THE UNFORGIVEABLES

Cristina Campo

A Translation with Commentary[1]

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Come, my songs, let us speak of perfection–
We shall get ourselves rather disliked.

– Ezra Pound[2]

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[1] By Andrea di Serego Alighieri and Nicola Masciandaro.

[2] From the poem "Salvationists," in *The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1956), 50. "We shall get ourselves disliked and very much liked, because the zest for perfection communicates its excitement to others" (Marianne Moore, "Ezra Pound," in *Predilections* [New York: Viking Press, 1955], 83). Moore's commentarial rephrasing of Pound's lines expounds a principle of crucial importance for Campo's idea of the unforgiveable, namely, that the path of perfection, which stands opposed to the general ways of the world, does not lie in abandoning society or merely reacting to it, but in working in its midst, both for and against the world, at the crossroads of all its opposites, without being swayed by the resultant praise and blame, like and dislike, the enjoyment of which offers a subtle and perilous temptation. The passion for perfection, as desire for the best, is perforce tensioned between its social situation, its inevitable entanglement in the comparative world of better and worse, and the need to remain indifferent to comparison, to stand apart from the fictions of being/becoming better (or worse) than others. Pound's singular-plural solicitation ("Come . . . we . . .") plays out this tension in a shrewd and humorous way, mocking its own indulgence in being disliked by reflecting it in the mirror of attraction for elite, coterie identity – a virtual belonging instantly shut down by the non-inclusivity of its *we*, by the fact that it is Pound

The passion for perfection comes late. Or better,[3] it appears late as a conscious passion. If the passion had been spontaneous – the

talking, that *gli imperdonabili* is not a club. Cf. the opening of Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ*: "This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them are even alive yet" (*The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 3). On the enticements of the social to be resisted by the poet, see especially section 5 below. Cf. "Perfection consists in remaining free from the entanglements of duality. Such freedom from entanglements is the most essential requirement of unhindered creativity. But this freedom cannot be attained by running away from life for fear of entanglement. This would mean denial of life. Perfection does not consist in shrinking from the dual expressions of nature. The attempt to escape from entanglement implies fear of life. Spirituality consists in meeting life adequately and fully without being overpowered by the opposites. It must assert its dominion over all illusions–however attractive or powerful. Without avoiding contact with the different forms of life, a perfect man functions with complete detachment in the midst of intense activity" (Meher Baba, *Discourses*, 6th ed., 3 vols. [San Francisco: Sufism Reoriented, 1967], I.35).

[3] The rephrasing ("O, per meglio dire . . . ") performs the movement of perfection's passion as movement into maximum amelioration. Cf. "Per correr miglior acque . . . " (Dante, *Purgatiorio*, 1.1). The lateness of perfection's passion is of a piece with the lateness of perfection itself as the thorough completion of an action or making (*per* + *facere*). Hence the wit of Pound's 'rather', which more originally means 'quickly, earlier, sooner', underscoring the structure of resentment and revenge at work in censure, as expressed in the word *rash* (from Proto-Germanic *raskuz*, 'rapid, quick'). "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 29:20). Antipathy towards (speaking of) perfection is the rhythmic inverse of the lateness of its passion, just as being 'quick to cast the first stone' is symptomatic of the envious/resentful type: "'We want to exact revenge and heap insult on all whose equals we are not' – thus vow the tarantula hearts" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 77).

moment, fatal to every life, of "general horror,"[4] of the world dying and decomposing around us – then it reveals itself to itself: a lone, wild, composed reaction.

In an age of purely horizontal progress,[5] where the mass of humanity resembles more and more that line of Chinese people

[4] Djuna Barnes, cited in section 5 below, from "The Antiphon." Campo wrote to Barnes on 18 April 1968, sending along her essay *The Unforgivables*, writing that "it all started from a long quotation from "The Antiphon" (Cristina De Stefano, *Belinda e il mostro* [Milan: Adelphi, 2002], 148). Here we get a glimpse of Campo's own interest in commentary as means of textual production: "To a friend whom she wants to convince to write, she advises to collect the quotations first: the text will grow later – she says – like a creeper among the rocks" (*Belinda e il mostro*, 102).

[5] The expression, mirroring the horizontality of the queue, evokes the analogy between the vertical/horizontal distinction and others such as ideal/norm, eternity/time, and quality/quantity, used to measure the difference between modern and traditional ages or worlds. For example, the anonymous author of *Meditations on the Tarot*, in his commentary on The Hermit, interprets the cunning promises of the serpent in Genesis 3:1-4 as a figure for the logic of scientific enlightenment as follows: "To open your eyes, to be like gods, knowing good and evil – this is the great arcanum of empirical science . . . Does it deceive us? No . . . On the plane of *horizontal expansion* (the 'fields' of Genesis) the serpent keeps its promise . . . but at what price with regard to other planes, and with regard to the vertical? . . . The more one has 'open eyes' for quantity, the more one becomes blind to quality. Yet all that one understands by 'spiritual world' is only quality, and all experience of the spiritual world is due to 'eyes that are open' for quality, for the *vertical aspect* of the world . . . The *vertical* world, the spiritual world, is that of *values* and, as the 'value of values' is the individual being, it is a world of individual beings or entities" (Anonymous, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell [New York: Penguin, 1985], 214). The sense of *progress* (from *pro-* 'forward' + *gradi* 'to walk') is ironic in the context of walking forward in line towards execution, a condition in which authentic progress is only possible via the suspension of pro-gress by maintaining a *qualitative* stance or comportment [*atteggiamento*] which is spiritually above or detached from one's surroundings.

being led to the guillotine about whom we read in the chronicles of the Boxer Rebellion,[6] the only non-frivolous attitude seems to be that of the man who, while standing in line, was reading a book. It is a surprise to see others, waiting their turn, squabbling in the blood for their preferred executioner working on the scaffold. One admires the two or three heroes who are still vigorously launching slings impartially at one or the other executioner (as we know that really there is only one executioner, despite the changing of the masks). All in all, the Chinese man who reads demonstrates wisdom and love for life.

It is prudent to forget that, according to the chronicle, this man kept his head because the German official escorting the condemned, unable to resist his composure, spared him. It is proper to recall the words that the Chinese man offered upon being interrogated, before losing himself in the crowd: "I know that every line read is

[6] Campo's endnotes give the source of the anecdote as Hugo von Hofmannsthal "nel suo imperdonabile *Libro degli Amici*," although we do not find it there. The anecdote also occurs in Uwe Timm, *Midsummer Night*, trans. Peter Tegel (New York: New Directions, 1998), 85-6, and is quoted at length in Durs Grünbein's essay "Why Live Without Writing," which provides the source as Hofmannsthal's diaries (*The Bars of Atlantis: Selected Essays*, trans. John Crutchfield [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010], 115), yet without certain details remembered/invented by Campo, such as the guillotine and the fighting for the preferred executioner. The figure of the singular Chinese man for whom every line is profitable echoes Campo's comparison of William Carlos Williams to "a Chinese master of the classical age," one of the few "living masters" of "the greatest savor [*sapore*] of each word," on which she comments: "I had naturally written the adjective *Chinese* which, dedicated to Williams, seemed to arouse some astonishment. While it would have seemed legitimate, I suppose, for the young Pound or for Brecht's latest lyrics. Better than for Pound, and at least as much as for Brecht, it seems to me that Williams deserves this comparison. If by *Chinese* we mean, as I think, the archetype of the artist most free in his time and space, that is, from his time and space: wise in bowing to the wheel of the seasons with the same purity with which the old man of the waterfall, praised by Zhuang Zhou, bowed to the furies and whims of the water" ("Il sapore massimo di ogni parola," in *Gli Imperdonabili* [Milan: Adelphi, 1987], 177)

profitable."[7] It is fitting to imagine that the book he was holding in his hands was a perfect book.

What does this mean? Not necessarily a sacred book in the canonical sense. As a renowned demonologist once said: everything joyous is in some way the territory of the divine.[8] I can as easily imagine a luminous treatise on the life of mushrooms, or on the knots of Persian carpets, an accurate description of a great swordsman, a collection of beautifully crafted letters. Or even that *Essay on Knives* which is being written, I am told, and which seems worth waiting for because the writer writes with perfection and may speak of knives, of Francis Bacon, of Anna Pavlova's taut big toe in the sorrowful arabesques of *Giselle*[9] – an essay responding in a way

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[7] The phrasing of the reader's exit is reminiscent of the story of Jesus's strangely easy escape from his would-be executioners at Nazareth: "And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went away" (Luke 4. 29–30) – also a story of reading: "And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" (Luke 4:20).

[8] "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on *the Enemy's ground.* I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden" (C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* [New York: HarperOne, 2015], 44, my italics). Cf. "He's a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and stakes and crosses are only a façade. Or only like foam on the seashore. Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure, and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are 'pleasures for evermore'" (ibid., 118). Campo similarly quotes "un celebre vecchio diavolo" from *The Screwtape Letters* in "Una divagazione: del linguaggio" (*Gli imperdonabili*, 92).

[9] "Her feet, remarkable for the power of the ankle, their high arch, and 'toes of steel,' made her *pizzicati* on tiptoe and steadily held pauses possible; but not easy, as noted by Mr. Dandré, since her long main toe, by which the whole weight of her body had to be borne, did not provide the squared support of the more level toes of

worthy of the honor of the guillotine that awaits: the poor biochemical world of tomorrow where thought (it is announced with reverence) will be no more than a mere serum, consciousness no more than an integument, but not even a serum and an integument which man will inherit at birth, since we know that, by work of a stranger, an electronic impulse may very well, at any distance, cut him off from both.[10]

Meticulous, beautiful, and unyielding, like all true visionaries, the poet Marianne Moore writes an essay on knives: she writes about lizards and Aldine ligatures, of dancers and the "maple- / leaf like feet" of flamingoes.[11] She writes of the pangolin: "armored animal–

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the somewhat typically thickest virtuoso. Yet 'when standing on one toe, she could change her entire balance,' André Olivéroff says, 'by moving the muscles of her instep. This may seem a small thing, but it was one of the many that contributed to her dancing the perpetual slight novelty that made it impossible for an instant to tire of watching her'" (Marianne Moore, "Anna Pavlova," in *Predilections*, 149).

[10] The analogy between waiting in line for execution and the poor biochemical world is illuminated by Ivan Illich's description of the medicalization of life as a quantified, horizontal duration: "life is turned into a pilgrimage through check-ups and clinics back to the ward where it started. Life is thus reduced to a 'span,' to a statistical phenomenon which, for better or for worse, must be institutionally planned and shaped. This life-span is brought into existence with the prenatal check-up, when the doctor decides if and how the fetus shall be born, and it will end with a mark on a chart ordering resuscitation suspended" (*Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* [New York: Pantheon, 1976], 79).

[11] Marianne Moore, "Critics and Connoisseurs," (*New Collected Poems*, ed. Heather Cass White [London: Faber & Faber, 2017], lines 10-11). Moore is not describing a flamingo but the "flamingo coloured" feet of a swan (and thus also not not a flamingo, the feet of which are similar in form), the "conscious fastidiousness" of whose "disinclination to move" serves as example of "something / that I like better" than the "poetry [found in] in unconscious fastidiousness." Presumably Campo's slippage, under the rubric of praising Moore's meticulousness, is as an intentional error, perhaps meant to highlight the ambivalence of the act of witnessing in the lyric word, where the truth of testimony, via the negative openness

scale / lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity . . . / the night miniature artist-engineer is, / yes, Leonardo da Vinci's replica."[12] She writes of "the dead fountains of Versailles,"[13] of the "noiseless music that hangs about / the serpent when it stirs or springs."[14] Within her rapid, avid quotation marks, enclosed between two hemistichs, she collects enough to be able to defraud it all of beauty, wherever it may lie: in Plato, in a zoo, in a catalog of ancient courtly dress, in the natural history column of the *Illustrated London News*. Of all this she writes, drawing forth the morality in rapid arpeggios, muted immediately by the jealous hand. She has but one concern, her praise and her psalm: that demanding and marvelous perfection, that divine offence which is to be venerated in nature, to be touched in art, discovered gloriously in everyday behavior.[15] This is why her books make good companions in the piazza of the guillotine.

There is a difference. It appears that the Chinese man was not questioned by his fated companions, only by the German officer. Today he is, constantly. Today no reader is permitted to read without justifying themselves.[16] But it suits him just as well to keep

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of indication and address, may include whoever hears it. "I have seen this swan and / I have seen *you*" (my italics). As the observed swan and unobserved reader are at once equally witnessed or seen by the poet's word, so may the perfect book in some sense be about anything, the *topos* of the profit of the reader who finds profit in every line.

[12] Marianne Moore, "The Pangolin."

[13] Marianne Moore, "No Swan So Fine." On the background of this line, which Moore enclosed in quotation marks, see Victoria Bazin, *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 161,

[14] Marianne Moore, "In Costa Rica."

[15] These sentences, which anticipate the later reference to Moore as a medieval nun (section 2), imply in parallel fashion a contemplative image of the poet as all at once, florilegist, exegete, and psalmist.

[16] "The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient" (1 Timothy 1:9). Correlatively, justification is the smell of evil, just as the freedom of the just man – "I need no justification for defending my own freedom" (Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012], 243) – inheres in his being: "The just man serves neither God nor creatures, for he is free, and the closer he is to

silent. Were he to offer even one word on the reasons for his reading, he would be forbidden from continuing it, to say the least. Why? First of all, it is a pure miracle that that book came into his hands. As Marianne Moore says of one of today's eminent poets: "He has naturally in some quarters been rebuked for his skill; writers cannot excel at their work without being, like the dogs in *Coriolanus*, 'as often beat for their barking / As therefore kept to do so.'"[17]

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> But it is true, they fear
> it more than death, beauty is feared
> more than death, more than they fear death
>
> – William Carlos Williams[18]

Perfection, beauty. What do these mean? Among the definitions, one is possible. Perfection is an aristocratic character, rather, it is in itself the supreme aristocracy. Of nature, of species, of idea. Even within nature, perfection is culture. The upright, delicate bearing of the girl from the Gold Coast is the work of centuries of swimming, of clay urns balanced on her head, of dances and songs of initiation

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justice, the closer he is to freedom, and the more he is freedom itself" (Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works*, trans. and ed. Maurice O'C. Walshe [New York: Herder & Herder, 2009], 130).

[17] Marianne Moore, "Unanimity and Fortitude," *Poetry* 49 (1937), 268. Moore is speaking of Wallace Stevens. Campo's translation gives "arte perfetta" for Moore's "skill," playfully performing the idea of poetic perfection as theft of itself across the threshold of translation/citation.

[18] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, revised edition, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992), 106. Campo comments on the same quote from Williams (which she translated) in *Sotto falso nome*: "And they are right, because to accept it is always to accept a death, an end of the old man and a difficult new life . . . All people experience this terror, but most prefer to shoot beauty down or to take refuge in horror by forgetting it" (Cristina Campo, *Sotto falso nome*, ed. M. Farnetti [Milano: Adelphi, 1988], 179-80).

more complex than the purest Gregorian chant.[19] If but one of the elements (piety, free play, feminine arts) were missing, perfection

[19] It is important that this figure for perfection concerns the grace of human bearing, our vertical bipedal stance, echoing the 'atteggiamento' of the reader in the previous section as well as the traditional analogy between body and earthen vessel ('orcio', from *urceus* and cognate with *urn*). Retrospectively, the figure of the reader standing in line, bent over a book, thus also registers the loss of erect bearing (*portamento eretto*) in the modern world of "purely horizontal progress," the lack/destruction of those vessels (i.e. practices receptive to the principles of perfection) the bearing of which perfects our own. And yet it is precisely his irresistible composure, as a form of auto-decapitation by the act of reading, that realizes the power of gesture (from *gestus*, 'gesture, carriage, posture') and saves his head, in a kind of perfect inverse of the legend of the death of Archimedes, converted by Meister Eckhart into a mystic fable of gazing into the divine ground of things: "For example, there was once a pagan master who was devoted to an art, that of mathematics, to which he had devoted all his powers. He was sitting by the embers, making calculations and practicing this art, when a man came along who drew a sword and, not knowing that it was the master, said, 'Quick, tell me your name or I'll kill you!' The master was too absorbed to see or hear the foe or to catch what he said: he was unable to utter a word, even to say, 'My name is so-and-so.' And so the enemy, having cried out several times and got no answer, cut off his head. And this was to acquire a mere natural science. How much more then should we withdraw from all things in order to concentrate all our powers on perceiving and knowing the one infinite, uncreated, eternal truth! To this end, then, assemble all your powers, all your senses, your entire mind and memory; direct them into the ground where your treasure lies buried. But if this is to happen, realize that you must drop all other works – you must come to an unknowing, if you would find it" (Meister Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, tr. Maurice O' C. Walshe [New York: Crossroad, 2009], 42). For a critical stance on verticality – or *vertical inclination* – see Adriana Cavarero's *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), especially in relation to what Campo describes as "feminine arts." In the introduction to the book, Cavarero elaborates on the following quote by Hannah Arendt: "every inclination turns outward, it leans

would not bind those limbs with its chaste and regal veil.[20] After millennia, one might say, the tree of paradise produced the lyrebird; joined hands, over the long course of time, became Gothic arches.[21] Now that all this is insulted, denied, and destroyed, irretrievable yet always present, like a poisoned thorn under the nail, men are bound

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out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world" (Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment,* ed. Jerome Kohn [New York: Schocken, 2003], 81) adding that "the thrust of inclination knocks the I from its internal center of gravity and, by making it lean to the outside . . . undermines its stability" (*Inclinations*, 6).

[20] 'Bind' here translates 'fasciare', which may recall the sense of power embodied in the vertically bound, and borne, wooden rods of the Roman fasces, tied around an axe, as well as the sewn fascicles of a book. The preceding image of the perfect book as "*Essay on Knives*" thus retrospectively foreshadows these connections, illuminating perfection's power in terms of a binding of what can sever.

[21] Cf. Auguste Rodin's sculpture, "The Cathedral":

to convert it into an object of sacred horror.[22] Every memory of celestial time is to be removed, buried forever in the potter's garden. It is, above all, to be negated, precisely because one knows that perfection is first of all this irretrievable thing, able to last, in quietness, stillness. The man in meditation, the woman at the threshold, the genuflecting monk, the king's prolonged silence. Or the beast lying in wait, or performing delicate tasks. This plain and horrible weight – silence, wait, duration – man has rejected it from himself.[23] Now he is living his paranoid terror of "feeling and precision, humility, concentration, gusto."[24] How else to summon, on the other hand, the courage of the excruciating cry: "Beauty, begone, I fear you, your memory tears me, may you be cursed"?[25]

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[22] Campo may have in mind a torture to which St. George of Cappadocia was subjected by the magician Anastasius, who sought to disprove his power–a fitting analogue to the futile negation of superior power. See Cornelia Steketee Hulst, *St. George of Cappadocia: In Legend and History* (London: D. Nutt, 1909), 92.

[23] Cf. Matthew 21:42.

[24] Campo's note here refers to Marianne Moore's essay "Feeling and Precision" in *Predilections* (first published in *The Sewanee Review* 52 [1944], 499-507), but the quoted phrase combines this title with that of her 1949 talk, "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto" (*The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* [New York: Viking, 1986], 420-6.).

[25] Fear of beauty registers the divine as 'threat', the undesired possibility of one's own perfection, of a truth or being that stands outside the circuits of the known. "In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there really is the presence of God. There is as it were an incarnation of God in the world and it is indicated by beauty. The beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible" (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario van der Ruhr [London: Routledge, 1999], 150). See also Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'effroi du beau* (Paris: Cerf, 1997). The interplay of reverence and terror, desire and hatred, involved in the fear of beauty is found in the conflict between the white and black horses in the chariot allegory of Plato's *Phaedrus*: "And so it happens time and again, until the evil steed casts off his wantonness: humbled in the end, he obeys the counsel of the driver, and when he sees the fair beloved is like to die of fear. Wherefore at long last the soul of the lover follows after the beloved with reverence and awe" (Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, in *The*

Like the cry of Eve cast out of Eden, all this calls for veils, the darkness of the forest. And behold the indirect attacks upon the handmaidens of the irretrievable: grace, lightness, irony, fine senses, a hard and steady gaze. Or to make intellectual use of theological terms: clarity, subtlety, agility, impassibility.[26]

Unforgiveable above all – things being as they are – is the poet. An august, modest old age protects the poetess of whom we spoke. But only a short while ago there was talk of her, not without grace after all, as a medieval nun embroidering remarkable chasubles, the

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Collected Dialogues of Plato, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961], 254e). David E. White comments: "The evil horse 'fears' the beautiful one by sensing that the soul will move toward that person in a manner nullifying its kind of motion. Fear is the appropriate feeling–the evil horse anticipates losing his very existence if soul should move in the opposite direction. It is the beauty in the beautiful one which the evil horse fears, beauty in alliance (through the unifying agency of the good) with moderation in contradistinction to beauty as an entry to satisfying carnal desire" (*Rhetoric and Reality in Plato's* Phaedrus [Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993], 160). Campo's 'excruciating cry' thus marks the fatal threshold of transition from the negative recognition of perfection, beauty grasped as metaphysical threat to one's self or order of being, to its organized banishment according to the brutality of power – "Why cannot money and life go for beauty instead of for war and intellectual oppression?" (Marianne Moore, "Ezra Pound," in *Predilections*, 67) – and philistine libido: "Here is something that the psychologists have so far neglected: the love of ugliness for its own sake, the lust to make the world intolerable. Its habitat is the United States. Out of the melting pot emerges a race which hates beauty as it hates truth. The etiology of this madness deserves a great deal more study than it has got. There must be causes behind it; it arises and flourishes in obedience to biological laws, and not as a mere act of God" (H. L. Mencken, "The Libido for the Ugly," *Predilections: Sixth Series* [1927]).

[26] "Sicut autem gloria in quam humana anima sublevatur, excedit naturalem virtutem caelestium spirituum . . . ita gloria resurgentium corporum excedit naturalem perfectionem caelestium corporum, ut sit maior claritas, impassibilitas firmior, agilitas facilior et dignitas naturae perfectior" (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV.86).

colors of their silks more shifting than the holy effigied faces – as if an effigy could inspire veneration had not an almost maniac attention selected the materials with which we see and respond to it.[27] But the great poets are by now all dead or very old.

But death is no longer a safe conduct. Editorial suicide is risked, and committed, when the essays of Gottfried Benn – that great lamentation on the Quarternary Man – are proposed to the public with delusional caution: please do not take this seriously, one should consider it as no more than a phenomenon.[28] Needless to say, not one critic has laughed.

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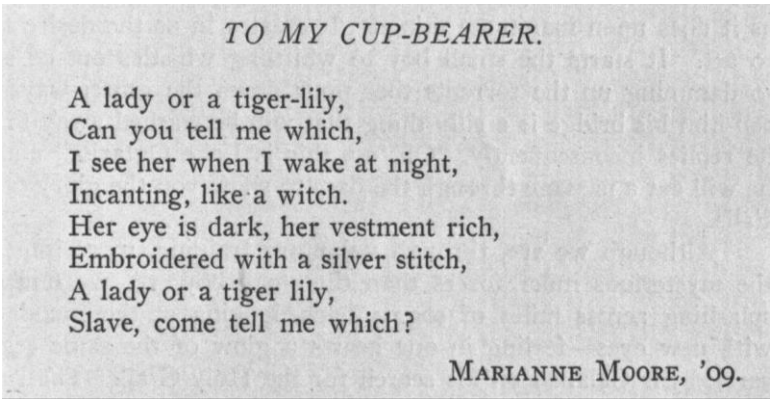

TO MY CUP-BEARER.

A lady or a tiger-lily,
Can you tell me which,
I see her when I wake at night,
Incanting, like a witch.
Her eye is dark, her vestment rich,
Embroidered with a silver stitch,
A lady or a tiger lily,
Slave, come tell me which?

MARIANNE MOORE, '09.

28 Here Campo is referring to one of Benn's most remarkable and difficult poems, *Quartär (Quarternary)* from the collection *Statische Gedichte* (1948). Quarternary is the current geological era, an era that – for both Benn and Campo – proceeds backwards instead of forwards. According to Campo, the poem should be read as a mournful song on the ruins of civilization, an Odyssean descent to Hades to find the shadows of history, a *nekyia* at whose ascent one should expect, instead of light, the end of everything. The poem begins as follows: "(1): The worlds drink and get drunk / in a rage for new room / and the last quaternaries sink / the Ptolemaic dream. / Falling, flaming out, and fallen– / in toxic spheres, cold, / but a few Stygian souls, / lonely, lofty and old. (2): Come–let them sink and ascend, / let the cycles break forth: / ancient sphinxes, violins / and from Babylon a door, / a jazz from the Rio Grande, / a swing as well as a prayer– / to the sinking fires, from the bounds, / where all the ashes are spread" (translated from the German by Edgar Lohner

Unforgiveable Benn, though certainly not in the political sinner's sackcloth and ashes (it is undignified to be reminded how often bad politics is forgiven in the name of bad writing), but in the purple stole of form's confessor: the author of poems possible only for the mastery of the highest teacher, in many years, of the German language, for that is what matters in the end. Unforgivable Benn, who affirms that the poet should not be the historian but the *precursor* of his own time to the point of finding himself millennia behind that time, [29] the antecessor to the point that he can prophesy the most

in *Origin VIII*, ed. Cid Corman [Dorchester, MA: Fall 1952], 146-147).

[29] Sotera Fornaro suggests that Campo's conception of Benn as a precursor could be "perhaps directly inspired by a memorable page of the *Ptolemaic* [G. Benn, Der Ptolemäer, in GW, cit., vol. II, p. 219], which also condenses and in a certain sense makes explicit the profile of Benn given by Holthusen (…) as a 'prophet,' whose prophecy, however, concerns the decline of a civilization and excludes the future from its horizon. Both Campo and Holthusen want to ignore the fact that this world was actually the ruins of Berlin in 1946, shunning any attempt at historical contextualization" (Sotera Fornaro "Il confessore della forma: il magistero di Gottfried Benn per Cristina Campo," in *Ah, la terra lontana…Gottfried Benn in Italia*, ed. Amelia Valtolina and Luca Zenobi [Pisa: Pacini Editore, 2018], 173). By falling into this problematic position, Campo, however, intends to – stubbornly – confirm that Benn's poetry (as with all of her unforgivable authors) is neither a phenomenon nor a sign of the times, the poet being (much like Campo herself) somehow withdrawn from life, and from her/his own time, deliberately solitary, deliberately removed from world and history. In order to shed some light into Campo's notion of reality, we could refer to what Elena Paroli writes about Campo's understanding of reality as an 'evocation': "the more something appears to be true, the more it must be mystified. It is precisely this aspect that constitutes the most fertile reservoir of influence on Campo, thus pushing her towards a cognitive use of the fairy tale. Unlike Weil, who applies an almost Manichean classification to the appearance-reality relationship, where appearance is error, falsehood, while reality is necessarily mystical, and therefore immaterial, Cristina Campo sees reality as an evocation. In other words, reality is not so much false as reductive: what we see is only a minor sign of the

distant cycles to come. He testifies only to that which endures, immovably: a warrior, a star, a death, a rowan bush.[30]

He offers proof of this almost unintentionally, in a poem of two stanzas, "but the two stanzas are twenty years apart."[31] Both stanzas begin with an identical chord, open into diverse progressions, then flow back in circles to their source, which is only possible for the totality and permanence of an identical, moved spirit. It is a small poem, of such feral beauty, beginning with the words "Welle der Nacht," found in the collection *Statische Gedichte*:

> Welle der Nacht –, Meerwidder und Delphine
> mit Hyacinthos leichtbewegter Last,
> die Lorbeerrosen und die Travertine
> wehn um den leeren istrischen Palast,
>
> Welle der Nacht –, zwei Muscheln
> miterkoren, die Fluten strömen sie, die Felsen her,
> dann Diadem und Purpur mitverloren,
> die weisse Perle rollt zurück ins Meer.
>
> Wave of the night – sea-ram and dolphin seen
> with Hyakinthos' airy weight borne high,

elsewhere [*altrove*], but it remains a necessary starting point for its discovery" (Elena Paroli, "Cristina Campo, una "filatrice d'inesprimibile": Il valore simbolico della fiaba nel processo cognitivo di una mistica del nostro tempo," *Italies* 21 [2017], 393-407).

[30] "Some say the mountain ash is found, more than any other tree, near the stone circles of the Druids" (E. Gutch, *Country Folklore* [London: Folklore Society, 1901], 59).

[31] "[I]n meinem Gedichtband 'Statische Gedichte' ist ein Gedicht, das besteht nur aus zwei Strophen, aber beide Strophen liegen zwanzig Jahre auseinander, ich hatte die erste Strophe, sie gefiel mir, aber ich fand keine zweite, endlich dann, nach zwei Jahrzehnten des Versuchens, Übens, Prüfens und Verwerfens gelang mir die zweite, es ist das Gedicht 'Welle der Nacht' – solange muß man etwas innerlich tragen, ein so weiter Bogen umspannt manchmal ein kleines Gedicht" (Gottfried Benn, *Probleme der Lyrik* [Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1951], 30).

where laurel roses and the Travertine
around the empty Istrian palace sigh,

Wave of the night – two chosen shells it bore,
in tidal stream from cliffs incessantly,
then, diadem and purple lost once more,
the white pearl rolls into the sea.[32]

We have also had, some time ago, our own writer convinced of refinement, responsible for the lese-majesty of the masses: the prince of Lampedusa. Untimely. Oh, he could hardly be more so, with his titanic irony, his prodigious indifference to false problems, the explicit happiness of his rhythm, something similar to one of those illustrious and negligent airs that the gentlemen of the past whistled on their way to a duel. The book of the prince of Lampedusa is little more than a duel to the death, between beauty and death, and his death, besides. Unforgiveable Lampedusa, who leaves the grand ball with a smile, a moment before the chandeliers blaze and the pavane unfolds which for the others is a fever. Unforgivable Lampedusa, deriding ideological gloom and sentimental earnestness, the whole insufferable, atavistic, national sport of 'taking oneself seriously'. Outrageously erudite. Attentive, without batting an eyelash, to the sole realities destined to the poet: the glory and ruin of the perfect creature, the final irony of dust. A dance, a star, a death, a rowan bush.[33]

[32] *Primal Vision: Selected Writings of Gottfried Benn*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: New Directions, 1971), 253.

[33] "Beware! The time approaches when human beings will no longer give birth to a dancing star. Beware! The time of the most contemptible human is coming, the one who can no longer have contempt for himself. Behold! I show you the last human being. 'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?' – thus asks the last human being, blinking" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 10).

3

Ritenendo quel solo degno
laddove tutta l'arte è impiegata.

– Dante[34]

But the masses, feeling hurt or not, read the prince of Lampedusa. A cenoby of young people read Gottfried Benn, read Marianne Moore. The unforgivables have their disciples.

Who, then, abhors perfection? One would be tempted to suspect those who know what perfection is made of, and what it costs to obtain it: the night vigils, the hard mornings, vows of chastity, obedience, the poverty it imposes. Those, I want to say, who were not cut out for all this. The discourse on art, when returned to its natural axis – the major or minor mastery of the artist – is immediately shifted onto different and not very clear tracks: commitment, presence. It is telling that the word itself, 'mastery', or the more humble 'technique', has now fallen out of critical language, as have the simple, unavoidable definitions of 'beautiful' and 'ugly'. Now it is the inheritance of the world of footballers and boxers, whose technique is held to a scrutiny worthy of the poetic competitions of the Court of Fujiwara.

Who will remember that the final aim of those great *essays for a theory of childhood,* or those *piano preparations to death* – Friedrich Chopin's 24 *Études* – was an impeccable discipline for two hands? Eternal, translucent children run among drops of sun and arrows of green through an eternal, translucent garden; the dead arise, tender and terrible, love measures its own abyss, people cloak themselves in mourning. The entire miracle rests, thus, on the most chaste intention: to flex the wrist at least 600 times to strengthen the articulation of the fourth finger.

Where now shall we search for the writer, given that time is not the business of poetry and that what is now asked of it seems to be the business of time?

Italy's last critic, it seems to me, was Leopardi. With De Sanctis, the pure disposition of the contemplative spirit was definitively perturbed and distorted by historical obsession. Leopardi was the last person to properly examine a page, in the manner of a paleographer, on five or six levels simultaneously: from the feeling

[34] ?

of destinies, to the opportunity for avoiding the concurrence of vowels.[35] That is to say, he examined it as a writer. For Leopardi the text was absolute presence,[36] so that he proceeds no differently when

[35] The expression "concorso delle vocali" is found in a passage from Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone:* "Besides in verbs in *sco* formed from third-conjugation verbs, the desinence in *isco* is not essential. From *noo* is formed *nosco: posco* [to demand], etc. etc. Either these desinences are primitive, or else, which I find more likely, the *i* which should be there, has been swallowed, in order to avoid the concurrence of vowels, since such desinences occur when the desinence in *isco* would be preceded by a vowel" (Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015], 1581). And in Torquato Tasso's *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*: "il concorso de le vocali ancora suol producere asprezza . . . quantunque il concorso dell'*I* non faccia così gran voragine o iato, come quello de l'*A* e de l'*O*, per cui sogliamo più aprir la bocca" (Torquato Tasso, *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e in particolare sopra il poema eroico* [1594], 461-463). "Evitare il concorso delle vocali" (*avoiding the concurrence of vowels*) refers to a specific condition of Italian language which tends to rely on the prominence of vowels. Writers and critics, such as Leopardi (and Torquato Tasso before him), as well as Cristina Campo, worked out specific prosodic forms whereby this condition could be challenged, attributing the poetic line with a certain rhythm and melody that "with its ebbing of one measure into a shorter one [could] give a sense of a melody that falters and extinguishes itself " (Emilio Bigi, *Dal Petrarca al Leopardi: Studi di Stilistica Storica*, [Milan-Naples: R. Ricciardi, 1954], 158).

[36] What order of presence or before-being (*prae + esse*) is being indicated here? Not textual presence in the medieval sense of "visibile parlare" (Dante, *Purgatorio*, 10.95) or the superiorly sensible materialization of intellectual vision: "For the meaning of the voice perishes with the sound; truth latent in the mind is wisdom that is hid and treasure that is not seen; but truth which shines forth in books desires to manifest itself to every impressionable sense. It commends itself to the sight when it is read, to the hearing when it is heard, and moreover in a manner to the touch, when it suffers itself to be transcribed, bound, corrected, and preserved. The undisclosed truth of the mind, although it is the possession of the noble soul, yet because it lacks a companion, is not certainly known to be delightful, while neither sight nor hearing takes account of it.

Further the truth of the voice is patent only to the ear and eludes the sight, which reveals to us more of the qualities of things, and linked with the subtlest of motions begins and perishes as it were in a breath. But the written truth of books, not transient but permanent, plainly offers itself to be observed, and by means of the pervious spherules of the eyes, passing through the vestibule of perception and the courts of imagination, enters the chamber of intellect, taking its place in the couch of memory, where it engenders the eternal truth of the mind" (Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon*, trans E. C. Thomas [New York: Lockwood and Coombes, 1889], ch. 1). Rather, absolute presence must here be akin to the texture of "quest'ermo colle, / e questa siepe" which provide the threshold – analogous to the poem itself – of the sublime in *L'infinito*, the space of relation between the small and the great, the evident and the invisible. "Infinity is a product of our imagination, and at the same time of our smallness and our pride" (*Zibaldone*, 4177). The absolute presence of text pertains to its power, not so much as to embody science as to serve as a medium of feeling: "Man does not desire to know infinitely, but to feel infinitely. He cannot feel infinitely, except with his mental faculties in some way, and mainly with his imagination, not with science or knowledge, which instead circumscribes its objects and thus excludes the infinite" (*Zibaldone*, 384). As everything no matter how great is totally infinitesimalized, utterly dwarfed by the phantasmatically grasped presence of all that is and is not, the endless void of possibility and impossibility, as "[a]ll existence . . . the universe is only a spot, a speck in metaphysics" (*Zibaldone*, 4174), so 'absolute presence' signifies, with a kind of thrilling ambivalence, both being before something absolutely present, infinitely there, and being before anything, witnessed in the presence of something never there at all, and yet . . . Cf. "The horror is that we know that we see God in life itself" (Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. Idra Novey [New York: New Directions, 2012], 154). The principle of multiple reading, invoked in the next sentence, corresponds to the absolute presence of the text precisely in relation to this ambivalence, that is, in relation to the experience of reading as dilation and explication of the text's limitless possibilities of itself. As traditional exegesis and commentary is ordered toward the plenitude or *copia* of proliferating senses, in light of the limitlessness of meanings that can be referred back to Love or the truth of everything (see Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*), so Leopardi

defines the greatness of human intelligence in correspondence with its awareness of the 'multiplicity of worlds': "No one thing shows the greatness and power of the human intellect or the loftiness and nobility of man more than his ability to know and to understand fully and feel strongly his own smallness. When, in considering the multiplicity of worlds, he feels himself to be an infinitesimal part of a globe which itself is a negligible part of one of the infinite number of systems that go to make up the world, and in considering this is astonished by his own smallness, and in feeling it deeply and regarding it intently, virtually blends into nothing, and it is as if he loses himself in the immensity of things, and finds himself as though lost in the incomprehensible vastness of existence, with this single act and thought he gives the greatest possible proof of the nobility and immense capability of his own mind, which, enclosed in such a small and negligible being, has nonetheless managed to know and understand things so superior to his own nature, and to embrace and contain this same intensity of existence and things in his thought" (*Zibaldone*, 3171-2). Correllatively, commentarial consciousness relates to text or scripture as an inexhaustible, inverted magnitude of meaning, analogous to this little Earth which yet overflows with everything: "Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein. And look into it; And become gray and old therein; And do not move away from it, for you have no better portion than it" (https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5.23). See Nicola Masciandaro, "Becoming Spice: Commentary as Geophilosophy," *Collapse VI: Geo/Philosophy* (2010): 20-56. Multiple reading is a mode of absolute presence in the same way that mysticism is a paradoxical hermeneutics of the hidden, a search for what cannot be disclosed which finds by not finding: "since that which human nature seeks and toward which it tends, whether it moves in the right or the wrong direction, is infinite and not to be comprehended by any creature, it necessarily follows that its quest is unending and that therefore it moves forever. And yet although its search is unending, by some miraculous means it finds what it is seeking for: and again it does not find it, for it cannot be found" (Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122:919, translation cited from Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century* [New York: Crossroad, 1994], 118). Cf. "Seek his face always, [Psalms 104. 4], let not the finding of the beloved put an end to the love-inspired search; but as love grows, so let the search for the one already found become

breaking down a passage from either Dante or Father Bartoli, or Homer or Madame de Staël. All that does not lend itself to *multiple reading*, he ignores. I cannot think of him examining a contemporary page. Even if it were among the most beautiful, I imagine he would notice before all the almost complete absence of the *how* or of the ablative absolute: the lack of an analogical, not to mention metaphorical, spirit of the wholly poetic (prophetic) faculty to turn reality into a figure, which is to say, into destiny.

4

> The poet does not speak language but mediates it,
> as the lion's power lies in his paws.
>
> – Marianne Moore[37]

Where, then, to look for the writer? Questions generate themselves one out of the other. For example: what is style?

The first image that comes to mind is this: a *polar* virtue thanks to which the feeling of life is at the same time rarefied and intensified. Thus, thanks to a simultaneous and contradictory movement where the artist concentrates the object to a maximum, reducing it, like the T'ang painters, to that single profile, to a pure line from top to bottom which is, so to say, the very pronouncement of the soul, the reader feels the object multiply in itself, and exalt itself in innumerable harmonics. An example of this tragic style and sublime horror, fixed in a single stroke, is found perhaps in Pliny the

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more intense" (Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, 6 vols. [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003], VI, 186); "Let us therefore so look as men who are going to find, and so find as men who are going to go on looking" (Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill [New York: New City Press, 1991], 271).

[37] Marianne Moore, "There Is a War That Never Ends" (1943), in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (1986). Campo refers to Moore speaking about Wallace Stevens, specifically about lines of his poem, "Poetry is a Destructive Force": "He is like a man / In the body of a violent beast. / Its muscles are his own … / The lion sleeps in the sun. / Its nose on its paws. / It can kill a man" (*Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Vintage Books, 1990], 193).

Younger, reporting the punishment of the Great Vestal Virgin, who, while being lowered alive into her burial chamber, quickly turns to gather her entangled stole and rejects the soldier's hand "with a last gesture of delicacy, as if not wishing to defile the completely chaste and pure body."[38] Of the same quality was the invention of a great Italian mime, Moretti, who in *Harlequin, Servant of Two Masters*, in the scene where two lunches are served together, at the height of an amazing progression of jumps and somersaults, suddenly reduces his movement to a succession of steady cadences––legs crossed, arms open, arms crossed, legs open––until falling unexpectedly on his head, while very slowly his motionless legs and arms continue the scissoring movement. For the audience, this feeling of vertiginous activity now touched the desired image, that of an impossibility. It concretized in a certain way the saying, "Nothing is more motionless than an arrow in flight."[39] Sir Lawrence Olivier, in *Henry V*,

[38] "Quin etiam, cum in illud subterraneum cubiculum demitteretur, haesissetque descendenti stola, vertit se ac recollegit, cumque ei carnifex manum daret, aversata est et resiluit foedumque contagium quasi plane a casto puroque corpore novissima sancti tate reiecit omnibusque numeris pudoris πολλὴν πρόνοιαν ἔσχεν εὐσχήμων πεσεῖν (Eurip. *Hec.* 569]" [As she was sent down into the subterraneous cell, her gown hung upon something in the way; on her turning back to disengage it, the executioner offered her his hand, which she, starting back back with averted face, refused, as if by a last impulse of chastity warding off his polluting touch from her pure and spotless person. Thus she observed every point of modesty in the concluding scene of her life – 'And took much forethought decently to fall'] (Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, trans. William Melmoth and W. M. L. Hutchinson [New York : Macmillan, 1915], IV.11). See Augusto Fraschetti, "La sepoltura delle Vestali e la Città," in *Du châtiment dans la cité: supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique: table ronde (Rome, 9-11 novembre 1982)* [Rome: École française, 1984], 97-129.

[39] Here Campo is probably referring to Zeno's paradox. Campo speaks about the movement of a motionless arrow in her poem "Il maestro d'arco": "Tu, Assente che bisogna amare . . . termine che ci sfuggi e che ci insegui / come ombra d'uccello sul sentiero: / io non ti voglio più cercare. / Vibrerò senza quasi mirare la mia freccia, / se la corda del cuore non sia tesa: / il maestro d'arco zen così m'insegna / che da tremila anni Ti vede" [You, Absent One whom

multiplied the weight of the impending battle, of possible wounds and future memories, by lifting a centimeter of sleeve on his wrist.[40]

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one needs to love . . . / term that eludes us and that chases us / like the shadow of a bird on the path: / I no longer want to search for you. / I will quiver almost without aiming my arrow, / if the heartstring is not taut: / thus teaches me the Zen archery master / who for three thousand years has seen You] (Cristina Campo, *La tigre assenza* [Adelphi: Milano, 1991], 32). Cf. "I'm going to die: there's that tension like that of a bow about to loose an arrow. I remember the sign of Sagittarius: half man and half animal. The human part in classical rigidity holds the bow and arrow. The bow could shoot at any instant and hit the target. I know that I shall hit the target" (Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva*, trans. Stephan Tobler [New York: New Directions, 1973], 10).

[40] "He that shall live this day, and see old age, / Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours, / And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian.' / Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars, / And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.' / Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, / But he'll remember, with advantages, / What feats he did that day" (William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, V.3). Laurence Olivier in *Henry V*, dir. Laruence Olivier (1944):

Few writers have a similar concentrated tension, which is to say, all great writers. At times the lesser ones draw from this tension exalted or exquisite moments. Now, it is more likely that such surprises and happiness are given to us by a nearly anonymous text on which an unalterable passion has worked. Marianne Moore confesses to succumbing to euphoria while reading the "passionately precise" report by an American Treasury expert on certain counterfeits in circulation. Leafing through a guide of the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, I fell into the jubilation one hears when listening to seventeenth-century music. I discovered that the author, a superintendent full of delicate rapture, had a delightful and unusual way of using the word 'so/such' (*così*) in place of 'very' (*molto*): "Originally, all the doors of the building must have been *so* precious . . . the elegant arches emanate from the capital and flow down onto *such* decorative feet." Even the innocent sprezzatura in the repetition of adjectives ("From this very high window, it is clear that we are in a high tower") adds to the "heroic beauty," as he would say, so that his great description of trompe l'œil in the study of Duke Guidobaldo – a bold work of skill if there ever was one – came out of this man *ex corde*, by virtue of amazement.[41]

[41] Campo elaborates on her own notion of *sprezzatura* in the essay *Con lievi mani*: "La parola sorella, *eleganza*, non sembra riconoscere alla sprezzatura la sua qualità creativa, la sua fresca fiamma comunicante; *piglio* la confina nella deliberazione, *disinvoltura* la dissolve nel gesto. *Noncuranza* è più affine ma non riempie della sprezzatura che la forma cava, negativa e dunque solo momentanea" [Its sister word, *eleganza* [elegance] does not seem to acknowledge sprezzatura's creative quality, its fresh communicative flame; *piglio* [look, expression] confines it in deliberation, *disinvoltura* [ease, nonchalance] dissolves it in gesture. *Noncuranza* [carefreeness, indifference] is closer but it only fulfills *sprezzatura's* hollow, negative, and therefore only momentary form]; "La segreta aristocrazia del folklore, l'intimo legame della danza popolare con lo stile del lignaggio da un lato, dall'altro con le occulte cifre ritmiche del canto religioso (che il rubato abbia radici nel gregoriano non sembra dubbio), fu la ricchezza degli antichi musicisti. È difficile discernere la danza dalla liturgia in una Passacaglia di Bach o in una Pavana di Bull" [The secret aristocracy of folklore, on the one hand, the intimate connection of folk dance with the style of lineage, on the other hand, with the occult rhythmical ciphers of religious chant

Nowadays we will look for such pleasures in dictionaries and treatises. Without resorting to the splendors of a Buffon, it is rare that, even in a modern zoological treatise or nursery catalog, we are not pleased by perfect verbalizations, with which so few writers know how to amaze us. (Description of certain owls: "A deep but short howl of two syllables, the second one emitted slowly decreasing, sometimes followed by a calm guttural titter . . . A high, sneezed bark ... A clear and barking *hoot*, etc." Description of a rose: "Tapered and perfect bud, turbiniform, opens always in a solitary flower, with velvety petals, turning at the edges. Color salmon-yellow, which fades into copper-colored chamois at the stem. An erect bearing, bronze foliage . . . ").

Spiritual devotion to the mystery of what exists is, by its own virtue, style, as demonstrated in the admirable, and endangered, language of the peasants. A poet who would give the same measure of attention to every single thing, visible or invisible, just as the entomologist works to express with precision the inexpressible blue of a dragonfly's wing, would be the absolute poet. He existed, and it is Dante. Others approached such forms of complete attention in some moments. Others, at all moments, lesser forms of attention. This is maybe the only non-momentary distinction between one and another poet, narrator, or philosopher. (The mystic who gave us the technical confirmation of every single moment of the spiritual life, in treatises which have no reason to envy the most perfect scientific inventory, without the word's wing ever losing a single drop of its purple – is Saint John of the Cross).

Nothing but a devouring passion for truth informs these moments of life multiplied and, as already said, eloquence can pivot on a particle. The last (Italian) letter of Mozart is an almost terrible example of style when it has fully become nature. It will be remembered for the great central phrase, the repeated lamentation of death at hand, cloaked in the black mantle of the stranger in the Requiem. And: " . . . Life was just so [*pur si*] beautiful . . . " he cries out. Let us try to remove one of these six little words. Here is the ordinary formula: life was beautiful. The nostalgic: life was still [*pur*] beautiful. The candid: life was so [*si*] beautiful. But "Life was just so

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(that *rubato* has roots in Gregorian does not seem doubtful), was the treasure of the ancient musicians. It is difficult to distinguish dance from liturgy in a Passacaglia by Bach or a Pavana by Bull] (Campo, "Con lievi mani," in *Gli imperdonabili*, 98, 106).

beautiful . . .” This alone is the dagger that pierces: pulled from the scabbard by virtue of two monosyllables, arranged according to a simple and inscrutable order.

5

Alone: you with words
And this true solitude.

– Gottfried Benn[42]

The miracle of life multiplied – which is nothing in the end if not happiness, to which the reader everywhere and always aspires, like a child who immediately stretches out his hand towards a pink peach or shell – seems to occur to a greater degree the greater the poet’s loneliness, their leap out of the water, of a salmon against the current, their staying, if necessary, “dry under the full moon,”[43] without hope and without despair. It is pointless to count the sacred hermitages: Ravenna, Recanati, the tower on the Neckar River, Amherst, the room with cork walls on Boulevard Haussmann.[44] But the great poets are now all dead or very old.

Among the living, Djuna Barnes is the one who best embraced this Trappism of perfection. No one knows where she is, she puts out a book every twenty years, even her name finds a way every time to fall out of the catalog. As far as anyone knows, she could be an unknown writer from the seventeenth century, a kind of Inés de la Cruz, or the Countess of Winchelsea. And here, in the imperial,

[42] “Allein: du mit den Worten / und das ist wirklich allein” (Gottfried Benn, *Gedichte*, ed. Dieter Wellershoff [Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1963], 299). The doubling of *allein* [alone], reverberating solitude, echoes Plotinus’s “flight of the alone to the alone” (*Enneads* 6.9.11).

[43] Campo has in mind the final line of Eugenio Montale’s poem, “L’Ombra della Magnolia”: “e l’oltrecielo / che ti conduce e in cui mi getto, cefalo / saltaro in secco al novilunio. / Addio” [it is the beyond / that draws you and into which I throw myself, a mullet’s / leap into dryness under the new moon. Goodbye] (Eugenio Montale, *Selected Poems* [New York: New Directions, 1965], 154).

[44] Respective locales of Dante, Leopardi, Hölderlin, Dickinson, Proust.

pitiless, and so long deferred verses of her great tragedy, *The Antiphon*, the secret of that infinitely demanding refusal:

> As the goldsmith hammers out his savage metal
> so is the infant axial to the dance.
> Wrapped in metric, hugged in discipline,
> rehearsed in familiarity reproved;
> grappled in the mortise of ritual,
> turning on the spirit of the play,
> equilibrium else would be a fall
> paid for in estrangement, each from each.
> . . . . . .
> Hands off, you too near thing!
> Would you that I leap into myself,
> there dismiss me of my occupation
> to set me in the slum of their regard?
> Would get me clapped between the palms of their approval?
> Get me rated
> in the general horror of the common mouth
> and to the verdict of the vulgar stand me down
> crying: "I am a fool!" to ease a fool?

In the general horror, there is this psalm which praises and flies away. Protected by similar texts is the boy who, according to Benn, wants "to hold on, sitting against the wall, reading Job and Jeremiah."[45]

Few, so few of these little forts are there that will allow themselves to be erased by sands and winds, rather than being undone into hotels and caravans. Sometimes it would happen that one would leaf through a magazine, bristling like a porcupine with impeccably momentary verses, and each would overtake the other in wild flight, holding more tight and warm its embrace with the hour of death.

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[45] "The things of the mind are irreversible; they go right along their road to the end, right to the end of the night. With your back to the wall, care-worn and weary, in the gray light of the void, read Job and Jeremiah and keep going" (Gottfried Benn, "Art and Old Age," in *Prose, Essays, Poems*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins [New York: Continuum, 1987], 183).

But a silence fell, the page opened itself like a pale marine sky, and a garland of verses lay there, pure as Ursa Major. It was a poet. Impassible and vertiginous, as future as joy and more remote than a tombstone. Cut out, the poem was immediately stored away, for it was already known by heart.[46] Then began the always long wait for the book, always small, that would have carried that poem: that hour of Lent or Pentecost, that imploring of the sea, those violet grains swirling in a spring rain warming like blood.

But should the poet waver for a moment – for it is easy to tempt a righteous soul with the double lie of the "renewal of its means" and its "duties towards the social" (as if, from within, the correct growth of spiritual forces is not incessantly changing his profile; as if the cenobite does not reach farther than the sociable man, "since example is eternal and the circles of its influence extend to infinity")[47] – should he for only a moment stop and sit against the wall, reading Job and Jeremiah, what torment then, and how the least of those brothers will beat him, at the first verse, to the ground of colloquial ideology, of worldly fluency. Captured by common talk, he can do no more. He is *human,* now, he is *supportive,* he is *comforting.* Quite simply, he is no longer memorable. More than once we have seen this albatross, for delicacy, entering the cricket's cage.

A joyous sight is the already old poet who, crossing all the seas, stumbled upon all the atolls, withdraws himself ever more, with the passing of days, into inaccessible and pure forms. Thus Boris Pasternak; thus William Carlos Williams, who closes life as a literary

[46] "The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other, and under dictation, by heart, *imparare a memoria* . . . I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart" (Jacques Derrida, "Che cos'è la poesia?" in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 228-31).

[47] Campo attributes this source to a letter from Lawrence of Arabia to Lionel Curtis (Cf. Campo's endonotes): "It seems to me that the environment does not matter. Your circle does not draw from me (except superficially) more than theirs: indeed perhaps caenobite man influences as much as man social, for example is eternal, and the rings of its extending influence infinite" (*The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, Ed. David Garnett, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1939, 418).

pioneer by writing in triplets. These are the unforgiveables – not the other one – to whoever reads with the eyes of the flesh.

6

Ardent in refinement . . .

(*The Temple Odes of Chou*)[48]

What, then, is style? We said above that it is culture, natural or mental. We called it an increased feeling of life; we called it solitude, honey and locusts. And yet we have said nothing and know that "one cannot say what it is, / one may say what it is not."[49] Style is the Tuscan house, similar to a lily, all light, loftiness, and renunciation. Style is the other white-black lily, the donor in the Portinari Triptych, that adolescent lady, half nun, half fairy, who adores her God with the most Florentine of smiles.[50] Style was

[48] Ezra Pound, *The Confucian Odes: The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 199.

[49] "Quello che è non se può dire, / puòse dire quel che non è" (Jacopone da Todi, *Le laude: secondo la stampa fiorentina del 1490*, ed. Giovanni Ferri [Bari: G. Laterza & figli, 1930], 235. Cf. "Il Beato ha espressa la legge dell'ineffabile. *Quello ch'è non si può dire, / puossi dir quel che non è.* E un rammarico simile al rimorso m'assale, mentre ne scrivo. E avrei serbato il dono nel mio segreto, se il mio amico elevato dalla sua santa morte alla condizione di mistero glorioso non mi sorridesse oggi a traverso quella visiera di cristallo" (Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Contemplazione della Morte* [Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1912], 44-5.

[50] Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Triptych* (c. 1475), details:

certainly the sacred dance of the great Watussi of Rwanda, so similar to the white priests of Dura Europos, and now destroyed by men of mediocre stature. Or the other dance ("hands clenched, wrists flexed"), as seen by a poet in the limbs of a dying child, which opened and closed slowly like a corolla. All figures in which the eye has grasped or transfused that second life which is the saving analogy: lily, corolla, dance, death, star – where peace and horror compose themselves in equal, innocent geometries.

Sometimes on a train or in a waiting room, one sees a human face. What is different about it? Again, we may say what that face does *not* have, what its features do not betray. The eyes neither distrust nor solicit, neither wander nor investigate. Eyes at no time absent, never entirely present. Nowadays such faces, common in ancient paintings, seem to be sealed by an invincible melancholy. On the train, in the waiting room, they also swell the soul with joy, with an increased feeling of life. No word is uttered, but the pure, sudden smile is a flight to a quiet place, vulnerable to the point of

being unattainable.[51] One says, quickly: "knowing eyes." In reality, they are heroic eyes. They gazed at beauty and did not flee. They

[51] In a letter to Margherita Pieracci Harwell from December 1956, Campo writes: "Io vorrei scrivere certi versi che ho in mente da tanto tempo. Una specie di Cantico dei Cantici rovesciato. 'Andrò per le piazze e per le vie, cercherò quelli che nessuno ama.' 'O tu che dimori nei giardini, non farmi udire la tua voce.' Vorrei scriverlo nella lingua più moderna, quasi sul ritmo di un blues e insieme dovrebb'essere solenne e puro – e anche qualcosa di terribilmente vivo – come un piccolo Goya. È il Cantico dei senza-lingua, come avrà già capito" [I would like to write down some verses that have been in my mind for a long time. A kind of Canticle of Canticles in reverse. 'I will roam the streets and squares, I will seek out those whom no one loves.' 'O thou who dwellest in gardens, let me not hear thy voice.' I would like to write it in the most modern of languages, almost on the rhythm of a blues and at the same time it should be solemn and pure – and also something terribly alive – like a little Goya. It is the *Canticle of the tongue-less,* as you may have already guessed] (Cristina Campo, *Lettere a Mita,* [Adelphi: Milano, 1999] 48). The image of roaming the streets in search of the unloved ones recalls Simone Weil's attention to subaltern subjects and the idea of an opposition between genius and talent (Campo specifically translated Weil's notebooks on the topic; see Simone Weil, "Della sventura", trans. C. Campo, in *Letteratura,* vol. 20 [Roma: De Luca, 1959]). More precisely, it originates from St. John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle*, a recurring reference for both Weil and Campo: "Seeking my love / I will head for the mountains and for watersides; / I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; I will go beyond strong men and frontiers" (John of the Cross, *Complete Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, DC: ICS Publication, 1991], 44). Campo's idea of a reversed Canticle of Canticles suggest a sort of profanation, whereby love (as union) is found in separation, distance, echoing a tradition of Apophatic theology. The expression 'tongue-less' brings forth an interest in a language that is at once "vulnerable and unattainable," unlearned and solemn, *other* and divine, barbaric and angelical, recalling the practice of 'speaking in tongues', for glossolalia "begins where the canonical determinations of language end: at the point at which speech is irrevocably loosened from both its significance and its subject, as one experiences, within oneself, 'barbarian speech that

have recognized its disappearance on earth, and by virtue of that have stored it up in their minds. Not even photography can completely destroy such faces – more and more rare, it is true. The race mutates, by now the species mutates. Soon such faces will be barely perceived, and when perceived also unforgiveable, so estranged from their context, from the system that encloses them. They are already beginning to make themselves invisible, like the Grail or the Lance of Longinus, which a hand is said to have carried back to heaven, when men were no longer worthy of keeping them – like the Chinese man who was reading a book, whom the crowd immediately enclosed. For them, however, the beauty cast out does not cease its unseen circuit. Flower, star, death, dance continue to resemble each other, and the resemblance to vanquish terror. Clarity, subtlety, agility, impassibility. Sit against the wall, read Job and Jeremiah. Wait your turn, every line is profitable. Every line of the unforgivable book.

Notes

The episode of the Boxer Rebellion is reported by Hofmannsthal in his unforgivable *Book of Friends.*

"feeling and precision": Marianne Moore, *Predilections.*

"clarity, subtlety, etc.": The four qualities of glorified bodies.

"essays for a theory of childhood": see *In medio coeli.*[52]

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one does not know'" (Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Speaking in Tongues," *Paragraph* 25 [2002], 93).

[52] "Tutti i piani dell'esistenza sembra investire questo tenace rapporto fra l'infanzia e la morte. Proust ne è un grande testimone, ma forse è Pasternak a rivelarcene l'ultimo senso nei suoi appunti su Chopin, là dove dice che gli *Studi* sono *saggi per una teoria dell'infanzia* e, proprio per questo, *una preparazione pianistica alla morte*, una ricerca dove *l'orecchio è l'occhio dell'anima*" [All planes of existence seem to run into this tenacious relationship between childhood and death. Proust is a great witness of this, but perhaps it is Pasternak who reveals to us its ultimate meaning in his notes on Chopin, where

The guide to the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino is the work of Professor Pasquale Rotondi.

The owls are described in *Guida degli uccelli d'Europa*, by Peterson, Mountford, and Hollom, introduction by Julian Huxley, Milan, 1958. The rose is in a catalog from Sgaravatti Nurseries, Rome.

"Ruby red color": This profile of a Barbera (Riserva del Marchio), which evokes certain tawny portraits of seventeenth-century marshals, is glossed by Ceronetti in an appropriately inexorable way: "I want to dedicate to Veronelli, the oenologist, an unrestrained publicity . . . Because everything in his pages is exquisitely, abnormally aristocratic. The choice, the style, the descriptions, the advice, the classifications, the denominations, the price established at the tasting: all is separation from the vulgar, all is proud withdrawal. Wines, like poetry, do not allow themselves to be democratized. This is why they cannot be found. The feudalism of small, privileged estates is a challenge (of delicate things) to centuries of accepted and lived reforms of the earth and of the brain. The Grapevine is a contemptuous aristocrat that Desmoulins would have hanged from a lamppost. If the angelic Corday had whispered in Marat's ear the name of the white Mersault-Santenots or the red Château de Chamirey, the fierce man immersed in his itching would for them have immediately asked for the hand of the Widow and thus deserved twice the Girondins dagger" (Review of *Catalogo*

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he says that the *Etudes* are *essays for a theory of childhood* and, for this very reason, *a pianistic preparation for death*, a research where *the ear is the eye of the soul*] (Cristina Campo, "In medio coeli," in *Gli imperdonabili* [Milano: Adelphi, 1987], 18). "Chopin's études are called technical manuals, but they are more like pieces of research than textbooks. They are musically expounded investigations into the theory of childhood, individual chapters of a pianoforte introduction to death (how striking that half of them were written by a twenty-year-old), and they teach history or the structure of the universe or anything whatever that is more distant and general than how to play the piano" (Boris Pasternak, "Speeches and Articles 1930s and 1940s," in *The Marsh of Gold: Pasternak's Writings on Inspiration and Creation*, ed. Livingstone Angela [Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2008], 215-56).

Bolaffi dei Vini d'Italia and *Catalogo Bolaffi dei Vini del Mondo*, edited by Luigi Veronelli, Turin, 1970, "L'Espresso," February 15, 1970).

"dry under the full moon": This is, as everyone knows, an image by Montale.[53]

"since the example is eternal": Letter from Lawrence of Arabia to Lionel Curtis.

"that which cannot be said / can say what it is not": Jacopone da Todi's description of approaching God by negation.

"hands clenched, wrists flexed": From a novella by William Carlos Williams.[54]

The style of styles: liturgies. But that would lead our discourse to another side of the word.

[53] See also footnote 54.
[54] "Danse Pseudomacabre," in Williams Carlos Williams, *The Doctor Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1984), 91.