

Lucia Busso interviews Piero Boitani

Piero Boitani is full professor of Comparative Literature at “La Sapienza” University in Rome. In the past, he has taught Italian Language and Literature at Cambridge University, where he obtained his PhD. Today, he teaches Comparative Literature at Università Svizzera Italiana (USI) in Lugano. He is a famous scholar of Dante, medieval literature, the Bible and its re-writings, and myth; he has also worked as translator. In his long career he was granted with numerous acknowledgments, among which: Premio Feltrinelli from the Lincei Academy for literary criticism (2002), Premio De Sanctis (2010).

*You wrote a wonderful book about Ulysses and his “shadow”. How do the three traditions that compose his archetypal figure (dodger, classical hero, figura Christi) extend to the modern man (and hero)?*

Perhaps none of the three traditions extends properly to the modern hero, certainly not the figura Christi. The dodger sometimes reemerges, as in Giono’s *Birth of the Odyssey*. The classical hero is the most recurrent one, often not directly: for example in Kavafis and Seferis. The figure which prevails in modern times is Dante’s Ulysses: the pure explorer, from the Renaissance and then from the Romantic period up till our days.

*In our world which is getting smaller and smaller and more and more technological, how do the ancient myths survive, in your opinion?*

The really strong ancient myths always do survive, because of their archetypal nature; that is, they are part of our mental and psychological background. That’s what happens with Oedipus. That’s what happens with Ulysses: *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a technological rewriting of Ulysses’ myth and it works just fine. Benjamin used to interpret Kafka’s parable on Ulysses and the Sirens from the perspective of technique. It is neither technology nor a shrunk world that can stop a strong myth, even though there was a time when such a thing seemed capable of occurring. Modernism, however, which firstly seems to implicate the disruption or the irrelevance of myth, then exploits it largely: see Joyce’s *Ulysses*. And Post-Modernism does just the same, from Borges to Berio.

*You are both a great expert on Dante and on English medieval literature. It is known that Dante’s language is mostly comprehensible to a contemporary Italian speaker, because Italian has long been a purely written and literary language. This cannot be said of English: Chaucer’s language is not as transparent to modern English speakers as old Italian is, and has changed greatly throughout centuries. Do you think that this difference, i.e. the accessibility of the texts of the origins without translation, somehow reflects on the two cultures and literatures?*

I would not be as confident as you are that Dante’s Italian is still comprehensible. Even Leopardi is now published with facing-page translation! Anyway, it is indeed true that Chaucer’s Middle English is less comprehensible than Dante’s Italian. Moreover, in English-speaking countries not even Shakespeare is immediately comprehensible to young people. And yes, this fact has

consequences on the difference between the two cultures: the Italian one more traditionalist and classical in style, and the English one more modern-oriented. I would restrict this phenomenon to approximately the last thirty years, though. Until the Sixties both in Italy and in England and America schools taught the language and national literature of the “great tradition”. Middle English and even Ancient English (Anglo-Saxon) were taught in English schools and Universities. When T.S. Eliot, in the *Waste Land* opening, wrote that “April is the cruellest month, breeding / lilacs out of the dead land” etc., everybody understood that it was a rewriting of the opening of Chaucer *Canterbury Tales*, “Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote”.

Today, that is no longer true, in England, in America as well as in Italy. Are we so sure that a young Italian is able to recognize the many, often explicit quotes of Dante in *Se questo è un uomo* by Primo Levi?

*After the Scientific Revolution, the stars and the universe gained, beside their “poetic” connotation, a new physical and mathematical significance. This aspect has been rather influential and fascinating for many modern artists (Van Gogh and Calvino in Palomar among the others). Do you believe that this “doubling” (science/poetry) in the modern concept of stars could be in literature what in drama Pirandello’s “hole in the paper sky” was, separating Orestes from Hamlet?*

I have always thought, with Aristotle, that the fundamental stimulus of marvel is at the basis of philo-sophy (that is of physical sciences, natural philosophy and strictly-speaking philosophy) and art. The ancient scientist- for example Hipparchus, Eratosthenes- is not that different from the modern one, because they both study the stars from a mathematical point of view, therefore different from the poet’s. But also in the ancient age did scientific theories influence poetry: Lucretius and Virgil among others. This continues during the Middle Ages, western and Islamic. Then in the Modern Era. And it is still present today: the last examples in my book are two contemporary poets, Haroldo de Campos in Brasil and Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua. In short, I do not fully believe to the ‘doubling’, the ‘two cultures’ of C.P. Snow. There are –there have always been- poets that know little or nothing about science and scientists knowing little or nothing of poetry and art. But these are not the majority, and the important examples go in the opposite direction. Where poetry has its shortcomings is, I would say, in finance, technology, trade. A customs officer generally buys a painting as an investment. A CEO goes to the Scala for his public image. In short, it seems to me that the doubling is between the scholar and the scientist on one side and the men of technology and money on the other. Once I was in Assisi, and I was giving a lecture on Ulysses for Unicredit’s bank managers of central Italy. At the end, one of them approached me and asked if, well, you know, I could explain to him what fraud was (I had talked about Dante’s Ulysses as a fraudulent consultant). I burst out laughing and told him that he was the banker, so he should know what fraud was much better than a scholar.