

An Experiment of Using  
Traditional Stylistic Analysis  
on a Contemporary Text

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On a basic level, many literary works that we face today appear to belong to a general trend of innovative disposition. Provisorily, we might call it not so much another refusal of conventional modules used in assembling language as a search for alternate compositional forms. As a possible alternative to disrupting “normal” composition and to tearing the tissue of communication, today’s artist creates his own structure of laceration. This attempted structure is not less consistent and regular (and therefore possibly readable) than normal structures of combination. Syntax, as the ordered reunion of elements subjected to a taxonomy, does not exclude such an operation by principle. If the taxonomy changes, as when the artist intends to affirm a greater value in the action than in the agent, for example, the syntax will have to comply. We know that “normal” syntax considers cases of illogical suppression or permutation (e. g., ellipsis) perfectly admissible.

On the same basic level, Nanni Cagnone appears to have selected a specific way of fitting together the three main parts of his poem “come ortica”. It is our assumption that 1) the special assemblage is structural, that is, it obeys an inner order; and 2) however puzzling or even obscure it may be, the compound is a “poetic effect.” I wish I only had to demonstrate this theorem, even if bicephalous or forked. But I shall have to bring in observation on individual stylistic procedures, comparisons with other contemporary texts, and even other levels of reading. I haven’t been able to find an apology to offer for this additional burden to the reader.

come ortica e lattuga, felce e felce,  
cammina intanto per tramiti  
svelto non avanza nella stranezza del mare  
che scorrono insieme smalto e ritrosia  
lungo ripetute somiglianze  
scorrono nel madornale fruscio  
già nascosto da nuvole, conteso,

insaputo confusissimo aroma.  
ditemi se dissipa da sé, lacuna  
che lentissima confonde.

like nettle and lettuce, fern and fern,  
meanwhile walks through ways  
quickly does not advance in the strangeness of the sea  
which flow together enamel and reluctance  
along repeated resemblances  
flow in the massive rustling  
already hidden by clouds, contested,  
unknown most confused aroma.  
tell me if it dissipates by itself,  
lacuna that most slowly confounds.

The three main parts of a2 (it is the second poem of the series called Andatura) cluster respectively around: 1) The action of cammina:

come ortica e lattuga, felce e felce,  
cammina intanto per tramiti

2) the contradiction of that action embodied in the image of sea:

svelto non avanza nella stranezza del mare  
che scorrono insieme smalto e ritrosia  
lungo ripetute somiglianze  
scorrono nel madornale fruscio  
già nascosto da nuvole, conteso,  
insaputo confusissimo aroma.

3) the quotient of part 2 operating against part 1, that is, a third action placed in indirect interrogation; questioned and questioning riflettente riflessivo (to quote another poem), suspended between the simultaneous perception of dispersion, and the doubting of it:

ditemi se dissipa da sé  
lacuna che lentissima confonde.

Interpreting part 1 involves employing at least one traditional styleme (I shall use this term for a special choice of an expressive arrangement of words and constructions), namely the inversion; and at least one “lacerative” styleme, the suppression of the subject, which pushes the known convention of ellipsis to a rare extreme. The inversion simply applies to the simile conveying a dense cluster of images and enhances an illustrative function that Dante himself has freely pursued. By reversing the topological arrangement, the general settlement of the sentence does not appear to show any organic cause for obscurity, while the images specify the different kinds of *tramiti*:

cammina intanto per *tramiti*  
come ortica e lattuga, felce e felce.

The image of walking is articulated in facets or situations: walking through the *tramiti* (“means” at the same time as “impediments”), similar either to *ortica e lattuga* or to *felce e felce*. Walking through nettles and salads evokes a shabby suburban scenery, a picture of human deed with its pungent mixture of culture and disorder; walking through ferns and ferns moves the scene into a natural milieu, suggesting the dark and moist abundance of a forest. The parallel couples, one essentially contrasting (*ortica* versus *lattuga*), one essentially multiplying (ferns endlessly propagating into ferns), modulate the action of *camminare* as alternatively contrasted or inspired. Both cases, by addition, guarantee a duration in the expression of the action: a duration where in fact the reader witnesses the connotation of a higher symbolism connected with the very image of *cammina*. I don’t think I need recall how far the connection of *camminare* and *vivere* can go since we all know of the *mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*. The expressive reason for the inversion itself is to emphasize those conditions which

endow the simple *cammina* with significance; the placing of *ortica* at the beginning of the poem is a concurrent effect, as the notion of pungency and difficulty, of human disorder and hostility in nature, set an individual note which will last not only through the whole line but, in different consonances and accords, through the whole poem.

The suppression of the subject is a frequent procedure in contemporary poems. For Cagnone himself, it is almost the rule. [...] Inversion, isolation of conventionally signifying but inexpressive signs such as a simple comma or a semicolon often strike the eye. They obey the principle of defining the image by its activity instead of by description: the poet wants to say that the image may exceed its initial state, or is contained in it; that the energy contained in an image is a state which has its own poetic life; that the dislocation can point to what is implied, as location points to what is explained.

I would like to indicate at least two values that the artist pursues by this procedure of laceration or deconstruction. One is a focus on the action and its circumstances, as on the pure, essential object of poetic representation. That cluster of dynamic meaning is poetically significant in itself and, in the view of the artist, can be enhanced if it is separated, isolated from biographical, and hence obvious, or in any event occasional specifications. The deeper aim of the thrust seems to be a conception of poetry as a special form of expression which transcends not so much the concrete as the evident level of description, and at the same time avoids the similarly evident abstractions of reason. The other order of value is formal and therefore local: the relief obtained by the sudden presentation of *ortica*, and then of the whole imaginative series suggested to the mind of the reader, is far greater than in the logical subordination which would be artificially applied in a flattening profanation either of a descriptive report or of a rational classification.

The interpretation of part 2 similarly detects traditional procedures of composition and innovative deconstruction. The ac-

tion (*svelto non avanza*) presents another inversion which is in fact double. The negative does not modify *avanza* but the attribute *svelto*, which is situated in a proleptic position. The clause model actually intensifies “advance”, loading it with a sense of difficulty and increasing its force by the very suggestion of resistance. The proximity of *svelto non avanza* to *cammina per tramiti* adds to the central sense of transition conveyed by *tramiti* a notion of impeding thickness, the presence of agents which affect the unknown subject of *camminare* by their power to oppose his penetration. *Svelto*, or rather *non svelto*, central as it is between *cammina* and *avanza*, expresses the contrast between an ideal motion and the actual situation characterized by the hindering power of material surroundings. The deceleration of progress is expressed at the exact point where the longing for an ideal motional rhythm coexists with the consciousness of exertion; the text simultaneously evokes the inherent antinomy of nature as a support for motion and an obstacle to it. The classic poetic illustration of such a theme is fluidity: and the text opens on the image of the sea. Lines 3 to 8 display how the poet, by means of several procedures of deconstruction, attempts to spread the mood of thematic contrast throughout a picture which is not a description. The progress (*avanza*) happens neither on the surface nor in the matter of the medium but within its metaphysical quality: not *sul mare*, but *nella stranezza* of the sea. The constituent feature of the poem, the oceanic body, is displayed here: it takes up the main space of the central section, and deserves observation on more than one level.

We shall be able to observe again, and here in a larger vision, that the task of poetic representation is conceived as particularly distinct from the mere announcement of sensorial perceptions, however refined, and as equally distinct from the metaphysical interpretation of them. Poetry, the text seems to declare, must capture the inseparability of the sensorial and the transcendent. It must place before the reader a state of being

where analysis and synthesis integrate each other, where the senses (here of sight, bearing, smelling) merge without losing their own sharpness, where the memory, however extended in time, is not posthumous, where mental action is so bound to its living matter as to be caught, so to speak, in a molten state, not yet broken down into discrete thought but defined by its process.

Such a stand binds the poet to rigorously selecting only those data which are appropriate to conveying the indivisible nature of being. The separation of the inner from the outer aspects belonging to the consciousness, the perception, or the thinking of the object (here, the sea) is a preliminary elimination of whatever can conceal the “poetic” identity of things. Admitting into the text the poetic “ultimate particle” isolated by the preliminary process results in what we might call an acro-statement, constructed with an elemental acro-vocabulary, in acro-clauses.

The motion of the oceanic body is expressed here with the twice occurring *scorrano*, opposed to the singular action of the non-subject (*cammina, avanza*) by its connotations of plurality, timelessness, aimlessness, freedom and amplitude. Its repetition allows the poet to relate it oppositionally not only to the declarative *cammina, avanza* which opens the poem, but also to the interrogative *dissipa da sé* which closes it. The obstructed striving of the human transcends its own disquiet by contrasting itself with the unimpeded course of the vast, spontaneous fluctuation; the loneliness of human effort is stressed by being compared with the unfettered coexistence of complexity and simplicity, multiplicity and singularity, instability and permanence in the ocean. Because of these relations, the doubt in *dissipa da sé* is no longer a function of an individual experience of awkwardness, but rather of what I’d call the bitter ecstasy found in the unearned freedom of nature. As the poet aims at expressing the inseparability of identity and difference, the motion verbs (*avanza, scorrono*) are simultaneously join-



ed and disjoined by their common local complement, the sea. While the human act of advancing occurs in an immaterial feature of the sea — strangeness — the flowing of *smalto* and *ritrosia* is presented in an intentional ambiguity of syntax. It can be related immediately to *mare* (*mare che scorrono*) with the result of picturing a different surface motion, inasmuch as it is material, and it can also be related to *stranezza* (*stranezza del mare che scorrono*), with the result of envisioning a mysteriously related modulation of symbols.

The inner subject that supports part 2, or the mirror-subject of the poem, is the “sea”. It is proclaimed in the group *smalto e ritrosia* upon which the repeated plural action *scorrono*, *scorrono* is dependent. The conceptual operation which originates the group consists of a rather dassic (however complex) succession of element-separation and choice. In turn, the expressive operation results from bending traditional forms to the requirements of the additional composition which that element-choice and conceptual reconstruction have produced.

The mental discrimination of the sensorial features of the sea has first of all isolated a sum of visual factors such as brightness, plate-like, smooth, hard coating, the timbre of a hue which is typical of enameled metallic surfaces, and the multiples of those combined effects; secondly, the discrimination isolates a sum of interpretive agents, where the perception of the advancing action of the water-ridges and the reflux of the liquid in the alternative undulation are coupled with an acoustic suggestion sunk into the syllabification of the very word *ritrosia*. The expressive unit resulting from the choice *smalto e ritrosia* breaks some rules of normal syntax and idiom, e. g., by associating a collective concrete and a singular abstraction in the same category; however, according to the governing design of freeing the poetic elements from spurious (descriptive, narrative, explanatory) components, it uses its own formal difficulty to concentrate attention. As a subject (the mirror subject of the poem) the expressive unit gathers (in a wide and

comprehensive flash of unity) color, extension, sound, motion, and metaphysical suggestions that emanate from the liquid body: it identifies that unity which gives novelty to the whole horizon. Subordinate descriptive elements, like the very fluidity of the mass, are denoted indirectly by dependent categories, such as the verbs *scorrono*. The most distinctive feature of the *smalto e ritrosia* grouping is that the two substantives affect each other reciprocally. As the concreteness of *smalto* imbues *ritrosia* by filling the abstraction with the suggestion of weight, reflux, backward movement, and even the precarious shape of the undulating ridge, so *smalto* itself participates in the symbolic and metaphysical connotations of the abstract *ritrosia*. The resistance of matter, the mystery of denseness in life, which emanates from that specific assessment of the oceanic image, influences the visual perception of *smalto* to yield an integrated expression of the mystery of hardness in beauty, of impenetrability in the fluid, of permanence in universal motion. Should I call this synthesis an ontological result? Ontological, of course, in the field of poetry rather than centrally in the field of metaphysics; the expressive unit contrived by the artist actualizes the poetic intention of capturing the essence of things in its own realm between the sensorial and the intellectual. It aims at assessing its specific emotional relation to an individual, introspective effort.

The presence of such an ontological exertion on language seems to be sustained by the lines that follow. Here the artist arranges a number of complementary units. The sameness and difference in the oceanic recurrence of motion is the theme governing line 5 (where the complement depends upon *scorrono*: *lungo ripetute somiglianze*). The pattern of the image was incipient in the pattern of diversity and infinity of the first images (nettles and lettuce, ferns and ferns). The elements built up into the connected whole of this line include an optical suggestion (*scorrono* “lungo”), a quantitative observation (*ripetute*), and an abstraction (*somiglianze*).

This composition merges what the eye records in running along the constant span of width over the unstable interval between waves and what the intellect wonders at in registering the bonds of regularity in the realm of the uncontrollable, the over-subtle meanings of a simply picturesque natural display. The second *scorrone*, while syntactically connected with the following complement (*scorrone “nel madornale fruscio”*), has a secondary function in prolonging the ferment of this line. The subject *smalto e ritrosia* is evoked again, and the repetition of *scorrone* (consistent with the general image of wave occurrence) allows the superimposition of an acoustic perception (the grand but subdued sound of the water) upon a visual one. The coupling of *madornale* with *fruscio* is what in traditional rhetoric is called an oxymoron—a pointed conjunction of seeming contradictions; as it brings into view an indefinite but sensorially perceptible structure of opposition, it develops in the text a more precise indication of the mysteries perceived by the eye and already tested by the intellect. It also develops the dramatic setting of the ontological problem, for the sound is interpreted as independent of the flowing of the enameled reluctance: *smalto e ritrosia* flow in the huge rustle, they do not cause it. The artist is now engaged in increasing the enigma, which he stages in a growing bewilderment of perception. As if it were a visual and not an auditory sensation, the rustle is hidden by clouds. The synthesis here is only an opening procedure: in fact, the glimpse into a view of overcast stillness intends to be less reaching by far in description than in meaning. The same rustle is also *conteso*, forcibly disturbed, opposed. Here the glimpses into adverse winds and counter waves, into foreign agents of noise, are further reduced to minute descriptive elements and collapsed into a dominant intuition of anguish. Finally, a sensation of smell, the most indefinite of bodily feelings, comprises the ultimate bewilderment: the rustle is an aroma. While the noun carries a minimal allusion to a physical reaction to the impervious, its qua-

fications are inversely loaded with a maximum weight: insaputo, not unknown as much as uncertain, not inaccessible as much as matchless, not unnamed as much as inestimable; and confusissimo, the word that directly links the mirror subject of the poem to the concealed main subject of it.

The link between the questioning “I” and its mirror, the “sea,” has reached its definition after a sequence of poetically ontological units; the sequence results in a “composition” which is an apt stage for the poem’s stress lines. The last dystich carries the original question mark, which is in fact the starting point of the inspiration but also the last apex of the dramatic build-up: while in a narrative its “normal” position would be initial, in the poetic treatment it terminates a process of coalescence and is therefore appropriately placed as a conclusion.

These two lines are essentially interrogative: the device of arranging them as an indirect question (dependent upon ditemi) stresses the accent of desperate appeal which rushes retroactively through the whole poem as a key vibration.

The artist breaks the sequence of lofty illustration with the familiar, low-keyed, direct ditemi: the plainest expressive device is selected in order to place a call for deliverance from the problem. The sudden humbleness of the linguistic touch connotes a posture of recourse which is simultaneously feverish and shy, reckless and feeble, while clinging to the conscious delusion of an impersonal knowledge and to the shadowy outline of a helpful human court; the appeal is so simple that a pure note of primitive anguish outlines even the mesmeric imagery of the preceding sea picture. And yet, the contrasting overtones of rashness and dimness subtly harmonize the interrogation with both the impressions of oceanic energy and those of human struggle. The substance of the following interrogation reaches a high conceptual and expressive density. Its axis dips vertically through the poem from the word stranezza in line 3.

This word possesses a built-in interrogative charge: strange as “foreign, alien, unexpected” implies an inquisitive stress, a

thrust to elicit an explanation. As an instrument of the poem, the word is manipulated by the artist as a revolving joint. By relating it to the initial idea of the “advancing” in life, he links the vision of life (inasmuch as it appears “strange”) to the composite image of the sea: the human subject strives forward in a sea-like strangeness. By relating it to the inner features of the sea itself (inasmuch as it moves incessantly without advancing in a perpetual reiteration of turbulence) the artist reads within the word strangeness a further and probably opposite link: the nonprogress in life is itself a mirror of the real nonprogressing dynamics of the sea. The final interrogative clause picks up the two different rhythms (proparoxytone accents in its first line, *dìtemi, dīssipa*, paroxytone accents in the second, *lacùna, confónde*) merging them in *lentìssima*, as in a metrical, figurative, and cognitive connection. It is a conclusive question; it may be worthwhile to analyze how it descends from the inside axis of disquietude which develops through the poem.

The embryo of the disquietude is located in the inchoate inquisitiveness of *stranezza*. An interrogative ingredient abides in each of the successive images of the sea; the sequence itself builds up another underlying wave-like structure. The interrogative component in *smalto e ritrosia* can be described as suggesting the wavering of the mind between outward appearance and inherent substance; *ripetute somiglianze* bears a doubt as to direct similarity and angular relation; *madornale fruscio*, the disturbance of reading either a natural “crushing” or an enigma affording expectation; *nascosto, conteso*, the suspicion of elusive denial and the covert longing for revelation. The question that ripens at the end of such an inner breathing of interrogative ingredients sums up the ontological moment. It aims at the very nature of that strangeness. What is the essence of that nonprogressive moment?

*Ditemi se dissipa da sé*: tell me if the infinitely repetitive uniqueness of each wave is the product of the element’s self-dispossession. *Dissipa da sé* is a bold expressive device relying,

formally, on the reduction of a normally reflexive verb to an absolute and, conceptually, on etymological and analogical values. The aphoristic concentration of *se dissipa* involves first of all a properly literary question, relating to the ancient and recent theories of the poet actually dispossessing himself of a portion of essence through the very fact of performing an artistic operation. It involves an existential question: does the self renounce part of its completeness in the unavoidable forward motion of events? It involves the social question of sharing, as *dissipare* etymologically means also “to apportion among others.” It involves the ideas of dissemination, dispersion, destruction (cf. *sfugga o sia diviso* in *What’s Hecuba to Him or He to Hecuba?*). As it is conceived as a prism and not as a polygon, the question refracts its sides, and the spectrum produced by the refraction can be seen in transparency. Is the unavailing expense of energy a product of inertia and of external causes? Or is it rather a mysterious but valid expression of an inner active principle, a drive that all natural beings possess by virtue of their very existence? The sea would exemplify it in a manner both terrifying and consoling, as its inescapable urge operates without impoverishment, and with an imposing result of beauty: *lacuna che lentissima confonde*. The final image conveys again specificity and infinity, interruption and continuity: the liquid space inexorably empties itself and unfailingly fills up by conflux. *Confonde* has to be read again as an etymological figure, *fonde in sé stesso*. Possibly, then, the moment of hindrance, and therefore of a gap, could be a necessary preparatory crisis, not the perverse mark of failure. The torment of slowness itself could be a powerful combination of qualities that ultimately delight even the senses.

Placed at the culminating point of a rather terrible monologue, *ditemi* doesn't seem to actually ask for exposition. In fact it rhymes with every element of the poem. Still, it could not function as a simple rhyme in a formal sense. Thus it seems to defy that noisy decision to dismiss all language conventions

which presides over the choice of a structure of deconstruction. In fact it probably declares that the idiom of poetic ontology can be reabsorbed into acceptability if it is simply recognized as the special language of a special and very ancient activity. Obscurity, trobar clus, are instrumental implements for obtaining the oblique vision which is essentially lyrical. The representation of any vision in purely ontological poetry might well be otherwise unapproachable.

A very naïve question that I had set for myself in initiating the present experiment was whether the new versified matter that I had under my eyes was poetry, experiment, curiosity, or homogenized nonsense. Just as naïve an answer arose from the study of several of these pieces: if there was poetry in the artist, it would appear; as Ovid had to remark in his childish scribbles, *versus erat*, it was poetry. Some rules of normative linguistics are forfeited. But those are the rules that do not comply with the reference problem admirably expressed by Benveniste: "The problem consists in identifying the intimate structure of the phenomenon of which one perceives only the outside appearances, and in describing its relation with the whole of the manifestations upon which it depends." Cagnone pursues exactly this task: whatever pertains to mere attributes of things, or to an external story, or to what is insubstantial in it, must be formally suppressed in favor of emphasizing what represents the underlying and substantial relation with the human inquiry. I find this vision of the sacred character of poetic activity admirable. This kind of poetic ontology, of onto-poetics, of ontology of reference (as Jacques Garelli calls it) commands the choice of rhythms, junctions, punctuation, and even the manias which constitute style. It aims at a graphical entity which cannot afford to be descriptive or exegetical, and therefore must avoid anything which is paragraphical or pseudo-graphical. The onto-poetic trend which takes form here needs to be clearly distinguished, in my opinion, from metaphysical ontology. I think some contemporary poets

are wrong in coating their theoretical justifications in metaphysical or grammatical language. These texts seem to declare that decision about reality is not the purpose of poetry. They rather seem committed to asserting the living pulse of a question in its intimate structure. Thus they are interrogative, not assertive. An answer, they seem to declare in striking unanimity, is finite — and so is the traditional stock of available expressions. Just as the inquiry has a substance of its own, as it is ultimately the major key to a hypostatical grasp of nature, so the innovational potential of language is open-ended and a central force in the field of expression.

In fact, innovation is the most traditional feature of tradition, if the tradition is alive. At the beginning of this century, Maurice Eisen wrote that “the dominant note of the present epoch is revolutionary, not only in the plastic arts and in music, but in everything that exists.” At the times of early cubism, Benjamin de Casseres was looking as far back as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman for the “real fathers of the cubists and futurists”. For a historian of forms of expression, the fertile interplay of innovation and tradition is the main originating force of literature: the degree of energy in the innovation factor indicates the importance of that given phase of advance. What appears wrong is to talk of an “avant-garde” instead of seriously talking of a “garde”. We are today pleased to salute one representative of our generation’s “garde”.