Classic Poetry Series

Giovanni Pascoli
- poems -

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Giovanni Pascoli(31 December 1855 - 6 April 1912)

Giovanni Pascoli was an Italian poet and classical scholar.

Life

Giovanni Pascoli was born at San Mauro di Romagna (in his honor renamed "San Mauro Pascoli" in 1932), into a well-to-do family. He was the fourth of ten children of Ruggero Pascoli and Caterina Vincenzi Alloccatelli. His father was administrator of an estate of farm land of the Princes Torlonia on which the Pascoli family lived.

On the evening of Aug. 10, 1867 as Ruggero Pascoli was returning home from the market at Cesena in a carriage drawn by a black and white mare (una cavalla storna), he was shot and killed by an assassin hiding in a ditch by the road. The mare continued slowly on her way and brought home the body of her slain master. The murderer was never apprehended.

Giovanni Pascoli had a tragic childhood, struck by the murder of his father and the early deaths of his mother, sister and two brothers, and the subsequent financial decline of the family. The father's assassination echoes in particular in one of his most popular poems, "La cavallina storna" . His whole first work, Myricae (1891), reflects his unhappy childhood.

In 1871 he moved to Rimini with six of his brothers. Here he made friends with Andrea Costa, and began to participate in Socialist demonstrations. This led to another key event in Pascoli's life, his brief imprisonment in Bologna following a protest against the capture of the anarchist Giovanni Passannante.

Pascoli studied at the University of Bologna, where his teacher and mentor was Giosuè Carducci. He graduated in 1882, and began to teach in high schools in Matera and Massa. He lived next to his sisters Ida and Maria, in an attempt to renew the original family, building a "nest" (as he called it) for the sisters and himself. Although he was almost married, it is speculated that he never did because of an immature and perhaps ambiguous relationship with his sisters.

In the meantime he began to collaborate with the magazine Vita nuova, which published his first poems later collected in Myricae. In 1894 Pascoli was called to Rome to work for the Ministry of Public Instruction, and there he published the first version of Poemi conviviali. Later he moved between cities living in Bologna, Florence and Messina, but remained always psychologically rooted to his original,

idealized peasant origins.

In 1895 he and his sister Maria moved into a house at Castelvecchio, near Barga, in Tuscany, bought with money gained from literary awards. The political and social turmoil of the early 20th century, which was to lead to Italy's participation in World War I and to the advent of Fascism, further strengthened Pascoli's insecurity and pessimism.

From 1897 to 1903 he taught Latin at the University of Messina, and then in Pisa. When Carducci retired, Pascoli replaced him as professor of Italian literature at the University of Bologna. In 1912, already ill of cirrhosis (from alcohol abuse), Giovanni Pascoli died of liver cancer at the age of 56 in Bologna. An atheist, he was entombed in the chapel annexed to his house at Castelvecchio, where his beloved sister, Maria, would also be laid to rest.

Poetics

His earlier poems look simple, and focus particularly on domestic life and nature. However, Pascoli, even in that period of Positivism and scientism, believes that life is a mystery; only symbolic associations discovered in the humble things of nature can lead man to catch a glimpse of the truth behind mere appearances.

His later poems share similar themes but are more experimental, and reflect his knowledge of classical antiquity. They were a great influence on later Italian poets, who incorporated his melancholy themes into their own works. He wrote in both Italian and Latin; he also translated English poetry. His numerous poems in Latin gained many international awards.

In 1897 Pascoli issued a detailed definition of his poetical stance, which he called poetica del fanciullino ("poetics of the child") and which showed the influence of Sully and von Hartmann. Poetry, according to Pascoli, would be the unceasing capability to get stunned by the world, typical of childhood, secondarily connected to the expressive capabilities of the aged. In a refusal of both Classicism and Romanticism, Pascoli opposed both the renunciation of self-analysis and the abandonment of the self-centered point of view, in favour of a semi-irrational comfort which the poet gives himself through poetry.

Pascoli's poetry shows interesting affinities with European symbolism, even if direct influences cannot be demonstrated. A wide use of analogy and synesthesia, a very subtle musicality, a lexicon open both to foreign languages and to vernacular or onomatopeic voices are major signs of a literary research oriented towards modern poetical language.

Part of Pascoli's work was translated into English by Lawrence Venuti, who in 2007 was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Humanities for that reason. In 2010 Red Hen Press published first appearance of Pascoli’s poems in English translation, under the title "Last Voyage: Selected Poems of Giovanni Pascoli." Pascoli was also known as a prose essayist and for his Dante studies.

In The Fog

I stared into the valley: it was gone—
wholly submerged! A vast flat sea remained,
gray, with no waves, no beaches; all was one.

And here and there I noticed, when I strained,
the alien clamoring of small, wild voices:
birds that had lost their way in that vain land.

And high above, the skeletons of beeches,
as if suspended, and the reveries
of ruins and of the hermit’s hidden reaches.

And a dog yelped and yelped, as if in fear,
I knew not where nor why. Perhaps he heard
strange footsteps, neither far away nor near—

echoing footsteps, neither slow nor quick,
alternating, eternal. Down I stared,
but I saw nothing, no one, looking back.

The reveries of ruins asked: “Will no
one come?” The skeletons of trees inquired:
“And who are you, forever on the go?”

I may have seen a shadow then, an errant
shadow, bearing a bundle on its head.
I saw—and no more saw, in the same instant.

All I could hear were the uneasy screeches
of the lost birds, the yelping of the stray,
and, on that sea that lacked both waves and beaches,

the footsteps, neither near nor far away.

Giovanni Pascoli

La Quercia Caduta

Dov’era l’ombra, or sé la quercia spande
morta, né più coi turbini tenzona.
La gente dice: Or vedo: era pur grande!

Pèndono qua e là dalla corona
i nidietti della primavera.
Dice la gente: Or vedo: era pur buona!

Ognuno loda, ognuno taglia. A sera
ognuno col suo grave fascio va.
Nell’aria, un pianto… d’una capinera

che cerca il nido che non troverà.

Giovanni Pascoli

Last Dream

Out of a motionless infernal
shudder and clang of steel on steel
as wagons moved toward the eternal,
a sudden silence: I was healed.

The stormcloud of my sickness fled
on a breath. A flickering of eyes,
and I saw my mother by my bed
and gazed at her without surprise.

Free! Helpless, yes, to move the hands
clasped on my chest—but I had no
desire to move. The rustling sounds
(like cypress trees, like streams that flow

across vast prairies seeking seas
that don’t exist) were thin, insistent:
I followed after those vain sighs,
ever the same, ever more distant.

Giovanni Pascoli

Night-Blooming Jasmine

And the night-blooming flowers open,
open in the same hour I remember those I love.
In the middle of the viburnums
the twilight butterflies have appeared.

After a while all noise will quiet.
There, only a house is whispering.
Nests sleep under wings,
like eyes under eyelashes.

Open goblets exhale
the perfume of strawberries.
A light shines there in the room,
grass sprouts over the graves.

A late bee buzzes at the hive
finding all the cells taken.
The Hen runs through the sky’s blue
yard to the chirping of stars.

The whole night exhales
a scent that disappears in the wind.
A light ascends the stairs;
it shines on the second floor: goes out.

And then dawn: the petals close
a little crumpled. Something soft
and secret is brooding in an urn,
some new happiness I can’t understand yet.

Giovanni Pascoli

Novembre/ November

Novembre

Gemmea l’aria, il sole così chiaro
che tu ricerchi gli albicocchi in fiore,
e del prunalbo l’odorino amaro
senti nel cuore

Ma secco è il pruno, e le stecchite piante
di nere trame segnano il sereno,
e vuoto il cielo, e cavo al piè sonante
sembra il terreno.

Silenzio, intorno: solo, alle ventate,
odi lontano, da giardini ed orti,
di foglie un cader fragile. È l’estate,
fredda, dei morti.

November

The jeweled air: the clear sun:
you look for the f lowering apricot tree,
and smell the bitter scent of hawthorn
in your heart.

But the thorn has dried out, and skeletal plants
weave black threads into the clear blue sky,
into the empty vault of heaven, and the hollow earth
rings with every footstep.

Silence, all around: from far away you hear
only the gusting of the wind, and from the orchards
and gardens, the fragile descent of leaves. It is
the cold summer of the dead.

Giovanni Pascoli

Passage

The swan sings. From deep in the marshes,
its voice chimes sharp and clear
like the striking of copper cymbals.

This is the endless polar darkness.
Great mountains of eternal frost
lean against the ice plates of the ocean.

The swan sings; and slowly the sky
fades into the darkness and tints itself yellow.
A green light rises from star to star.

The swan’s metal voice rings like a harp
caressed here and there; already the green
northern lights glaze the icy mountain peaks.

And in the deepening night,
an immense iridescent arc grows
into huge ladders that spread open the aurora.

The green and vermillion glow catches fire,
shoots rays, pulsates, subsides, rises again,
exploding, all in utter silence.

With a sound like the bell’s final
angelus chime, the swan shakes its wings:
the wings open, and lift, enormous,
pure white, into the boreal night.

Giovanni Pascoli

The Gold Of Night

In the houses where one
still converses with neighbors
beside the fire; where already
the daughter-in-law brings to
Grandma her babies,
one in her arms, two by the hand;
through the black chimney,
amid the crackling of logs,
the wind carries a sound long and slow:
three, five, seven chimes
from a village very far away:
three, five, seven voices
of people, slow and languid:
voices from a hamlet at the crosses,
people who no longer have anything.
Be silent! Silent! Silent!
We do not want to know.
Night? Day? Winter? Summer?
Silent, you with that cradle!
See that the infant does not cry. Be
silent! Silent! Silent! Silent!
We do not want to remember
wine and wheat, mountains and plains,
the cabins, the hearth.
Mother, babies, Be silent!
Silent! Silent! Silent! Silent!

Giovanni Pascoli

Xxiii. The Truth

And there was a flowering garden in the sea,
in a sea glossy as the sky; and a song
of two Sirens did not resound yet,
because the meadow was distant.
And the old hero felt a strong premonition,
a current running in the calm sea,
pushing the boat toward the Sirens;
and he told the men to raise their oars:
“The ship turns away from them now, friends!
But don't worry that the roar of the rowing
disturbs the songs of the Sirens. By now
we should hear them. Listen to the song
calmly, your arms on the oarlocks.”
And the current running quiet and smooth
pushes the ship forward more and more.
And the godlike Odysseus sees at the top
of the blooming island, the Sirens,
stretched out among the flowers, heads
erect, upright on idle elbows, watching
the rosy sun rising across from them;
watching, motionless; and their long shadows
were stripes across the island of flowers.
'Are you sleeping? The dawn has passed
already. Already eyes under delicate brows
look for the sun. Sirens, I am still mortal.
I heard you, but I could not stop.”
And the current ran on, quiet and smooth,
pushing the ship forward more and more.
And the old man sees the two Sirens,
their eyebrows raised high above their pupils,
gazing straight ahead, at the fixed sun,
or at him, in his black ship.
And over the unchanging calm of the sea,
a voice rises from him, deep and sure,
'I am he! I’ve returned, to learn!
I am here, as you see me now.
Yes; all that I see in the world
regards me; questions me: asks me what I am.”
And the current ran on, quiet and smooth,

pushing the ship forward more and more.
And the old man sees a great pile of bones
men's bones, and shriveled skin near them,
close to the Sirens, stretched out,
motionless, on the shore, like two reefs.
“I see. Let it be. You may be innocent. But
how much this hard pile of bones
has grown. Speak, you two.
Tell me the truth, to me alone,
of all men, before I doubt that I have lived!”
And the current ran on, quiet and smooth,
pushing the ship forward more and more.
And the ship thrust itself high, and above,
the brows of the two Sirens with the fixed eyes looked on.
'I will have but a moment. I beg
you! At least tell me what I am, what I will be.”
And between the two reefs the ship was shattered.

Giovanni Pascoli

Xxiv. Calypso

And the blue sea loved him, swept him
far out for nine days and nights,
swept him to a distant island,
to the cave covered with leaves
of grape vines blooming to the edge.
And around it, a gloomy forest
of alders and pungent cypresses;
and hawks and owls and squawking crows
making their nests there. And nothing left alive,
neither god nor man, ever stepped there.
Then, among the leaves of the forest, the hawks
beat their noisy wings, chasing out
the owls from holes in the old trees,
and from branches, the squawking crows
flapped at the thing that came from the sea.
And Calypso wove a song inside herself,
near the fragrant blaze of a cedar,
astonished, hearing an uproar in the forest,
and, in her heart, said: "Oh, I heard omens,
the voice of the crow and the hoot of the owl!
And among the dense leaves the hawks are fluttering.
Is it because they have seen, on the crest of a wave,
some god, who, like a huge cormorant, dives through
the impossible whirlpools of the sea?
Or moves without footsteps, like the wind, over
the soft meadow of violets and white flowers?
But it seems too far away for me to hear.
There's a hatred the gods have for solitary
Calypso. And I know it well, from when
I sent the man I loved back to the sea
to his sadness. O can you see, owl
with your round eyes, and you, squawking crows?"
And so she left, gold spool in hand,
and kept watch. He lay on the earth, beyond
the sea, at the foot of the cave, just a man, sleeping
on the last journey's wave: and he, white-headed,
knew that cave of hers very well,
and above him a vine shoot, trembling
a little, hung with long clusters of grapes.

It was Odysseus: the sea returned him
to his goddess: it brought him back dead
to the solitary Calypso, to the deserted island
that branched out from the navel of the eternal sea.
Naked, he returned, who once was clothed in garments
of plants the eternal goddess gave him;
white and trembling in death, he who once
wore the immortality of his youth.
And she wrapped the hero in a cloud
of her hair, and she howled across the arid
waves where no one could hear:
'Not to be! Not to be! More than nothing,
but less than dead, not ever to be again.'

Giovanni Pascoli