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WHOLLY FALSETTO
WITH
PEOPLE DANCING

OTIS BOOKS | SEISMICITY EDITIONS

The Graduate Writing program

Otis College of Art and Design

LOS ANGELES ● 2013

down in the thimble again, and now
real estaters, subdividers, landlords, freeway
engineers arguing. this is their land and
I walk on it, live on it a little while...

Corrado Costa, born at Mulino di Bazzano (Parma), August 2, 1929, died in his hometown of Reggio Emilia, February 9, 1991. Apparently in mid-sentence, as witty as ever, according to Rosanna Chiessi with whom he was walking. With Corrado peering over the wheel of his Mercedes (he was barely five-and-a-half feet tall), or seemingly trotting at my side, I discovered Italy. (He liked to tell people that I was his bodyguard.) Secret, mysterious, out-of-the-way, often-difficult-to-find-again Italy. I translated two of his books of poetry, two plays (adapted for radio), as well as numerous selections of poems, all the while struck by his wondrously comic and various imagination. Perhaps one may glimpse Corrado's mind in the following bio note he wrote in 1989: "Corrado Costa are two brothers. They bear the same name. They have the same birth date, even if the term 'brother' arose from some quick thinking nine years later, unknown to their mother Maria Viappiani, and in the presence of their teacher Moser, Fifth Grade, Filippo Re Elementary School. First row on the left. First desk. The teacher seizes a lined notebook edition of the unpublished *Rime in X and Y*. In a loud voice, for the benefit of the whole class, the teacher expands on the theme of wasting time (read: poetry) and of poor application (read: literature). In his defense, Corrado Costa replies: 'It's my brother's.' Thus, in the humiliation and hubbub, is born the poet brother as a ward of the brother with a degree in jurisprudence. From then on the lawyer has to submit to all kinds of questioning: 'What does your brother do? Where is he? Why don't we ever see him?' Or, better yet: 'Did you see what he did?' Or: 'Please explain him to me, because I don't understand at all.' The situation grows worse. The poet charges humiliations, problems, bills and debts to the professional brother. The lawyer works and

the do-nothing poet lives happy, enthusiastic and unknown. He passes on shocking news and continually advances proposals like: 'I met Antonio Delfini (1962) and I invited him to eat eels at Comacchio.' And the brother pays. 'We are starting a group of Estense poets, under the aegis of Ciro Menotti, against the poets of Parma.' And the brother pays. 'I'm going to the Gruppo 63 meeting. I'm going to Rome for the journal *Quindici*, for the magazine *Il Caffé*. We're going to publish our own magazine, *Malebolge*. The expenses mount. Fine. But publishing, what will we publish? Eighteen poems thanks to Vanni Scheiwiller (*Pseudobaudelaire*, 1964), another twenty (*Our Positions*, Geiger, 1972), another eighteen in the U.S. (*The Complete Films*, Red Hill, 1983). All on account of the professional brother, because if it were up to the other, we would still be stuck on the proposal made to the publisher Guanda, in 1950, for the never written *Meeting in the Water with Emerging Woman*. Ten poems submitted, the request for thirty more was never fulfilled. Now the poet complains that any production following *Pseudobaudelaire* will be viewed as adapting to writing 'after' the improbable poems he was forced to write 'before' *Pseudobaudelaire*, waiting for this text to become actual and contemporaneous. Meanwhile, at the poetry festival at Cogolin (1984), he declares: 'I don't do anything, but I do it slowly.' So we ask ourselves: does the poet's biography mask that of the professional or does the professional's mask that of the poet? Or is it the case, as both brothers sustain, that neither of them has the so-called right to a biography? Certainly we know that, for the second edition of *Pseudobaudelaire* (Scheiwiller, 1986), the professional brother, asked by the poet, 'You write the bio,' answered the publisher as follows: 'Time does not unfold in poetry time. Write this: poetry stands still.'"

Cherokee. Not the bebop standard but the young and strikingly beautiful Cherokee woman – with the most ravishing cascade of black hair – who got into my cab and whom I drove to an apartment house on the corner of Cherokee and Yucca in

Hollywood. She was stoned and said she was special, considered almost “holy” back home. She was an hermaphrodite; she said, “Wanna see?” from the back seat of the cab. I believed her, I said, but she insisted. And so she was. Cherokee on Cherokee.

Dd

Doubly votive in a warm, soft dusk, even for a Los Angeles Christmas Eve, with a couple of muffled dog barks somewhere downhill.

Besides being one of the most esteemed critics of his generation – his two books on Ezra Pound are still important in the field – Donald *Davie* (1922–1995) was a poet of discourse; what, in his book on 18th century verse, he calls “a poetry of statement.” However sustained by a tough-minded, North Country Protestantism, Davie’s talk, both in his prose and poetry, is as cool and sharp as any of the post-War British “Movement” poets, with its anti-romantic posture and desire for an austerity that is almost downright sentimental. As Davie once said to me, “We’re all romantics after all. We can’t help it.”

After taking his course on Pound, which got me through a terrifically disappointing first semester of graduate school, I signed up for what he called a “poetry course” in my second semester, where he selected seven of us, grads and undergrads, to meet with him individually one hour a week. It was like a shrink’s hour in which we could talk to him about anything to do with our writing, and often a lot more. It was the start of 1969, difficult and querulous times, indeed. Though not unsympathetic, he tolerated my political fervor and encouraged me to develop a practice as a poet-translator. He said, in true Poundian fashion, that translation would keep me honest, my eye on the subject, allow me to bring poetic values not found in our language into play, and, “as close to doodling as poets can get, especially during those dry times.” He handed me

an issue of *Poetry Australia* (Fall 1967), with a supplement on Italian poetry, edited by Frederick May, including poets from Marinetti to Adriano Spatola, and I was off and running. Started in translating pieces of Vittorio Sereni's *Algerian Diary* (World War II prisoner-of-war poems) and on to where I retranslated many of poets in the Australian magazine. Besides Sereni, I would meet Adriano Spatola, Antonio Porta, Elio Pagliarani, Pasolini and others in those pages.

There were two other poets he wanted me specifically to know, both Americans: George Oppen and Ed Dorn. And on it went, Davie having sown several of the seeds, besides old Uncle Ez, for what would remain central in my life as a writer. One more thing about Donald Davie's influence. When, in 1999, I founded the Graduate Writing program at Otis College of Art and Design, a basic feature of our course of study was a requirement, for poets and fiction writers alike, called "History and Practice of Translation," having in mind Davie's (and Pound's) insistence on translation as a vital source of education, as well as innovation. Twelve years later this is the only required seminar that remains in our curriculum, and a class that students continue to point to as one of their most valuable experiences in our program.

I began losing track of Davie when he moved to Stanford, and certainly a few years later when I quit grad school, in the process of writing my dissertation on Pound. But, as they were fond of saying at Trinity (Dublin), *there he is*, one of the fairest and most honest readers of poetry. His critical opinions illuminated his poetry and vice versa, as here in a piece on Ezra Pound's incarceration at the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks near Pisa:

Ezra Pound in Pisa

Excellence is sparse
I am made of a Japanese mind
Concerning excellence:
However sparred or fierce