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## Amelia Rosselli's *Sleep (Sonno)*: Beyond the Double-Margin

When the title for the present conference, "Exile and the Exile of Self," was presented to me, my first impulse was to entitle my own talk "Eggsalad and the Eggsalad of Self." Interestingly enough, when I spell-checked this document with my computer, the dictionary wanted me to replace the word "eggsalad" with the word "exile." Since "eggsalad" had no meaning for my computer, perhaps my title **would** have meaning for the Lacanian "exile" who crossing the desert came across a tablet with such an epithet as my would-be title. Lacan writes:

Suppose that in the desert you find a stone covered with hieroglyphics. You do not doubt for a moment that, behind them, there was a subject who wrote them. But it is an error to believe that each signifier is addressed to you—this is proved by the fact you cannot understand any of it. On the other hand you define them as signifiers, by the fact that you are sure that each of these signifiers is related to each of the others.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Tarzan who uncovers the ABC-primer his deceased parents had intended him to read, and deduces that the letters are insects crawling on the page, Lacan's desert-traveler is capable of identifying a process of signification.<sup>2</sup>

This recognition of the "precedence of the signifier" may perhaps be represented metaphorically by the elusive etymon of the word "exile." Philologists speculate that it derives from the Latin *ex solum*, "chased away from one's own soil." This possible etymology, however, reveals the modern poet's task of articulation: the lyric voice seeks to breach and transgress codes of linguistic competence. Poets wish to venture outside of tradition and glorify the "precedence of the signifier," or the signifier before a state of articulation. They attempt to grasp an enunciation before it reaches the stage of "secondary articulation."

As my colleague, Carmen Di Cinque, has already illustrated, Amelia Rosselli is herself an exile of sorts. My talk today, however, deals with a more recent publication in which Rosselli not only breaches lyric tradition, but also breaches the geographic literary tradition of her home soil by writing in English.

As Freud teaches, our lives are permeated with the desire to return to an

organic state, to return to the soil. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The final release is, of course, death: Hamlet's "Undiscovered Country," where the economy of Western tradition has finally been eradicated, where all codes and systems of meaning have been deconstructed. Yet death is not to be embraced without some reservation, Hamlet warns:

To die, to sleep—  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. (*Hamlet* III.i.64-68)

Amelia Rosselli's *Sleep* (*Sonno*) is a journey into her "Undiscovered Country" in which the Italian poet revisits her linguistic formation and her "mistrust of language(s)," as Emmanuela Tandello has called it (364).

The work is a series of poems in English composed by Rosselli between 1953 and 1966: as a collection of poems it represents the (im)possibilities of interpretation and exegesis that occur when poetic language breaches the nonplused confines of the Western lyric tradition. Rosselli's *langue* or "linguistic competence" does so in an especially perplexing manner because it is based on a polyglot conception of language that opaquely moves in and out of English through paronomasia and calks of Italian words and graphemic representation of Italian language with English characters. It is perplexing and problematic, however, not in a pejorative sense; it is an experimentation that subverts normative codes of linguistic and lyric tradition.

The nature or genesis of this subversion lies perhaps in the origin of Rosselli's (ab)normative linguistic formation. She was born in Italy to an Italophone father and an Anglophone mother. At a young age her family moved to Paris where French was spoken at home.<sup>3</sup> A breach was already present in the poet's linguistic formation: Italian was the language of the father, and the presence of the mother-tongue, English, was usurped by French. From France, after the assassination of her father, she moved with her mother and siblings to England, and then to the United States. During this period, 1940-1946, we can only assume that she spoke English in the home, and in America the poet herself affirms that she had institutionalized schooling: "Feci gli studi ginnasiali e liceali sino a quindici anni, seguendo per ultimo dei corsi estivi in vista del mio ritorno in Italia, che avvenne nel 1946" (*Antologia* 151). It was upon her return to Italy, however, that the first shock to her linguistic identity would come about:

A sedici anni, dunque, raggiunsi Firenze, e qui ci furono delle complicazioni.  
 Gli studi che avevo fatto [negli Stati Uniti] non erano equiparabili, fu una

grossa delusione per me. Volevano che studiassi con i tredicenni, io rifiutai.  
(*Antologia* 151)

Indeed, it must have been tremendous for a sixteen-year-old to find that the scholastic institution of her native Italy would not recognize the experience of her early adolescent socialization. As a result she returned to London to continue her studies: "A Firenze vissi qualche mese, mi trasferii a Londra per riprendere gli studi, che non erano risultati validi in Italia" (*Antologia* 151). Her words, "ci furono molte complicazioni," seem to indicate that what once had been pure and simple, had in turn become complicated and diverse. Moreover, when she says, "io rifiutai. . . . [M]i trasferii a Londra per riprendere gli studi, che non erano risultati validi in Italia," she marks the first break from a tradition that had refused to recognize her intellectual—or the beginnings of her intellectual—formation: she arrived in Florence—which is historically the linguistic center of the Italian lyric tradition—and was denied access to her (paternal) literary tradition when they insisted that she study with students younger than she. Her reaction was to return to London, center of the English literary tradition, to continue her studies. This identity crisis would later be even more deeply engraved in the poet when she returned to Italy at the age of eighteen to work, as Emmanuela Tandello writes:

Amelia, like her two older brothers, was educated in America and then in England. Her first contact with Italy came at the age of eighteen,<sup>4</sup> where, as an officially "unskilled" young woman, she found employment working as a translator, perpetuating thus the by now permanent dimension of linguistic and cultural split(s) experienced from birth. (364)

Where then in the hierarchies and genres of literature—so dear to literary scholars and critics—must we place an Italian poet who writes and publishes in Italy a work composed in English?

In Italy Rosselli has been anthologized by the academic institution (albeit dubiously) as the representative *par excellence* of Italian women poets: Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo distinguished her in his *Poeti italiani del Novecento* as the voice of women poets in Italy (although she is the only woman writer allowed by him). Mengaldo writes in the preface to his anthology:

Osando una formula, [perhaps aware of the ambivalence of what he is about to say] si potrebbe parlare di identificazione tendenzialmente assoluta della lingua poetica col **registro del privato**, del vissuto-quotidiano personale: equazione realizzata per la prima volta coi risultati finora poeticamente più efficaci, io credo, dalla Rosselli, un'iniziale atipica che anche per questo oggi si rivela un'anticipatrice. (lxi)

Bordering on irony, he praises Rosselli while at the same time equating her poetry to an equation or formula “*del privato*.”

And even though he anthologizes her, he insists on emarginating her work (and thus by extension he emarginates all Italian women poets for which he has chosen Rosselli as sole representative) by calling her an “experiential” rather than “experimental” writer:

... [L]’aggressione disgregatrice perpetrata da [i suoi versi] pochissimo o nulla ha in comune con lo sperimentalismo guidato e tecnologico della neo-avanguardia. . . , ed esattamente opposto ne è l’esito: una scrittura, o piuttosto una scrittura-parlata, intensamente informale, in cui per la prima volta si realizza quella spinta alla riduzione assoluta della lingua della poesia a lingua *del privato*. . . . (Mengaldo 994-95)

Lucia Re contested Mengaldo’s argument in her article, “Poetry and Madness”<sup>5</sup>, and it is not my purpose to discuss Rosselli’s Italian poetry here, as my colleague has already done so. It is interesting to note, however, that Mengaldo mentions the work, *Sleep*, and the English writings of the poet in his introduction to the selection of her work (993), and he maintains that “La suggestiva e spesso potente poesia della Rosselli era e resta un fenomeno in sostanza unico nel panorama letterario italiano, legandosi piuttosto ad altre tradizioni, l’anglosassone . . . e la surrealista francese” (993-94). It is indeed contradictory that he call her work “unico nel panorama italiano” while he singles her out at the same time as the voice of an **entire** generation of women poets. It’s almost like the overly ambitious first-year college student who highlights the first line of every paragraph in the text book: by underlining the topic sentence, the student consequently **erases** the information itself.

The inherent flaw of his paradoxical categorization of Rosselli reveals that: (1) by denying her a place among the *neo-avanguardia* poets, he—like many other historians and critics of the avant-garde have done with women writers—emarginates women from the all-male, avant-garde club since he calls Rosselli the **best** of the women writers; and (2) he doubly emarginates her work when he says that her work belongs to other traditions which lie outside of Italian literary heritage, i.e. the Anglo-Saxon and French Surrealist traditions. Mengaldo seems to subscribe to the notion that there is a tradition of the avant-garde in Italy that must be recognized in order to join that club, and nevertheless the presence of a male signature is necessary to open the doors to that club.

The polyglot aspect and international influences present in her work are the very elements of her writing that empower and enrich her poetry (even though critics like Mengaldo write them off as experiential and marginal). Her work is

inherently outside of tradition (be it venerable, worthy or not). Moving beyond the “double margin”—as Susan Suleiman has called it (11-32)—of literary criticism and definitions of literature and the avant-garde, Rosselli experiments with the boundaries of language and lyricism. Moreover, the choice of English, her mother-tongue, represents a subversion of the Italian tradition to which Rosselli cannot help but belong. This perhaps is the strongest and most striking force of her writing: it denies categorization while creating an allegory of *plurilinguismo*, so coveted in the Italian tradition. As Susan Suleiman writes (of French Surrealist women writers) in her book, *Subversive Intent*, these should be considered positive aspects that found the basis of experimentation in such a work:

In a system in which the marginal, the avant-garde, the subversive, all that disturbs and “undoes the whole” is endowed with positive value, a woman artist who can identify those concepts with her own practice and metaphorically with her own femininity can find them a source of strength and self-legitimation.

(17)

Rosselli’s “practice” of writing in English marks an exaltation of her femininity, her mother-tongue, which is the basis of her work.

It is as if Rosselli foresaw the way she would be emarginated by the Italian academic institution when she wrote the poem which she placed at the beginning of her English *canzoniere*, *What woke those tender heavy fat hands*:

What woke those tender heavy fat hands  
 said the executioner as the hatchet fell  
 down upon their bodily stripped souls  
 fermenting in the dust. You are a stranger here  
 and have no place among us. We would have you off our list  
 of potent able men  
 were it not that you’ve never belonged to it. Smell  
 the cool sweet fragrance of the incense burnt, in honour  
 of some secret soul gone off to enjoy an hour’s agony  
 with our saintly Maker. Pray be away  
 sang the hatchet as it cut slittingly  
 purpled with blood. The earth is made nearly  
 round, and fuel is burnt every day of our lives.

While the first period appears fragmented due to the absence of punctuation in the indirect discourse (this [non]use of punctuation makes me think of Gertrude Stein), the second period speaks loud and clear to the poet telling her that not only will she not be included on the “list,” but she never “belonged to

it." The "hatchet" sings as it evokes Christianity ("the incense burnt" and "our saintly Maker") and castrates the object, slicing it away from the saintly tradition of which Mengaldo speaks. In *What woke those tender heavy fat hands*, Rosselli parodies Western traditions of religion, and patriarchal hierarchy (and possibly psychoanalysis, i.e. the notion of castration), and along side the fragments of these codes which appear in the text, the allegory of the executioner, with his singing hatchet, looms above her.

The executioner and the hatchet are eager to emarginate Rosselli because her linguistic flexibility denies categorization and challenges conventions and normative codes of language. But Rosselli's use of language *per se* represents most importantly a recovery in her work of a pre-social organization, or pre-dipal state, a breach of normative processes of articulated linguistic signification. As Emmanuela Tandello (who is the translator of *Sleep*) observes pointing to Rosselli's Italian poetry in her article, "Doing the Splits: Language(s) in Amelia Rosselli's Poetry":

the proverbial mistrust for language revealed by her Italian poetry is in fact a mistrust for language *tout court*, deriving from her personal experience of language(s) as (a) system(s) of communication, and the glaring absence of a clearly identifiable "mother" tongue; and, finally, that this foreignness is the ideal inhabitable space of an exiled identity. (364)

"Mistrust of language" is indeed a mistrust of normative codes of communication, and the act of writing in English reflects, moreover, a mistrust of the "father" tongue: in *Sleep* Rosselli returns to the mother-tongue that was denied her until the death of her father and her family's self-imposed exile from Continental Europe.<sup>6</sup>

In *Sleep*, however, she recuperates the language of her father in graphemic representations of Italian words. The representation of Italian in *Sleep* introduces signifiers into the text that appear at first glance to be nonsensical, yet in reality are the forces that undermine what Julia Kristeva has called the "symbolic"—or the articulated state of signification—and, hence, recuperate the "semiotic"—or the pre-articulation (94).

An example of the "precedence of the signifier" or the recuperation of the semiotic may be found in the line:

and run out rapid against a fence of spine. (*Sleep* 40)

The signifier, "spine," on a paradigmatic axis (as opposed to a syntagmatic axis), in an English code of signification, recalls "spine" as in "spinal cord." But on the following page where the Italian translation is presented (the English is on

the even pages and the Italian on the odd pages; thus the original and translated texts are revealed simultaneously), the reader finds the same graphemic representation, “spine,” which in Italian means “thorns”:

e correre fuori rapida contro una cinta di spine.

Depending on the linguistic competence of the reader, the exegesis of the text offers multiple possibilities. This is indeed the power of the text, and it is along this axis that it passes in and out of symbolic signification to and from the semiotic. Along this axis the scope and dimension of the work is truly revealed: as the reader brings more and more linguistic competence to the reproduction of the text, more and more meanings are generated. The anomaly itself, the breach of the linguistic code, opens up seemingly limitless readings of the text.

An incredibly problematic case of this sort of linguistic anomaly in symbolic signification may be found in the line:

o the shallops put out to sea and we remain ashore. (*Sleep* 34)

In the translator’s note of the book, Tanello (who translated the work under Rosselli’s guidance (Caporali 8)) writes, “l’italiano funziona . . . visibilmente, emergendo attraverso il controllato poliglottismo giocoso dei cosiddetti lapsus—“shallop” per scialuppa, “shind,” scindere, “fall drit into the mire,” cadere dritta nel fango” (*Sleep* 216). Whereas “shind” and “drit” are not to be found in the English dictionary, the word “shallop,” although rare, corresponds in meaning to the Italian “scialuppa”: “dinghy.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is merely Tanello’s oversight, but, editors and translators aside, the power of the text—as is—lies in the fact that it calls upon the reader’s linguistic competence to recognize its internal process of signification. The “mistrust of language” is transferred thus from the subject to the reader, and hence the reader may consciously become subject. The obvious parameters of this phenomenon begin with the reader’s competence in Italian and English, but they become infinitely complicated if you consider the possibility of a Italian/English translator-reader, or a Shakespearean scholar-reader, or a bilingual native speaker-reader. The reader is Lacan’s desert-traveler: a wayfarer in the wilderness of signification, the reader believes erroneously that the text speaks to her/him when in fact the purely graphemic representation speaks only to itself.

Ever since Pier Paolo Pasolini published his “Notizia su Amelia Rosselli” in *Il Menabò*, scholars and critics have inappropriately called this experimentation in linguistic competence “misspellings” or “lapsus.”<sup>8</sup> These anomalies of Rosselli’s poetry are not mistakes or errors, and her work does not belong under the rubric “atypical” or “curious.” Rosselli’s use of language is a formal and



technical experimentation with language. The title of the collection of poems, *Sleep*, is ironic in this sense: for years her poetry has been called “informal,” “playful” and full of lapsus into the unconscious; if sleep is truly where the unconscious reigns, the title parodies those critics and scholars who have wanted to categorize Rosselli’s work as full of slips into the unconscious. *Sleep* does not slip into the unconscious: it is a stylistic representation of the precedence of the signifier in the human experience. The work doesn’t assume that it’s reader is Italophone, Anglophone or Eskimoan for that matter. The text only asks the reader to recognize that the words are signifiers, and that since they have been organized by a subjective voice, they speak to someone, perhaps not the “you” of the reader, but someone.

Rosselli was born into the high bourgeois tradition of Italy: she passed through the French, the English and the American traditions, and then finally returned to Italy as an adult. In her book, *Sleep*, she partially reveals the mistrust that she developed for language in her adolescent years, indeed the period in which linguistic formation is galvanized. The executioner and the hatchet in her work represent the attraction to death present in all works of art. “[A]rt takes on murder and moves through it,” writes Kristeva. “It assumes murder in so far as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes ‘art’” (119-20). Finally, Amelia Rosselli can sleep.

To die, to sleep—

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub.

Amelia Rosselli has the courage to breach and overcome Hamlet’s “rub.”

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lacan 199 (Easthope 31)

<sup>2</sup>“The boats, and trains, and cows and horses were quite meaningless to [Tarzan], but not quite so baffling as the odd little figures which appeared beneath and between the colored pictures—some strange kind of bug he thought they might be, for many of them had legs though nowhere could he find one with eyes and a mouth. It was his first introduction to the letters of the alphabet, and he was over ten years old” (Burroughs 43). Tarzan does return, however, to his parents cabin and makes a discovery similar to that of the Lacanian wayfarer: “In his hands was a primer opened at a picture of a little ape similar to himself, but covered, except for hands and face, with strange, colored fur, for

such he thought the jacket and trousers to be. Beneath the picture were three little bugs

### BOY.

And now he had discovered in the text upon the page that these three were repeated many times in the same sequence.

Another fact he learned—that there were comparatively few individual bugs; but these were repeated many times, occasionally alone, but more often in company with others” (Burroughs 48).

<sup>3</sup>Already a tension had developed in the linguistic hegemony of the household: “Si parlava francese anche in casa, tranne che con mio padre, fedele all’italiano. Quando arrivava lo zio Nello, si parlava sempre in italiano; l’inglese l’ho dovuto imparare dopo.” *Intervista ad Amelia Rosselli* (in *Antologia poetica* 150)

<sup>4</sup>Actually her first contact was at the age of sixteen, as Rosselli herself explains in the quote above.

<sup>5</sup>Re writes of Mengaldo’s introduction: “What is most striking, however, is the extent to which the anthologist’s treatment of Rosselli constitutes a form of misrepresentation in terms of the very categories he establishes. For, as even cursory perusal of Mengaldo’s own choice of poems reveals, Rosselli’s work is formally experimental and resists any immediate naturalization. Her link with the Italian *neoavanguardia*, while neither slavish nor obvious, cannot be denied” (134).

<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note—as Rosselli revealed in an interview about *Sleep*—that the work began as polyglot diary that was then abandoned when she wanted to “acquire security” in Italian, her father’s tongue: “Nei primi tempi scrivevo a mano un diario in tre lingue, camminando e cercando di sentire se non proprio un campo magnetico qualcosa del genere. Quei testi non rappresentavano una soluzione ma un esercizio. Avrei voluto pubblicarli come qualcosa di momentaneo, di sperimentale. Maturava in quegli anni la volontà di esprimermi in italiano, di acquisire una sicurezza che ancora non avvertivo.” As cited by Caporali 9.

<sup>7</sup>*Webster’s New Twentieth-Century Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Collins World, 1978. 1666.

<sup>8</sup>Even Tandello uses the word. See quote above.

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