

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

Coral Ann Howells

The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry

Francesco Benozzo, The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry, preface by Antonella Riem Natale. Udine: Forum, 2022, 32 pp., € 14.25, ISBN 978-88-3283-341-6



<https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/the-ridge-and-the-song>

Francesco Benozzo begins his slim volume with a sweeping view back into prehistory: “We have been on earth for some 5,000,000 years [...] Poetry belongs to the 5,000,000 years of our history” (13). Within this panoramic perspective across aeons of time he tells a story of origins – about human habitation on earth, on the development of language, on the birth of poetry (“Poetry is connate with the origin of man” as Shelley phrased it), when the human brain first revealed its ability “to create stories, songs, rituals, and explorations of the inner world” (13). He takes us through the long evolutionary process on a journey back towards beginnings in his urgent quest for “the indispensable awakening of poetry through these challenging and anaemic times” (15). This is his *Defence of Poetry*, for Benozzo is a practising poet, musician, and scholar of international reputation, and this beautifully produced text is a theoretical study of poetry and poetic creativity cast in the form of a long prose poem.

This book is such a brief distillation of the man’s lifetime work in its vast scope that

readers may initially feel (as I did) the need for some guidance, and Antonella Riem's preface, like her afterword in the latest publication of Benozzo's complete poems (*Sciamanica*, Udine, Forum, 2023), provides the necessary context for our understanding of his visionary thinking. She also spells out the aim of this study: "[the] goal of this intense and passionate book is to map poetically and echo the ancestral gift of naming" (8), returning to the role of our Palaeolithic ancestor *Homo Poeta*. We are given further guidance through the constant reminder of resonances between past and present provided by the photographs in the text of massive rock formations, hard geological evidence of prehistory coded into the landscapes of Benozzo's native Apennines and his adopted Welsh mountains. These images form the author's signature visual trope which is amplified in its realistic and metaphorical dimensions as he sails through the archipelago of poetry.

Poetic art might be related to cartography, a multidimensional mapping of the interrelation between humans and the world outside, given its unique capacity to name the world and to remind us now of "feelings and affections that bear something of our removed and most heartfelt origins" (16). Benozzo proposes an elemental poetics which has affinities with contemporary models of ecological thought and ecocultural studies, though he adopts a more radical view of the genesis of poetry. For him, poetry is an elemental life force like "the anarchy of the clamour of stars" (17), and in this body-centred poetics of nature he sees no separation between subject and object where poetry was the human expression of corresponding rhythms between inner and outer worlds: "We did not create words; we translated the world around [...] *Homo Poeta* preceded *Homo Loquens*. We were poets before being able to speak" (17).

This radical revision of the concept of poetic creativity is based on his theoretical writing in *Speaking Australopithecus: A New Theory of the Origins of Human Language* (2016), which is a chronicle of transformation and loss as the Palaeolithic incantation of primeval songs was dominated and almost silenced by the Neolithic formalisation of that primordial language into symbolic thinking. Benozzo calls for a revolution in sensibility, for a reawakening of the ancestral poetic awareness of the world, guided by the poet. That ancient rupture was for Benozzo nothing less than apocalyptic, a process registered here in his intensely poetic scenario of visions of darkness and geological turbulence as the Neolithic era dawned on a new landscape where only vestiges of the old Palaeolithic poetry remained. But the poets have always remembered: "Songs sung by *Homo Poeta* may arise in asymmetric ridges [...] poets can still walk along them, crossing with awareness the layers of ancient poetic art" (24-25). In his endeavour to translate the chthonic power of poetry Benozzo employs a riot of geological and biological images, for poetry is not purposive in an evolutionary sense, "not asked for, unexpected [...] adrift, with no direction, at the mercy of its own needs" (28). In his provocative thought experiment he envisages a rewriting of Western cultural tradition where the disciplinary structure of Greek, Latin, and Humanism would be replaced: "Instead of evolutionism, diffusionism shaped what we are" (29).

With his nostalgia for origins, Benozzo tells another story about the genesis of poetry, "related and then lost in that estuary of dynamic matter" (29) out of which life was created. Perhaps the art of poetry is, as he suggests, "nothing but the memory of other reigns" (31), an appeal to unconscious memories deeply embedded in the human psyche. The book ends

in the present with the figure of the poet, a lone singer striding high on the mountain ridges, which becomes a metaphor ("Poetic language is vitally metaphorical" said Shelley) for the territory of poetry, that archipelago with its scattered islands thrown up from the deep substrate of prehistory. This richly challenging text is a modern version of the poet-shaman's journey, which the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood described as a special task: "to journey in spirit from this world to another one [...] and then to bring back some knowledge or power that would be of use to the community" ("Literature and Environment" 2010). That is a perfect summary of Benozzo's purpose and his destiny.

Coral Ann Howells is Professor Emerita of English and Canadian Literature, University of Reading, and Senior Research Fellow, Institute of English Studies, University of London. She has lectured and published extensively on contemporary Canadian fiction in English. She is the author of *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (2003), editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006) (revised 2nd edition 2021), co-editor with Eva-Marie Kröller of *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (2009), and co-editor with Paul Sharrad and Gerry Turcotte of the final volume of *The Oxford History of the Novel in English* (2017). She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.
c.a.howells@reading.ac.uk