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Four poems by Giosuè Carducci

by David Yezzi

Giosuè Carducci (1835–1907) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1906. He was the first Italian to have done so. Since then, he has fallen into obscurity, despite his onetime eminence as something of a national poet, a trumpeter of Italian unification. Traces of him remain: there is a handsome plaque to him in the church of Santa Croce in Florence (where his family was from) alongside memorials to Dante, Galileo, Machiavelli, and Rossini. In Bologna, where he became a professor in 1860, his house has been turned into a museum for history buffs. But he has lost the youth market: now forced to study him in school, students develop a distaste for his poems bordering on contempt, while the professoriate has vastly preferred the poetry of Carducci's contemporary Giovanni Pascoli, whose work provides a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Carducci, with his dated syntax and arcane allusions, is firmly rooted in the late 1800s: he does not sound the way Italians talk today, and his passion for the classical past makes him seem even more remote. In his numerous poems on Garibaldi and the Risorgimento, he comes off more as an artifact than as a living voice.

But at one time he was the most famous poet in Italy. He embodied the hope of a generation and sang in classical meters of mythic visions that connected the Italian landscape to its roots in the ancient world. His poetry, criticism, and translations ran to a score of volumes. It was in his late volume, *Odi Barbare* (1877–1899), that he arrived at a transcendent, death-marked music. To my ear, a kind of Symbolist sonority emerges as the poems counter Romantic impulses with classical poise. In the four poems here, the past and the present overlap, occasionally in equal measure. In "Snowfall" ("Nevicata"), ghosts from the speaker's past beckon to him, and he answers that he will be with them soon. "Kingfisher" ("Cèrilo") incorporates part of the Greek poet Alcman's Fragment 26, which describes the fearless flight of a seabird in a storm. The poem begins with an image of the writing desk, with its dreary scribbling, and soars up to the mountaintops and out to sea. Alcman's fragment stands here at a double remove, translated first from the ancient Greek by Carducci nearly 140 years ago, and then from Carducci's Italian.

"At the Station in an Autumn Morning" ("Alla stazione in un mattina d'autunno") is a nightmarish look at modernity, juxtaposed with the delicate sweetness of the beloved, who appears ghostlike in a freezing late-autumn landscape. "Death During a Diphtheria Epidemic" ("Mors nell'epidemia

difterica") achieves an almost Dantean level of horror and pathos in its depiction of how, with their fathers looking on, children succumb to a deadly outbreak of disease. Death, the diva or goddess, descends as another ghostly presence in the landscape in this sequence of haunted poems. Carducci clearly felt a romantic's longing for the spring, but he knew that winter was quickly, inexorably approaching.

Snowfall

A light snow falls through an ashy sky.
From the city no sounds rise up, no human cries,

not the grocer's call or the ruckus of his cart,
no light-hearted song of being young and in love.

From the tower in the piazza, the quinsied hours
moan, sighing as if from a world far off.

Flocks of birds beat against the misted glass:
ghosts of friends returned, peering in, calling to me.

Soon, O my dears, soon—peace, indomitable heart—
I will sift down to silence, in shadow rest.

January 29, 1881

Kingfisher

Not under a steel nib that scratches in nasty furrows
its dull thoughts onto dry white paper;

but under the ripe sun, as breezes gust
through wide-open clearings beside a swift stream,

the heart's sighs, dwindling into infinity, are born,
the sweet, wistful flower of melody is born.

Here redolent May shines in rose-scented air,
brilliant the hollow eyes, hearts asleep in their chests;

the heart sleeps, but ears are easily roused
by the chromatic cries of La Gioconda.

O Muses' altar of green, white-capped
above the sea. Alcman leads the chaste choir:

“I want to fly with you, maidens, fly into a dance,
as the kingfisher flies drawn by halcyons:

he flies with halcyons over spindrift waves in a gale,
kingfisher, purple herald of spring.”

Verona, June 8–9, 1883

At the station

in an autumn morning

O the lamps—how they chase
each other lazily there behind the trees,
yawning their light through dripping
branches onto the mud.

Faint, fine, shrill, a nearby
steam engine hisses. A lead sky
and the autumn morning
enwrap us like a great chimera.

Where and to what are they going, these people,
cloaked and silent, hurrying to dark cars—
to what unforeseeable sorrows
or pangs of remote hope?

Even you, rapt Lydia, give
to the conductor your torn ticket,
and to pressing time your beautiful years,
your memories and moments of joy.

Along the black train come
the trainmen hooded in black
like shadows, with dim lanterns
and iron sledges, and the iron

brakes when plied make a long
enervated clang: from the soul’s depths,
an echo of languor makes its sad
reply, like a shudder.

And the doors slammed shut
seem like outrages: a quick jibe
sounds the final farewell:
thundering on heavy panes, the rain.

Already the monster, owning its metallic
soul, fumes, slouches, pants, opens
wide its fiery eyes; defies the heavens,
whistling through the gloom.

The unholy monster goes; with a horrible tug,
beating its wings, it carries away my love.
Ah, the alabaster face and fine veil,
hailing me, disappear in darkness.

O sweet face of pale rose,
o starlit placid eyes, o snow-white
forehead ringed with luxuriant curls
gently bending in a nod of love.

The warm air was throbbing with life;
the summer throbbed when she looked on me,
and the youthful June sun
liked to shower her cheek

with kisses of light, reflected through
auburn hair: like a halo
more brilliant than the sun, my dreams
encircle her soft shape . . .

Beneath the rain, I return through
the haze; and I would lose myself in it.
I stagger like a drunk. I touch myself
to see if I also have become a ghost.

O how the leaves are falling—cold,
incessant, mute, heavy—on my soul.
I know that everywhere in the world,
solitary and eternal, it is November.

Better he who's lost the sense of life,
better this shadow, this haze:
I want O how I want to lie myself down

in doldrums that will last forever.

June 25, 1875

Death

during a diphtheria epidemic

When the precise diva drops down on our houses,
the far off roar of her flying is heard,

and the shadow of her icy wing, icily advancing,
spreads wide a melancholy silence.

When she comes, men bow their heads,
but the women fall to pining.

Thus the treetops, when July winds gather,
do not sway on the green hills:

the trees stand almost utterly still,
and only the hoarse moan of the creek is heard.

She enters, passes, touches, and without even turning levels
the saplings, delighted by their young branches;

she shears the golden wheat, and strips even hanging grapes,
scoops up the good wives and innocent girls

and tiny children: pink between black wings they reach their arms
to the sun, to their games, and smile.

O sad homes, where before their fathers' faces,
silent, livid diva, you put out young lives.

Therein, rooms no longer sound with laughter and merrymaking
or with whispers, like birds' nests in May:

therein, no more the sound of joyful rearing,
nor love's woes, nor wedding dances:

they grow old therein, the shadowed survivors; to the roar
of your return their ears incline, O goddess.

June 27, 1875

David Yezzi is former Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion*. His most recent book, *More Things in Heaven: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Measure Press.

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