



Francesco Benozzo,
The Ridge and the Song.
Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry
Preface by Antonella Riem Natale

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by Saverio Tomaiuolo

This slim but theoretically dense book by Francesco Benozzo represents an ideal summary of his research in the field of poetic theory, anthropology, and philology, exemplified in his 2017 study *Speaking Australopithecus. A New Theory on the Origins of Human Language*, written with Marcel Otte (Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso), in which he dated the first appearance of human language back to the Homo Australopithecus (between 4 and 3 million years ago) rather than the Homo Sapiens or the Homo Neanderthalensis. *The Ridge and the Song* offers readers an entry into Benozzo's approach to the study of language and into his peculiar worldview, influenced by a wide array of cultural sources ranging from Romantic poetry to Shamanism.

In her preface to the volume, Antonella Riem Natale argues that Benozzo's book "guides us into the mysteries of poetic creation, charting for us the very origins of Life itself, which coincides with the birth of Poetry" (Riem in Benozzo 5). In this respect,



Benozzo has coined the definition of “Speaking Australopithecus”, which constitutes — as it were—the theoretical basis upon which his approach to poetic creativity is founded. Benozzo’s notion of the *Homo Poeta*, intended as the custodian of the land and of the sacred value of the Word (not in the way we normally think of the traditional figure of the poet as creator) may be thus associated with that of the shaman, who approaches words as living matter in the form of trees, rivers, and mountains. During the Neolithic these words-as-essence were formalized into songs, symbols, and metaphors according to a process that somehow reminds us of the Lacanian transition from the imaginary order of the mother to the symbolic order of the father. As Riem Natale concludes, before quoting from Cheyenne poet Lance Henson (who described his poetics standing in front of the natural landscape), the aim of *The Ridge and the Song* is “to map poetically and echo the ancestral gift of naming” (Riem in Benozzo 8).

Accompanied by suggestive black and white pictures, Benozzo’s book opens with a reflection on the traumatic transition of human beings from their primeval condition as shamans to their evolution as writers, remarking on the importance of rediscovering the enormous potentialities of human minds and of the indispensable contact with nature “against these challenging and anemic times” (p. 15). Poetic art, therefore, becomes a cartographic process which, through a sort of geological investigation, delves deep into our origins to name the world anew. Following this lead, poetry is not to be intended as a simple creative act with a subject giving birth to an artistic object, but as a self-creative act in which poetry precedes the capacity to speak, and in which the *Homo Poeta* preceded the *Homo Loquens*. Poetry turns into the outcome of an exploration without a definite goal or, as Benozzo contends, “[to] be able to speak implies to be able to speak beyond everything that has been spoken. The agent of this ‘beyond’ is poetry: transcending without transcendence” (Benozzo 19). In this sense, real poetry for Benozzo is something that goes beyond metrical structure, defined as an “artificial gimmick” and only a residual product “of the sacred rainbow of primeval songs sung for millions of years” (Benozzo 21). Unlike the dancing shaman, who embodies a living form of poetry, the modern poet tries unsuccessfully to imitate and mimic the complexity of the ecosystem that surrounds humanity. In many sections, this book recuperates the message conveyed by P. B. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* (and, generally speaking, of nature poets ranging from William Wordsworth and John Clare to Walt Whitman), in which he described poets as those individuals who participate “in the eternal, the infinite, and the one”, and who lift the veil “from the hidden beauty of the world”. The final section of Benozzo’s book focuses on the importance of rediscovering the value of the *Homo Poeta*, whose artistic creation is compared to the fluctuation of ice margins, and on the necessity to awaken and reactivate the “demiurgical quality” (Benozzo 25) of the poets-shamans inhabiting earth in its pre-historic beauty. Benozzo thus redefines the poetic canon, asserting that—in light of their shaman-like approach to poetic creation—poets such as Whitman and Yeats are more primeval than Homer “in the same way that the dialects spoken today are much more archaic than the languages attested in ancient written form” (Benozzo 29).



All in all, *The Ridge and the Song* challenges many of our assumptions on what poetic creation is, and on the value of art as an unending dialogue with nature that it is necessary to rediscover in its purest form. According to Benozzo, existence is to be intended as a backward journey that brings us forward and, at the same time, beyond ourselves; in Carlos Castaneda's words, "you have everything needed for the extravagant journey that is your life. Life in itself is sufficient, self-explanatory and complete."

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I raccomandati/Los recomendados/Les recommandés/Highly recommended

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