

FRANCESCO BENOZZO
Homo Poeta. Le origini della nostra specie
La Vela, Lucca, 2024, 100 pp.

This recent publication by Francesco Benozzo, *Homo Poeta. Le origini della nostra specie*, is a condensed poetic effusion that puts in resonance different moments in the cartography of his poetic and scientific journey. The book, which calls to mind some significant echoes and recollections of Benozzo's Defense of Poetry, *The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry* (2022), is a dense and profound meditation on the function of *Homo Poeta*, in his ancestral and traditional role of being the singer of beauty and truth¹. This happens, or should happen, at every crossroad, at any moment and passage of our lives when we meet the other, who is "another *from* me" and, "at the same time, indeed, another *of* me" (Benozzo 2012, p. 15). Thus, when his words reverberate from the ancestral depths of wisdom, the poet plays the role of protector and saviour of what is more human, loving, caring and compassionate in himself and us. This capacity is centred on the precious and unique power of the individual to choose freely and with responsibility for himself, with deep respect and acknowledgement for one's fellow human being in the shared journey of life, with its passions, setbacks, mistakes and exalting beauties:

This is a book about the amazing power that each individual – as an incomparable, unique, free and speaking creature – has within himself to produce and to create constantly imaginary new worlds (Benozzo 2024, p. 14)².

The magisterial capacity for speaking and producing imaginary worlds in words, music and song, more often sung words, is the highest quality of *Homo poeta*. According to Benozzo, this aptitude is inherent to the human being, who was born as *Homo poeta*. It is not special in any way, as the gift of a solitary romantic genius, rather it is *native* and *original* to *Homo poeta* as a species, for it descends from our ancestral *origins*. At the same time, this capacity has to do with powers of naming and thus creating and giving life "we would call *magic*" (Benozzo 224, p. 91, my italic), but there is no contradiction in this, for the multilayered linguistic creativity of *Homo poeta* is a wonderful tapestry of intertwined colours. Thus, this genius for speaking/singing the world into existence originates in the human species itself, which according to Benozzo and Otte's theory (Benozzo & Otte 2017), would need to be backdated to at least three and a half million years ago. Fundamental is also the deep connection that *Homo poeta* needs to have with the landscape in order to be able to sing and imaginatively create. The cartography of the landscapes explored deepens the poetic experience. Panikkar also gives voice and studies the deep connection between "the soil" explored and experienced as a living body of landscapes and language incarnated in flesh and bones:

Geography or, better to say, the soil, space and time, embodied in things, belongs both to

¹ See: <https://www.francocardini.it/minima-cardiniana-458-5/>.

² If not otherwise specified, all translations from Italian texts are mine.

man and to the word. Every word is an incarnation. If there is no flesh there is no word, if there is no concrete land, a limited space, a certain time there is no word (Panikkar, 2007, p. 47).

Mythologically and archetypically, the creative faculty of singing and speaking (and dancing life into existence) descends from a Goddess, *Sarasvatī* in India, *Maat* or *Isis* in Egypt, *Carmenta* in Rome, all protectors and inspirers of poets and singers. The terrible *Kali Ma*, Death and Mother-Goddess at the same time, is possibly the oldest of these incarnations, dancing with a necklace of skulls where the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are engraved: they are *matrika*, the mothers bringing all things into life (Woodroffe 1972, p. cvii). Letters were originally sacred elements engraved on stone or on tree-trunks. As Benozzo says in his Defence of Poetry, *The Ridge and the Song*:

Poetry was born in itself, it procreated itself, it was an emanation of itself. We did not create words; we translated the world around. The world was its names; the names of the world were the world. *Homo Poeta* preceded *Homo Loquens*. We were poets before being able to speak. (Benozzo 2022, p. 17)

Indeed:

We were shamans; we have become writers. Beyond the stone gates of Palaeolithic, our words were trees, rivers, mountains; after the advent of Neolithic, they came to be signs, symbols, and metaphors (Benozzo 2022, p. 13).

Language, both oral and written, is always saturated with symbolic values: images, feelings, sonorities, graphic elements, ideas, dreams, echoes (Walker 1983, p. 545). In a certain way it also expresses what it cannot fully articulate. This derives from a system of cosmic correspondences typical of ancestral *traditional* cultures, where every element has to find its harmony, contemplation and *cor-responence* with the others. In India, *sphota* is the opening and germination, the passage from word and cosmic inner sound to what we call *reality*. In Hinduism, the word arises out of *Mahāsūnya*, the Great Void, which is also absolute silence, from which the universe arises with the first OM sound.

As in a musical composition, Benozzo's meditation on *Homo poeta* follows its own rhythms, both inner and outer, words pronounced (or heard) aloud awaken the poet from his creative trance full of whirling and twirling visions and sounds, interlacing music, sound, poetic word and silence. From this original stillness, the pure poetry of sound arises, with its melodic and rhythmic force. It carries inspiring insights and tunes that remain long after one finishes reading/listening/feeling/perceiving/absorbing deep down the subconscious mind, reaching deep into the heart of things:

While I had been standing still for hours watching in amazement and as if hypnotized the gulfs in turmoil, among the spectres of lichens, under the fiery boreal feathers of the tides of the subarctic epic, in a sort of drowsiness, I uttered some words and the words had the power to reawaken me. They were simple words, maybe *stone*, maybe *cloud*, maybe *wave*. Simply naming things, my body came back to itself. I suddenly felt the cold, the verses of the *myrusnīpa*, the minute Faroese bird descending and rising vertically in the inlets of volcanic basalt, and I noticed that the downpours of a barbaric rain whipped me and had soaked my clothes and every part of me. I stood up abruptly and went back to the small house – one of the two present on the island [Stóra Dímun in the Faroer islands] – where I slept in those days. The enlightenment I speak of concerns the fact that I understood intimately at that very moment: we were poets even before we knew how to speak. Each of us was born as a poet before we knew how to use words. Words, naming the world, awaken it, or rather, they awaken us within the world, just as they awakened

me from that ecstatic torpor in which I was, unaware, for hours (Benozzo 2024, pp. 16-17).

The Common Snipe³, *mýrusnípa* in the Faroese language, appears in the *walked Poem Stóra Dímun*, where Benozzo poetically describes the very experience of this “ecstatic torpor”:

The wings of the *mýrusnípa* flutter
while up it soars and lets itself fall
from the ocean skies above the moors.
(Benozzo 2023, pp. 176-177)

The *mýrusnípa*'s wings are laboriously “descending and rising vertically in the inlets of the volcanic basalt”. The bird is fighting with the wind, pushing itself up – soaring, and letting itself down – falling from the ocean-skies above the moors. The poet himself is the *mýrusnípa*, with his voice first, spoken aloud across the wind of life, and then his wing/hand rising and falling, moving on the page while he writes, like the waves rhythmically washing the heights of the island. He tells and sings of the *Common snipe*, which breeds and lives on muddy soils – marshes, swamps, tundra and wet meadows throughout the Palearctic. Benozzo sings the fatigue of the bird riding the strong winds, like the poet himself, bewildered, stunned in a trance, swaying in the power of the elements, almost falling headlong into the cloud, wave, stone, forgetting himself, journeying backwards in time/space, hypnotised by the tumultuous waters. This passage illumines a poetic and *magic* truth, also in what it does not expressly say. It silently tells us about our true humanity as singers of life's beauty and power. We have to cherish and love the music of words, sung, spoken and only in a second moment written and read silently aloud:

I have already said that the word is as valuable as feeling and implies relationships at least between two human beings. Otherwise said, *speaking is music* and what we today call human relations. [...] Language is also music and in the word there is a musical reality. Speaking is singing and in the same way singing is speaking. [...] We will not learn to speak our language, nor will we speak it well, if we do not learn to sing it (and to sing our songs), nor can we sing if we cannot speak it. [...] In practice we want to say that *the music of a people and its language are inseparable* (Panikkar 2007, p. 93, my italics).

Thus, as Benozzo underlines in paragraph XIX, “An effort of redemption”, poetry is a song, a weightless sonorous and luminous pulsation setting our souls on fire, a rhythmical beat that musically resounds and keeps the tempo of the creation and destruction of worlds:

Poetry pulses weightless, clear as a light incandescent beat. Before the Neolithic, words were a spell of unknown destinies, an unforeseen and welcoming home, an undisturbed and sometimes quiet refuge. After the Neolithic, poetry came to regain its uncontrolled strength in a night of infinite nudity, with its premonitions, unpredictable as the movements of birds hidden in the fronds. Poets pushed themselves into the heart of the world, risking their own eyes, their own song, life itself. They saw rivers collapse and with dismay they observed the splendour of the cataclysm. They saw the sea being

³ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/birds/wading-birds/snipe>.

reborn, humiliating itself, possessed by an ephemeral indiscipline. They saw the continent crumble, reduced to shreds of barbarian archipelagos. This represents their continuous and meticulous effort: the effort of poets to redeem *Homo sapiens* (Benozzo 2024, p. 37).

This beat, this sung word, this pulsation of birds hidden in trees, speaks of the power of sound and rhythm, which repeats the rising and falling of waves in the sea:

I am inclined to think that what is proper to each language is its rhythm. Rhythm more than syntax. Rhythm is what inspires the order of words and places adjectives and verbs at one point or another. It is the rhythm that suggests whether to use one word or the other. Rhythm is what gives rise to contractions, repetitions and the cadence of the sentence (Panikkar 2007, pp. 84-85).

Benozzo's poetic prose perfectly manifests these contractions, repetitions and pulsating words he jots on the page, and his deep inner vibrations which he cannot *ex-press*. He approaches words as living matter and sound, throbbing life in the form of birds, wolves, serpents, trees, cliffs, rivers, seas and mountains. He follows the rise-and-fall not only of the faroese *mýrusnípa*, but also of his own nomadic instinct and emotional need for an abode... a poetic abode, a dwelling, a place, a castle, a small house, a home, a castaway's shack, a hut, where the wandering poetic warrior and Bard can return and rest, only for a brief while:

In its twofold essence, in its being both the source of our species and the antagonist of its evolution, *Homo poeta* represents at the same time our nomadic instinct and our emotional need for an abode. This conflict is resolved in a restless transhumance [...]. The word lives on the threshold and in the existing gap between what it was and is before being spoken, and the world it has become and becomes continuously as it has nominated and nominates it. As an erratic anomaly, it holds back and strenuously reveals within each of us the freedom of its previous life that preceded and allowed its advent. Perhaps what remains as its image, and ultimately as an image of our species, is then similar to the restless wind that lashes the cliff and articulates a song among the peat clods of the small island from which this exploration started. (Benozzo 2024, p. 95).

Perhaps, in this gap, in the revelation that is forever expressed and held back at the same time, in what we nominate, saying and singing aloud the powerful overflow of our feelings and then immediately cancelling and denying them, we always speak and re-write the same story/poem. Significantly, Benozzo reminds us that as we restlessly sing again and again the same song, we repeat the words that resonate most powerfully in our hearts and souls, declined in multiple forms, languages, nuances of meaning. These key elements forever resound, revolve and return as poetic and critical obsessions, as if, in the end, it were impossible to *say* beyond the ultimate saying, which is *silence*, *Mahāsūnya*.

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