

Fame or Freedom? 'Resistance' to Fame and the search for Happiness of Italian modern poet Sandro Penna

Dr Livio Loi

Honorary Fellowship, University of Wollongong, Australia

Member of AATI: American Association of Teachers of Italian, US

Member of IATI: Illawarra Association of Teachers of Italian, Wollongong, Australia

Email: loilivio@yahoo.com.au

Abstract

A troublesome and thorny poet, Sandro Penna (1906-1977) elected individual freedom as his Gospel. Although his reputation as a distinguished lyric poet and a unique literary phenomenon seems unquestioned among readers and critics, recognition of his work has been both tardy and problematic. Having the difficult task of writing poetry in Italy at a time of Nobel Prize recipients such as Salvatore Quasimodo and Eugenio Montale, Penna remained an outsider, difficult to label, subject to the harsh censorship of the Italian Fascist regime for the homoerotic subject of his oeuvre. This paper investigates Penna's peculiar kind of 'resistance' to the common concept of literary fame and to the commodification of art. His lack of interest in publishing and his craving for personal and artistic freedom are the main factors responsible for the delayed literary recognition of a poet deeply admired by contemporary fellow writers and readers.

Keywords: Italian modern literature, Sandro Penna, fame, censorship, bohemianism, freedom.

[A]s a poet he was more loved than studied, his poetry worshipped - by some - as a religion.
(Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 1990)¹

Penna is the only poet of the *Novecento* who has quietly refused - without outburst - the ideological, moral, political and intellectual reality of the world we live in ... rejected by him as a worthless world, a little vulgar, a little miserable, made of ridiculous cheating and notorious vanity.

(Cesare Garboli, 1984)²

Contemporary fellow writers considered Sandro Penna(1906-1977) “a peer” and for some critics the Italian lyric is one of the best poets of his generation and a unique literary phenomenon. Despite the recent increase in awareness and appreciation of his poetry in Italy and abroad, recognition of his work has been both tardy and problematic. Penna wrote mainly, though not only, dreamy and delicate homoerotic lyrics. A couple of lines in a simple, direct but precise language never obscure or “hermetic”, an epigram recalling the *Haiku* style, is a typical Penna poem:

Io vivere vorrei addormentato / entro il dolce rumore della vita (59)³
I'd like to live falling to sleep / amid the sweet roar of life

Longer poems often show an *imagist* touch presenting a vivid image revealing an intense moment of experience in the manner of a Joycean epiphany:

La vita ... è ricordarsi di un risveglio
triste in un treno all'alba: aver veduto
fuori la luce incerta: aver sentito
nel corpo rotto la malinconia
vergine ed aspra dell'aria pungente.
..... (3)

Life...is remembering a sad awakening
in a train at dawn, seeing
the hesitant light outside, feeling
in the broken body
the virgin and bitter sadness of the biting air.

Penna's poetry may appear as almost monothematic, revolving principally around his love for young men, but he actually devoted large space to the natural world as well, with a sort of pantheistic feeling for Nature.

1 Introduction

Penna was unwell all his life, suffering from psychological and physical illnesses since his teenage years: bronchitis, neurosis, insomnia and a heart condition. A self-taught person, he was an avid reader, quite familiar not only with the Italian literature and poetry of his times, but also with the French symbolists (whom he could read in the original language), Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud (whom he called ‘my god’). He was familiar with the German romantics, English and American literature (Shelley, Wilde, E.A.Poe and Jack London), the European avant-garde, and quite an expert on Modernist and Futurist art. To cure his depression and neurosis, Penna underwent psychoanalytical treatment, and read Freud's works, which he often discussed – and criticised – with his friends, as recorded in his short autobiography dictated to a tape recorder(Penna, *Autobiografia al magnetofono*, 2006).

Among his friends and admirers of his work, there were the best intellectuals of his time, such as Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Umberto Saba, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante , Dacia Maraini, Natalia Ginzburg, Alfonso Gatto, Carlo Emilio Gadda and Mario Soldati.To anyone familiar with Italian modern Literature, many of those names will sound much more famous than the name of Sandro Penna. Despite their consideration and appreciation, Penna never gained the literary fame they achieved in their lifetime. He has been called an outsider or an ‘island’ within twentieth-century Italian poetry, though he

received appreciation and consideration also from Italian literary critics (mostly after World War 2 and the end of Fascism in Italy when they could write their reviews more freely). A limit in the appreciation of Penna's work has been for many years to confuse moral judgements with aesthetic values, grounding Penna's criticism on his biography.

Homosexuality is not the reason which pushed Penna to write poetry: it is true that the youths he loved are a basic, all-present element of his poetry, but not the only theme; in fact the word 'life' appears more often than the word 'love' or the word *fanciullo* 'lad'.

One of the most respected Italian literary critics, Cesare Garboli went so far as to depict Sandro Penna as the greatest Italian lyric poet of the twentieth century defining Penna's poetry as "extraordinary" his verse "outstanding" and the poet himself a "mythical lawmaker" (Garboli, 1984: 31). Italian poet and critic Roberto Deidier placed Penna on the same level of major Italian poets Umberto Saba and Eugenio Montale. Penna's work, when finally published, after delays, issues and difficulties, generated within Italy a substantial amount of interest and criticism.

2 Fame: The 'Anxiety of Influence'

Penna was an individualist showing at times a complete insecurity about the value of his poetry, but also quite aware he was writing something new and innovative. He rejected any label refusing to be associated with any literary movement or artistic *trend* of his time or the past. In his tenacious refusal of any influence Penna seems to suffer from an "anxiety of influence" as described and studied by Harold Bloom (1973). Bloom's argument is that all strong poets have suffered, in a way or another, from the anxiety of influence. Some of them saw it as something positive, some rejected the idea as a limitation to the originality of their poetry (50). Penna belongs to the latter group in his rejecting any comparison, suggested by some critics, to other fellow poets. Bloom also reports one of Goethe's statements about how self-confidence can overcome this sort of anxiety: according to Goethe the world will influence us from the moment we come into it till we die, the originality lies only in our own energy and will and what we are able to do with it (52). But Penna, despite his strong individualism, his independent lifestyle and strong-willed personality, was not self-confident at all. Many passages of his letters to Eugenio Montale (Montale, 1995) show all the doubts about his own poems when the moment comes to publish his works. Penna was not a 'socially acceptable' individualist. He was never able to balance his originality and uniqueness with the obligations of belonging to a society; that is what you need when you want to become famous or are anyway interested in the approval of an audience. To use Leo Braudy's words: "[...] a famous person has to be different enough to be interesting, yet similar enough not to be threatening or destructive." (Braudy, 1986:8)

We can identify at least two main sets of reasons responsible for delayed recognition of Penna as one of the greatest Italian lyric poet. The first concerns the poet himself, with his distinctive individualism, his choices in life and in poetry, his 'bohemianism', his ideas about art and literature, his 'resistance' to fame and his rejection of the commodification of art. The second – no less important – involves the context of his life with the historical and literary background, his fellow writers, the critics and the audience of Penna's time.

3 Penna's choices

Penna chose to live a bohemian life, refused to get a permanent job and lived in poverty in order to devote himself to the writing of poetry. His extreme individualism resulted in a refusal to belong to any intellectual elite and places him among those artists who did not want to be involved in the "wealth generation" or take part in the production of commodities.

Throughout the years critics found many colourful expressions to define Penna based on his life and poetry. He has been called “the vagabond”, “the Polynesian”, “the saint”, “the tramp” of the Italian twentieth century poetry, and - of course - a “bohemian”. Bohemianism for Penna was a way of life, a state of mind, an atmosphere. It was about living richly and irreverently, beyond convention; it was about being uninhibited, unbuttoned, creative and free. It is the freedom that appeals: the freedom to ignore social conventions and not having a boss.

Making a living as an artist is fundamental to bohemianism, to be committed to his art was, for Penna, vital. His first poems date back to 1922 when he was 16. At the age of 22 he had already made his choice about his future life, and wrote to his friend Acruto Vitali that poetry was the only thing which interested him in life and that poetry was never going to leave him:

“Unir parole ad uomini fu il dono / breve e discreto che il cielo mi ha dato” (Pecora, 1984: 373), ‘To be joining words with men / has been my brief and discrete gift / sent by heaven’.

Penna was not forced into poverty rather he voluntarily accepted a frugal lifestyle in order to sweep away all possible distractions to his commitment. His laziness and his disdain for the notion of finding an “ordinary job” to support himself shines through the pages of his extremely short autobiography, recorded on tape and edited by Elio Pecora (Penna, 2006). The list of jobs that friends and family found for him and that he refused or quit after a couple of weeks, is long and varied. It runs from quite modest positions as an accountant (he had a diploma in accounting) to requests from literary magazines and journals to write some criticism on contemporary poets. He did accept and translated two books from French: one of these was, quite appropriately, *Carmen* by Mèrimèe with its bohemian Spanish gypsy. Italian critic and poet Cesare Garboli wrote:

When he was young, Penna lived a blessed life of a bird, the haughty and luxurious life of a flower. The life of the poor, but more whimsical and more imaginative than a rich man’s one (Garboli, 1984: 27,28)⁴

Penna used to move from one city to another, always in a state of moral prostration and suffering terrible economic conditions, continuously asking for help from friends and people who admired and respected him. But even in the most difficult times in the thirties, when some of his poems had already been published with success in one of the most important Italian literary journals, *L’Italia Letteraria*; he still hesitated to accept the offer by Italian critic and editor Pavolini to collaborate with reviews of poetry, despite the pressure from his friend and mentor Italian poet Umberto Saba to accept an occupation that would bring him some earnings.

In the winter of 1931 he wrote to his friend Acruto Vitali: (Penna, in Pecora 113) “I am in such physical and spiritual decay that I do not think I can get out if not through annihilation” (Pecora, 1984: 113).⁵ Depression, anxiety, addiction to sleeping pills and severe economic conditions lasted for life even when, after the fifties, his poetry had been awarded two major literary prizes (Premio Viareggio and Premio Bagutta). At that time his friends, Italian novelists Enzo Siciliano and Natalia Ginzburg, persuaded major Italian publisher *Garzanti* to pay Penna a small monthly fee. In the pages of the national newspaper *Paese Sera* donations were called for the needy poet. Penna even allowed a *bar* near his home to place a donations box with his name. But these circumstances in the life of Penna should not lead u to see the poet as a sad, grumpy, resentful bitter person, who did not appreciate or enjoy life. Quite the opposite, in his autobiography Penna writes:

My critics, even those who exaggerate in praise now, see my poetry and my life as a tragedy. I’d like to recall, even for the entertainment of the reader, that this so called tragedy is not true at all. I had a very happy life, the only tragedy is told by my poems.(Penna, 2006: 29)⁶

Gianmarino De Riccardis(1997) also quotes an interview where the poet recalls:

The 'trades' that I have exercised are not, alas, the usual strong jobs of 'the great poor': I have never shined shoes, never worked in a barber shop, I have never washed dishes for anyone. I lived in blissful idleness due to the goodness, above all, of a stingy and hard-working mother, so different from me... Only in '43, at the height of the famine, and not only mine, I found some economic comfort/relief selling to my friends, painters and poets, some hams, or gluten canned soups. I could not understand at the time how you could earn three *Lire* a day. Eugenio Montale in those years, used to reply to me: I have three Lire a day but I am equally unhappy. (28,29)⁷

4 Bohemianism

When we associate Penna with *Bohemianism* we base it on his life and art choices, and we refer to the term *Bohemian* in the way it has come to be commonly accepted in our day as the description of an artist or *littérateur* who, consciously or unconsciously, retracts from conventionality in life and in art. Penna was, by all means, an outsider, apart from conventional society and untroubled by its disapproval. He displayed all the characteristics of irresponsibility, laziness, adolescent romanticism, and a pervasive lack of funds, commonly associated with artists who did not achieve success or fame, who did not sell their work for appreciable sums of money.

It is a matter of fact- as we will see later - that Penna was never interested in achieving literary fame, cared nothing for literary society, and did not consistently cultivate or maintain literary friendships. All he wanted to do was 'write poetry' as a need for himself only, not for any audience. Similar to the 'early nineteenth-century dandy' or the avant-garde artist at the end of the century described by Leo Braudy for Penna too "the audience is not the 'people' but the 'happy few,' for whom the poet or artist becomes a socially alienated saint" (Braudy, 1986: 466). In the same essay Braudy, referring to American poet Emily Dickinson's reticence and love of privacy, writes: "Dickinson limited her immediate audience as much as her ideal one, decisively separating the poet's calling from any aspect that might be called public. As her poems continually assert, the poet's calling is not practical but divine, not in the world but exterior to time"(480). The same could be said of Penna.

5 Mystery

It is worth noting that while Penna rejected any connections to other poets or artistic/literary movements, he suggested for himself – to Cesare Garboli - the definition of 'poet of the mystery' (Garboli, 1984: 26). Mystery here is obviously connected to 'divination' which is the accepted origin of all poetry (Bloom: 59). Perhaps Penna wanted to suggest that he never needed any influence as his poetry is a 'divine gift' a 'grace' (as the word "*grazia*" was often used by critics to define the peculiarity of Penna's poetry). Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922 – 1975) Italianfilm director, poet, writer, intellectual, and highly controversial political figure, not only identified in Penna a protest against social conformity and called Penna in *Passione e Ideologia* "the best poet of his generation" "a saint" and his poetry as "my religion" (Pasolini, 1985: 345-346).The association of poets and poetry to Divinity is not new. Since Greek civilization and up until the 19th century artists were considered to have magic powers connected to religion and divinity and a sort of *medium* between Divinity and the humans. Similar to the artist of ancient Greece (with whom he was associated by critics) Penna felt a profound sense of responsibility towards his gift and towards poetry in general. In these lines from a letter to his friend Vitali (13th February 1928) we find the evidence of Penna's

“lack” of hunger for literary fame: he was obsessed by poetry as only Poetry allowed him the directness of personal assertion because only there could he describe himself.

(Penna in Pecora 141-142).

I love not more than a few poets, but my love for Poetry is now so strong I think it is changing me and will never leave me! ... I am not, as you expected, away from poetry, and never more shall I be, because my passion is pure, my whole soul is soaked with it, and does not aspire to the, now alas, very common literary craze [...] I love above all poets who have not wanted to make their name a ‘universal word’ I love the poets that nobody knows.(Penna in Pecora, 1984: 141,142)⁸

6 The context: the search for happiness.

Writing poetry for almost 40 years, during the ‘30s under Fascism in Italy and then in the decades after World War 2, Penna lived through a period of great anxiety, exacerbated –for all artists- by the fear that autonomous thought and creativity were lost. In those times of revolutions, war and authoritarian systems of government, Penna carried on his personal war against the hypocrisy and the ugliness he saw around him, in a quest for love and happiness beyond boundaries and limits. Though he called himself on more than one occasion the poet of Love, and the poet of Mystery, he was very much aware of living in times of mass culture and commodification of art. We cannot ‘label’ Penna as a modernist or a futurist or an avant-garde rebel, as his individualism and originality will ban any ultimate definition, but we can certainly say that he shared most of the ideas and tenets of these cultural movements.

In Penna’s time the so called ‘avant-gardists’ (Cubists, Expressionists and Futurists) were confronting the rules, morals and values of the bourgeoisie and asserting the autonomy of art as an end in itself. Although Penna refused any political commitment, his oeuvre– based and inspired by a ‘scandalous’ kind of love - was seen by his contemporaries (especially by the Italian ones) as a criticism of the dominant morality. Modernism, in literature and art, was a movement on a quest for new kinds of expression; the autonomous spirit of art was paramount, with the commitment not to succumb to commodification. Writers moved their attention away from society to the single individual, focusing on their irrational complexities and artists rejected old values and forms for an emotional view of reality which was to some degree influenced by thinkers such as Freud, Nietzsche and Bergson.

Penna’s friends were avant-garde and surrealist artists, including Italian painter and poet Filippo De Pisis (1896 - 1956) other famous painters such as Mario Mafai (founder of the modern art movement called “Scuola Romana”), and Mario Schifano (1934 - 1998): Italian painter, film-maker and musician of the Postmodern tradition who filmed Penna in his house.. Paintings by De Pisis and Mafai, gifts the two artists gave to their friend Penna, were found in Penna’s bedroom after his death, leaning against the walls. His friend and mentor, Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale, the champion of Italian hermeticism, was also an appreciated modernist writer at an European level; known to T.S.Eliot who published a translation of Montale's *Arsenio* in an early number of *The Criterion*. Penna himself was an art expert, he says in his *Autobiografia* about Mafai paintings: “... faceva quadri belli.... Per quelli che ha dipinto dopo posso addirittura chiedere una somma per l'espertise” (27) ‘... he used to make beautiful paintings ... for those paintings I can even ask a sum for my expertise’.

On the other hand it is interesting to note what Penna wrote about the same fellow artist later in the autobiography when Penna complains about Mafai ‘succumbing’ – according to the poet- to market taste, with his painting turning quite ordinary, instead of pursuing ‘great art’ even at the risk of not being popular or not selling:

Mafai says he is lost. His 'dispersion' was a beautiful thing because it made him do many things. And everything managed to be very beautiful, in his golden age of course. One criticism about Mafai is that he's a genius, but he fully managed to express himself when he was about thirty. Later his works were quite dull, they are of course recognizable as his own, but they give me no emotion. (Penna, 2006: 27)⁹

7 Commodification of art and mass culture

As major critics of the commodification of art and mass culture (Adorno and Horkheimer in the first place) have pointed out in so many ways in their works, the culture industry is one which does not tolerate autonomous thought or 'deviation' to any degree. To the Italian audience and critics of Penna's time - mostly provincial and for 'survival' reasons fascist- Penna's poems appeared disturbing, unnatural, and perhaps even morbid, like the dadaist or surrealist paintings of his friends; but as a poet, Penna seemed not to have any audience in mind, when creating, but the individual single human being. The same emphasis on 'the individual' can be found in the first editorial page of *Blast*, where Wyndham Lewis (1914) shows his interest also in the Italian Futurism and Marinetti's manifestos. Lewis states that *Blast* was not addressed to a particular social class but: "...to the individual. The moment a man feels or realizes himself as an artist, he ceases to belong to any milieu or time. Blast is created for this timeless, fundamental Artist that exists in everybody. ... Blast presents an art of individuals" (Lewis, 1914: I- 7,8). Penna was interested in Italian Futurism, even though his lyric poetry has nothing to share with the Futurists; in 1928 he attended in Perugia a lecture by Marinetti, he was impressed enough to write in his notebook: "Liberation: balance. Healthy, happy - frantic activity - conscious of his own genius - happiness, youth - digging my originality with a futuristic strength." (Penna in Pecora, 68)¹⁰

Penna's quest for happiness demanded absolute freedom and he was definitely ready to pay the price for it. The Italian mass culture of Mussolini's regime was intended and expected to confirm the validity of the system. Art was no longer understood as an end in itself but was meant to primarily affirm and celebrate the system, its ideals and its purpose. Autonomous thought was a threat to the political and social established power and its morals. During the years of Fascism the censorship of works of literature was quite severe and certainly very different from what we are used to in our present-day cultural climate. In the years of the Fascist *ventennio*, social conventions could never possibly consider a sexual relationship between two males as "normal", it was sinful and to be condemned without exceptions. To quote from one of Penna's poems published in *Poesie*: "Fuggono i giorni lieti/ lieti di bella eta'/ non fuggono i divieti / alla felicità" "The pleasant days of the beautiful age run away... but the bans to happiness still stay' (Penna, 1957)

Penna was the artist who did not confirm the authority of Fascist society and system, but ignored it, offering his personal view of the world, which was not gloomy and dark like a prison but bright and full of harmony as in the famous two-line poem *Moralisti* 'Moralists':

Il mondo che vi pare di catene
tutto è tessuto di armonie profonde ((Penna, 2000: 304).
The world that appears in chains to you
Is entirely made of profound, interwoven harmonies.

8 Critical response and literary climate

As a matter of fact Penna has never been fully accepted by much literary criticism that has clouded its image either with the silence or relegated him between the pariah of social disapproval. De Riccardis wrote: "His 'irregular Eros' has never been fully accepted, because it stretched the rules of morality and good poetry" ((1997: 171)¹¹. At the time Italian critics had Montale's Hermeticism as the only example of successful, good modern poetry, so they found themselves caught off guard by a kind of poetry that upset those canons and whose originality destined it to remain a unique case in the Italian poetic context of the twentieth century. Elio Pecora writes in his preface to Penna's *Autobiografia*: "Penna had, as a native gift, the honesty claimed for poetry. Honesty as a necessary expression, which precedes compromises, prohibitions, ornaments. Wasn't that the 'holiness' that Pasolini recognized in Penna?" (1984: 9)¹² Major novelist, playwright and journalist Natalia Ginzburg was one of Penna's closest friends; she defined Penna as "a genius" and knew him enough to write these very revealing words:

Living outside the laws that Time determines and imposes, not acknowledging he, in his world any social classes or ideological scaffolding, and keeping, and having always maintained a full and free indifference towards any established power, and entertaining with the living and with the dead, with the powerful and the powerless, a relationship of absolute simplicity and equality, he is one among the most free human beings that ever existed. (Ginzburg, 2002: 10)¹³

This peculiar concept of Time in Penna's poetry, but also in his life, can explain why History seems never to appear in the Poet's work, it can also account for Penna's indifference towards achievement of literary fame during his life, especially when we read Braudy's work about fame: "in the ancient world the desire for fame is a desire to make an impact on Time, to be remembered" (1986: 27) and further: "Fame frees its possessor from human time" (1986: 30). From the following poem we get the idea that Penna was not interested in being remembered but was aware of the transience of life and of death, and, if anything, more willing to believe in repetition than in the uniqueness of his life.

You will die, lad, and me too
But more gorgeous lads than you
will sleep in the sun again by the sea.
But they will just be ourselves again. (2000: 315)¹⁴

9 Censorship and publications through the years

A brief overview of the difficulties encountered in the publication of his work is useful to demonstrate Penna's kind of 'resistance' to the common concept of literary fame and to underline his lack of interest in the publication thereof, witnessed by fellow writers and publishers. At the time the hermetic avant-garde was at the centre of twentieth century Italian poetry, with the absolute aesthetic pre-eminence of Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970), Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) and Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968). Penna had the difficult task of writing at a time when contemporary Italian poetry had reached amazing achievements with Quasimodo receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959 and Montale in 1975. Although Montale called Penna 'a peer' and Ungaretti helped Penna with the publication of a couple of poems in the literary review *Il Giornale del Popolo* - in spite of the strict censorship during Mussolini's regime; nevertheless for all critics Penna remained an outsider, difficult to label, who was writing a kind of poetry difficult to assess because of its censurable, embarrassing subject matter.

Why do certain books or authors become famous? Or, in the case of Penna, why not? In the previous sections some factors have been pointed out: Penna's personal choices, the social, cultural and political context of his time, his sexual preferences and the Fascist censorship. All these factors summed up and are responsible for a literary recognition so long in coming, for a poet whose work was so deeply admired and appreciated by contemporary fellow writers and intellectuals. W.S. Di Piero of Ohio University, wrote in the foreword of the first and most complete translation in English of Penna's poems:

In 1973, when I was doing my first translation of Sandro Penna's poems I hoped to meet Penna and show him the results of my work ...but the meeting never came about ... he refused to see anyone except a few close friends.... Penna was perhaps the least visible, the least public, of important Italian poets, yet his reputation as a distinguished lyric poet seemed unquestioned among Italian men of letters. In conversation with (Italian) writers and critics I was often told that any understanding of modern Italian poetry would be incomplete without consideration of Sandro Penna. (1982: xv).

The night of the 24th of August 1928 Penna wrote, on the edge of a sheet of newspaper his most famous poem: *La vita ... è ricordarsi di un risveglio* which will open his first published volume of poems. One year later, in 1929 he sent some poems to major Italian poet Umberto Saba who replied encouraging the young poet to go on writing. But that was all. Three years later in Rome he finally had a chance to meet Saba through the efforts of a psychologist (Dr. Weiss, a disciple of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud) as both poets were his patients. Saba immediately remembered his poetry with enthusiasm and helped him publish two poems in the 20th of November 1932 issue of the literary journal *L'Italia Letteraria*. At that point Penna had already been writing poetry for 10 years, in solitude and poverty. Through Saba's contacts though, Penna was able to meet Eugenio Montale, who liked Penna's work and became his friend and mentor. In 1933 Montale helped the young Penna to publish two more poems in the literary journal *Solaria*. Penna received appreciation and encouragements and by the age of 27 it looked like a literary career was about to have a chance to start. In 1936 (Penna was 30), the same editors of *Solaria* discussed putting together a volume of Penna's verse. Penna requested the assistance of Montale to decide which poems to publish, Montale said the plan was useless since most of the better poems were liable to be censored in those years of Mussolini regime. This is an example of a poem that was at the time liable to be censored: "When street-lights weep/ I want to hug a boy in silence."

Later on even an old friend of Penna's such as Elsa Morante, herself the author of novels dealing frankly with the issue of homosexuality, advised against publishing material that was too explicit. As a matter of fact the first attempt to publish a volume of Penna's poetry in 1936 failed for a question of 'decency'. An issue which played a vital role in Penna's decisions whether to publish or not in the future.

The volume was finally published with the title *Poesie* by Parenti in 1938 and the critical reception was enthusiastic. It seemed that finally critics and some readers had become aware of this 'new' poet, who was swimming upstream, writing lyric poetry in times of 'hermeticism' and celebrating homoerotic love in times of fascist censorship. Nevertheless we have to wait until 1950 (twelve years later) to see the publication of the second collection of poems, published by Meridiana with the title *Appunti 'Notes'*, and contrary to what one could have expected, except for Pasolini and Piero Bigongiari, Italian critics just 'ignored' the book. Where had all his friends and admirers gone? Penna was not good at cultivating literary friendships and that he was an indomitable individualist. But Penna's friend and critic Garboli also suggests: 'many Italian modern poets his contemporaries, owe a lot to Penna ... nevertheless it is difficult to say why they thought of him as an unreachable, elusive and somehow intimidating competitor. Montale owes Penna something in his *Mottetti*, Saba learned from him.' (Garboli, 1984: 19)¹⁵.

Penna was never interested in literary competition, when he tried and participate to literary awards was only because he was constantly in need of money to survive. Penna's only interest was in his poetry and his freedom, but perhaps it was precisely for this attitude that he was seen as an 'elusive and intimidating competitor'. Penna's closest and sincere friend Natalia Ginzburg helps us to understand what is perhaps the most decisive reason and cause of Penna's delayed fame. Ginzburg recalls how – when she was working as editor at *Einaudi* - she marvelled at how un-frenetic Penna had always been about the publication of his work. Penna never showed a real interest in publishing his poems, Ginzburg explains, he used to visit her at her office and chat, then leave without any agreement or plan about publishing his work (Ginzburg, 2002: 8). This was an enduring characteristic of Penna as a writer. Publication of his poetry was always problematic but he seemed to be undisturbed by the inevitable delays and issues.

After the second volume *Appunti* in 1950, in the Spring of 1956 the publisher Scheiwiller accepted thirty of Penna's poems and published *Una strana gioia di vivere* 'A strange joy of living' This time interest in Penna's literary reputation was rekindled once again by Pasolini who reviewed the volume in the literary journal *Paragone* in April 1956. In 1957 newly collected *Poesie* was published by Garzanti. This volume combines the contents of his first poetry book with more than a hundred unpublished poems. Here is further evidence of Penna's peculiar personality. Penna was always reluctant about offering his poems for publication and as such they are extremely difficult to date - he used to tell friends and publishers who were asking for new poems that he had not written anything for years. For instance, Penna's volume of prose pieces, *Un pò di febbre* 'A little fever' had been written over thirty years before it was published in 1973.

In 1957, after the committee's long and bitter struggle to reach a decision, *Poesie* won the Premio Viareggio¹⁶. This was the first important literary award for Penna but it was a bitter-sweet achievement because his victory was condemned by right-wing intellectuals as a triumph for the left, pornography and immorality. The judges who supported him, Giuseppe De Robertis, Giorgio Caproni, and Leone Piccioni, were particularly reproached. Although Fascism and World War 2 were gone, Italy was not ready yet for Penna: once again the man was not in accordance with the times. *Poesie* was followed in 1958 by *Croce e delizia* 'Trouble and Delight' which contains forty-three previously unpublished poems. The 1960s appeared to be a quiet decade for Penna with no apparent literary activity to report. Eventually in June 1975, two years before his death, Penna was persuaded to offer for publication a selection of his oldest poems, then he changed his mind, probably out of insecurity (evidence of this insecurity about the artistic value of his poems can be found in most of his letters addressed to Montale), and unconcerned, as usual, about literary success, despite the fact he was so poor that the previous year (1974) Natalia Ginzburg and Goffredo Parise raised ten million lire to help ease his situation, which anyway made little difference in his standard of living. These poems were published posthumously in 1980 with the title *Confuso sogno* 'Confused Dream'.

During the last years of his life the poet was terribly sick, suffering from insomnia and spending most of the time in bed. He did not want to see anyone not even his closest friends. Nevertheless in 1976 Garboli persuaded Penna to publish 119 of his poems written between 1957 and 1976; this volume was given the title *Stranezze* 'Oddities'. Although Penna was immediately sorry that he had released this particular group of poems accusing the critic to have somehow 'stolen' them, *Stranezze* won the Premio Bagutta¹⁷ Ginzburg and Garboli went to Milan to receive the prize for him only one week before his death. He died in his sleep in Rome on 21 January 1977 of heart failure, caused an overdose of sleeping pills.

10 The English compartment

Despite the important position Penna occupies in the Italian twentieth century poetry, he is yet to be studied in the Anglo-American world. A good number of English translations are already available, but there is a lack of monographic and philological studies in English. A brief overview of the most important

translation and criticism on Penna starts with the first release of his work in English was made by Carlo L. Golino (1962), in a fortunate and now historical anthology entitled *Contemporary Italian Poetry* published at Berkeley, Los Angeles by University of California Press. The work presents six sections and Penna is included in section four "Tradition and Experiment". Golino translated With the five poems translated by Golino Penna was introduced, for the first time, in North America.

After that first step, George Singh published "Sandro Penna, Tutte le Poesie" (*Forum Italicum*, 3, 1971), followed by an article by R. Dombroski ("Sandro Penna" *Books Abroad*", April 1973). From 1973 to 1982, Penna's name is not even considered in several widespread anthologies (one example is the book edited by Lawrence R. Smith, *The New Italian Poetry* (University of California Press, Los Angeles 1981), in which Penna's work is completely ignored.

A translation of Penna's oeuvre in an organic volume entitled *This Strange Joy: selected poems* (Ohio State University Press), appeared in 1982, edited by William Simone Di Piero, poet, critic, professor of English at Stanford University, and translator of many Italian authors. A new, more extensive monograph was published in 1993; the book, *Remember Me, God of Love*, edited by Blake Robinson and published by Carcanet, England, was modestly distributed in North America, receiving good reviews. In 1995 Sandro Penna was included in *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing*, (Penguin Books, New York 1995).

Conclusion

Thirteen years after his death the first National convention dedicated to Sandro Penna took place in his native town Perugia with the title *Epifania del Desiderio* 'Epiphany of Desire' (Luti, 1992). A second meeting celebrated in Rome the 20th anniversary of Penna's death in 1997 with the title *Una diversa Modernità* 'A diverse modernity' (Napoletano, 2000). In 2007 the International Association of Literary Critics organised in Cosenza, Italy, a seminar on Penna's poetry and his appreciation outside Italy, including papers by Prof. W.E. Leparulo from Florida State University and Prof. Ichiro Saito from Geidai University, Tokyo – among others (Bruni et al., 2007) In 1979 a first translation of Penna's poems appeared in Spain and subsequently in France. These were followed by translations (quoted in the previous section) published in the USA (1982), The Netherlands (1984), Germany (1985), Czech Republic (1986), Poland (1989), China (1989), UK (1993), Japan (1999), Venezuela (2000), Portugal (2006).

American writer and critic W.S. Di Piero and Blake Robinson have already been mentioned and recently American novelist David Leavitt included a short prose piece by Penna in his *Anthology of famous gay writers*. Critic John Butcher and author Gregory Woods also wrote journal articles on Penna in the English language. Peter Robb who reviewed Penna's poems in *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote:

His fixation on the adolescent boy is of a piece with his repudiation of the nexus of work, money and power. His attention is directed exclusively at a figure poised uncertainly between childhood and manhood, pre-eminently the being without power, or even a real place in the world. (Robb, 1990)

The words of the Australian author and critic perfectly summarize what Penna was actually rejecting, that is: "power". The power that fame and money can bring would have come together with acceptance of compromise and sacrifice of part of his freedom. A troublesome and thorny poet for his contemporaries, Penna elected individual freedom as his Gospel, he thought of himself as a modest master of his own life, a life sometimes sad, but also loud, garish, snobbish and authentically 'cursed'. Most of the time alone – for his own choice- he passed through life almost unnoticed, with indulgent pats on the back from his fellow poets and ambiguous interest from critics, with rare exceptions. If Penna wanted his poetry to be enjoyed by

like-minded readers, it seems that unfortunately his creative period was not favourable to reaching that type of audience, his poetry had to wait patiently for a mood and taste more compatible with him and his personal world. The interest and fascination with his poems and the steady increase in awareness and appreciation of his poetry in Italy and abroad does not seem to be likely to cease soon. In his loneliness and isolation Penna was probably able to understand better the human condition and write a timeless poetry.

References

- Bigongiari, P. (1952). *Il senso della lirica italiana e altri studi*. Florence: Sansoni.
- Bloom, H. (1973). *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Braudy, L. (1986). *The Frenzy of Renown*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bruni, P. N. (L'inquietudine Del Vivere: Sandro Penna, la sua fortuna all'estero e la poesia del XX secolo, Pellegrini 2007 Cosenza edited by Pierfranco Bruni, Neria De Giovanni,). *L'inquietudine Del Vivere: Sandro Penna, la sua fortuna all'estero e la poesia del XX secolo*. Cosenza: Pellegrini.
- Di Piero W.S., T. (1982). *This Strange Joy. By Sandro Penna*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Fontanella, L. (1992). *La parola aleatoria: avanguardia e sperimentalismo nel novecento italiano*. Florence: Le Lettere.
- Garboli, C. (1984). *Penna Papers*. Milan: Garzanti.
- Ginzburg, N. (2002). *Introduzione. Il Viaggiatore Insonne. By Sandro Penna*. Genoa: Edizioni San Marco dei Giustiniani.
- Lewis, W. (1914, June). I. *Blast*, pp. 7,8.
- Luti, G. e. (1992). *L'Epifania del Desiderio. Atti del Convegno nazionale su Sandro Penna*. Perugia: Provincia di Perugia Editori.
- Mengaldo, P. V. (1990). *Poeti Italiani del Novecento*. Milan: Mondadori.
- Montale, E. S. (1995). *Lettere e minute 1932-1938*. Milan: Archinto.
- Napoletano, P. e. (2000). Una diversa modernità. Rome: Fahrenheit 451.
- Pasolini, P. P. (1985). *Passione e Ideologia*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Pecora, E. (1984). *Sandro Penna, Una cheta follia*. Milan: Frassinelli.
- Penna, S. (2000). *Poesie*. Milan: Garzanti.
- Penna, S. (2002). *Il viaggiatore insonne*. Genoa: San Marco dei Giustiniani.
- Penna, S. (2006). *Autobiografia al magnetofono*. Genoa: Edizioni San Marco dei Giustiniani.
- Riccardis, G. D. (1997). *Sandro Penna: Un poeta oltre*. Lecce: Milella.
- Robb, P. (1990, March). Poise of the powerless. *March 1990 issue of The Times Literary Supplement*.
- Robinson, B. (1993). *Remember Me, God of Love. Sandro Penna translated by B.R.* Manchester: Carcanet.
- Singh, G. (6, 1982). Sandro Penna: "Tutte le poesie". *"Forum Italicum"*.

NOTES

¹"... poeta più amato che non studiato, con punte di vero e proprio culto" (Mengaldo, 1990: 734)

²"Penna è il solo poeta del Novecento il quale abbia tranquillamente rifiutato, senza dare in escandescenze, la realtà ideologica, morale, politica, intellettuale del mondo in cui viviamo [...] lo ha rifiutato come un mondo insignificante, un pò volgare, un pò miserabile, fatto di ridicoli imbrogli e di vanità risapute." (Garboli, 1984:45)

³All quotations of Penna's poems are from *Poesie*. Milan: Garzanti, 2000. Print. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁴“Quando era giovane, Penna conduceva una vita beata di uccello, la vita altera e lussuosa di un fiore. La vita di un povero, ma più capricciosa e più fantasiosa di quella di un ricco”

⁵“Mi trovo in un tale decadimento fisico e spirituale che non credo io possa più uscirne se non attraverso l'annullamento”

⁶ “I miei critici, anche quelli che ormai esagerano in lodi, vedono nella mia poesia una tragedia. Vorrei ricordare, anche per il divertimento di chi legge, qualcosa di questa mia tragedia che non è vera affatto. Ho avuto una vita molto felice, l'unica tragedia la dicono le poesie.”

⁷ “I ‘mestieri’ che ho esercitato non sono stati, ahimè, soliti forti mestieri dei grandi poveri: non ho mai lustrato le scarpe, non ho fatto la barba, non ho cucinato ne lavato piatti a nessuno. Ho vissuto in ozio beato dovuto alla bontà, soprattutto, di una madre avara e laboriosa, proprio il mio contrario... solo nel '43, nel colmo della fame, e non solo mia, trovai un sollievo economico nel vendere agli amici poeti o pittori un po' di prosciutti, o di pastine glutinate. Non riesco a capire come si potessero guadagnare tre lire al giorno. Eugenio Montale in quegli anni, mi rispondeva: Io ho le tre lire al giorno ma sono ugualmente infelice”.

⁸ “[...] non amo più che pochi poeti ma il mio amore per la Poesia credo sia ora così forte che mi stia tutto trasformando e non mi lasci più! ... non sono, come credevi, lontano dalla poesia, e mai lo potrò più essere, poiché in me la passione è allo stato puro ne è imbevuta tutta la mia anima e non mira alla, ahimè comune, mania letteraria ... amo soprattutto i poeti che non hanno voluto fare del loro nome una parola universale, amo i poeti che nessuno conosce”

⁹“Mafai dice di essersi disperso. La sua dispersione è stata una cosa bella perchè gli ha fatto fare molte cose. E ogni cosa gli riusciva molto bella, certo nell'epoca buona. Una riserva che posso fare su Mafai è che lui è un genio, ma che è riuscito a rivelarsi verso i trent'anni.... In seguito ha dipinto quadri piuttosto scialbi che di sicuro sono riconoscibili come suoi, ma non danno nessuna commozione.”

¹⁰“Liberazione: equilibrio. Sano, felice — attività spasmodica — coscienza del proprio genio — felicità, giovinezza — scavare la mia originalità con forza futuristicamente”

¹¹“Il suo ‘eros irregolare’ insomma non è mai stato del tutto accettato, perchè costituiva uno strappo alle regole della morale e della ‘buona poesia’ ”

¹²“Penna possedeva, per dono nativo, l'onestà che si pretendeva per la poesia. Onestà come espressione necessaria, che precede i compromessi, i divieti, gli ornamenti. Non era questa la santità che Pasolini riconosceva a Penna?”

¹³“Vivendo egli fuori dalle leggi che il tempo determina e impone, e non conoscendo egli nel suo mondo né classi sociali, né impalcature ideologiche, e mantenendo e avendo mantenuto sempre una piena e libera indifferenza nei confronti del potere, e intrattenendo con i vivi e con i morti, con i potenti e con gli inermi, un rapporto di assoluta semplicità e parità, egli è uno fra gli esseri umani più liberi che siano mai esistiti.”

¹⁴ “Tu morirai, fanciullo, ed io ugualmente.

Ma più belli di te ragazzi ancora
dormiranno nel sole in riva al mare.
Ma non saremo che noi stessi ancora.”

¹⁵“ [...] tanti poeti italiani contemporanei sono debitori di Penna,... e' difficile dire per quale ragione lo abbiano sentito un fuggitivo ed inarrivabile concorrente. Montale gli deve qualcosa nei Mottetti, Saba ha imparato moltissimo da lui”

¹⁶ The *Viareggio Literary Prize* is a prestigious Italian literary award, whose first edition was in 1930, and is named after the Tuscan city of Viareggio to rival the *Bagutta Prize*, given in the city of Milan.

¹⁷The *Bagutta Prize* is an Italian literary prize that is awarded annually to Italian writers. The prize originated in Milan's *Bagutta Ristorante*. The writer Riccardo Bacchelli discovered the restaurant and soon he had numerous friends who would dine together and discuss books

Author BIO

Specialised in Italian and English modern literature, Livio Loi worked as Italian Government Lecturer in Australia at the University of New England and Wollongong University and at the Italian Cultural Institute in Sydney, teaching advanced Italian language and Italian culture. Graduated with a BA (Hons) at the University of Cagliari, Italy with a thesis on the verse of English poet Edwin Muir, has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Wollongong, Australia. Research interests include Italian modern literature, transnational Modernism, visual arts, women writers, western Haiku poetry, cinema.