

A Modern Bestiary

Ars Poetastrica

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HERLA PUBLISHING

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A Modern Bestiary

The Harpies

They do not make their nests in undergrowth,
as Dante said: it is inside the cloisters
of happiness itself that these foul monsters
are pleased to bring their brood of snakes to birth.

For them it's not enough to sink their claws
in hearts of enemies: they go berserk
(never, I think, regretting the attack)
even against their own poor sons and heirs.

On those few joys which our small world holds out,
on the most innocent dreams or sentiment,
they love to drop their filthy excrement;

and never reach the peak of their delight
unless, sometime before they fly away,
they hit us with some hideous prophecy.



The Mule

I thought: at least occasionally the mule,
stumbling under the loads that weigh him down
(I saw one only yesterday in Rome),
would have a feeling that he must rebel;

some spark of his heredity must show,
drawn from his mother's background as a horse,
always climbing, always in such distress,
humiliated, given stick. But no:

the mule is born, grows up, and dies a mule:
whether it rains, or shines, or storms are brewed,
you will not see him ever raise his head.

Not even if a caustic cockerel
should peck him critically upon the arse
would he once rear and bridle like a horse.

Moths

If you put on a light when all is dark,
you may be sure that very readily
round that deluding image of the day
the rushing moths will gather, in a flock.

And they will twist around that light and turn
until eventually the greedy heat,
like naked flame from a fire that's blazing bright,
consumes their waxen plumes and all are gone.

I ask you this: what makes them so delight,
Icarus-like, in dancing like a fool
that dance of death, and with no hope at all

but martyrdom? Is it mere love of light,
the wish perhaps to be warmed in the glow,
or lust for dazzlement, makes them act so?



FANT

The Sheep

Who does not see being herded as sheer bliss,
noticing life is oh so comfortable
for sheep today? Who does not feel the pull
of blessed bleating self-forgetfulness

on meadows the good shepherd has picked out;
to graze uninterruptedly and browse,
and tamely ruminates, and even drowse
like a domesticated fireside cat.

To live this way – no trouble to be taken,
and with no need for thinking in the least –
I would be happy to be milked and fleeced.

The ancient wisdom's very much mistaken:
better a hundred years spent sheepishly
than live as lions do one troubled day.

Ars Poetastrica

Da quando hanno inventato il verso anarchico,
la poesia non è più un regno oligarchico,
ma si è a tal punto democratizzata
che è diventata ormai una baggianata,
tanto che non esiste analfabeta
che oggi non possa dire: 'Io son poeta.'

Il secolo oramai volge alla fine
e seppellisce nelle sue rovine
orde d'opere indegne di memoria
10 di poeti senza arte e senza gloria,
milioni di milioni di parole
che svaniranno come brina al sole.

Spesso mi chiedo con malinconia:
'Dove è andata a finire la poesia?'
Viene rabbia a pensare che qui intorno,
sopra questo deserto, fiorì un giorno
un rigoglio di cime verdeggianti,
come Dante, l'Ariosto o Cavalcanti!

Forse da qualche parte è sotterrato
20 il loro seme, e se non si è seccato
di certo prima o poi germinerà –
magari tra due secoli, chissà –
ma intanto sulla terra desolata
non si raccoglie neanche l'insalata.

Quando mi guardo intorno vedo solo
un infinito e brulicante stuolo
di gente persa su binari morti
(o lungo i labirinti più contorti
che l'intelletto umano può creare)
30 in cerca di qualcosa da trovare.

Soon as anarchic writing came to hand,
verse, now no more an oligarchic land,
became so democratic as to be
a paradise for sheer tomfoolery;
so that, by now, there's no illiterate who
does not declare: 'I am a poet too.'

This century is drawing to its end.
Beneath the ruins it will leave behind
are works of poets without art, unnumbered,
10 inglorious, and not fit to be remembered,
millions of words that came and now are gone
as snowdrifts vanish at a touch of sun.

I wonder in my melancholy way:
'What has it come to now, this poetry?'
It is a staggering thought that all around
there used to flourish in this desert land
clusters of laurel wreaths, poets in plenty,
like Dante, Ariosto, Cavalcanti.

Now maybe underground somewhere or other
20 their seed is buried; if it does not wither,
sooner or later it will germinate,
perhaps two hundred years hence it will sprout;
meanwhile throughout this desolated region
no one can hope to harvest lettuce even.

As I look all around I come upon
nothing except a never-ending swarm
of lost souls moving on to some dead end
or (such the contortions of the human mind
in subtle mazes that still lead nowhither)
30 looking for something that they can discover.

Vedo gente che fa versacci orribili,
gente che scrive porcherie illeggibili,
gente che si nasconde nei nonsensi,
o in brodi acquosi o in minestrone densi,
gente che scrive ma non sa perché,
gente che cita Eraclito e De Andrè.

40 Questi poetastri sono così tanti,
e sono così tossici e inquinanti,
che col tempo potrebbero causare
dei disastri ambientali in terra e in mare,
ma per fortuna il tempo li setaccia
e di loro non lascia alcuna traccia.

Quelli che adesso chiamano poeti,
come L***, Z*** o S***,
se lasciate passare qualche anno
vedrete che destino oscuro avranno:
i loro nomi se li porta il vento
e spariranno in meno di un momento.

50 Ma per me oggi il guaio principale
non è tanto una crisi generale
di qualità, quanto il fraintendimento
di cosa è la poesia, l'atteggiamento
nei confronti dell'arte e, soprattutto,
la mescolanza adultera del tutto.

60 Cerchiamo dunque di capire bene
che cosa è la poesia e se le catene
di verso e rima servono a qualcosa
o se al contrario è giusto che la prosa,
con le sue schiere caotiche e confuse,
invada la regione delle Muse.

Some are producing nasty scraps of verse,
writing what is illegible, or worse,
hiding in nonsense like a sort of cloak,
or soup that's watery or far too thick,
people who write but do not know the reason,
who quote both Heraclitus and Bob Dylan.

40 The thing is that there are so many such,
and they're so poisonous and pollute so much,
that, given time enough, they might well be
the cause of some worldwide catastrophe,
except that time will always sieve and sift
until no trace of them at all is left.

Those who for poets nowadays do duty,
as do L***, Z***, or S***,
if you just let one or two years go by
you'll find they end up in obscurity,
their very names borne off by some light breeze
in less time than it takes to tell you this.

50 Today for me, however, the salient vice is
not after all the universal crisis
of quality, so much as the mistake
over what poetry is, the line they take
towards the art, and most of all this stew,
this mishmash, *mélange adultère de tout*.

Let us therefore try hard to understand
what poetry is, and see what worthy end
is served by all the chains of rhyme and verse,
or whether rather it is right that prose
should, with its lawless ill-assorted forces,
60 invade this region sacred to the Muses.