

Poiein and Pictura in Alfonso Gatto's Rime di viaggio per la terra dipinta

Introduction

Certainly Alfonso Gatto was one of the most original poets to emerge from the cradle of the Hermetic movement during the 1930s. Hermeticism was named after Hermes Trismegistus to whom the forty-two Hermetic books are attributed. Trismegistus meaning three times greatest Hermes, is the title the Greeks gave to the Egyptian Thoth, lord of wisdom and learning and scribe of the gods. The Hermetic books covered subjects ranging from magic, alchemy, healing, and wisdom to writing, cosmography, geography, and mathematics. Hermetic poetry is said to tend toward the arcane and the magical. In the Italian context this movement stems from the French Symbolists Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud. Campana and Onofri are usually considered the Italian precursors of Hermeticism, and they are often referred to as the "first generation."¹ Historically the term "ermetismo" came into widespread usage with Francesco Flora's 1936 *La poesia ermetica*. The critic focused on poets such as Ungaretti, Montale, and Quasimodo whose work was characterized by an intensely allusive and compact language in which analogy and metaphor replaced comparisons and similes. Ungaretti's *Allegria* is an excellent example. These poets are often considered the "fathers" of the third generation Hermetic poets, that is, Luzi, Gatto, Betocchi, Bigongiari, Parronchi, Sinisgalli, and Traverso, among others.² Mario Luzi's *Avvento notturno* is considered by many to be the culmination of the Hermetic movement that was at its peak through the thirties until the Second World War. *Avvento notturno*, for example, signifies through an absolute analogical anti-discourse. Images are coupled against traditional grammar and art is a major source of the poetic visions.

Many Hermetic traits are apparent in Gatto's first two collections of poetry, *Isola* (1932) and *Morto ai paesi* (1937). The poems tend to avoid any objective reality and they are built around groups of images whose logical connections are often missing. The classic hendecasyllable is used extensively along with other shorter verses and fragments. Already here the *quartina* emerges as one of Gatto's characteristic poetic units. We can appreciate an example of his early but clearly defined style in *Carri d'autunno*. The impact of Ungaretti's *Allegria* is evident in the poem's highly concentrated and concise style.

Nello spazio lunare
 pesa il silenzio dei morti.
 Ai carri eternamente remoti
 il cigolio dei lumi
 improvvisa perduti e beati
 villaggi di sonno.
 Come un tepore troveranno l'alba
 gli zingari di neve,
 come un tepore sotto l'ala i nidi.

Così lontano a trasparire il mondo
 ricorda che fu d'erba, una pianura.

In *Morto ai paesi*, Gatto persists, for the most part, with similar non traditional stanzas. Nevertheless, we remark that a number of poems are groups of quatrains written in hendecasyllables such as *Periferia* where a nocturnal scene depicts a cold beauty.³ The analogical accumulation of images is rendered more intense through the final oxymoron *l'improvvisa eternità dei treni*.

La piscina è gelata contro il muro
 dell'obitorio che ha i suoi morti spogli
 in tutto il freddo della terra: al puro
 grigio dell'aria restano le spoglie

e l'improvvisa eternità dei treni
 che curvano la notte, una ringhiera.

...

It is well known that the fall of Fascism and the end of the Second World War brought the Hermetic movement to an abrupt end. Ungaretti, Luzi, Quasimodo, and many other poets radically altered their style in reaction to the horrific events of those years and Gatto was no exception. *Il capo sulla neve* (1947) offers us compositions grounded in the harsh historical reality of that conflagration as *Per i martiri di Piazzale Loreto*:

Ed era l'alba, poi tutto fu fermo
 la città, il cielo, il fiato del giorno.
 Rimasero i carnefici soltanto
 vivi davanti ai morti.

Among Gatto's major post-war books, *La forza degli occhi* (1954), *Osteria flegrea* (1962), and *La storia delle vittime* (1966), we nonetheless discover characteristics originating from his earliest compositions. The

continued use of rhyme as a producer of meaning and the emphasis of poetry's phonic and playful qualities even when the contents of the poems are somber. The form that typifies many of these poems, especially in *La forza degli occhi* and *Osteria flegrea*, has been identified as the *canzonetta*, a simplified version of the *canzone* with shorter verses and varying lengths. Indeed Gatto uses more settenari and novenari in these poems as in *Albergo (La forza degli occhi)*. The music of this poetry is lighter and the rhythm swifter.

Dormire in un racconto
laggiu' in fondo allo specchio
in quest'albergo vecchio
da mettere sul conto
della morte.

Osteria flegrea heralds the return of the *quartina* once more. Thus we have a mixture of canzonette and other forms structured around the quatrain and written in hendecasyllables. In the brief poem after which the book is titled, *Osteria flegrea*, long and short verses comprise the stanza.

Come assidua di nulla al nulla assorta
la luce della polvere! La porta
al verde oscilla, l'improvvisa vampa
del soffio è breve.

La storia delle vittime, poesie della Resistenza could appear to be an anomaly within the work of a poet whose origins were Hermetic. Published in 1966, the volume is composed of poems originally written between 1943 to 1947 and 1963 to 1965. As we might expect, we find poems that mourn and remember precise historical events, *Lo sbarco*, *Le vittime*, or *Sei agosto (Hiroshima)*, but among these victims we also discover one of Gatto's lyrical masterpieces, *La donna di Rialto*. This mournful homage to the urban victim Venice is written in hendecasyllabic quatrains noteworthy for their elegance, fluidity, and beauty.

E di Venezia il grigio il verde asilo
d'un muro quando a raffiche s'avviva
il cielo della pioggia e corre un filo
di nero al sale dei palazzi. . . .

Da svolta a svolta s'incanala l'eco
d'una barca che appare e sparisce dietro
il suo richiamo, scivola di sbieco
in quel chiaro annerendo. . . .

La storia delle vittime unifies civic poetry with the melodic or lyrical by claiming Venice as one of history's many victims. But perhaps this distinction is inappropriate. Luigi Baldacci has shown that these two modes may be considered two moments of one single poetics. The melodic poet performs a civic role since melody is a popular expression of all our daily lives and the civic poet doesn't necessarily seek a revolutionary break but achieves a *pietas* or compassion that leads to harmony, melody, and the concordance of rhyme (Baldacci 21).⁴

Indeed the distinction between "melodic" and "civic" is valid only if we consider the text from a thematic point of view. If we approach the poems from a formal perspective such a distinction is no longer pertinent. In *La storia delle vittime* for example, Gatto uses his characteristic *quartina* and even in some of the most political and civically oriented texts such as *Sei agosto* or *Il racconto* we find rhyme and metaphor. *Sei agosto* uses double settenari as did Gozzano in *Le due strade*.⁵ The last stanza is a double quatrain whose rhyme scheme is abab/cdcd. Although the verses are longer, this form is very similar to that which dominates the *Rime di viaggio per la terra dipinta*, the main object of this study. The last stanza of *Sei agosto* follows:

Fatelo dunque il male, credetegli spendete
la moneta sonante del rogo d'Hiroshima.
Ogni assetato resta a chiedere la sete,
sull'ultima parola ritornerà la prima
che avvenne nel chiamarci. Fatelo tutto il male,
credetegli, spendete la sua scienza beffarda.
La morte più non basta, demente irrisa guarda
la genesi una bianca eternità di sale.

If we consider Gatto's poetry in its entirety, a formal approach is more effective than a thematic one. And if we place him in the context of classic Italian poetry we understand that it is useless to attempt to distinguish "civic" from "lyrical" just as it is in Dante, Petrarch, and Leopardi.

Techné and Poiein

In the last single collection of poetry published while he was still alive, Gatto focuses exclusively on these melodious *rime* and even uses the term in the title of his volume: *Rime di viaggio per la terra dipinta*, 1969. We can learn much about Gatto's poetics from the title. The choice of *Rime* informs us of the poet's stilnovista ascendance. The *techné* or technical aspect of his *poiein* is central to his artistic concept. Poetry's traditional tools are retained and exploited: rhyme, verse, metrics, and, in the Italian context, hendecasyllables, settenari, etc. The cornerstone of this work is the *quartina*, the unit around which virtually

all of *Rime di viaggio's* poems are built. Some texts are epigrammatic fragments consisting of only four lines while others are groups of three to six quatrains. There are several classical Italian sonnets present as well as more unusual Shakespearian sonnets.⁶ These, unlike the Italian original, consist of three quatrains with a final couplet. The title *Rime* also highlights the importance of rhyme throughout Gatto's book. The rhymes range from traditional to highly inventive and varied. They are mechanisms that produce "magic" and at the same time generate effects that are more "real than reality" as Ruggero Jacobbi has pointed out (142). Gatto's use of rhyme is certainly one of the key elements of his mode. It may seem disconcerting to our postmodern sensibilities and indeed his decision to use rhyme only multiplied the demands of his art. Usually his *rime* adhere to the conventional definition, although occasionally he uses off-rhymes as *Chimera/nero* (*Chimera napoletana*). Nor was Gatto the only poet who began with the Hermeticists to use rhyme (Luzi's *Avvento notturno* uses it extensively, and was published three years after *Morto ai paesi*). However, Gatto's manner of using rhyme distances him from the Hermeticists and brings him closer to an Italian Surrealism. Rhyme was the key to fully exploiting poetry's phonic dimensions. Gatto would follow an auditory pattern to its end, while at the same time maintaining a rigorous, though at times intricate syntax. We may observe an excellent example in *Eden meridionale*:

Vecchie reggie borghesi di croccante
 eternità marina dov'è netto
 lo squillo delle tegole, le piante
 s'affacciano ai dirupi dallo stretto

Baldacci observed that we can even justify the term "écriture authomatique" in which rhyme is the musical key for building the poem.⁷ In *Eden meridionale* the intriguing *croccante/piante* rhyme causes the synesthesia and striking enjambement *croccante/eternità marina* thus intensifying the poem's creative verve. From a grammatical point of view Gatto verses are less elliptical than those of other Hermetic poets. Continini recognized Gatto's Hermetic origins but was quick to point out the traits that rendered the Southern poet's work unique:

le immagini sono vertiginosamente analogiche, sia nelle singole metafore, sia soprattutto nella loro connessione, ma cio' contrasta con la regolarita' della sintassi, talora relativamente ricca, con la complessa tradizionalita' dei ritmi tanto recitativi quanto cantabili, con la frequente pittoricita' cromatica della sensazione. Da questo contrasto esce la principale attrattiva di Gatto, perdurante fino ai versi dell'ultimo quindicennio . . . quella di un surrealista che, diversamente dai surrealisti veri e propri, indulge di rado alla frase nominale e all'immediatezza in largo

senso interiettiva e onomatopeica, istituti che la cultura poetica italiana aveva infatti consumati nel futurismo e nel movimento di *Lacerba*. (377–78)⁸

If we compare the rhymes of Gatto's early books, *Isola* and *Morto ai paesi* with those of the *Rime di viaggio*, we remark that the early rhymes are frequently, though not exclusively, associated with the stereotypical evening coloratura of certain crepuscular poets. As Baldacci has noted: "Troppe lune, troppi mari, troppo cobalto e troppa biacca nelle prime poesie di Gatto" (23). But he goes on to point out that these crepuscular rhymes are cleansed with the passage of time as the poet moves toward lighter shades. The early rhymes are characteristic but they are not used as radically as in the *Rime di viaggio*. They are more often subjugated to a meaning that excludes their sonority, whereas in the *Rime*, sonority and meaning are strictly interconnected.

Although this is Gatto's most visionary work, it is also, as several critics have duly noted, his most literary. The use of traditional forms makes this clear as does the extremely rarefied and innovative lexicon. Gatto uses neologisms, rare and precious words, terms from dialect, etc. Some of this lexicon comes from D'Annunzio, such as *silente*, *nenufaro*, *calami*, *quadrello*, *gorgoglio*, *verdicante* or Montale, *agro*, *flabello*, *aggalla*, *ribaldo riviere*, *cerulo*, *scrimolo*, etc. But there are many other sources. Poliziano also used *quadrello* and *nenufaro* may be found in Mallarmé'. Other examples, such as *sciaraban* or *sciantose* are Southern Italian deformations of French words, *chairs à bancs*, a type of carriage with several seats that served as for public transportation and *chanteuses* for singers. Certain words may not be found in standard dictionaries, such as "falalella" a noun also used by Lorenzo Lippi, another painter poet. Lippi uses the word in his burlesque poem *Il Malmantile racquistato*, line 358.⁹ *Falalella* is a tune. Gatto also uses it to mean tune. There are many other examples of this type of precious or rare lexicon.

Let us not forget the third word of the title: *viaggio*, which carries considerable weight for obvious reasons. Gatto places himself in the company of other illustrious travelers, from Dante to Ungaretti.¹⁰ Yet Gatto's *Rime* are about a voyage through the *terra dipinta*, which is the painted earth. Therefore there is no transcendent movement to his travel. Indeed his title has three nouns: *Rime*, *viaggio*, and *terra*. The single adjective thus acquires greater importance: *dipinta*. He is traveling through the painted earth, which is to say, through his paintings of the earth. And indeed we know that these poems were born while Gatto was in the process of painting 100 watercolors for an exhibition or a book of prints commissioned by Mondadori. Most of these watercolors were sold at various exhibitions since the Mondadori project never came to fruition.¹¹

Pittura

Gatto was a *chiarista* as friend and fellow painter Mario Carotenuto reminds us: "Se si volesse classificare il pittore Gatto nell'ambito del '900 italiano si potrebbe dire che egli è un chiarista, ma con una fisionomia tutta sua, spesso anche mutevole e contraddittoria" (63). *Chiarismo* was so defined by Edoardo Persico, an early champion of the movement that originated around 1929, and was so called because of the luminous, transparent, and delicate tones used for portraits and landscapes. The movement opposed itself to the monumental academics of certain twentieth-century institutions. Among the *chiaristi* were Umberto Lilloni, Adriano di Spilimbergo, Francesco de Rocci, Angelo del Bon, Facciotto, and Cristofaro De Amicis. Several of their most important exhibitions took place in Milano, which is where Gatto himself held one of his earliest major shows at the Galleria dell'Annunciata in 1943. He was presented by Virgilio Guidi, a well-known artist himself, certainly more renown than Gatto would have been at that time as a painter.

Gatto seemed to prefer watercolors and was known, in a *chiarista* manner, to mix abundant water into his colors when he painted. He felt affinities with contemporary artists such as Rosai, De Pisis, Del Bon, Morandi, Carrà, Guidi, Semeghini, and Scipione, several with whom he enjoyed warm relations. Masters greatly admired and studied by Gatto included Cezanne, Giotto, and Masaccio. It is therefore natural to find pictorial concerns and perspectives in his poems. Critics have studied his "pittura verbale" (Chiappini 147) consisting in his chromatic and technical references to Cezanne, Braque, Severini, Mondrian, Utrillo, Van Gogh, and many others.¹² Many of the poems in the *Rime* are *nature morte*, still lives, such as *Olio e aceto*, concentrated chromatic descriptions of particular scenes. *Olio e aceto* "paints" a table, a bottle of olive oil, lettuce, vinegar, garlic, an artichoke, etc:

Per la verde lattuga trasparente,
fresca la foglia aperta al suo ventaglio,
c'è quest'olio di luce, queste mente
di poggio e dal suo tartaro fiorita
la viola d'aceto, spicca l'aglio.
Il carciofo nell'indaco s'abbruna
al suo verde di panno e di laguna.
Rosso il radicchio a prendere s'avvita
nel suo cespo croccante. E la tua tavola,
un giorno che riposa — nel nome d'ogni cosa.
Ed è quasi una favola.¹³

Perhaps the poem that most intensely expresses the total importance of painting for Gatto is *La panchina di Van Gogh*. Like many others

in this book, the title *La panchina di Van Gogh* refers to painters and their paintings. In this sense, the title of the poem echoes that of the book: *Rime di viaggio per la terra dipinta*. But we find many other titles linked to painters, their places, their works and techniques such as *Place du Tertre* and *Monmartre*, *Autoritratto da ragazzo*, *Autoritratto per boxe*, *Nudo in soffitta*, *Figura*, and so forth.

We all know that the post-Impressionist Dutch artist was the painter of painters whose canvasses contain a striking concentration of color, expressionistic texture, and energy. Van Gogh is famous for his swirling brush stroke technique, his thickly textured surfaces, and strong earthly tones. Gatto appreciated the physicality of his painting. Van Gogh also stands out for his numerous self-portraits of which he painted a total of thirty-five, twenty-nine while he was in Paris. The genre of the self-portrait is a vital one since it represents the transformation of the painter into his work. Self-portraits were also an important component of Gatto's art. Van Gogh's portraits could explain why he is the only artist after whom a *Rima* is titled. Gatto attended the exhibition of Van Gogh's works in Milano in 1952 in which several self-portraits were included. He wrote an original article covering the event for the *Risorgimento socialista* in March of the same year.¹⁴ Indeed our poet views the Dutch painter in a very literary manner comparing him to Dostoyevsky's *Idiot*, one who has the courage to do good through his paintings. In fact Gatto's piece is titled *Pitture come buone azioni*. Gatto criticizes the stereotypical manner in which Van Gogh is misunderstood as the "madman." He insists that Van Gogh paints "with earth" and infuses an intense expressiveness to his objects. He is a wonderer who seeks goodness through beauty:

Il cittadino errante di questo mondo nuovo che ha in sè la diretta presa di un bene che non è mai l'altra faccia del male, ma lo sguardo di un occhio solo; il personaggio della bontà assoluta e inutile, è l'idiota che stanno braccando davanti ai tribunali di tutte le ragioni che sono interessi o degli interessi che sono ragioni di Stati e di individui. . . . Oggi Van Gogh è imprigionato nello stesso mondo che intende la libertà come una libertà di pensare il male sempre maggiore di quel che è per aver ragioni sufficienti alla propria paura e alla propria difesa. . . . Le sue opere, esposte in queste fredde sale d'un palazzo reale aperto ai venti di una piazza dove s'avvicinano comizi di paurosi che hanno tutti una chiesa, restano quali testimonianze di un uomo che ha voluto essere assolutamente buono, cioè "buone azioni" esse stesse. (*Risorgimento Socialista* 16 March 1952)

But let's return to the title of Gatto's poem. *La panchina di Van Gogh* may be placed in the context of the various essays inspired by Van Gogh's paintings of objects such as shoes and benches. In *The Origins*

of *Art*, Heidegger wrote at length about Van Gogh's shoes attributing them to a peasant woman and considering them a means by which "aletheia, truth happens" (177) while Art Historian Meyer Shapiro insisted these shoes belonged to the artist himself. Derrida playfully and with considerable wit deconstructed Shapiro's critique suggesting that Van Gogh's shoes may not even be a pair and that the pair Heidegger/Shapiro could have been projecting their own ideas into the painting.¹⁵ However, Gatto's poem is not named after a pair of shoes, but another object, a bench. *La panchina di Van Gogh* evokes the series of at least eight paintings of benches (and several drawings) in the garden of Saint-Paul Hospital in Saint-Remy de Provence between May 1889 and May 1890, when Van Gogh voluntarily confined himself to the asylum.¹⁶ We cannot help but remark that for the eight paintings of shoes discussed by Derrida, Heidegger, and Shapiro there exist eight paintings of benches in San-Remy. What could be the connection between Van Gogh's paintings of shoes and those of benches in Southern France? Both represent objects that usually house human beings. Without their usual occupants they strike us with their emptiness. A sense of absence strongly characterizes the Saint Remy bench paintings. Out the eight paintings, only one shows the bench occupied by a seated figure. In all the others the benches are always uninhabited. Van Gogh himself analytically described one of his own such paintings in great detail to his friend Emile Bernard:

Here is the description of a canvas which is in front of me at the moment. . . . Now the nearest tree is an enormous trunk, struck by lightning and sawed off. But one side branch shoots up very high and lets fall an avalanche of dark green pine needles. . . . Underneath the trees, empty stone benches, sullen box trees; the sky is mirrored — yellow — in a puddle left by the rain. . . . You will realize that this combination of red-ocher, of green gloomed over by gray, the black streaks surrounding the contours, produces something of the sensation of anguish, called "noir-rouge," from which certain of my companions in misfortune frequently suffer. Moreover the motif of the great tree struck by lightning, the sickly green-pink smile of the last flower of autumn, serve to confirm this impression.¹⁷

Van Gogh did drawings and two variations of the same perspective in this instance. The paintings show two benches at opposing angles framing a large cut tree trunk. The reds and blacks are marked but so are the yellows and greens. There is one figure upright walking away from the benches and two barely discernable figures to the far right end of the scene. The benches are empty and the tree is mutilated. These elements also contribute to the intense anguish present in the work's movement. The painting of the stone bench also possesses the

same “noire-rouge” contrast and is perhaps even more desolate as there are no human figures visible and the bench is viewed from a closer distance in all its solitude. Such paintings certainly have a troubling almost haunting pitch to them. They seem to call forth a form of disappearance, a vanishing of self and humanity.

If we move beyond the implication’s of Gatto’s titles we discover that his poem is certainly inspired by the art of Van Gogh, though while reading the first lines we realize that the poet is not focusing on the Saint-Remy bench paintings but on Van Gogh’s self-portraits. Are we to take Gatto’s title seriously? Should we dismiss it as a surrealistic label? Is there a connection between Van Gogh’s bench paintings and his self-portraits? Why would Gatto title a poem about Van Gogh painting his own portrait *La panchina di Van Gogh*? One textual connection between the title and the subject of poem lies in the use of the word “errante,” which refers to the painter, one who is a wanderer.

Capiterà l'errante col suo forte
Spessore di capelli, il viso stretto
Per gli occhi vuoti, le due mani attorte. (emphasis added)

Again as in his earlier article, Gatto calls Van Gogh *errante* thus summoning forth the vision of the artist or poet as wanderer, permanently displaced as in the cases of Rimbaud, Campana, Ungaretti, and Van Gogh himself. Ungaretti used the term “girovago” for himself in *L'allegria*, which we could consider a synonym of “errante.” On a more literal level *errante* denotes a vagrant or vagabond. The connection between vagrants, wanderers, and benches needs no elucidation. This key adjective is also connected to the title of the book: [*Rime di*] *viaggio*. As we have seen in Van Gogh’s Saint-Remy paintings, the benches are intensely haunting evocations. They suggest a strong sense of self-effacement and disappearance. Ideally such works demand some sort of “restitution,” and what could better complete a painting of absence than one of sheer artistic presence, that is, a self-portrait. Thus Gatto’s poem transforms the absence of the bench with the presence of the self-portrait. The connection between the title and the body of the poem lies in the equalities of extremes. The self-portrait is an attempt to negate absence.

With this in mind, Gatto’s piece reads more coherently while still retaining its surreal qualities. Since Van Gogh painted so many self-portraits we could assume that Gatto’s poem refrains from focusing on any single work. Yet there are clear indications that he had particular portraits in mind: the rare ones in which Van Gogh’s hands are visible and where we can actually see the painter’s tools. Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait as an Artist* (1888) shows the artist standing with the right frame of the easel visible, his colors and paintbrushes in hand.¹⁸ The

wooden frame of the easel reinforces the verticality of the painting that is highlighted by the expression Gatto uses in the first stanza: *l'albero del petto*. Gatto mentions *le due mani attorte*, in all likelihood the hand of Van Gogh and his own. Clearly Gatto envisioned Van Gogh's somber mood when he wrote *viso stretto/per gli occhi vuoti*. The Dutch painter depicted his own gaunt face with a vacant stare and hair and beard painted with thick whirling strokes.¹⁹ In a letter to his sister Van Gogh refers to his downcast mood and untidy appearance. His forehead was wrinkled and his red beard was "considerably neglected and mournful."²⁰ *La panchina di Van Gogh's* first stanza is very intense as a series of metamorphoses occur while the painter burns into his colors, is even "whipped" by them. Another reference to the 1888 self-portrait may be found in the expression "pugno di scaglie" or "fist of scales." In this painting the artist holds his palette by placing his thumb through a small opening and holding his hand in a fist. The fist holds a dazzling array of colors that could be compared to scales of reptiles or fish. Since the artist is painting himself, the suffering and metamorphoses of the first stanza become a game in the second. The suffering is transferred to the painting and the artist not only recreates himself but frees himself of his anguish: *perche' sale / tutto il dolore al vertice del male, / ai grandi spazi della mente*.

Capitera' l'errante col suo forte
 spessore di capelli, il viso stretto
 per gli occhi vuoti, le due mani attorte.
 Le scotole veementi del colore
 gli frusteranno l'albero del petto,
 pugno di scaglie al prendere del fuoco
 che lo divampa.²¹

The fiery transformations of the first stanza give way to the joyfulness of a "game" (*L'allegria del gioco*) in the second when the struggle and suffering yield to the serenity of an epiphany. The discovery of a new self in the portrait, a sort of rebirth which frees tension and feels like the "sole delle prime parole" and the complete transformation of the artist into his work. Before the self-portrait the painter doesn't exist in a sense and thus he paints his *raison d'être* against death and nothingness of the empty benches like Van Gogh's.²² For clarity I quote the entire poem:

Capitera' l'errante col suo forte
 spessore di capelli, il viso stretto
 per gli occhi vuoti, le due mani attorte.
 Le scotole veementi del colore
 gli frusteranno l'albero del petto,

pugno di scaglie al prendere del fuoco
che lo divampa.

L'allegria del gioco
irrompe ad accerchiarlo perche' sale
tutto il dolore al vertice del male,
ai grandi spazi della mente, al sole
delle prime parole.

Ora ascolta ammansito dal fragore,
albero e vento: come una foresta,
la sua fatica, e questa calma nuova
che lo sorprende a mettere la testa
sul braccio, sul profilo dell'amore.
Cosi' dipingera' prova su prova
la sua ragione d'essere nel fiore,
nel seme, nella terra, nella morte.²³

In the last part, the painter is in the forest of his new world, calmed, *ammansito* and weary at having recreated himself anew. His head falls upon his arm and hand, the *profilo dell'amore*. His mind joins his instrument, the hand, in an act of love, which is painting. This cycle of torment, epiphany, and serenity will be repeated over and over again.

Clearly this sort of cycle was experienced by Van Gogh and Gatto and by many artists in general. *La panchina di Van Gogh* stands out because of its intense and ingenious reconstruction of the process of achieving a self-portrait as well as for its form within the *Rime di viaggio*. The unit of four is set aside here and the rhyme scheme is voluntarily irregular. As for each *Rima*, it is highly visual and at the same time literary. *Rime di viaggio per la terra dipinta* unifies the sharply different modes of painting and poetry in an alchemistic tour de force; Gatto's visionary brilliance energizes and innovates the technical excellence of his craft.

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NOTES

¹Pascoli, whose life spans the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has also been considered a precursor since he contributed a great deal to liberating the poetic word from its traditional restraints through his linguistic and technical virtuosity.

²The difference between the second and the third generation according to Ramat, lies primarily in their conception of the symbol. For the Ungaretti of *Sentimento del*

tempo and the Montale of *Le occasioni* the symbol usually functions as a defensive emblem, a figure that shields the poet from darkness, non being and nothingness. For the younger poets of the third generation, however, the symbol becomes more positive (*Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana* 193). See also Macri', *Caratteri e figure della poesia italiana contemporanea*, 1956.

³Ramat brought to light Gatto's particular use of the color whiteness in *Morto ai paesi*. This color is usually associated with death and absence for the poet from Salerno. See also Ramat's "Alfonso Gatto."

⁴Baldacci writes: "Io credo che su questo punto dovrà impegnarsi la critica futura: distinguere un Gatto poeta civile da un Gatto melodista o concludere che alla base di questi due momenti c'è una stessa o sola ragion poetica, e che il melodista è poeta civile nella misura in cui la melodia è espressione di vita popolare e che il poeta civile mira non a un'infrazione rivoluzionaria, ma ad una *pietas* che è di per sè concordanza (con la fatica dell'universo e della storia) melodia, rima" (21).

⁵Guido Gozzano *Le due strade* in *I colloqui* used settenari doppi. The verse, however, has an illustrious past. Cielo D'Alcamo was among the first to use it *Rosa fresca aulentissima*.

⁶Shakespearian sonnets are obviously more unusual in the Italian context, especially when we remember that the sonnet was an Italian invention and that the British form is a variation of the original.

⁷Si potrebbe quasi parlare di una *écriture automatique* di cui la rima è la chiave musicale, il nucleo irradiante. In principio era la rima, e dalla rima nasce tutto. La poesia è come una *boîte à surprise* della quale il poeta stesso ignora il contenuto, finché almeno non sia esaurito e concluso il periodo musicale" (Baldacci 19).

⁸Contini also distinguishes Gatto's pictorial style. He writes: "Di questa carriera; un tratto importante è dedicato alle composizioni d'oggetti che fanno pensare al cubismo pittorico (principalmente nella versione di Braque) e al cubo-futurismo poetico russo" (378).

⁹Lorenzo Lippi, 1606–1688, author of the narrative burlesque poem in *ottave*, *Malmantile riacquistato*, 1688. The poem is best known for its wealth of linguistic inventions.

¹⁰There are many other such illustrious travelers, such as Virgil, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Campana and Mallarmé. Gatto shares distinct textual affinities with Rimbaud and Campana in particular.

¹¹Gatto gave an exhibit of these watercolors at the Galleria d'arte del Naviglio in Milano from 19 December 1969 through 8 January 1970. He also presented his new book *Rime di viaggio per la terra dipinta* on this occasion. It is likely that most if not all the watercolors were sold at this gallery founded by Carlo Cardazzo and at other exhibitions during this general period. His paintings were also shown in Trieste at the Torbandena Gallery in October 1969 and at the Galleria d'arte Santacroce from 22 January 1970.

¹²Gatto's interest in other artists was the result not only of his activity as painter himself, but as art critic. His production in this area is enormous. He wrote for numerous journals and newspapers. He also was a sports correspondent (*Giro d'Italia* and the *Tour de France*) and even covered the trial of the SS Commandant Herbert Kappler,

responsible for the murder of over 300 innocent civilians at the Fosse ardeatine. See *Il racconto* in *La storia delle vittime*.

¹³My translation of this still-life poem follows: For the green transparent lettuce / whose fresh leaf opens its own fan / there is this light of oil, these mints / from the hill and from its tartarus of vinegar / sprouts the garlic with its flowered violet. / From indigo the artichoke darkens / its greens to cloth and lagoon. / For the taking the red radicchio turns / in its crunching tuft. This is your table, / A day resting in the name of each thing. / And it's almost a fable.

¹⁴"Pitture come buone azioni," *Risorgimento Socialista* 16 March 1952: a. II, n. 11. See also *Catalogo delle lettere ad Alfonso Gatto*.

¹⁵In "Restitutions, de la verité en peinture" among many other things, Derrida points out that neither Heidegger (*The Origin of a Work of Art* 162–63, 177) nor Shapiro (*Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society* 134–53) view the object in context. Shapiro disagrees and criticizes Heidegger but the art historian reads a fragment of Heidegger's essay out of context, just as Heidegger fails to examine the one painting of shoes in the context of Van Gogh's eight such paintings. "Il faut accompagner un moment cette démarche heideggerienne. Elle constitue le contexte encadrant immédiatement l'allusion au 'célèbre tableau.' Et si Shapiro a raison de reprocher à Heidegger d'être si peu attentif au contexte interne et externe du tableau comme à la sérialité différentielle des huit tableaux à chaussures, il aurait dû lui-même éviter une précipitation rigoureusement correspondante, symétrique, analogue: découper sans autre précaution une vingtaine de lignes dans le long essai de Heidegger, les arracher brutalement à leur cadre dont Shapiro ne veut rien savoir, en arrêter le mouvement puis les interpréter avec une tranquillité égale à celle de Heidegger faisant parler les *chaussures de paysan*" (Derrida 325). Derrida then examines the contexts of both Heidegger and Shapiro and reconstructs an interpretation of the paintings in question.

¹⁶Van Gogh also completed watercolors of persons sitting on benches from 1882. These earlier works were not painted in France and do not portray the strong sense of absence found in the Saint-Remy paintings.

¹⁷Van Gogh 3: 524. See also Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Saint-Remy and Auvers* 146. All of Van Gogh's paintings discussed in this essay may be easily visioned online. The Museum of Amsterdam Website is excellent (<http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl>) but there are many excellent internet sources, for example, <http://www.vangoghgallery.com> (for the Saint-Remy benches and the self-portraits). This is not the case for Gatto's works, which are much more difficult to trace. A few are reproduced in *Alfonso Gatto Picaro e poeta Tra nord e sud*.

¹⁸For more detailed analysis and reproductions of Van Gogh's self-portraits, see Kendall, *Van Gogh's Van Gogh* 84–85.

¹⁹*La panchina di Van Gogh* stands out for many reasons, one being its peculiar rhyme scheme. Nineteen lines with alternating rhymes and rima baciata. The first and last lines, *forte/morte* rhyme while the only other instance of rhyme in "orte", *le due mani attorte*,² the third line: ABA CB DD EE FF CGH GCH CA.

²⁰Letter to Willemien Van Gogh, c. June 22, 1888. The full description of his own self-portrait from this long letter follows: "A pinkish-gray face with green eyes, ash-colored hair, wrinkles on the forehead and around the mouth, stiff, wooden, a very red

beard, considerably neglected and mournful, but the lips are full, a blue peasant's blouse of coarse linen, and a palette with citron yellow, vermilion, a malachite green, cobalt blue, in short all the colors on the palette except the orange beard, but only whole colors. The figure against a grayish-white wall" (Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters* 3: 437)

²¹Gatto's use of the noun *scotole* establishes an association between painting and textiles. *Scotola* belongs to the textile lexicon. *Scotolare* [to scutch] means to separate the woody fiber from flax or hemp by beating with a wooden or iron utensil. The *sco-tola* is the instrument used to prepare the cloth in this manner. It can be a large and long piece of wood used for beating the cloth or it can be smaller and resemble a knife. The *Dizionario universale della lingua italiana* (ed. AntonMaria Robiola, vol. 6, 1844, Torino), gives the following definition of *scotola*: *strumento di legno o di ferro a guisa di coltello, ma senza taglio, col quale si scuote e batte il lino avanti che si pettini, per farne cadere la lisca*. For the verb *scotolare*, the *Dizionario* gives an interesting example for the usage of the verb from Lorenzo Lippi's *Malmantile riacquistato*: *E col col-tel da Pedrolin di legno / Su pel capo gli scotola i capelli. Falalella* is another rare word occurring in both Lippi and Gatto. Since a *scotola* is similar in form to a knife, it can also function as a painter's tool. Gatto also used this word thinking of thick texture of Van Gogh's paintings.

²²Although he dedicates little space to *La panchina di Van Gogh*, Jacobbi interprets the poem in a similar manner: "La panchina di Van Gogh, dove i simboli della pittura ridiventano le misure geometriche d'una aguzza, disperata lotta dell'uomo contro il nulla" (146). We would say *dell'artista contro il nulla*.

²³For clarity, I provide my translation of this key poem. "Van Gogh's Bench": The wanderer will appear with his strong / thick hair, his face pulled tight / by his empty eyes, his twisted hands. / The vehement scutches of color / will whip the mast of his chest, / fist of scales at the catching fire / which burns him. // The joyfulness of the game / bursts forth encircling him since / all the suffering rises to the summit of evil, / to the great spaces of the mind, to the sunlight / of the first words. // Now he listens, placated by the clamor, / to tree and wind: like a forest / his weariness and this new calm / which surprises him placing his head / on his arm, on the profile of love. / Thus he will paint, trial upon trial / his reason for being in the flower, / in the seed, on earth and in death.

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