

*Tempo. Excursions in 21st-Century Italian Poetry*, ed. Luca Paci (Parthian)

The first thing to say is what a beautiful production this book is, and a 300+ page hardback for £15 is a bargain. The second thing is that this is my kind of anthology: it doesn't make outrageous claims for itself, there's no bullshit about Italian poetry being the new rock & roll, just a wide-ranging sample of what is going on, with each of the 22 authors given a brief introduction and enough pages for a decent selection of their work.

Most of these authors are new to me. I am one of the readers Paci mentions in his Introduction, who knows the usual few Italian poets (Montale, Buffalino, Quasimodo, Ungaretti), although I have got Jamie McKendrick's Faber anthology on my shelves. It's clear I've been missing out, although I don't like everything included here. And whilst I don't read or speak much Italian, even I can see from the Italian versions here, that there is a musicality and alliteration missing from many of the English translations.

There are some key subjects here, one being a kind of obsession with death, another recent Italian history. I'm writing this a few days after being in Bologna, and one of the novels I read there was about the revolutions and bombings in the 80s, a subject Matteo Fantuzzi writes about, sometimes in general terms (one of his poems is called 'The meaning of a massacre'), but at other times very specifically, as in 'If from the square you start walking and stay under the arches', which has a note pinning the poem to the specifics of 'A bomb exploded in the heart of Bologna Second of August 1980':

If from the square you start walking and stay under the arches  
in the city centre and manage to pass in one fell swoop  
that crowd, the sales, shop windows, the small desk for signatures,  
if you manage not to stop in front of that homeless  
one his knees as a Christ who is begging for  
coins, and who is praying to everybody for money, if all of a sudden  
you remain strong and start running, stopping to glance  
elsewhere you will find yourself all of a sudden on the left  
the place lying with open legs and in the middle the wound  
which still gives a hint, which remembers the day  
when people were the same for that one time,  
and only that one.

All communists, priests. All *bolegnesi*.

I especially love that 'all of a sudden on the left' which is both political and geographical allusion, but the whole thing repositions the contemporary city in the past in a kind of time shift, as well as being both informative and uplifting.

Antonella Anedda, whose poems appear first in the book, is more oblique. She writes about a world of forensic medicine, anatomy (Bologna is home to a couple of collections of early anatomical waxworks and skeletons of the diseased and disabled; not to mention numerous saints' relics and corpses) and the dead, but declares in 'VI' that 'language has no innocence', going on to say in poetic self-awareness:

And so I write with reluctance  
with a few dry stumps of phrases  
boxed into humdrum language  
which I arrange so as to call out  
down there as far as the dark  
that sounds the bells

Elsewhere there are more mundane poems. Fabio Franzin's narrative poem about Marta and how she has spent 25 years sanding frames for a job explains too much and seems rather ordinary, as does Mariangela Gualteri's romantic declaration 'I have been a girl in the rose garden / a nymph'. Really? I am not convinced.

Mostly, however, the poetry in *Tempo* is intriguing and fresh. Andrea Inglese plays with notions of borders and frames, force-justifying her poems inside boxes on the page; she also writes inward looking poems that consider the way they are being written and read. Valerio Magrelli's writing can also be self-aware, but he mostly writes down-to-earth, warmhearted love poems, for instance in 'The Embrace', which moves from a sleepy kiss through prehistoric imagery to its memorable conclusion:

And we are the wicks, the two tongues  
flickering on that single Paleozoic torch.

'Lai of Reasoning Slowly' is a ruminative and engrossing poem by Lello Voce, a poet and performer, which winds its leisurely way over several pages in stepped patterns; Marco Giovenale offers both condensed prose poems and thinner, more spacious short poems; the selection of Maria Grazia Calandrone's work offers some longer, dense and busy texts, including a prose poem sequence about an actual murderer who killed his parents. This makes use intriguing of advertising slogans and phrases from *Miami Vice* as section headings or narrative interruptions.

Elsewhere, Calandrone perhaps sums up this anthology at the start of her poem 'Intellect of Love':

Poetry is anarchic, it follows only its own laws, it cannot and must not bend to anything except itself.

Its inner law is rhythm, pure and simple music.

That explains why we can be moved by poetry we hear read in languages we do not know.

I'm not convinced that poetry needs to move us, but *Tempo* is full of music of all sorts, and is a wonderful door into a different literary world from the one I mostly inhabit. These are excursions I intend to keep making, poets whose work I hope to find more of and enjoy.

Rupert Loydell