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Marco Fazzini

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Marco Fazzini

Three Interviews—Three Views

Derick Thomson, January 24, 1996

Fazzini: *When did you feel that you would become a writer?*

Thomson: I started writing very early, certainly before the age of ten. Made a “house magazine,” wrote simple verses in Gaelic and English. Fairly committed to writing by mid-teens.

Fazzini: *Did your parents encourage your interests in writing?*

Thomson: Parents encouraging. My father was a poet and editor of poetry. My mother very interested in poetry and song.

Fazzini: *What do you remember of the period when you were a student? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?*

Thomson: A fellow-student at Aberdeen University, from 1939, was Alexander Scott, who had been writing from his early teens also. We both published poems at that period. After the War, Iain C. Smith (from the same village as myself in the Island of Lewis) became a fellow-student at Aberdeen. I had for some years been a committed Scottish Nationalist, and read quite widely in Scottish literature in the 1940s.

Fazzini: *What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?*

Thomson: Reading ranged fairly widely. Deep interest in Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Probably Yeats became the strongest individual focus in the postwar years. Also much involved with Gaelic song, especially from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Fazzini: *Speaking about translation, Valery affirms: "The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into 'language of the gods' and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms."*

Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

Thomson: Poems can come into being in many different ways, and Valery certainly describes some important springs for poetry. I sometimes have an urge to write about an experience or an event, but just as often a poem begins from a sensation, a memory, a vision, a phrase, and then grows, moulding itself out of images, words, rhythms.

Fazzini: *Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being predetermined?*

Thomson: Sometimes there is a period of gestation, but this can vary from five minutes to fifty years. I remember writing a poem about the decline of Gaelic speech about 1963, but the poem is set about thirty years earlier, at the time of my grandfather's death ("Coffins"). Longer poems, especially sequences, tend to have a longer and more deliberate period of gestation. A recent sequence "Meall Garbh" ranges over fifty years of memory, and a few more centuries of history, and was written throughout February 1988.

Fazzini: *Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?*

Thomson: One comes to expect a degree of misinterpretation. The danger is more acute when non-Gaelic readers or critics comment on Gaelic poetry, since even accurate translation cannot capture the range of resonances that a poem has in its original form. There is often a danger of critics letting their personal prejudices (political, generational) show.

Fazzini: *The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth," says that "the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in*

poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind."

Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: "Poets often lie"?

Thomson: I would agree that the relationship between poetry and "truth" is a complex one. Sometimes a poem can be "inspirational" to the extent that the poet does not fully understand its "truth" or "meaning" at the time, and may be puzzled or surprised by it later.

Fazzini: *Could you explain what it means being a Gaelic speaker in Scotland? And what does it mean writing poetry in Gaelic now?*

Thomson: Gaelic is in a state of flux in Scotland. There are said to be about 66,000 speakers, perhaps 2,000-3,000 of these learners, and many thousands more who have started learning Gaelic. But the native-speaking population is declining steadily, and so the most secure base for the language is gradually withering. Public support is stronger and more obvious, with more publication, more media exposure, more pressure-groups. We seem to be moving gradually towards the Irish-type situation, with a declining native core and a spreading learner-group which sometimes brings a brash confidence and sometimes an insensitive dimension to the use of the language.

Gaelic poets have already fallen into two fairly distinct groups: native and learner.

I decided to write poetry only in Gaelic about 1948, and have stuck to that since then, but often provide parallel English versions. What began partly as a political decision has become a way of life. I believe that whatever I have to say as a poet relates strongly to my Gaelic background, but I am of course involved and deeply interested in the world around me. A friend recently accused me of extreme tenacity, perhaps obstinacy, in continuing to write Gaelic poetry. He had a point.

The Gaelic-literate public for poetry is very small—a few hundred only—so it is now important to provide translations, as we all want to speak to a larger body of people interested in poetry.

Fazzini: *Do you think the translations (both of your own poetry and other poets) can be considered a kind of versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?*

Thomson: In my own translations (of my own verse and that of others) I try to convey the exact sense of the original, and to suggest the rhythmic flow. There are ideas and turns of phrase that cannot be translated exactly, and cannot carry the associations that the original expressions have. Sometimes a different image or idiom will bring one closer, and then it is worth sacrificing the literal translation.

Fazzini: *As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal "deep structure" underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a "recoding" or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 can be understood by the readers of Text 2. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated into the totality of their "intentions," that is "pure language" as Walter Benjamin has defined it. Would you comment on this?*

Thomson: I can go along with the Wilhelm von Humboldt statement in a general sense, but think that there are many subtleties of thought that are affected by particular language usages: that communities can develop patterns of thought and individual idiosyncrasies that become woven into the community language, and that one of the fascinations of individual languages is such individuality.

Fazzini: *Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of "disponibilité" and he states:*

At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him. (Renato Poggioli, "The Added Artificer," in Reuben Brower, ed., On Translation (Cambridge, MA, 1959), p. 141)

Do you believe in what Goethe called "elective affinity?"

Thomson: I can agree with Poggioli's statement in general.

Fazzini: *Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, I say that in Scotland it is the "passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions." Do you agree with this statement?*

Thomson: I like your statement about Scottish poetry. There is a long history of interest in “an agnostic link between man and nature” in Scottish poetry generally, and it shows up quite strongly in Gaelic poetry from early times, then in the eighteenth century, and again in the twentieth.

Fazzini: *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?*

Thomson: I think there is a conscious effort to extend the subject range of poetry in Scotland, but on the whole politics and aesthetics are not seen as comfortable bedfellows.

Fazzini: *Do you consider yourself as a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?*

Thomson: A Scottish poet.

Fazzini: *Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?*

Thomson: I expect to see constitutional change, leading to a kind of European “independence,” in the next decade.

Fazzini: *Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?*

Thomson: Yes, why not? Scotland, like the U.K., is a post-colonial country, though it still has a colonial flavour within the U.K.

Fazzini: *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?*

Thomson: My poetry has a strong basis in reality, whether one is attuned to that reality or finds it distressing or uncongenial, but poetry should not consist of sermonising or philosophising. It should, ideally, move reality on to the different plane of the imagination, which make new insights possible, and can transform discourse into art.

Iain Crichton Smith, January 30, 1996

Fazzini: *When did you feel that you would become a writer?*

Smith: I was writing from an early age—about eleven.

Fazzini: *Did your parents encourage your interests in writing?*

Smith: It was only my mother who was alive. My father had died when I was one or two years old. My mother didn't show much interest in my writing.

Fazzini: *What do you remember of the period when you were a student? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?*

Smith: I was in Aberdeen University. I was lucky that there were a number of writers in that particular university. Derick Thomson, the Gaelic writer was there and so was the late Alexander Scott who edited a magazine called *North East Review*. These two had been in the war and were older than me.

Fazzini: *What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?*

Smith: I have read widely in poetry and prose. But in my late adolescence my most important influences were T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Later in my life, in the 1960s, I was much influenced by Robert Lowell.

Fazzini: *Speaking about translation, Valery affirms: "The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into 'language of the gods' and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms."*

Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

Smith: I do agree with this. Poetry can be a sound searching for the idea which it will express. Or perhaps "theme" might be better as in Yeats, "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain" etc.

Fazzini: *Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being predetermined?*

Smith: Sometimes an intuition can re-emerge a long time after its first appearance and the poem might then be written. Sometimes the poem can be written in response to an urgent immediate demand.

Fazzini: *Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens in his "Adagia":*

After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.

Smith: I'm not sure if so much weight can be placed on poetry as to replace religion. Arnold had a similar idea. Certainly there is a connection in that one often waits on the poem as one might wait on a religious phenomenon.

Fazzini: *Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?*

Smith: I think this can happen. However, if the explanations are consistent one might have to accept them as possible ones.

Fazzini: *The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth," says that "the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind."*

Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: "Poets often lie"?

Smith: I think in poetry one has to be true to what one feels. It is not objective truth set against reality. Rather the language has to be so exact in poetry that it forces one towards the truth of the self.

Fazzini: *Could you explain what it means being a Gaelic speaker in Scotland? And what does it mean writing poetry in Gaelic now?*

Smith: There are 70,000 Gaelic speakers according to the last census. To write in Gaelic is an act of faith that there will be a public though a small one.

Fazzini: *Do you think the translations (both of your own poetry and other poets) can be considered a kind of versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?*

Smith: I have done a number of translations from Gaelic into English. I try to be as faithful as possible to the sound the poem makes and to the words the poet uses. Even if his style is totally different from mine, I try to follow it. One should not aggrandize another poetry to one's own work.

Fazzini: *As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal "deep structure" underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a "recoding" or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 can be understood by the readers of Text 2. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated*

into the totality of their "intentions," that is "pure language" as Walter Benjamin has defined it. Would you comment on this?

Smith: I'm not sure that I agree with this. Some people would say that for instance English and Gaelic are so different from each other that one cannot translate a Gaelic poem into English at all. I think a language has its own "genius." All one can do is an approximation.

Fazzini: Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of "disponibilité" and he states:

At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him. (Renato Poggioli, "The Added Artificer," in Reuben Brower, ed., On Translation (Cambridge, MA, 1959), p. 141)

Do you believe in what Goethe called "elective affinity?"

Smith: I have translated mainly because I wish to display my enthusiasms to others. Translation should not be a task. It should be done out of love for the original text.

Fazzini: *Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, I say that in Scotland it is the "passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions." Do you agree with this statement?*

Smith: I think there is a strong link between the poet and nature in much Scottish poetry and especially in Gaelic poetry. I'm not sure that there is necessarily a sense of the sacred in this. Scottish poets tend to view nature unsentimentally and they generally don't philosophise about it, as Wordsworth does.

Fazzini: *What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be skeptical about its value?*

Smith: I think that one can find comfort in certain great poetry. But I don't think that poetry can replace religion (I myself am not religious). It can, I suppose, supply a sense of order but one cannot live one's life exclusively by poetry.

Fazzini: *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?*

Smith: In certain young Gaelic poets there is a feeling of nationalism. In essence I would say that they are more political than my own generation was. On the other hand the generation before mine was highly political.

Fazzini: *Do you consider yourself as a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?*

Smith: I would say I consider myself simply as a poet. Others may categorize me, perhaps in my opinion wrongly. I would imagine that my Scottishness will appear in my themes and perhaps in my choice of language.

Fazzini: *Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?*

Smith: I do think so. It seems that Labour will win the next election and they have promised devolution if not independence. I think in the near future there will be a change in Scotland's constitutional status.

Fazzini: *Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?*

Smith: I think it should be treated on the basis of what it says about the human predicament. Its depth of insight is what will be important.

Fazzini: *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?*

Smith: Imagination can transform a reality which may appear to be meager. It does not however need to falsify reality. It can say, reality should be like this, or that. Imagination should be based on reality, otherwise it becomes fantasy.

Fazzini: *Would you tell me when and why you started writing "The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe"?*

Smith: I wrote "The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe" in the nineteen seventies. I was led to it by my interest in loneliness as a phenomenon about which I had written many poems and also by my interest in language. What happens to his language if a man has only himself? Is language a communal activity? Also, what happens to a man's relationship to reality when he is absolutely alone? These questions still seem to me to be important.

Fazzini: *Was there any intention to re-write and destroy from within one of the institutional texts of English tradition?*

Smith: No. However there is a programme called “Desert Island Discs” (on radio) in which people are asked what books etc. they would take to a desert island. Interviewees in my opinion do not at all wrestle with the idea of total solitude. I meant to show in my poem the seriousness of loneliness. What would have happened, for instance, if Robinson Crusoe had gone blind? Where are the limits of the individual: that is what I was concerned with.

Sorley MacLean, March 25, 1996

Fazzini: *When did you feel that you would become a writer?*

MacLean: I had no ambition to become a writer, but verse, in Gaelic and English, seemed to come to me in my teens. This verse was normally generated by the attractiveness of girls or natural scenery, especially of woods, hills and mountains. In my later teens I sometimes wrote verse expressing my failure to live up to my ideals of conduct. I was enthralled by the fusion of “music” and poetry in many Gaelic songs and frustrated by my own inability to sing them, as most of my family could. I was angered by attempts to “improve” Gaelic songs.

Fazzini: *Did your parents encourage your interests in writing?*

MacLean: My parents did not know of my verse until they saw in a magazine “The Highland Woman” in 1938. They disapproved very much of its “anti-religious” tone, but they did not disapprove of poetry in general. On the contrary, my father liked and knew much poetry. He was a fine singer and a piper.

Fazzini: *What do you remember of the period when you were a student? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?*

MacLean: There was much discussion of poetry among many groups of students; and, among certain Highland students, of Gaelic song, often attacks on the “improvers” of Gaelic song. I very often translated Gaelic poetry orally, and wrote some literal translations for Hugh MacDiarmid to versify. I came to love the “lyrical cry” in poetry and eagerly accepted Croce’s ideas of the lyrical nature of all poetry. I did not show any of my own verse to anybody until very late in my student days, when I showed some to James Caird, but when I came back to Edinburgh, in January 1939, I showed some to Garioch. “The Ship” was read at the Annual Dinner of the University Celtic Society in 1934. It is symbolist, and its content is politico-literary.

Fazzini: *What are the writers or artists you feel most attracted to?*

MacLean: The answer to [this question] is implied in much of my answer to [the previous question]. I had a great liking for Shelley but nothing I wrote myself was influenced by his poetry except that perhaps I had some of his “passion for reforming the world.” I had a great admiration for Blake’s shorter poems. My readings had to be comprehensive in English but I liked Latin and French poetry and, above all, Greek poetry, which I knew only in translation. I read and liked selections of Italian poetry, and read all the *Divina Commedia*, with the Italian and English versions on opposite pages. Of the French I especially liked Baudelaire and Verlaine and Villon. I read all the Scottish Gaelic poetry I could find but was especially fond of sixteenth and seventeenth century song.

Fazzini: *Speaking about translation, Valery affirms: “The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into ‘language of the gods’ and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms.”*

Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urgent message to be expressed?

MacLean: I accept Valery’s ideas about some poem or poets but not by any means of all poets or poems. Norman MacCaig has often said that he sat down to write a poem and when words came he let the poem develop. If he approved of the result he kept the poem. If he did not he burnt it. I think that in some ways the end of Yeats’s translation of Ronsard’s famous poem supports Valery’s words, which I find very obscure.

Fazzini: *Would you speak about a period of gestation in which the poem is being predetermined?*

MacLean: Yes, the gestation is frequently semi-conscious, or hardly even semi-conscious. I would say that emphatically about two or three or more poems of my own, notably “Dogs and Wolves” and the conclusion of “The Cuillin”, both written in a half-awake condition, about three a.m., in the last week of Dec. 1939, after I had heard terrible news of a woman I loved.

Fazzini: *Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens in his “Adagia”:*

After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.

MacLean: I would say it could apply after great disillusion with an ideal or ideals, or a terrible loss, but in most cases it would not apply.

Fazzini: *Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?*

MacLean: When so much comment on one's poetry is by people who do not know Gaelic or who do not know it well, there is more bad criticism than normal. I do not object to any honest criticism however ignorant.

Fazzini: *The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay "On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth," says that "the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling... To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind."*

Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: "Poets often lie"?

MacLean: I do not agree with the German or with Plato.

Fazzini: *Could you explain what it means being a Gaelic speaker in Scotland? And what does it mean writing poetry in Gaelic now?*

MacLean: I think Gaelic has a great great song-poetry, and even for that Gaelic has to be preserved because song cannot be really appreciated except by people who know the language. I think Gaelic has some great syntactical qualities; for instance, its ability to indicate degrees and positions of emphasis by natural inversions and particles. Besides it has been the language of all my people for as many generations as I can count. The syntactical qualities of Gaelic, which I have mentioned, make it all the more difficult to translate into modern English.

Fazzini: *Do you think the translations (both of your own poetry and other poets) can be considered a kind of versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets' ideas and verbal inventions?*

MacLean: I myself try to be as literal as possible. I think "thought" in itself can be fairly well translated, and that visual imagery can be quite well translated but it is impossible to translate that, with the translation of the auditory image at all well translated. As Gaelic poetry has a very predominant auditory sensuousness it is all the more difficult to translate. Besides Gaelic is largely not in the main European tradition because it does not have the huge Greco-Latin vocabulary of most European languages.

Fazzini: *As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal “deep structure” underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a “recoding” or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1 can be understood by the readers of Text 2. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated into the totality of their “intentions,” that is “pure language” as Walter Benjamin has defined it. Would you comment on this?*

MacLean: I think this “deep structure” is nonsense, and the rest does not follow.

Fazzini: *Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide’s concept of “disponibilité” and he states:*

At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him. (Renato Poggioli, “The Added Artificer,” in Reuben Brower, ed., On Translation (Cambridge, MA, 1959), p. 141)

Do you believe in what Goethe called “elective affinity?”

MacLean: I agree that Poggioli’s words are true in many cases, perhaps in most.

Fazzini: *Presenting an anthology of Scottish poetry in Italian translation, I say that in Scotland it is the “passion for sensuality, for an agnostic link between man and nature to enable the reader to enjoy a new sacrality, a sacrality relieved from institutional and ceremonial conventions.” Do you agree with this statement?*

MacLean: I agree provided I know exactly the meaning of “sacrality” as you use it. What does the “it” stand for in the sentence, in the 2nd line of [your question]. It all depends on our idea of the “high seriousness” of the poem or others piece of art.

Fazzini: *What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be skeptical about its value?*

MacLean: MacCaig says: “there is no consolation.” I am sceptical about consolation except in rare cases; I am still more sceptical about redemption in art. I think Yeats himself got some consolation from poetry, in what he called “joy.” Eliot’s poetry of redemption is contrived and precious.

Fazzini: *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the young generation of Scottish poets?*

MacLean: I cannot speak for the whole generation of young Scottish poets as I have not read them all. There are some authentic voices such as MacNeacail (Nicolson) three or four Campbells (men) and three Montgomeries (women). There is a remarkable learner, Meg Bateman.

Fazzini: *Do you consider yourself as a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?*

MacLean: Scottish.

Fazzini: *Do you see any chance for Scotland to attain a constitutional change in the near future?*

MacLean: Yes, but I think the chance of complete independence is not great unless the dreadful Thatcherite policy comes to full fruition.

Fazzini: *Do you think that Scottish literature should be treated and included in the so-called post-colonial discourse?*

MacLean: I am not sure what the “so-called post-colonial discourse” means but I think there is some reason for the post-colonial treatment.

Fazzini: *Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?*

MacLean: All poetry that is not pure fantasy must have a sense of reality or rather be based on reality. MacCaig said he had no imagination but his ability to make the ordinary wonderful is surely the product of a wonderful imagination. My most realistic poems are the few war poems and the “Broken image” poems, but the “Haunted Ebb” poems are an imaginative concealment of a terrible reality, a tragedy of love in extremis. My two best poems “The Woods of Raasay” and “Hallaiig” have the same muted reality, the first 11 octaves of the “Woods of Raasay” being descriptive realism, the rest of the poem hovering between imaginatively concealed tragedy and delight in natural sights and sounds.

*Università ca' Foscari
Venezia*