

Pascoli, Nature and the Supernatural

That Pascoli is a supreme poet of nature and domestic life is clear. His descriptions of the countryside, of birds, flowers, and trees, are most vivid and precise. His best descriptions of nature, however, are also stepping-stones to the supernatural; conversely, the supernatural intrudes again and again on Pascoli's world. The world and its sounds speak to him in moments of deep emotion or brief epiphany, usually coming at twilight and mediated by the pealing of bells. In the preface to Canti di Castelvecchio, Pascoli anticipated objections to the numerous birds and bells in the volume. After defending the former, he considers the latter:

E sono anche qui campane e campani e campanelle e campanelli che suonano a gioia, a gloria, a messa, a morto; specialmente a morto. Troppo? Troppa questa morte? Ma la vita, senza il pensier della morte, senza, cioè, religione, senza quello che ci distingue dalle bestie, è un delirio, o intermittente o continuo, o stolido o tragico.

At first glance the poems in Canti di Castelvecchio, one of the earlier volumes of Pascoli's verse, simply record natural scenes or domestic events. Yet Pascoli repeatedly moves from these simple subjects to a consideration of the dead and the afterlife. This tension between

the natural and supernatural is most compelling in four poems from Canti di Castelvecchio: "L'Or di notte," "Notte d'inverno," "La Servetta di monte," and "Le Rane." In "L'or di notte" the sounds of the living wake the souls of the dead, who return and order the living to be quiet. In "Notte d'inverno" bells and the noise of a train make the poet reflect on a woman--real or imagined?--and the mystery of life. "La Servetta di monte" contrasts with the other poems in that the sounds awaken in the listener no awareness of another dimension of life. Finally, in "Le Rane" the poet questions the natural world and receives a response of sorts.

All four poems exemplify a typical Pascolian theme, namely the poet's dissatisfaction with the world he finds around him. Unable simply to accept the gifts of nature and the domestic ties he so cherishes, he seems always to feel the need to look beyond the obvious in the hope of achieving a deeper understanding of his sensibilities. His searching leads him to meditations that point up the constant interplay in his own mind of the mundane and the supernatural. It is precisely that central tension and its significance in Pascoli's poetry that I wish to explore in this essay.

The first sentence of "L'Or di notte" (given below) establishes the setting, and the rest of the poem is spoken by the dead in the succeeding stanzas.

Nelle case, dove ancora
si ragiona coi vicini
presso al fuoco, e già la nuora
porta a nanna i suoi bambini,
uno in collo e due per mano;

pel camino nero il vento,
tra lo scoppiettar dei ciocchi,
porta un suono lungo e lento,
tre, poi cinque, sette tocchi,
da un paese assai lontano:

tre, poi cinque et sette voci,
lente e languide, di gente:
voci dal borgo alle croci,
gente che non ha più niente:
--Fate piano! piano! piano!

In stanza 1 Pascoli quickly paints a warm family scene where neighbors converse before a fire and a mother leads her three children off to bed. Into this warm, human world comes a sinister note in stanza 2: the wind brings, down the black chimney, the bells of the parish church (as Pascoli explains in the notes, 614). The pealing is from "un paese assai lontano," but the far country rapidly draws near. Line 11, the first in stanza 3, is almost an exact repetition of line 9, and the lines almost rhyme (tocchi/voci). These "voci dal borgho alle croci," i.e., the cemetery, are of "gente che non ha più niente." They can no longer have anything of life on earth, yet they still have desires. The first words they utter to the living are an admonition for silence: "Fate piano! piano! piano!" This refrain is repeated at the ends of the next two stanzas with increasing vehemence, "piano" being repeated three, then four, then five times.

In stanza 4 we learn the nature of the desires of these unlaidd ghosts: they want quiet, for the sounds of human activity remind them of the physical world, which they miss intensely. They ask first for nescience ("Non vogliamo saper nulla") and list the poles of opposites which characterize life on earth ("notte? giorno? verno?

state?"). The sound they specifically forbid is the crying of the baby (ll. 18-19), which apparently stirs the deepest emotions. Stanza 5 mirrors stanza 4, but the dead are more specific. Not only does their awareness of life on earth bother them; they are also troubled by memories of their past lives ("Non vogliamo ricordare"). The items they then list are increasingly intimate: food, countryside, home, hearth, mother, children. The list trails off with ellipsis after "bimbi" (l. 24), suggesting the deepest emotions beyond words. Several of these elements we will see again: night, wind, bells, thoughts of the afterlife, and the quest for peace. Most important, it is the sound of bells that prompts the poet to think of the dead, to tell us of their return to the world of the living, yet he does not say whether the inhabitants of the house are aware of them.

"Notte d'inverno," unlike so much of Pascoli's poetry, which typically deals with birds and the natural world, is about the approach of a train and with it, the arrival of a particular woman.¹ The experience is disorienting, and the poet repeatedly confuses the sounds of the train with those of church bells, wind, and a river, elements more typically Pascolian. The poem falls into four sections, beginning with the ringing of a bell ("il Tempo"), and an ellipsis in line 2, indicating the poet's reverie. He hears a message in the bells and is lost in thought, only to be interrupted by the roar of the distant train--or is it the sound of the river? He is not sure and realizes that it had been sounding for some time before he became aware of it (Né prima io l'udiva, / lo strepito rapido, il pieno / fragore di treno"). In stanza 3 the bell is personified explicitly: it is "la voce straniera, / di bronzo" (perhaps a bit inimical?) which actively

seeks out the poet: "me chiese . . . / mi venne a trovare ov'io era." This "voce straniera" from the "torre lontana," undoubtedly that of the parish church, disturbs him, and one is reminded of "la voce di colui che grida nel deserto" (S. Giovanni, l. 23).

Section 2 opens with the train closer, and stanza 4 almost begins the poem over again, since it is closely modeled on stanza 1: the first sentence ends with ellipsis, and line 14 is a variation of line 3. In stanza 1 the poet is simply declarative ("è un treno"), and the train is still far off. In stanza 4, he is more involved ("Già sento") and more specific about the train: it is "la querula tromba che geme." Yet for all the increased noise, the poet is still not sure it is a train that he hears ("se non è l'urlo del vento"), or at least he thinks of it in terms of nature. In stanza 5 the roaring of the wind is reinforced with the repeated verbs ("rintrona rimbomba, / rimbomba rintrona") until it blends with the train's horn to produce a deafening effect. The "querula tromba" of line 13 is repeated in line 17, but this time Pascoli uses the indefinite article rather than the definite. Perhaps the horn of the train has reminded him of that other horn ("udii dietro a me una gran voce, come d'una tromba" [L'Apocalisse, l. 10]). In stanza 6 the poet addresses another human being who answers, which does not occur often in Canti di Castelvecchio. Again the poet is mistaken: this is not the train he was expecting.

In section 3, he addresses a "piccola dama" on the train. In stanza 7 the train is a "mostro dagli occhi di fuoco."² Then, in stanza 8, the poet asks the lady questions and reassures her: if she is cold and afraid, his home and heart will warm and protect her. At this point (l. 28) we

find the poem's only future tense verb ("Riameremo"), which stands alone as a complete sentence. The stanza ends in the present ("T'aspetto") and we realize with a jolt that the poet was not talking to another human being. This has been an interior monologue. With stanza 9, the last in section 3, the train finally arrives and stops. Again the first sentence ends in ellipsis. The poet exclaims not "Mia Dama" or "Mia giovane," but "Mia giovinezza." Was he expecting a real woman after all? Someone on the platform had already told him this was not the train he expected. Section 3 then ends with the last blast of the train's whistle "gemendo gemendo / nell'oscurità . . . ," the ellipsis suggesting its fading in the darkness and indicating the lapse of time between this and the final section. There is no reunion.

The first stanza of section 4 begins the poem yet again, for the bell (Time) is crying to the poet that it is day (was what preceded a dream?) as it marks the cycle of day and night, and the poet hears again the horn and the thundering noise. The endless rhythm of daily events is emphasized throughout the poem with the repeated verbs ("squillando squillando" [l. 10], "rintrona rimbomba, / rimbomba rintrona" [ll. 15-16], "tremando tremando" [l. 21], "gemendo gemendo" [l. 32], "vengono vengono" [l. 41], "piangendo piangendo" [l. 43]). Here the bell marks the succession of day and night, now grown much alike ("Il giono è coperto di brume"). The sounds of river and wind, confused with those of the train in sections 1 and 2, are now "flebile" and "labile." The river and the wind, always coming but never arriving, are like that wailing which seeks the soul but never arrives (ll. 42-44). As pointed out earlier, this last stanza, unlike the other five-line stanzas, does not end with

"nell'oscurità," and line 42 does not rhyme with line 44. The previous pattern has led us, however, to expect "nell'oscurità," and since we do not get that phrase but another which rhymes with it, we link the two together. The crying of the soul goes searching eternally in the darkness. The noise of bells and horns, disturbing and apocalyptic, signaled reunion with the beloved, but the reunion was merely illusion, and the soul continues its vain search for union and peace, just as the river and wind go on their way. This theme of the ceaseless quest for peace we will see again in "Le Rane."

"La Servetta di monte," by contrast, is filled with sounds which are lost in the darkness, but they apparently spur no reflection in the humble servant girl who hears them. The poem begins in the evening, a mule travels out of earshot, and the cries of a nightingale and an owl end with sunrise. There are 34 finite verbs, all in present tense, indicating that the narrator is describing the events from the point of view of the servant as they unfold around her. "La serva" seems to be the subject of 14 of the verbs, most of which ("è," "siede," "osserva," "conosca," "ode" [twice], "sente" [thrice], "vede" [twice], "guarda") denotes states or mental activities. Yet it is not entirely clear that she is, in fact, the subject of all of these verbs: "si sente" in lines 18 and 23 and "si vede" in line 22 may be merely impersonal constructions. "Fa" and "ritorna" in lines 5-6 mark her most dynamic action: she looks around the room and back to her apron! She is an attentive observer, but an unreflective and almost completely passive one, in contrast to the poet in "Notte d'inverno" or "Le Rane." The sights and sounds of the household and woods, especially the sounds, are presented as she observes them, merely absorbing them all. They do

not remind her of anything beyond herself; she asks no questions, for she is "selvaggia" (l. 2) and "nulla . . . conosca" (l. 7).

The poem begins with an ending ("Sono usciti tutti"), and the servant, as the verbs suggest, dominates stanza 1. Then her presence recedes in stanza 2 and continues to flicker in and out in the rest of the poem.

Stanza 2 describes the extreme quiet in the kitchen. It begins with the assertion that the servant recognizes nothing, implying that the things around her carry no deeper significance than their obvious utility, since she certainly knows what they are. The silence in this stanza, broken only by the buzzing of a fly on the windowpane and the bubbling of the pot, is almost palpable. This description of the kitchen continues in stanza 3: it is so still that a mouse ventures out, and the only sound is that of the water as it begins to boil. Pascoli uses one of his favorite devices, ellipsis (l. 16), as if to suggest the continuity of the events described. "Lontano lontano lontano" in the next line is an imitation of the distant sounding of the mule's bell. Some of the visual details in the poem are quite striking: the little drama of the mouse appearing and disappearing at the crack and the mule seen through the trees are especially effective. However, the sounds clearly dominate all other aspects of this poem, both in variety and persistence. The mule's bell in stanza 4, for example, is heard long after the mule is out of sight.

Stanza 5 is an aside on the seemingly unending twilight, and in it the poet's voice intrudes for the only time; surely the exclamations in the last four lines of this stanza

are not those of the servant who looks and listens so passively. In stanza 6 the servant appears again, named ("la ragazza") for the first time since line 1 ("la serva"). After the digression on the endless evening, the mule's bell is brought in again, heard now and then among the other sounds of the night. The long sentence which comprises the rest of the poem catalogs the sounds that veil and succeed the mule's bell: a cascading stream, leaves rustling in the breeze, the song of a nightingale, the hooting of an owl, and the trilling of a woodlark at dawn.

As mentioned above, the sound which persists in over half the poem (ll. 17-42) is that of the mule's bell (or is it pots and pans or other wares in his pack?). Church bells, which in the other poems trigger thoughts of the dead or metaphysical questions, are absent here, though mimicked in a lower register (the mule's bell is "campanaccio" in l. 23). The mule is presumably accompanied by a man, but he is not mentioned. The servant is the sole human being in the poem, and she is as unreflective as the mouse peeping out of the crack or the nightingale in the woods. This poem contains all the ingredients for the intrusion of the supernatural, but the servant girl does not have the consciousness for anything beyond the natural. She is immersed in, and part of, the simple events of the house and mountain, a stark contrast to the poet of "Notte d'inverno" or "Le Rane."

"Le Rane" is rich in sights, colors, sounds. Pascoli's precision in describing nature is everywhere apparent. He has not seen "fiori" but "fior di trifoglio," i.e. Trifolium incarnatum, and "fiengreco"; not "siepi" but "siepi di pruno"; not "alberi" but "pioppi"; not "fogliame" but "penero"; not "uccelli" but "canapine," either

Sylvia hippolais or Sylvia salicaria. And he tells us how the plants and animals look and sound with a rich, exact, often onomatopoeic vocabulary. The earth is "inondata" with clover, and the ditch is "soffice." The endless road doesn't swarm with birds at dawn; it is "tremula d'ali." The warbler's song is "lunghi lor gemiti uguali," a "tinnulo invito." The skylark "svolge dal cielo i gomitoli / d'oro." The frogs "gracchiano"; their croaking is like "lo strepere nero d'un treno / che va." The country Pascoli describes is a riot of vivid colors: "rosso," "verde," "giallicci," "nero," "giallo," "bianco," "rosa."

"Le Rane" is constructed symmetrically. In stanza 1 Pascoli tells us what the countryside looks like, in stanza 2 he asks a series of questions, and in stanza 3 he introduces the frogs for the first time, ending the first half of the poem with ellipsis. Stanza 4 gives another description, primarily visual but auditory too, continued in stanza 5, which ends with a response to the questions in stanza 2 in the form of commands to the poet. Stanza 6 again is about the croaking of the frogs and also ends with ellipsis.

The poem begins in the past, lines 1-2 and 3-4 being almost mirror images with the ABAB rhyme and anaphora ("Ho visto . . . ho visto"). One can almost smell the clover and see the hedges and road lined with poplars disappearing in the distance. The endless road links stanzas 1 and 2 and brings the poet out of his meditation on the past and into the present. It is dawn ("all'alba" l. 10), and he is surrounded by mystery. He describes nature precisely, but he does not understand it and must ask questions, for the road and the birds' songs seem weighted with significance beyond their obvious utility for travel and courtship. The first half of the poem

is brought to a close with the shorter stanza 3, which for the first time introduces the frogs, announced in the title. It is still dawn, as the light is soft ("lume sereno" l. 20). The response to the questions of stanza 2 is the sempiternal croaking of the frogs, croaking that is "lo strepere nero d'un treno / che va . . ." forever, the ellipsis suggests. The use here of a train to describe a natural sound will be taken up below. At this point the frog's croaking has no apparent meaning; it is merely noted. Yet when Pascoli considers it again in stanza 6, it does have deeper significance.

The ellipsis at the end of stanza 3 marks a turning point, and the rest of the poem takes place at sunset, as is made clear in stanza 5. Pascoli has purposely excluded other human beings from this poem. Indeed, as we see in stanza 4, it is not a shepherd or some other person who plays the rustic flute; there is simply "un sufolo suona." Anaphora in the next two lines ("Tra campi . . . tra campi" (ll. 25-26)) emphasizes the multiplicity in the poet's surroundings. The repetition in line 27, "mi trovo; mi trovo," however, runs counter to the sense, or perhaps expresses the poet's wish to find himself. He finds himself among these precisely described objects and sounds, but he does not find himself, because he is, in fact, lost among them, wondering about their meaning as they speak to him. Among red and yellow fields, on a green plain whitened by churches, he finds himself ("mi trovo" is repeated a third time, perhaps to convince himself). "Dolce" fits the countryside he has described, and "lontano" recalls the endless road "che si perde / lontano" (ll. 7-8). Yet this is not his country. It is a far country, and one is reminded of that other traveler, "il figliuol più giovane . . . se ne andò in paese lontano" (S.

Luca, 15. 13).

Like stanza 4, the fifth stanza opens with sounds made by humans, but the people are not mentioned, just their "voci." The tired voices (l. 32), the long shadows of the crosses extending over the road (ll. 33-34), and the pink sky (l. 35) indicate that it is evening. The pealing of the bells comes "notando nel cielo di rosa." The bells must be the angelus, calling the faithful to prayer, and they reinforce the idea that the poet is a pilgrim or prodigal, that this is not his country: "Ritorna! Rimane! / Riposa!" Churches, tired people at end of day, crosses by the road, bells ringing--all naturally remind Pascoli of man's journey and his destination, which he considers with the croaking of the frogs in the last stanza.

Stanza 6 is in many ways a reprise of the third. Both have only six lines, both are about the croaking of the frogs, both end with ellipsis. Since these two stanzas alone justify the title, and since they fall in the middle and end of the poem, they must be especially important. The world of the poem is the pre-industrial countryside. The only works of man are the road, churches and rustic flute--and the train, brought in only as a metaphor in stanza 3 to describe the croaking of the frogs.³ As we have seen, Pascoli also called the train "mostro" in "Notte d'inverno." Seen in that light, Pascoli's train metaphor in "Le Rane" is unexpected, since he uses it to describe the natural world in terms of human technology.⁴ Such a metaphor suggests that man's activity, his technology, is as much a part of nature as are frogs and is as meaningless--or meaningful--as their croaking. In stanza 6 we cannot tell whether the train is a literal or metaphorical one; in fact, it may well be both.⁵

Regardless, Pascoli's train is symbolic of a futile endeavor, moving continually, yet going nowhere, "searching, ever searching / that which never is, that which ever / will be . . ." The train emblemizes, then, not simply technology, but all human activity in the idyllic world of nature which is still not man's world, this "paese / lontano" in which bells summon one home.

These poems illustrate effectively the central tension of unfulfilled desire in Pascoli's poetry. Deeply moved by nature and domestic ties, he cannot enjoy them alone. The dead and religion constantly call to him, although he resists those summonses. Whether or not the people in "L'Or di notte" are aware of the return of the dead we cannot know, but their presence, mediated by the church bell, disturbs the poet's contemplation of a pleasant evening. In "Notte d'inverno" the sounds of machine and nature, of church bell and train horn, of wind, river, and train, are mingled and confused. Day resembles night, and the formal repetitions in the poem suggest that the dream of reunion with the poet's beloved--or his youth--is recurrent. The confusion of sounds indicates the poet's confused state of mind and contrasts with the discrete descriptions in the other poems. In "La Servetta di monte" the supernatural does not intrude at all, though there are bells, the usual trigger for that intrusion. The crucial difference between this and the other poems is the subject, the servant girl, who is not haunted by questions of a larger existence. She is as much a part of her surroundings as the mouse which peeks out of the crack. Whether Pascoli envies her simplicity or not--and he gives us no clue--he cannot have her freedom from the questions that torment him. "Le Rane" can be read allegorically.

In the morning (youth), the poet enjoys nature in all its multiplicity and sees that the activities of man and nature are of the same order. In the evening (old age), human activities play a larger role (though observed from a distance and subordinate to nature) and religion intrudes. However, the most important and final image is of the ceaseless activity of man and nature, which never stops and never arrives at its goal. Though Pascoli dearly loves nature and domestic ties, he is "cercando, cercando mai sempre / ciò che non è mai, ciò che sempre / sarà. . . ."

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Notes

¹One cannot read this poem without thinking of another poem about a train, Carducci's "Alla stazione in una mattina d'autunno." Pascoli surely read that poem by his older contemporary, but whereas in Carducci's poem the poet is seeing his lover off, in "Notte d'inverno" he is awaiting a woman on the train.

²This is an echo of Carducci's train in "Alla stazione in una mattina d'autunno," which has "fiammei / occhi" and is "l'empio mostro" (ll. 30-31, 33).

³Carducci had called the train a horrible monster in "Alla stazione in una mattina d'autunno"; in "A Satana" he had used it as a

symbol of progress, of the triumph of reason over religion and superstition.

⁴We are hardly surprised when Carducci calls the train "mostro" and develops the metaphor at length. Personifying machines to indicate their effects on people is one of the most natural poetic devices, but Pascoli is not merely trying for a novel effect.

⁵The train, one of man's technological enterprises, is neither Carducci's monster of "Alla stazione . . . ," grinding man down, nor the reason of "A Satana," liberating him from the past.

Bibliography

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