's latest book is indeed ambitious: *Un topos moderno: Il pellegrinaggio sentimentale nella poesia europea tra Otto e Novecento* is a topological study that traces the development of the sentimental pilgrimage in modern European poetry. The author identifies the methodological basis of the study in the definition that SATOR (Société d'Analyse de la Topique Romanesque) gives of the word *topos*: by defining it as a «configuration narrative récurrente» (p. 20), SATOR shows a particular interest in the patterns of variation and innovation that the very *topos* can show in the course of its historical development. As Grasso points out, the importance SATOR places on variation in the *topos* is at odds with the interpretation Curtius had given of the latter, centered as it was on patterns of similarity and continuity. Rather than as an abstract entity, then, SATOR conceives of *topoi* as of living configurations, with an origin, an evolution, a decline and a death. Indeed it is in discontinuities rather than homogeneity that Grasso looks for the most useful insights the transformation of the sentimental pilgrimage in poetry can grant to us readers. Her study, the author anticipates in the introduction, proceeds in two directions of critical inquiry: first, the return to the father's house and garden of childhood is analyzed according to the trajectory of the *topos*' development in time; that same transformation is traced by considering a selection of European poets spanning from the Italian pre-Crepuscolari to 20<sup>th</sup> century authors who have successively dealt with the *topos* of the pilgrimage. The experience of the pilgrimage faces poets of the modern age with their own past and with the necessity to come to terms with it in light of their artistic vocation. According to this dual line of inquiry, the introduction anticipates the most important change that is to be observed in the change of European poetry at the turn of the century: while most late 19<sup>th</sup> century poets could find relief for their sense of belatedness and inadequacy in the private idyll the birthplace or garden finally turned into, poets of the new century all tend to interpret the sense of oth-

erness associated with the homecoming as a universally regenerating and eternizing experience.

Thus prepared, readers enter the first chapter of the study, which investigates the poetic strategies of return to houses and gardens in late 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry. Betteloni's *Piccolo Mondo* is a fine example of the aforementioned bourgeois idyll that is recreated in the forefathers' house: the poet seeks refuge in the paternal mansion, and after questioning the worth of his own literary profession as opposed to his forerunners' active example, he finds comfort in the positivist trust his own time and culture puts in the prosopopoeia of the House, the seat of evolutionary regeneration and change. In a similar fashion, though behind the apparently unresolved match between nature and human perception that is felt to be inseparable from it, the garden teaches a lesson in progressivism, as in Nencioni's *Il giardino abbandonato*: just like his contemporary Betteloni, the poet overcomes in fact the dejection induced by the perceived otherness of nature reigning in the rediscovered garden only thanks to a declared and positivist faith in the passing of time.

The Italian Crepuscolari constitute a phase of transition between the poets considered so far and the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in Gozzano's *Il frutteto* the positivist faith appears so weak that it also seems to imply a parody of D'Annunzio's typical garden, now turned into a humble and unadventurous orchard. The poet's ironic tone marks a detachment from the bourgeois idyll Gozzano's precursors had delighted in, so that the poem somewhat bitterly celebrates the metamorphosis of the garden and its losing its ancient and famed vegetation. The orchard becomes therefore a correlative for the poet's declining powers, now used to celebrate domestic and quite unheroic values.

The author then moves into an investigation on the origins of the *topos*: chapter III (part I) constitutes indeed the heart of Grasso's study, retracing the common roots of the religious and secular kinds of pilgrimage. Long before translating a personal and psychological experience devoted to the worship of one's individual past, the *topos* of the pilgrimage had in fact been Christian and religious in its forms and presentation: hence, Grasso's interest in tracing the changing structures of the Christian pilgrimage which sur-

vive in the modern tradition of the sentimental journey. Among the many enlightening remarks made by the author in this section, special note should be made of her adopting M. Eliade's theory of the hierophany (p. 166), the manifestation of the sacred, to explain man's election of privileged spaces whereto he seeks to return: rather than on the basis of rational speculation, these *topoi* are chosen according to an elementary, religious experience which precedes any reflection on the world. Grounding her study in the writings of authors such as Eliade and Freud, Grasso manages to raise the *topos*' double nature, both religious and secular, to a more explicit level and thence to try and more neatly define the boundaries between the two literary versions of the pilgrimage.

In her next chapter, Grasso examines the fate of the *topos* at the turn of the century: leaving at their back the private and bourgeois dimension that rediscovered houses and gardens had once disclosed to the poet, authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century find a new meaning in the representation of return. The new-century idyll sees a fundamental harmony between nature and man, where the latter conceives of the former as an eternal catalyst of forces for humanity rather than as a profitable and commodifiable resource for modern civilization. It is in light of a similar harmony that poets like Saba, Jimenez and Montale can accept the passing of time in the eternal return of the same. Unlike the rediscovered mansions and gardens of late 19<sup>th</sup> century poets like Nencioni, Betteloni or Moréas, the places Saba goes back to in *Piccolo Berto* have been preserved by virtue of time's eternal return, of its cyclical running. On his part, Jimenez celebrates, in *Diario de un poeta recién-casado*, the joyful and cosmic dimension of the return home: the quality of this rediscovered harmony is illustrated by an important change taking place with poets of the new century, namely the shift from a quest in search of a strict, active and austere father to a quest in search of the beloved, accessible and forgiving mother. Only in light of such a modification in the return pattern is the poet free to feel forgiven and accepted "as a poet" in the world: thus, in *Mediterraneo*, Montale can imagine a future for himself in the restoration of a bond with his own roots through poetry.

With the concluding section of the study, Grasso's reflection on the poetry of Frénaud, the whole analysis comes full circle: influenced as he is

by the German Romantic philosophers, Frénaud sees in the poetic act a revelation of the eternal tension between Being and interpretable sign. Far from the positivist *raison d'être* 19<sup>th</sup> century poets had believed to reside in the places of nostalgia, the French poet definitely identifies the *topos* of the house with the poetic *logos*. His whole artistic experience is therefore organized as a quest for meaning that is achieved by means of a re-discovery and literal re-construction of places through language. Within such a larger frame, house and poetry are brought together by the organizing principle that governs them both, the bricks of the former finding their perfect analogue in the words of the latter. Grasso's remarks on Frénaud's *Le château et la quête du poème* stand out for the precision with which they bring the scholar's analysis to a logical conclusion: in the poem, Frénaud resorts in fact to the image of the castle as a metaphor for artistic creation, where the architectural stance of the place testifies to the complexities and sophistication faced by the poet in his progress to knowledge and meaning *via* poetry. The only country or birthplace the poet can return to exists solely in the constructed domain of poetry: to accept the failure of such a return to a tangible yet impossible seat of origins and to rest content with the «scanty plot» of the written word is nothing but the great lesson of the Romantics, to whose writings Frénaud was deliberately looking at for inspiration. Indeed, as Grasso herself often recapitulates in her work, it is only after the secularization of thought leading to the rise of Romanticism in Europe that the Christian pilgrimage evolved into a secular *topos*. Grasso's study is therefore deeply committed to tracing the rise of a topological tradition with specifically Romantic roots and its evolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Concluding her analysis with a contemporary like Frénaud, the author makes no allusion to any possible decline of the *topos*, thus placing, at the end of her study, utmost importance on the potential for variation and continuation that is understood to reside in the *topos* itself. After all, Romanticism is nothing but «the first major phase in an imaginative revolution which has carried on until our own day, and has by no means completed itself yet», as argued by Northrop Frye (Random House, 1968: p. 15). Ida Grasso's *Un topos moderno: Il pellegrinaggio sentimentale nella poesia europea tra Otto e Novecento* definitely

complies with such a view of literary change by dealing with the *topos* of the pilgrimage as if it were a living and evolving entity.

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