

# Cultural Meditations on Poetry and Landscape, and the Landscape of Poetry, in Contemporary Italy

當代義大利詩歌景觀文化的思考以及當代義大利詩歌景觀

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## ABSTRACT

The relevance of landscape in the great tradition of Chinese poetry is acknowledged and discussed by Liu Xie in the *Wenxin diaolong*, where special attention is devoted to the subject. This essay therefore starts from an appreciation of this Chinese classic, and especially from chapter XLVI of his work, entitled, in Alessandra Lavagnino's Italian version, "Il colore delle cose" (The color of things). In Italy, a century-long tradition of poetry and painting that dates back to Petrarch and Leopardi on the one side, and to Giorgione and Giovanni Bellini on the other, has developed a special way of looking at landscape, a gaze that is still visible in contemporary time. An age-long yearning after beauty in Nature that is visible in the painters of the Venetian Renaissance has survived through the centuries and become part of a cultural worldview where landscape is still a relevant element, although in a totally different relationship when compared to the past. Modernity has broken into the serenity that pervaded those ancient landscapes, causing an implosion of their hitherto harmonious balance. An excellent example of this complex approach where memory, contemplation and fraught observation of the present coexist and are intertwined, can be found in the lines of the poet Andrea Zanzotto, who died in 2011 and can be considered the most important voice in contemporary Italian poetry. His reading of the presence of landscape in contemporary Italian culture, and enchantment with landscape itself, interacts with a radical criticism of our times. This discourse is linked to the great tradition of landscape poetry and painting (in Italy as well

as in China), but also, on another side, to the worldwide destruction of natural and ancient landscapes caused by urban and industrial development in our age. Sprawling cities, uncontrolled industrial exploitation, and disregard for territorial conservation are threats to the world's beauty, increasingly understood as an endangered common good. Is landscape doomed to be confined to the poetic imaginary and memories of the past? Where has the poetry of our landscapes gone? In Zanzotto's first collection of poems, significantly entitled *Dietro il paesaggio* (Behind the landscape, 1951), the poet sees in landscape a shelter against the dramatic fury of life similar to the lightning running through the sky in Giorgione's painting *The Tempest*. Since then, the poet's consciousness gradually absorbed the facts of a destructive modernity that has maimed his landscape and betrayed the beauty that was inscribed in it, causing the end of a context that was also his own personal Eden. Beauty then becomes a memory, or, rather, a phantasm of the mind that has taken refuge on poetry, and gazes upon a schizoid self from a sidereal distance. In his later poetry, Zanzotto looks for salvation through the language that will enshrine his beloved landscape allowing its eternal presence although a demented modernity has materially destroyed it. His poetry – as it is analyzed in this essay – embodies the tragedy of cultural and emotional loss. Hills and mountains were cut open by quarries to dig for marble and stone, to make gravel and sand; woods were cut down and destroyed or strangled; fields were left untended by farmers and went wild; rivers and lakes were contaminated by chemical waste and/or abandoned in general neglect. Little by little, the well-ordered, harmonious countryside that we see in the great paintings of Venetian Renaissance was eroded, or vanished and disappeared, giving way to a multitude of chaotic buildings, mushrooming suburban conglomerations. The territory of the Venetian inland, defenseless, was devoured by a mounting tide of monsters that went so far as to threaten Venice itself with chemical plants erected right by its splendid lagoon. This is a tragedy common to many places in the world where economic growth does not care to protect the immense common good that is the land, whose aesthetic version is landscape. Andrea Zanzotto was among the most passionate guardians of his territory while he was alive, and frequently intervened in public debates in order to influence local and central governments and persuade them to protect the endangered patrimony of Italian landscape and artistic tradition. But it is especially through his poetry that he provided a testimonial of our Venetian landscape, which he absorbed into his language and imagery, inside the broken and halting music of his verses. The ancient master Liu Xie would surely consider Andrea Zanzotto one of those happy (or unhappy) few who could reach and express “the subtle meanings and the profound inner workings of the heart [...]. [because] Only the subtlest soul understands their secret, and only the most flexible mind comprehends their number”.

**Keywords:** Liu Xie, Andrea Zanzotto, Italian poetry, landscape, Venetian Renaissance painting.

摘要

在中國傳統文學巨著——劉勰的《文心雕龍》中對風景進行了探討，並特別關注這一主題。因此這篇文章從對這本中國古典作品的欣賞開始，尤其從他作品中第四十六章開始，在蘭珊德教授翻譯的義大利語版本中，標題為“物色”。在義大利，長達一個世紀的詩歌和繪畫傳統，一方面追可溯到彼特拉克和賈科莫萊奧帕爾迪時期，另一方面也可追溯到喬爾喬內和喬凡尼貝利尼時期，他們採用了一種特殊的觀察景觀的方法，這種方法在當代仍被採用。在威尼斯文藝復興時期的畫家中，對自然之美的漫長渴望已經存活了數百年，並已成為文化世界觀的一部分，這其中，景觀仍是一個重要元素。儘管與過去相比，已完全不同。現代性打破了這些古老景觀的平靜，並引發了迄今和諧平衡的大爆發。採用這種記憶、沉思、觀察入微共存且交織在一起的複雜方法的一個很好的例子可以在詩人安德列贊佐托的詩中找到，他於2011年去世，他的詩被看做當代義大利最重要的聲音之一。他對當代義大利文化中景觀的看法、景觀自身的魅力與對時代的激進批評相互作用。這種論述不僅與景觀詩歌、繪畫相關聯，（不止在義大利，在中國亦如此）另一方面，也是我們這個時代，由於城市與工業化進程而導致的世界範圍內自然與古老景觀的破壞。不斷擴張的城市、不受控制的工業開發、對領土保護的無視都是對這世界上美好事物的威脅，且越來越成為瀕危的共同利益。所以，景觀註定要成為詩意的想像和過去的記憶嗎？我們的景觀詩歌哪兒去了？贊佐托以醒目的標題“（景觀背後1951）”命名他的第一本詩集，詩人在風景中看到了一個避風港，如同喬爾喬涅畫作“暴風雨”中對抗生命的憤怒的閃電。此後，詩人逐漸接受了這已遭破壞的現代性的事實，這一破壞了自然的風景，背叛了鐫刻的美感，從而導致了一種語境，也是他個人伊甸園終結的事實。美麗隨之成為一個記憶，或者是一個在詩歌中避難的心靈的幻想，並從一個恒星的距離凝視著一個分裂的自我。在他後來的詩歌中，贊佐托通過語言珍藏他所愛的景觀，使其永恆地存在，儘管瘋狂的現代性已經實質毀滅了它。他的詩歌——如本文中分析的那樣——反映了文化和情感淪喪的悲劇。丘陵和山脈被開採，挖掘大理石和石頭，製成礫石和沙子；森林被砍伐、被摧毀或扼殺；農場沒有耕種，逐漸荒蕪；河流和湖泊受到化學廢物的污染或普遍被忽視的遺棄。威尼斯文藝復興時期的偉大畫作中，我們所看到的秩序良好、和諧的鄉村一點一點地消失了，消失了，消失了，讓位於許多混亂的建築物和如雨後春筍般增長的城郊群。威尼斯內陸的領土，手無寸鐵，被一大堆“怪獸”吞噬，甚至威脅到威尼斯本身和其生長在美麗瀉湖中的化學植物。這是世界上許多地方共同的悲劇，經濟增長並不在於保護巨大的共同利益，即土地的美學版本——景觀。安德列贊佐托(Andrea Zanzotto)在活著的時候是對領土最熱情的守護者之一，經常參與公開辯論，以影響地方和中央政府，使他們保護義大利景觀和傳統藝術的瀕危遺產。尤其是通過他的詩歌，為我們提供了威尼斯風景的證明，他把自己的語言和意象融入到了他詩歌斷斷續續的音樂中。古代大師劉勰肯定是能夠瞭解安德列贊佐托(Andrea Zanzotto)那些幸福（或不幸福），能夠觸碰和表達“心靈的微妙含義和深刻的內在運作的人之一。[因為]只有最微妙的靈魂才能理解他們的秘密，只有最靈活的頭腦才能理解他們的數字”。

關鍵詞：劉勰，安德列贊佐托，義大利詩，風景，威尼斯文藝復興繪畫。

When I first perused the Italian version of the *Wenxin diaolong* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) I was dazzled, as if I had opened a casket full of shining diamonds and rubies: amazing jewels hitherto hidden under a lid carved in a language unknown to me. Alessandra Lavagnino's elegant translation (Liu Xie 1995) seemed to pierce and gradually dissolve the opacity created by language barriers, and I felt I was being admitted into the realm of an entirely new beauty, but also into the complex cultural structure of a different world.

Do we learn along the lines of similarity, I wondered, or by exploring sharp differences and boldly leaping into what appears to be totally new? Should I be looking for ideas like the ones I grew up with, for an aesthetic that might recall my own Italian tradition? An idle question indeed, since I soon discovered that the gap between my line of analysis and Liu Xie's was far too wide for any attempt to proceed by way of comparisons and analogies.

The moment of enlightenment came when I decided to abandon myself to the text of the ancient master Liu Xie while keeping as my only guide the golden thread of poetry itself, or, rather, the magic presence of an absence that lies at the secret core of the human search for poetry. Chapter one of the *Wenxin diaolong* – “On *Tao*, the source (*Yüan-Tao*)”<sup>1</sup> – intrigued and enchanted me immediately, with the initial invocation to the *wen*:

*Wen*, or pattern, is a great power indeed. It is born together with Heaven and Earth. Why do we say this? Because all color-patterns are mixed of black and yellow [the colors of Heaven and Earth], and all shape-patterns are differentiated by round and square [that is, the shapes of Heaven and Earth]. The sun and moon, like two pieces of jade, manifest the pattern of Heaven; mountains and rivers in their beauty display the pattern of Earth. There are, in fact, the *wen* of *Dao* itself [...]. (Liu Xie 1983, 8-9)

Liu Xie considers and defines as “wise” the person who creates, and as “enlightened” the person who transmits meaning. But he also writes that:

The sounds of the forest wind blend to produce melody comparable to that of a reed pipe or lute, and the music created when a spring strikes upon a rock is as melodious as the ringing tone of a jade instrument or bell<sup>2</sup>. (Liu Xie 1983, 9)

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, all references to the English version of the *Wenxin diaolong* report the translation by Vincent Yu-chung Shih (Liu Xie 1983).

<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that in English we refer to *wind instruments* / *stringed instruments*.

and he wonders: “If inanimate objects possess such great qualities, how could the container of the mind [that is, the human being] not possess the *wen*?”. This statement is reinforced and summed up in the closing lines of that same first chapter:

The Map the dragon carried presents the substance,  
And the Writing the tortoise brought makes manifest the form  
Here may be seen the patterns of heaven  
Which serve all people as models.

(Liu Xie 1983, 13)

Chapter XLVI of the *Wenxin diaolong* offers rich thoughts about poetry and Nature, under the general title “The physical world (*Wu-se*)”, translated by Alessandra Lavagnino as “The color of things”. I am not attempting here to comment on the wise and learned words of the ancient master, but I would like to recall his observations, for us to meditate upon them:

[...] spring and autumn roll around, succeeding one another, and the *yin* and *yang* principles alternately darken and brighten. When objects in the physical world change, our minds are also affected. [...] as the new year is rung in and the spring begins to burgeon, we experience a joyous mood; as the luxuriant summer rolls by, our minds become filled with happy thoughts; as the sky heightens and the air becomes clear and brisk, our hearts become darkened and heavy with distant thoughts; and when the ground is covered by boundless sleet and snow, our souls become burdened with serious and profound reflections. Many different things appear in the course of the year, and each has a number of phases.  
(Liu Xie 1983, 245-246)

Of course, we all know that the physical world, and landscape, permeated Chinese poetry at the same time as Liu Xie was writing, and even much earlier. If we only had time for that now, I would like to quote some examples from the classic English translation by Arthur Waley or the brilliant remaking by Ezra Pound. In fact, the book of Chinese poetry I read as a student was *Liriche cinesi* (Chinese lyrics), a 1952 Italian version with an admiring introduction by the poet Eugenio Montale (Valensin 1952). It was here that I first met, among others, the poet Po Chu-i, and his charming evocations of sites and seasons.

Liu Xie then gives a survey of the styles and manners used by poets in the *depiction*, as he calls it, of natural things in a variety of forms. “Because of such skills”, he writes, “we are able to see the appearance of things through the descriptive words, or to experience the season through the

diction” (Liu Xie 1983, 248). It is important to notice how poetic writing is viewed by the ancient master as close to painting. An interestingly polysemic situation, I suppose, partly because Chinese writing is done with a brush and is in fact a sort of painting, but also because of the visual factor implied in the definition of *description*, where the eye becomes a relevant element in the process of poetic creation and its corollary, i.e., reading and meditating. The eye can decode a poem as well as it reads a natural landscape.

Liu Xie looks at natural facts – the changing of seasons, the rich array of colors and shapes, etc. – as something that is *used* by the poet and stimulates his mind by evoking powerful and different emotions. In a telling passage, he concludes:

The four seasons repeat their cycle, proliferating forms in great confusion; but to use them as the elements of poetic metaphors requires measure and control. The physical world presents a variety of colorful objects, *but the language one uses to analyze them* must be brief. Such control of content and language makes the reader experience a sense of exhilarating lightness, and puts him in an emotional mood ever refreshingly new. [...] *Mountains, forests, plateaus, and plains are certainly the ultimate source of literary thought.*<sup>3</sup> (Liu Xie 1983, 248-249)

These remarks by the ancient master remind us that writing is a complex process where the magic undertaking achieved by Cang Jie, who created it and therefore made demons cry, and rice grains fall from the sky at night time<sup>4</sup>, goes hand in hand with professional skill. A final result of harmony can be reached only through a combination of thought on the one side and technical skill on the other, plus the careful management of measures and rules derived from previous, recognized models. But Liu Xie states – and we acknowledge – that the creative process is deeply rooted in one’s relationship with the world of phenomena, that is, Nature and – as we call it here – landscape.

The blowing of winds and storms, the rugged profile of mountains and the undulating line of hills, the emerald nuances or sapphire transparencies of skies are components of landscape all over the world, wherever human beings dwell, and call home. Familiar landscapes enter into the vision and concept of *home*, and become an intimate part of it – such is

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<sup>3</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter XXXIX of the *Wenxin diaolong*.

the process through which a culture is born and shaped. When I hear the ancient master hint at the ringing of jade bells and rustling of winds, and describe how “Mountains rise one behind another, and waters meander and circle; / trees interlace and clouds mingle” (Liu Xie 1983, 249), my mind goes to familiar sights of landscapes in my own part of the world, the Venetian hinterland, from the Adriatic Sea beside Venice to the Alps, from the green plains to the sub-alpine hills. It is an ancient landscape celebrated by the painters of the Venetian Renaissance, who decided to abandon the gold, abstract backgrounds of medieval art so as to transfer into their tableaux the living shapes of trees and skies, mountains and rich green pastures, together with signals of human life – huts and houses, castles and towers, bridges and boats.



*Figure 1. – Giorgione, The Tempest.*

In European culture, landscape became prominent for the first time in the XV century through the oil paintings of Giorgione, who was born in Castelfranco Veneto, a gracious little town encircled by pink walls. Giorgione's most famous work, *The Tempest* (see Fig. 1), combines the depiction of a storm, announced by lightning, with the serenity of human life in a cocoon of rural, almost Arcadian surroundings. A strange sort of music emanates from this scene, as happens again in his intensely green *Rural Idyll* (see Fig. 2). In fact, Giorgione often portrayed figures of young people playing in concert, whose enigmatic melodies seem to re-echo from the silent canvases. The intimacy implicit in these scenes betrays the secret bond that links human beings to their landscape, making them part of it and creating a compact and meaningful cultural whole.



Figure 2. – Giorgione, *Rural Idyll*.

The culture of pictorial landscape reflected an outside world still ruled by harmony, where architecture fitted into the natural scene without the slightest effort, as one can see in Cima da Conegliano, another painter from the Venetian school, born in the hilly area of Conegliano, near Venice. Cima's view of castles, walls and towers, still medieval in style, is framed by trees and the pure transparency of a light blue sky, so typical of that area and created by sunshine reflecting off the seawater in the meandering lagoons of the Adriatic coast (see Fig. 3).





Figure 3. – Cima da Conegliano, *Madonna of the Orange Tree* (detail).

The previous tradition of Italian painting had been mainly religious in inspiration and theme, and had thus derived a transcendent approach to saintly or divine figures. The Renaissance brought into the foreground a new kind of model, human and earthly, although often meant to represent the divine world of God, Christ, the Saints and the Madonna. It then placed this new man/woman against a background of familiar landscapes, a process eventually leading to the prominence of the landscape over the figures, so that in the end, only the landscape or still life was left on the canvas. The transition took over a century to complete, however, and before then, there were other splendid painters in whose works landscape combines enchantingly with figures, expressing a harmonious relationship between man and Nature.

Another great painter of the Venetian Renaissance whom I would like to quote in this context is Giovanni Bellini. He was a master at combining the Venetian landscape with human figures to create effects of sublime beauty (see *Fig. 4*), and Italian poetry of that period follows a similar pattern, which is first visible in Petrarch's sonnets and from there continues its course through the whole tradition of Italian poetry, from Ariosto and Tasso up to the XIX century poet Giacomo Leopardi.



Figure 4. – Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna with Child*.

With Leopardi, we are well into Romanticism, where the view of Nature is dramatic, and the poet's contemplation leads to an acknowledgement of catastrophe, as happens with the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Leopardi's poem *L'Infinito* (The Infinite, in 2010 Galassi's translation) is perhaps the highest example of such poetic contemplation.

*The Infinite*

This *lonely hill* was always dear to me,  
and *this hedgerow*, which cuts off the view  
of so much of *the last horizon*.  
But sitting here and gazing, I can see  
beyond, in my mind's eye, unending spaces,  
and superhuman silences, and depthless calm,  
till what I feel  
is almost fear. And when I hear  
*the wind stir in these branches*, I begin  
comparing that endless stillness with this noise:

and the eternal comes to mind,  
and *the dead seasons*, and *the present*  
living one, and how it sounds.  
So my mind sinks in this immensity:  
and foundering is sweet in such a sea.<sup>5</sup>

Had Liu Xie been able to observe the development of the Italian poetic tradition, we might now be reading his comments on the patterns and rules created by the subsequent schools as our history unfolded. I believe he would have devoted whole chapters to the role of landscape and its dominance over human figures in the Venetian school of painting.

Our Venetian masters and the Renaissance poets left us an idealized worldview where there seemed to be no fractures, no conflicts nor contradictions between man and Nature, and where the former interrogated his environment in tranquility, while the latter was friendly or even maternal to him. The result of such harmonious relations was an essential serenity (see *Fig. 5*).



*Figure 5. – Giovanni Bellini, St. Jerome in the Desert (detail).*

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<sup>5</sup> My emphasis.

The age-long yearning for beauty in Nature that is visible in the painters of the Venetian Renaissance has survived through the centuries and has become part of a cultural *Weltanschauung* where landscape is still a relevant element, although in a totally different relationship when compared to the past. Modernity has broken into the serenity that pervaded those ancient landscapes, causing an implosion of their hitherto harmonious balance. An excellent example of this complex approach where memory, contemplation and fraught observation of the present co-exist and are intertwined, can be found in the lines of the poet Andrea Zanzotto, who died in 2011 and can be considered the most important voice in contemporary Italian poetry.

Here, I would like to remind my readers that I am myself part of the cultural milieu of Venetia, the Venetian hinterland, since I grew up amidst those suave hills, not far from the familiar line of the Alps on one side, and the flat line of the Adriatic Sea on the other. Thus, my heart resonates with the soft colors of Venetian painting and the ringing jade bells of our poetry, both ancient and contemporary. This was one more reason why I chose to introduce Andrea Zanzotto in my discourse on the ancient master.

Andrea Zanzotto was born in Pieve di Soligo, a small-town nestling among the hills just south of the North-Eastern Alps, and although he travelled around the world, and as a young man even emigrated abroad, he lived there till the end of his life. The Soligo area, and Venetia in general, was his home – his *Heimat*, in Hölderlin's definition – and formed an essential element of his poetry. At the same time, from the beginning of his poetic itinerary, his native landscape was both an emotional and cultural factor, on the one side and, on the other, a metaphor for the whole outside world, engaging him in an interminable conversation with the changing face of things.

His first collection of poems was significantly entitled *Dietro il paesaggio* (Behind the landscape) and appeared in 1951, when the echoes of World War Two were still alive. War marks Zanzotto's sky with the dramatic fury of that lightning in Giorgione's *Tempest*, but here it strikes the old landscape causing a horrendous metamorphosis where parts of that very landscape – night, moon, grass, wind – seem to revolt and change under the effect of a phenomenon alien to the natural world:

Night is diminished  
and all its lances honed  
but more especially in the moon

that has already divided  
the lost fragments of the world from light  
[...]

The grass grows beak and feathers, and the ricks of phosphorous  
startle the toothed  
shadow of the wind  
which has hollowed out the moon above.

(Zanzotto 1975, 37-39)

Through contemplation of the landscape, the poet does not wish to describe a natural scene, but rather to pour into his lines the intense activity of his self. The familiar landscape becomes a shelter against the risky adventure of life, perhaps of poetry itself, and the danger implicit in the sublime, in the poem entitled *Ormai* (By now):

By now the primrose and the warmth  
at one's feet and the green insight of the world

Uncovered carpets  
the loggias shaken by wind and sun  
quiet larva of thorny woods;  
my distant pain, thirst distinct  
as another life in the breast

Here all that's left is to lock the landscape around the self  
to turn one's back

(Zanzotto 1975, 13)

The poem that gives the collection its name, *Dietro il paesaggio* (Behind the landscape), indicates the double function of landscape, mountains that enclose and at the same time are there to be overcome:

In the closed mountain places  
they reached me  
called to me  
touching my feet. [...]  
Through the most distant ways of fallen earth  
helped by late days and few  
I descend in the sun of shivers  
that blows from the tramontana.

(Zanzotto 1975, 69)

From 1951 onward, Andrea Zanzotto evolved his worldview through the eyes of poetry. His consciousness gradually absorbed the facts of a

destructive modernity that has maimed his landscape and betrayed the beauty that was inscribed in it, causing the end of a context that was also his own personal Eden. He thus becomes a central witness of the tragic extraneousness of poetry when confronted with the transformations brought about by contemporary times. There ensues a shift, then, toward a new role taken up by the poet, who, although marked by an unredeemable trauma, identifies the defense of poetry with a defense of what is human.

The poetic province of his native land is still with him, albeit defaced, disfigured and fractured into a thousand fragments. Beauty becomes a memory, or, rather, a phantasm of the mind that has taken refuge in poetry, and gazes upon a schizoid self from a sidereal distance.

Andrea Zanzotto is what one might call a civil poet, that is, in his case, a poet whose inspiration moves from the inside toward the outside – a poet whose language, the very engine of his vision, bends its exceptional singularity to a conversation with the human world.

In his prose writing – mainly essays, but also short fiction, biographical sketches and autobiography – he often meditates on his native landscape and the nature of landscape itself, occasionally in the context of a critical discourse on painting (he wrote on Cima da Conegliano, Camille Corot) and photography. Referring to the painter Cima, Zanzotto writes that “It was the Venetian painters who made the Venetian inland, a land that imposes itself with its violent grace” (Zanzotto 2013, 41).

One important essay in this regard is *Il paesaggio come eros della terra* (Landscape as eros of the earth).

The landscape [...], or, rather, what we call ‘landscape’, breaks into the human soul from early childhood with all its powerful strength. From this first ‘wonder’ originate all the infinite series of attempts made by the child [...] to experience things as they happen, [...] like a ‘movement to and fro’ between the growing self and the landscape as a horizon that can be perceived totally, as ‘world’. The world is the limit within which one acknowledges oneself, and this relationship, which has its epiphany within the circle of the landscape, is in fact what defines the circle of our own self.<sup>6</sup> (Zanzotto 2013, 32-33)

All cultural acquisitions, then, depend on this uninterrupted dialogue between man and nature, a dialogue between the mother and her fetus

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<sup>6</sup> My translation.

who is in fact doomed never to leave the womb (Zanzotto 2013, 34). In his famous poem *Yes, the Snow Again*, from the collection “La beltà”, a voice enquires:

What will happen to the snow  
what will happen to us?  
A curve on the ice  
and then and then and then ... but the pines, the pines  
all emerging to meet the snow, and until the last age  
surrounded by pines. Sic et simpliciter?  
[...] What are they saying up there in life,  
there from those parts there in part;  
what is being hatched peeled opened up  
in that little in that dimness  
inside the small nut inside the small almond?  
And the thousand milk teeth that gnaw it?  
And the pine-tree. And the pines-ines-ines by profiles  
*ines-ines at the side in front*  
*behind the eternal the external the internal (the landscape)*  
*behind before on all sides,*  
the pines how are they, are they all right?  
Said to the snow: “You’ll never abandon me, right?”  
And small pincers, now, a small clamp.<sup>7</sup>

(Zanzotto 1975, 215-221)

In positioning his phantasmal natural elements, the poet puts the landscape in brackets: a visual version, or instance, of the process of otherization suffered by what used to be his own beloved world.

Here the poet looks for salvation through the language – not a literary language, but the material aspect of language – and the background is provided by Freudian and Lacanian concepts. The terrible clash between macro- and micro-history, and the precipitous advent of consumerism, are threats to the immaculate beauty of snow and moon (two basic elements of poetic imagery), while the whirl of destruction is getting at the trees, the landscape.

From 2001 dates the moving poem *Ligonàs*, an invocation to his beloved landscape that is forever present to the poet although materially destroyed by a demented modernity:

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<sup>7</sup> My emphasis.

No, you never betrayed me, [landscape]  
on you  
I poured all that you  
infinite absent, infinite embrace  
cannot have: the black of enemy  
doom/cloud or of guilt, of implosive maelstrom.<sup>8</sup>

(Zanzotto 2001, 15)

Landscape remains behind, or rather outside, the poetic voice, which crosses it as if it no longer existed in reality, but only in the poetic mind. Yet poetry germinates out of that crossed landscape that cannot, however, be erased or disappear from the phantasmal world of imagination.

Andrea Zanzotto experimented with haiku in the eighties, a period when he suffered from writer's block. In the Japanese tradition, the haiku is always linked to natural phenomena, and Zanzotto's compositions are no exception – but even here, the theme of landscape is often contradictory, as if it were stated and at the same time denied:

Insight, if possible, into the landscape  
which has not yet quiet faiths—  
insight, sigh now, tomorrow blue blank.

(Zanzotto 2012, 48)

There are also instances when an implosion takes place in the poet's inner world, as a consequence of the polluted outside world:

An interior world-fog generates  
frogs and rotten foods  
swift fires of eyes burn it all.

(Zanzotto 2012, 8)

A poem dated 2009, from a section of *Conglomerati* (Zanzotto 2009), entitled "Isola dei morti" [Island of the dead], sounds like an extreme invocation launched from a horrid, desolate cemeterial land threatened by dark apocalyptic shadows, where one place only – poetry? – survives as a shelter against the wrath of a Cosmos enraged at human madness:

While stench and hail and heaps of war  
While everything shakes in the delirious climate  
and the killing rage, an evil, invents invents

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<sup>8</sup> My translation.



Rare are the places where to resist,  
places where the Muses gather  
to maintain the echo of a harmony  
to remind us the sublime still exists  
to re-praise ancient splendors and receive new ways of Beauty

Rare yet again, and buried in the shadowy forests of total weapons  
a Place: and now it is reborn, and it tries to defend us from the Cosmos' wrath.

(Zanzotto 2009, 131)

Our meditations on the poetry of our contemporary Andrea Zanzotto calls attention to the cultural changes experienced by Italy in the second half of the XX century and, even more so, in the XXI century. The end of World War 2 (1945) found the country half destroyed, destitute and torn by terrible memories. Urban and industrial areas had been heavily bombed, rural areas were impoverished. The Centre-North of the country had seen two years of German occupation and a puppet fascist regime collaborating with Nazi occupiers. The North-East of the peninsula – i.e., the Venetian hinterland, the region we have been focusing on – had seen a violent civil war fought by the antifascist Resistance. Zanzotto had lived through all this; like many of his generation, he fought in the Resistance and then took active part in public life during the Reconstruction period. He was a socialist, and, although he never entered into politics, he was an influential figure in Italian public life.

A great cultural change took place in Italy after the sixties. A wide-ranging, rapid industrialization and remarkable economic boom caused internal migrations from underdeveloped areas to the highly-industrialized ones. The pattern of Italian migration, which used to be directed towards the US, Canada, Australia and various European countries – Zanzotto himself emigrated temporarily to Switzerland in the early postwar period – was redirected from the poorer South and its underdeveloped areas towards the more rapidly developing parts of Italy.

The gradually improving standards of living, the strong influence of a hegemonic American culture, the advent of new communication systems – first television, then all the rest – changed the lives of Italians and brought them new wealth and leisure. Yet the speed of change, disorderly growth and all the rest caused a generalized looting of the land. Today we see that among the victims of that inordinate growth, that neglect of our cultural and natural patrimony, one of Italy's most beautiful assets, the Italian landscape, can be counted.

The poet sensed the approaching disaster, and his poetry embodies the tragedy of cultural and emotional loss. Hills and mountains were cut open by quarries to dig for marble and stone, to make gravel and sand; woods were cut down and destroyed or strangled; fields were left untended by farmers and went wild; rivers and lakes were contaminated by chemical waste and/or abandoned in general neglect. Little by little, the well-ordered, harmonious countryside that we see in Giorgione, Cima and Bellini's paintings was eroded, or vanished and disappeared, giving way to a multitude of chaotic buildings, mushrooming suburban conglomerations. The territory of the Venetian inland, defenseless, was devoured by a mounting tide of monsters that went so far as to threaten Venice itself with chemical plants erected right by its splendid lagoon.

This is a tragedy common to many places in the world where economic growth does not care to protect the immense common good that is the land, whose aesthetic version is landscape. Is China also affected by a similar disaster, in the wave of the gigantic economic growth that it has been experiencing in recent years? And how are poets and artists reacting to such a catastrophe?

I would like to mention here the artistic experience of Ai Weiwei, whose installations are often a discourse focusing on the feared loss of natural beauty and an attempt to recover landscape by creating its phantasmal referent through art. His *Birds Nest Stadium* inaugurated for the Olympic Games in Beijing captured the peculiarity of animal dwellings; the *Sunflower Seeds* installation, exhibited at Tate Modern in London, plunged visitors into a sea made of a million China seeds; his *Trees*, at the Louisiana Art Museum in Denmark, created a strange new sort of metallic forest; his deep blue *Bubbles of 25*, exhibited in San Gimignano but also in Milan, seem an intriguing device, an artefact capable of trapping the colors of the sky, the sea, the lake, while reminding the observer of a classic Chinese color and a traditional Chinese material, porcelain. Ai Weiwei might well be considered a poet of our times, who marks the vertiginous changes of his culture with a strong sense of history and tradition.

Andrea Zanzotto was among the most passionate guardians of his territory while he was alive, and he frequently intervened in public discussions and debates in order to influence local and central governments and get them to protect the endangered patrimony of Italian landscape and artistic tradition. But it is especially through his poetry that he provided a testimonial of our Venetian landscape, which he absorbed into his language and imagery, inside the broken and halting music of his verses.

The ancient master Liu Xie, whom we are celebrating today, would have spoken highly of him – he would surely consider Andrea Zanzotto one of those happy (or unhappy) few who could reach and express:

[...] the subtle meanings beyond our thought and the profound inner workings of the heart [...]. Only the most subtle soul understands their secret, and only the most flexible mind comprehends their number. (Liu Xie 1983, 157-158)

Liu Xie concluded his chapter XXVI – “Spiritual thought or imagination (*Shen-ssu*)” – with the following wise and intriguing lines:

Under the operation of the spirit the phenomenal world becomes articulate,  
In response to varying emotional situations.  
Things are apprehended by means of their appearances,  
And the mind responds by the application of reason.  
It carves and engraves in accordance with sound patterns,  
Forging similes and metaphors as it goes.  
It gathers together all its ideas and worked them into harmony,  
And [like General Chang Liang] wins victory afar while sitting in his tent.  
(Liu Xie 1983, 158)

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