“Light Up The Signs”: The Poetry of Adam Vaccaro

In this broad Earth of ours,
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,
Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
Nestles the seed Perfection.

Walt Whitman – “Song of the Universal”[1]

One place to trace the seed of Adam Vaccaro’s poetry might be in the choral, humane values of the rural, agrarian society irredeemably swept away by the *miracolo economico italiano,* the economic boom that electrified Italy through the fifties and sixties. From a backward, prevalently rural society, Italy became an industrialised nation and Adam Vaccaro’s native Bonefro, a place of poverty and pastness, was emptied slowly by migration. A few months in Milan, writes Luciano Bianciardi in *La vita agra*, were enough for any worker to become little more than an empty shell; and in twenty years, he believed, the whole of Italy would resemble Milan. Never sentimentally nostalgic or stubbornly elegiac, Vaccaro’s poetry sings the timeworn trace that has endured through the years, in the “dead rubble” that has resisted the corruption and grossness: the trace, or memory, that has survived a gone world. In Pasolini’s terms, the country gave way; and of the two irreconcilable drives, *sviluppo* and *progresso*, development and progress, the former won out. Thus an idealistic strive for goods of necessity, for social *progress*, was outdone by an intense and febrile production of consumer goods, the heady courtship of the superfluous auspicated by powers both pragmatic and economic.

A successful poet, literary critic and writer, Adam Vaccaro has been a prominent figure in the Italian cultural panorama for the past forty years. Born in Bonefro, a small town in Molise in 1940, he has lived and worked in Milan for over forty years. He has published several collections, among which *La vita nonostante* (Studio d’autore, 1978), *Strappi e frazioni* (Libroitaliano, 1997) and *La casa sospesa* (Joker, 2003). Select poems from these three books are collected in 2005’s *La piuma e l’artiglio*, (Editoria e Spettacolo, 2006). In *Seeds*, Vaccaro’s palette combines classical mythology with a vernacular poetic tradition that preserves a substratum of dialectal élan and musical gait. His songs of grace and humility illuminate and revive. Hushed, the voice of amorous attachment to a destitute land becomes a plea of dissent, a denouncement for the manifold abuses endured. A post-lapsarian voice, “amid the measureless grossness and the slag”, ruefully aware that the change befallen is too great - the links are severed. For this, Vaccaro’s verses are vested, at times, with pressing social criticism; with almost prophetic locution he writes of the mire of Italian politics: “the empty words / of crooks who sit in parliament, / appeased only by the singer’s verses / and the comedian’s curtsies”.

Emblematically, Vaccaro’s scene is a land of “many things - parched and poor / and thick with life and proud”. The migrant Ulysses is caught somewhere in the dialectic between a dream of freedom, an emancipatory “leaving at last”, and the “conjured corners / of memories and thoughts / of shadows with their present past” - between longing and impossible return. Vaccaro deftly inhabits this fecund middle ground, with the vivid, tormented scenes of a post-war bike ride in “Bicycles”, or the solitary journey north of a migrant worker in “Peppino’s Buttons”. The presence of the Other – be it migratory, human or poetic – is always called upon as a necessary, albeit

[1] Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire, 1995, p. 209.

problematic force to be reckoned with. “Fierce Innocence and Beyond”, for example, a sanguine recollection of rural childhood past-times, torturing trapped animals, remembers those few, “versed differently”, who shy away from the rubble and grit to higher places of poetic evasion, “that thrust / along our dreams of assault on the sky”. In *Seeds I*, especially, ghost-like figures guide our poetic journey. “The Mallet” recalls an influential primary school teacher, while “Sparks” evokes an authoritative father “in his carpenter’s lair”. Indeed, Vaccaro’s work is populated by a host of *personae*: Ulysses, the wearied, home-bound traveller; Pino, the village simpleton; Sentenzio, the fearless cyclist, Peppino, the migrant everyman; Marylou, the ageing housewife; the despotic town mayor, spinning arachnoid webs to paralyse political dissent; the electrician and the stonecutter. In bringing blood to these local ghosts, *Seeds* is somewhat reminiscent of a modern-day *Spoon River*; like Masters, Vaccaro sets out to bring out the epic in the everyday. Fittingly, Ulysses and Penelope return, “wise to the lightning and / songs, the deeds and tales of a love / untamed”.

A few words must be spent, here, to elucidate the concept of “adjacencies”, which sits at the very core of Vaccaro’s poetics. Having renounced all efforts to adhere stringently to the Thing (the event, the experience, the object of philosophical enquiry), the poetic word can only strive to locate itself in its proximity (*ad-jacere*), where it can gather all the sensations, perceptions, imaginings that constitute our experience of the world. Atmospheres, sounds, words, phonemes and fragmented language come as close as they can to evoking the Thing, or a particular landscape, setting or experience: these *adjacencies* collect multiplicities of perceptions.

The poetic word can thus emerge as the inchoate anticipation of knowledge (from senses to sense) and capture the coalescence of meaning whose *seeds* are scattered in the smell, touch, weight, taste, colour, feel, image and sound, through which we apprehend the Thing. Vaccaro’s poetry is primarily endowed with synesthetic properties and is therefore capable of conveying that complex multiplicity of our correspondence with the world and with one another; words, we are told, “taste of sugar and salt”. The landscape, for example, in a given poem is approximated, narrated by a certain image or assonance – a word or expression which captures and collects the protean sensory perceptions - as a manner of relating to and investigating the real. Genova, for example, is “like grape must, mute and lost”, dreams are “of lost green” or “a hungry void”, the silence “glassy” and “the rose of your flesh explodes / in fits of laughter”. Vaccaro’s is a quest for a sensuous voice that is both choral and humane - his is the language of emotions, ethical reasoning and recollections, with gaze firmly fixed on the self and the world, of which the poem becomes a shared space and provides a moment of unity, decreasing the alienation of the single subjective voice as it becomes song.

As a collection, *Seeds II* is more syncopated, more wilfully uneven. Vaccaro guards the sobriety of his poetic voice, yet the narrative arc discloses a more nuanced and openly metaphysical dimension. This second phase is more expressionistic, formally more probing. Vaccaro mixes styles and voices loosely, heightening the polyphony of *Seeds I*. The poems are at times almost epigrammatic in nature (“Riches”), and occasionally show traces of wavering surrealism (“Meta”; “The Great Bear’s Path”). Vaccaro’s sparse, concrete images endow the naked word with an acute potential of signification. The texts are “Sparks”, glowing white in joys and pain, “beaten ears of wheat lit by the sun”. As they become progressively more refined, essential in their imagery and metaphorical prowess, the scenery is changed, made vital. As we shift from Genoa, to Milan, from Egypt to Palestine, a new urgency moves the verse: from the personal we confront matters seeped in universal, human scope. The political tones are amplified - the polemic in “The Red and the Snow” acerbic. At times, Vaccaro’s poetry acquires an almost hieratic value, containing visionary elements

and a particular kind of discreet wisdom. Indeed, as we approach the end of the book, the imagery becomes rarefied, absolute: “A smear of red resisting the stillness / or a soft sweet plum sprawling wide, / weeping in the wind and sun”.

Self-professedly originating in the Italian *Neoavanguardia*, Vaccaro shirks its excesses, always maintaining a clear emphasis on the social and critical functions of the poetic medium. Vaccaro seldom separates his production from a probing metapoetic reflection; indeed, given poetry’s inherently indefinable nature - tending, as it does, to life’s totality – he believes that the poet cannot disregard his or her attitudes or methods. Vaccaro identifies two different, parallel developments of Italian poetry: the first, more heavily reliant on the solitary creator, stresses the intrinsic value of internal, intrasubjective discourse; in its unabated excesses, this poetic voice can drift into spurious, self-referential lyricism, abstraction and pursuit of absolutes. The second, alternatively, sees the artist-*artifex* as product of the historical-social context from which he or she derives, and the work as synchronic part of the historical and anthropological narrative from which it emerges. Vaccaro artfully navigates between intimistic, subjective expression and an overtly ideological, political drift. His poetry sweeps from the profoundly lyrical (“Boundless Wilderness”) to the prosaic and material, addressing love and illness, beauty and senseless abomination (“Auschwitz”, “Tsunami”, “Haiti”), to find and embody sporadic moments of mourning and joy.

Rarely starkly narrative or reified in its scope, often the subject of Vaccaro’s verses is poetry itself and its purchase on reality, evoked through experiences sensory in nature. Often it appears that Vaccaro is exploring the generative *potential* of his medium. Heavy with accent, the lines become sensuous and lush; and in its erotic flourishes, the work is often pregnant with meaning. To echo Frost: “How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed”. And thus, sharing the ceremony and the possibility of Frost’s verse, Vaccaro’s book celebrates the sacrality of life, with a lilting, erotic uplift, which assumes both masculine and feminine connotations as words flow into an androgynous sea, an experience of life’s fullness. “The sturdy seedling with arched body comes / Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs”.[2]

And as life regenerates, often present, and providing a tentative poetic synthesis, is the domestic leitmotiv: the house - a stableness *ab origine*, invigorated by the alliterative thrust of *casa*: *cosa*. The house embodies a redemptive concreteness, the Thing, “heaped with whey and thoughts / of freedom light, wide mirrors of identity”. It is also, however, place of arrival, a place to take root, a place to preserve the spoors of exile. In its sweeping gaze and fullness of expression, *Seeds* reaches a cyclical return; and the selection presented in this volume, jointly agreed on by author and translator, is not only an excellent introduction to the poetry of Adam Vaccaro, but also constitutes, to some degree, a distinctive narrative push forward in the poet’s work. With sober *decenza* and civic conscience, Vaccaro returns to a body of work that has been quietly omnipresent in the Milanese poetic discourse for the past forty years, adding new texts and revisiting others. His vital and often comic poetic musings speak out, with courage and sincerity, of the possibilities of hope and poetry, of “life reborn, / alive once more in the small and the tall”.

[2] Robert Frost, “Putting in the Seed”, 1920, in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, ed. David Lehman, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 255.

On Translating Adam Vaccaro

An apology, a plea for indulgence for the deviations from the source text, is inevitably called for here, given the shortcomings implicit in what Ezra Pound described as the sacrifice of *melopeia* to *logopeia*. Transposing a “discourse mainly conducted by sound” into another language, while preserving “the implicit cognitive meaning of the discourse”[3], is certainly a cumbersome process, and one which poses particular problems with English translations of Vaccaro’s complex verse. In his *Defence of Poetry*, Percy Bysshe Shelley writes: “The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower — and this is the burden of the curse of Babel”.[4] Where possible, I have striven to make these texts stand up alone, to endow them with their own autonomous vitality, and their own dignity – uprooting, as it were, the seed of the text, and allowing it to grow in the fecund soil of a foreign tongue. Although, semantically speaking, mine are largely conservative translations, unavoidably, as with all labours of this nature, something has been lost – something that the indulgent reader will hopefully forgive: the lexical slide, the dialectal flourish, the play on words. Every translation, as Umberto Eco has argued, “even when trying to give us the flavour of a language and of a historical period, is in fact *modernizing* the source to some extent”.[5] As such, I have been unafraid to diverge slightly from the source lexicon and construction in order to heighten poetic effect, or to welcome slight deviations to “fuse the original, foreign text with ‘the nervous system’”[6] of a new language and time.

In confronting the source texts, I was presented with perhaps two principal difficulties - thankfully, the poet was forthcoming and accommodating in offering counsel and guidance. The dialectal aspect of Vaccaro’s poetry is difficult, if not impossible, to render convincingly in English, but I have tried to negotiate, where possible, the fraught word games and neologisms and leave a trace of authenticity even in English, with its much less frequented tradition of vernacular verse. I would like to think that a dialectal trace has survived in poems such as “Peppino’s Buttons” - the *topos* of the migrant is by now almost commonplace, and I have attempted to preserve an echo of the lost, small-town voice in the lexical and syntactic choices. This rediscovery of a local language, a dialect, is central to the recovery of a “pride” in all that the poet knows – a language which is able to portray, to be semantically faithful to, the linguistic object. In similar ways, Walcott and Heaney put to fruition their local language and culture “as historically amassed possessions”, singing in English but “celebrat[ing] their local idiom”.[7] Evidently, this dialectal faith is betrayed in translation to some degree.

Secondly, I have at times encountered difficulty with the more ludic aspects of Vaccaro’s phonic, sound-centred poetry. Specifically, Vaccaro’s verse is often heavily alliterative, hinged on phonic repetition and correspondence – at times, so pronounced are these devices that the verses resemble a litany: “accerchiato da una vita accanita / che sguarnita e inarresa annusa”. Occasionally, the phonic repetitions are upheld by untranslatable puns and word games; I am thinking, here, of terms like “(bi)sogno”, “pomi/doro”, “abban/donati”, “confine: fine”, “infilare: filare”- as well as

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[3] Guido Almansi, Bruce Merry, *Eugenio Montale*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1977, p. X.

[4] Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”, in: *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. William Harmon, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003, p. 355.

[5] Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translating*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 20.

[6] The phrase is Robert Lowell’s; it is reprinted in Richard Fein, *Robert Lowell*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1970, p. 96.

[7] *The Sunday Times*, 26/7/98.

neologisms such as “lievegrevi” (“heavy-light”). Translating such intricately ethereal, self-referential poetry is always a challenge; where no suitable alternatives could be found in English, I have attempted, in any case, to preserve assonance and rhyme, or to replace one device with the other, when this proved impossible.

In “Fierce Innocence and Beyond”, I was presented with the question of what to do with Ungaretti and Quasimodo’s seminal verses. The texts in question, “Mattino” and “Ed è subito sera”, are milestones in the poetic education of all Italian children, in some way informing the general conception of what poetry *is* and does. They are certainly amongst the most well known poems in the Italian language, and Vaccaro’s choice to align the two texts seems to reflect their canonical standing, as well as offering us a glimpse of transient totality: the quintessential morning and evening of Italian lyrical poetry. I was unable to find a satisfactory English translation: with its open vowels and gnomic intensity, the revelatory flash of “M’illumino d’immenso” is untranslatable; Quasimodo’s poem, too, with its exquisite sibilant ending, loses much in English. It appears to me, however, that in “Fierece Innocence and Beyond”, the poems are being cited, and celebrated, precisely in their intangible and ritualistic qualities, to attest to the power of poetry, able to uplift and excite those sensitive to its power. I have thus decided to leave these verses untranslated, as I believe that the child-like wonder, the primordial rapture and incantatory nature are much more important, both to the children depicted and the reader, than an interpretation of their elusive meanings.

Generally speaking, I have chosen to capitalise and normalise some of Vaccaro’s more ebullient punctuation, or lack thereof, for reasons of simplicity and comprehensibility. Clarity of meaning in such refined and articulate verse has always been amongst my primary concerns. I have provided English equivalents of some of the Italian names, particularly the more common, monosyllabic ones, to accentuate the universality of the situations and characters depicted; however on equal occasions I have preserved the original, more unusual examples, to guard authenticity. Again, the indulgent reader will, I trust, forgive these inconsistencies.

I have sought to recreate the conversational tones where these appear (“The Spider and the Crows”; “The Esna Ants”). Metrically speaking, I have given the English texts a certain regularity, evening out the metre and using pentameter where possible. Overall, and with the poet’s gracious consent, I have granted myself a substantial degree of freedom in syntactically and grammatically playing with the texts: tenses have occasionally been altered, often to the present, for rhythmic reasons and, often, to eternalise the moment in an a-historic tense. Translation is perforce an interpretation – in this case, the first in English, and my intention has been to tend gently and patiently to these arborescent creatures of melody and invention.