

impressions. (By the way, in *Incarnation* and *C'est moi la vérité*, the late French philosopher Michel Henry brilliantly brought to bear on similar Christian ideas this somewhat forgotten notion of a self-reflexive “apperception,” originally studied by Kant, Leibniz, and especially Maine de Biran.) Indeed, Betocchi’s spiritual quest is constantly nourished and challenged by an “involved participation with the real,” as translator Ned Contini views it, and his poetry thereby expresses much more than an “exclusively inner adventure.” A real discovery for us in English, Betocchi is an at once down-to-earth and philosophically minded poet who also wrote some moving love poetry (about his musician wife, Emilia). He can now be read alongside the better known Hermeticists, especially Mario Luzi (whose fascinating *Earthly and Heavenly Journey of Simone Martini* was translated not too long ago at Green Integer).

Wings, by Franco Buffoni (b. 1948), juxtaposes vivid, subtly mysterious poems recalling childhood (in *The Reopened House*, 2000, as well as in several pieces from *Theios*, 2001) and two long poems about torture and brutality from a different series, *War* (2001). In the latter sequence, even the mildest descriptions of torture are as excruciating as they are timely: “When he is supine / tied down on the ground / he sees only the boots / that circle around him / that come near him, / another turn of the thin ropes; / the other two enter . . . / he does not recover right away.” And consider this dialogue, excerpted from a longer poem that reproduces with perfect realism a scene from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s:

Are they oysters, commander,
asked the young lieutenant
as he looked at the basket near the table.
“Twenty kilos of Serbian eyes,
a gift from my men,” answered the colonel,
smiling. He kept them in his office
next to the table. Ripped out by Croatians from prisoners.

Buffoni’s thematically disparate sequences about war and childhood are nonetheless formally linked by the poet’s technique of superposing various time frames, and this is why depictions such as the above, once reinserted into the broader and more intricate context of the long poem or sequence, are less straightforward than they might seem. This heady effect is reinforced when Buffoni introduces a multifaceted “you,” who is also probably the poet as eyewitness and “professional deserter”:

“You’re always the same, your eyes in 43 / the same as in 17 / you had them at Solferino in 59 / it’s always you from the troops of Napoleon / of Attila of Cortez / of Caesar and Scipio / you, professional deserter, / hidden in the bushes / spying on them as they attend to their needs / to stop history.”

Buffoni thereby stages a complex narrative awareness of the concomitance of, or rather flowing back and forth between, past and present, inner and outer worlds, and detached poetic observation and the suffering of others. In his coming-of-age verse, which comprises some touching evocations of household objects (notably a sewing machine wielded by his mother’s hands) and tragedies (such as when a playmate, attempting to retrieve a soccer ball, falls “into the labyrinth of siphons and water tunnels” and is sucked away to death), he is also attentive to the enigmas of recollecting the past as if it were present (the “presence of things past” that Saint Augustine described so memorably) and to the disturbing emotion that arises whenever we let “things be felt / without their given name.” This question of “naming” as an inevitable human activity, but also as an obstacle to experiencing life fully—a dilemma that was first brought to the fore in modernist European verse by Rilke—is a central anxiety of other poets reviewed here.

The mysteries pinpointed by Donatella Bisutti (b. 1948) are less involved with history, even private history, than those featured by Buffoni, though two recent poems (“Persephone” and “Meeting at Philippi”) included in *The Game* arguably relate amorous experiences by means of mythological masks. And other poems are addressed directly to a lover, but they are usually set in the present.

Bisutti is most challenged by the goal of perceiving all the significance, or plenitude, of the present, and her most arresting poems about this fullness are, paradoxically, almost haiku-like, grasping phenomena in a flash but with the additional—European?—attempt to suggest ideas behind the sense impressions. “The open flower / breaks the shadow’s seal,” she finely observes, before noting: “The shadow refills it / again.” And to these delicate lines, this versified maxim can be contrasted: “From the seed / death blossoms last / and is the ultimate flower.” I am reminded of the French aphorist and poet Pierre-Albert Jourdan (1924–1981), whom Bisutti has likely not read. It is not the self that is essential, but rather the self’s searching for insights leading beyond the self, among the humblest elements of the natural world.