

Eugenio Cirese

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BOOKS: Sciure de fratte (Campobasso, 1910);

Canti popolari e sonetti in dialetto molisano (Campobasso-Isernia: Colitti, 1912);

La guerra: discurzi di cafuni (Campobasso: De Gaglia e Nebbia, 1912);

Ru cantone della fata. Storia de tiempe antiche, with a preface by Nicola Scarano, engravings by Armando Carmignani, illustrations by Alfredo Trombetta (Pescara: Stabilimento Industriale Grafico, 1916);

Suspire e risatelle, with a preface by Ettore Moschino, cover by Cesare Marcorelli (Campobasso: Colitti, 1918);

Gente buona, primer for the schools of Molise (Lanciano: Carabba, 1925);

Canzone d'atre tiempe, words and music by Eugenio Cirese, with piano arrangement by G. Belardi (Pesaro: Federici, 1926);

La lettricit , for the inauguration of the Primo Salto power plant (Roma: Unione Arti Grafiche Abruzzesi, 1926);

Rugiade, with cover and illustrations by Armando Carmignani (Putaturo: Marsica, 1932);

Tempo d'allora: figure, storie e proverbi, prose in the dialect of Molise, with drawings by G. Ruggiero and A. Trivisonno (Campobasso: Petrucciani, 1939);

Canti popolari della provincia di Rieti (Rieti: Nobili, 1945);

Lucecabelle, edited by Mario dell'Arco, with an introduction by Ferruccio Ulivi and cover by Domenico Purificato (Roma: Bardi, 1951);

Poesie molisane, edited by Alberto Mario Cirese and Ferruccio Ulivi, with a portrait of the author by Domenico Purificato (Caltanissetta-Roma: Edizioni Salvatore Sciascia, 1955).

OTHER: "I disegni infantili," in Rivista di psicologia applicata (May 1909).

In the extremely varied landscape of Italian dialect literature Eugenio Cirese finds his place as an authentic poet (an opinion held by critics and writers such as Pasolini, Barberi Squarotti, Betocchi and many others) generally considered to have been the first important writer to use the dialect of Molise as a literary language, with a keen awareness of the implications - personal, literary, social, ideological - inherent in such a choice. He instinctively recognized the dignity and latent power of this unwieldy, untested instrument, both mother tongue and sacred language, living witness to what De Benedetti called "la coscienza infelice della storia" (the unhappy conscience of history), and took it from a beginning rooted in the musical tradition of the popular song to the airy lightness and purity of his last poems, always convinced of the absolute, for him almost physical, necessity to write in dialect. To the question "Why do you write in dialect rather than in the literary language?" which in 1953 the poet and critic Pier Paolo Pasolini posed in Il Belli to dialect poets, Cirese answered: "

Il dialetto è una lingua. Perché possa essere mezzo di espressione poetica e trasformarsi in linguaggio e immagini è necessario possederla tutta; avere coscienza del suo contenuto di cultura e della sua umana forza espressiva. Nell'infanzia e nella prima giovinezza - o sia nel tempo più bello e più vivo d'interessi della mia vita - ho parlato, raccolto e cantato canzoni, gioito, pianto, pensato in dialetto... Aggiungo che il dialetto è sempre stato il luogo del mio respiro: quando mi trovai a cantare l'amore, nato e patito sotto le finestre e sulle aie; ora che il ricordo giunge a farsi memoria tutto solo perchè tante cose ha lasciate per la via.

(Dialect is a language. In order for it to become a means of poetic expression and to transform itself into a personal language and into images it is necessary to possess it wholly; to be aware of its cultural content and of its human expressive power. In my childhood and in my early youth - namely in the best, and most alive with interests, time of my life, I have spoken, I have collected and sung songs, I have rejoiced, I have wept, I have thought _____ in dialect... I add that dialect has always the place of my breathing: when I happened to sing of love, born and endured beneath the windows and on the threshing-floors; now that recollection becomes memory all alone because so many things it has left along the way.)

Pasolini was also the first to recognize three distinct phases, generally accepted by subsequent critics, in Cirese's poetic evolution: a melic phase, following in the tradition of the Neapolitan Di Giacomo and the monodic song; a socialistic phase, which in Cirese never means abstract ideological denunciation, but is deeply-felt participation in the life and suffering of his people; and finally, in his later years, a refined ("squisita") phase, reflecting the search for an "essential" poetry, with its roots in the Decadent and Hermetic movements, and therefore very responsive to the most important and decisive results of twentieth century poetry, both in dialect and in Italian. Yet Cirese's poetry is not subservient to the more prestigious and culturally advanced model, "la poesia in lingua", poetry in Italian, with which dialect poetry has always been in a symbiotic, often adversarial, relationship; it is not a translation from Italian, a skillful calque, as is often the case with dialect poetry, but lives totally within the dialect of Molise and within the limits of cultural mediation that that dialect allows. Because he refused to accept the supposedly subordinate status of dialect poetry, he insisted on the universal nature of poetic

language, and the question whether his poetry belonged to Italian Literature or a regional literature was put to rest with one inevitable, definitive reply: "Se è poesia, non può soffrire limiti né avere confini" (If it is poetry, it cannot tolerate limits nor have boundaries).

Complementary to the figure of Cirese the poet, and just as noteworthy, is that of Cirese collector of popular songs. His two published works, Canti popolari della provincia di Rieti (1945) and Canti popolari del Molise (1953), are considered to be major contributions and have won the praise of specialists and laymen alike.

Eugenio Cirese was born in Fossalto, a small town near Campobasso, in the mountainous region of Molise, on 21 February 1884. There he spent a normal childhood with his parents, his sister and three brothers. His love for the moon, whose recurrent presence in his poetry has caused more than one critic to see an affinity with Leopardi's cosmic questioning, has distant origins indeed. In an autobiographical page in Il Belli Cirese wrote: "Mamma mi diceva che quando ero in fasce rimanevo incantato a guardare la luna e stendevo le mani per acchiapparla. Si può, perciò, stabilire che ho fatto l'acchiappalune da quando sono nato" (My mother used to tell me that when I was a babe in arms I would look spellbound at the moon and I would extend my hands to catch it. Therefore it can be established that I have been a moon-catcher since birth.) After finishing elementary school he was sent to Velletri, where he obtained his teaching diploma, and for a brief time taught elementary school in Civitacampomariano. Soon thereafter he moved with his family to Castropignano, where his brother Nicolino was employed as town clerk, and his house in Fossalto was closed for ever: "La casa méia\`tè l'uocchie chiuse e morta pare" (My house\`has its eyes closed and it seems dead). In Castropignano, which was to become his adoptive city, he devoted himself to his teaching and began his long apprenticeship as a poet. Cirese's early poetry is rooted in the culture of late Romanticism, with its fondness for popular songs and popular traditions, resulting in a reassessment of idiomatic usage and of dialects, and in his own strong inclination to interpret the popular soul of Molise. It is not by chance that his first slender book, Canti popolari e sonetti in dialetto molisano (1910) includes songs "raccolte in mezzo al popolo" (gathered among the people) and transcribed "nella loro rustica, ma espressiva semplicità" (in their rough, but expressive simplicity) with the addition of a few sonnets "scritti nelle soste del pensiero"

(written during the pauses of thought), both an expression for Cirese of the dialect of Molise, "che ha, forse più di tanti altri d'Italia, spontaneità d'espressione e forza di sentimento" (which has, perhaps more than so many others in Italy, spontaneity of expression and strength of feeling). To the musical cadence of the folk songs, the sonnets add realistic impressions of everyday life, with the exception of the last one, which includes the couplet "Duorme, bellezza me', duorme serene/ nu suonno luonghe quant'a a la nuttata", (Sleep, my beauty, sleep serenely/ a sleep as long as the whole night) which will always reappear, even as an epigraph, in subsequent collections. In the preface to the book, which the author dedicated to his brother Rocco for his wedding, Cirese explains how he began collecting folk songs, an activity to which he would remain deeply committed for the rest of his life:

Una sera dello scorso febbraio, mentre ero
seduto al mio tavolo da studio, e, nel silenzio
della casa addormentata, la mente era assorta nelle
pagine profonde di pensiero d'un nostro grandissimo,
mi giunsero, di lontano, le note lunghe e appassionate
d'una canzone popolare, cantata a coro. Chiusi
il volume, e, per una irresistibile associazione d'idee,
l'anima tornò al passato; mi rividi, con te, bambino,
proprio quando, sull'aie, allora nostre, ascoltavamo
il rustico canto dei coloni, al lume chiaro della
luna, nelle notti d'estate.

Non rimpiansi: una dolcezza infinita m'inondò
il cuore, e pensando a te, a le tue ansie e a le lotte
del passato, a la gioia del presente, mi sorse l'idea
di raccogliere alcuni di quei canti, e di offrirteli
nella festa più bella della tua vita."

(One evening last February, as I was sitting at
my desk and, in the silence of the sleeping house,
the mind was absorbed in the pages, profound with
thought, of one of our great writers, from a distance
came the long and passionate notes of a folk song,

sung in chorus. I closed the volume, and, for an irresistible association of ideas, the soul returned to the past; I saw myself a child again with you, just when, on the threshing-floors, we listened to the rustic songs of the farmers, in the bright moonlight, on summer nights.

I did not feel regret: a boundless sweetness filled my heart, and thinking about you, your worries and the struggles of the past, about the joy of the present, I conceived the idea of collecting some of those songs, and to offer them to you in the most beautiful celebration of your life.)

In the same year he published another small collection of poems, Sciure de fratte (Brushwood flowers), which would be soon out of print, but was included in the later volume Suspire e risatelle. In 1912 he published another booklet, La guerra: discorzi di cafuni, which recorded the reactions of the farmers to the war in Libya, alternating surges of nationalistic pride with memory of the fallen and the anguished weeping of a mother for her son, far away and wounded. These modest beginnings attracted the attention of the distinguished linguist and philologist Francesco D'Ovidio, who commented favorably on the "forme nuove" (new forms). Cirese replied, revealing his late-romantic roots, that he had taken them "con criteri esclusivi di arte, dal popolo, fonte naturale di forme e di concetti" (with exclusive art criteria, from the people, natural source of forms and concepts). Somewhat ingenuously he was expressing a firm approach to poetic research, the indissoluble bond between folk song and dialect poetry, which will remain constant and unaltered throughout his life, and which will be treated at some length forty years later, in the preface to Canti popolari del Molise.

Still a young man, Cirese won a competition for school inspector, but, due to the reforms by the Minister of Education Giovanni Gentile, was forced to accept a position as principal in an elementary school in Teano. Meanwhile the first world war broke out, and Cirese was called to Macerata, while his brothers Nicolino and Rocco were sent to the front. Here he became a good friend of the journalist Raffaello Biordi and the poet Luigi Lodi, and wrote a patriotic poem, "La cuperta" (The blanket), which made him somewhat of a celebrity among his friends and fellow soldiers. The superficial treatment of the patriotic theme

is partly offset by the skillful handling of the disconsolate music of the the verses:

Se l'uocchie me z'allàchene de chiante,
se me vuoglie addurmi,
làcreme e suonne i'gliótte che llu cante
che prima de parti,
a mezzanotte me scegnètte 'n core...

(If my eyes become flooded with weeping,
if I want to fall asleep,
sleep and tears I swallow with the song
that came into my heart,
at midnight before leaving)

In 1916 Cirese published Ru cantone della fata, a short narrative poem written in octaves, to be included later in Rugiade (1932), based on the popular legend of a simple girl who chooses death rather than give in to the lustful advances of a tyrannical lord. The anonymous narrator is a simple, uneducated man of the people, yet a bit too well-acquainted with historical facts to be entirely believable; he is, however, a sober storyteller, and has moments of real dramatic efficacy, coupled with flashes of earthy wit and common sense. In his introduction, Nicola Scarano noted that "Cirese ha sentito la poesia della leggenda...Anzi leggendo a voce alta par di sentire come una melopea in nota mestamente carezzevole, della maniera di quella dei cantastorie" (Cirese has felt the poetry of legend...In fact, reading out loud, one seems to hear something of a melopoeia in a sadly caressing note, in the manner of ballad singers).

After the war Cirese returned to his job as principal, this time in Avezzano, where he was able to collect in Suspire e risatelle (1918), the complete corpus of his early poems. The title itself, purposely unassuming (Sighs and snickers), points to the author's twofold inspiration, the melic abandon of the love songs and the keen observation of the attitude of the townspeople and the farmers toward everyday events and extraordinary occurrences (the Libyan war and the 1915-18 war). The "realistic" tendency, prevalent in this first phase, is not to be taken as a subjective, ideological involvement. As Scarano had already noted, Cirese knew how to create a spark of humor between the thought of the people and the more refined, cultured thought. Yet

the ironic detachment of the man of culture does not, in Cirese's case, exclude his participation in the common nationalistic feeling.

More interesting, both for the results achieved and their implications for Cirese's future poetry, are the "canzune appassionate", the love songs, whose expert echoing of popular airs heralds the later, more mature poems. In "Serenatella", for example, the bold opening with its sudden dilation of space and its internalization of the cosmic vastness, is reminiscent of Leopardi, while the musical phrasing already approaches the quality of Di Giacomo's best compositions:

"l'è notte e iè serene
dentra ru core e n' ciele.
Le stelle
fermate
vicine,
a cocchia a cocchia
o sole
com'a pecurelle
stanne pascenne
l'aria de notte"

(It's night and it's clear
within the heart and in the sky.
The stars
stopping
near,
two at a time
or alone
like little sheep
are grazing
the night air)

After this phase, which could be defined as philological and late romantic, Cirese's intellectual and cultural development takes place under the aegis of the educational policy of Giovanni Gentile, Minister of Education, whose reforms envisioned greater freedom in the

classroom and a more responsible approach toward teaching, based on experimentation and the full expression of the student's personality. In keeping with these principles, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, general director of elementary schools, tried to shift the focus of the teaching process from the teacher to the student, and the emphasis on abstract factual knowledge was replaced by a methodology stressing the needs and cultural background of the student. In order to understand and guide his pupils, a teacher had to be well acquainted with the environment and the culture in which they lived, and had to strive to interpret that world for them. Even textbooks were now required to reflect the life of the region in all its aspects, including the local dialect. It is in this climate that Cirese, always directly and actively involved in the everyday reality of the school system, published Gente buona (1925), a primer for the schools of Molise. Written with undeniable skill and didactic effectiveness, a product of a personal and at the same time collective experience with the schools of the region, and with a brief introduction by Francesco D'ovidio (a sort of regional self-determination being the only residual tie with the old philologist, since Cirese was about to take a very different direction), the book is patterned on the school calendar and on the seasons and months of the year. It is a compendium of useful information on the geography, industry, commerce, fairs and holidays of the region, with a historical national calendar and short biographies of important regional figures. The result is a realistic picture of the social and economic life of the region, largely dependent on agriculture, and to a lesser degree on handicraft: a faithful representation of Southern Italy at the time, which, however, does not try to conceal an underlying pride and satisfaction in the traditional values embodied by the rural life.

In 1926 Cirese wrote the poem "Canzone d'atre tiempe", which he also set to music with his own melody, still faithful to the melic origins of his poetry. This song soon became quite popular, and brought the author wide recognition, eventually achieving the status of a widely circulated folk song, as confirmed by Ferruccio Ulivi in his preface to Lucecabelle: "Canzone d'atre tiempe'...che è salita al grado di canto popolare anonimo, e udii recitare ex abrupto da un dialettale dell'anima, Francesco Jovine, con un gusto che somigliava a protettiva tenerezza" ('Canzone d'atre tiempe'...which has reached the level of anonymous folksong, and I heard it being recited ex abrupto by someone who held his dialect in his soul, Francesco Jovine, with a relish that resembled protective tenderness). It is ostensibly a poem about emigration, at the time a serious problem in the south, and it is the emigrant himself who tells his story, but with such intense melancholy that the reader immediately feels that the realistic theme is the substratum of a light inventiveness, of a musically charged imagination:

"I' parte pe 'na terra assai luntana:
l'amore m'accumpagna e me fa lume.
A notte passe e beve a la funtana,
me ferme a la pagliara 'n faccia a sciume.
Ma l'acqua de la fonte è n'acqua amara
repose cchiù nen trove a la pagliara.

Nen tènghe cchiù pariénte né cumpagne;
nen tènghe cchiù 'na casa pe reciète;
perciò mò vaglie spiérte, e nen me lagne,
ca tu me rièste, amore benedette!
Tte sola m'à lassate ru destine
lampa che scalle e 'nzegne ru camine.

La via è lòngha e sacce addó me porta:
me porta a nu castielle affatturate
'ddó càmpene le gente senza sorta,
'ddó scorde ru dolore appena 'ntrate.
Tu famme, core a core, cumpagnia,
nen fa stutà la lampa pe la via.

(I'm leaving for a very distant land,
accompanied by love that lights the way.
At night I go by and drink from the spring
in the straw-hut by the river I go stay.
But the water of the spring is bitter water,
in the straw-hut I cannot find my rest.

I no longer have relatives nor friends;
I no longer have a house to give me shelter;
that's why I wander lost, and don't complain

because I still have you, my blessed love!
Only you has my destiny left me
lamp that warms and shows the way.

The road is long and I know where it leads me:
it leads me to a castle of enchantment
where people without fortune make their home,
where once inside you soon forget your torment.
Close to my heart, always by my side remain,
don't let the lamp die out along the way)

There is no rebellion, no denunciation of the atavic, inextirpable poverty; there is instead the painful acceptance of the necessity imposed by a cruel and ineluctable destiny, modulated on a deeply melancholy melodic line that reaches notes of universal sorrow, and set against an increasingly magical landscape, which holds the promise of final deliverance.

In 1932, marking the conclusion of the second phase of his poetic journey, Cirese published his second volume of collected poems, Rugiade (Dews), which, in addition to unpublished material, contains many of the earlier poems, such as Ru cantone della fata, La cuperta, and La 'lettricità. Notably missing are the "canzune appassionate" of Suspire e risatelle, which represented the extreme tension of melic abandon. The poems in Rugiade are generally didactic, gnomic, adaptations of popular legends or fables, or love songs again echoing the catchy airs of the folksongs:

"Sciurille verde:
vularrisce vulà, ma nen t'azzärde,
credènne sola sola ca te spierde."

(Little green flower:
You would like to fly, but you don't dare,
thinking you'll get lost so all alone)

And in "Chitarra mèia" there appears for the first time one of the recurrent themes of later poetry, the search for a lost world of innocence and purity:

"Famme, chitarra, ariturnà guaglione,
famme turnà 'nnucente!

Famme penzà, sunanne 'n tutte l'ore
lu munne bielle e buone"

(Make me, guitar, a little boy once more,
make me innocent again!

Make me think, playing at all hours,
the world is good and beautiful)

The real significance of Rugiade, however, rests in Cirese's abiding commitment to restore the cultural, historical and geographic identity of his region, and to portray his people in all their complexity as human beings and as members of an identifiable social and political system, against the background of real historical events, and living in a world which is spiritually coordinated according to the linguistic forms of its dialect. It is this determination to rehabilitate the personal and social history of the people which led Pasolini to speak of a "socialistic" phase in Cirese's poetry, rooted in the progressive movements of pre-Fascist Italy. This, however, would imply a pronounced sense of denunciation and class struggle, while Cirese's socialism is grounded in humanitarian empathy, not as a generalized concept, but as the sorrowful personal experience of a sincere participant in the life of the people, especially the people of Molise. His fundamental concern for human dignity is reflected in the few verses which preface the last section of Rugiade, and which offer the key to its interpretation. The culture of the "illiterate" people, once recovered, can accept and assimilate in its invariant mental structure even progress and novelty: "Nen fa lu superbiuse\ liégge e pensa,\ ca pure nu cafone\ pò dà la 'ducazione\" (Don't be so high and mighty\ read and think,\ because even a farmer\ can teach you a few things\). The attempt to represent the effort of the rural world to come to terms with new, unfamiliar concepts, is reflected on the lexical and semantic levels in a mixture of dialect and cultured speech, with a resulting stylistic tension which at times become parodistic mimicry, and betrays a subtle ambiguity, an underlying detachment and irony. Yet his contributions to the redefinition of a regional identity, as a collector of folksongs and as a dialect poet, are a real source of pride for Cirese, and in the preface to Rugiade they are considered in the light of the cultural and political context of the time: "L'origine vera e profonda dello spirito e del carattere d'una regione è il dialetto, come l'origine dell'unità di coscienza d'una nazione è la lingua.

Negare l'unità della lingua significa negare la Nazione, negare l'unità del dialetto significa negare la Regione, svuotare l'arte dialettale del suo contenuto e della sua funzione essenziale, che è quella di celebrare la regione col cuore e col linguaggio di tutti, di avanzare, con tutti, al possesso di nuovi valori" (The real, profound origin of the spirit and of the character of a region is the dialect, just as the origin of the unity of consciousness of a nation is the language. To deny the unity of the language means to deny the Nation, to deny the unity of dialect means to deny the Region, to deprive dialect art of its essential content and function, which is to celebrate the region with the heart and with the language of all, to advance, with everyone, toward the possession of new values).

Finally appointed School Inspector, in 1938 Cirese was sent to Campobasso, where the following year he published Tiempe d'allora, a collection of regional stories, vignettes, proverbs and anecdotes, and again broke new ground by adapting the dialect to narrative prose, underscoring once again in the preface the dialect's powers of adaptation and self-renewal: "A contatto della pulsante vita d'oggi e nel flusso irresistibile verso la lingua, accresce le sue possibilità espressive. La prosa dialettale perciò è matura per le prove di capacità nel campo narrativo." (In contact with today's pulsating life and with the irresistible flow toward language, it increases its expressive possibilities. Dialect prose is therefore ready to be tested in the narrative field).

In 1940 Cirese moved to Rieti, where he would live for the rest of his life, and there he began collecting the folksongs of the area of Sabina, which will later appear, more than seven hundred of them, in Canti popolari della provincia di Rieti (1945), a work of considerable historical and documentary value, but lacking the philological acumen characteristic of Cirese, due to his inadequate knowledge of the dialects of the region.

Cirese's third book of poems, Lucecabelle (Fireflies), generally considered his best and most mature work, came out in 1951, almost twenty years after Rugiade. The first section contains poems dating back to the years between 1913 and 1932, while the rest of poems, unpublished, were written after 1944. While some of the earlier compositions are retained, such as the poems which had also been set to music ("Canzunetta", "Torna l'amore" and "Canzone d'atre tiempe"), and some of the love poems from Suspire e risatelle, they are chosen according to very different organizational and formal principles, aiming at a thematic and stylistic unity far removed from the preceding anthological heterogeneity. While some of the melic verse is recovered in the context of a rigorous new formal discipline, the realistic poetry is completely eliminated. In the section called "La fatia" (a word meaning weariness as well as toil), the

traditional realistic element -the ageless, interminable toil of the farmer in every season and in every possible condition- is subsumed and transcended in a desolate metaphor of human condition:

"Ogge lu pane.
Iere, lu recurdà.
Demane, lu recumenzà.
Ogge, iere, demane.

Lu vinnele trapàna la matassa,
z'agglomera lu file e scorre e passa.

Pàssene le iurnate longhe e corte,
pàssene a un'a a una estate e vjerne.
Lè nu succede che nen sembra vere
sta vita che camina
a rabbraccià la morte.
Ogge e demane: iere.
'N eterne."

(Today the bread.
Yesterday, remembering.
Tomorrow, starting all over.
Today, yesterday, tomorrow.

The skein-winder goes through the skein,
the yarn winds into a ball and runs and passes.

Long and short the days go by,
one by one go by summer and winter.
It's something that doesn't seem real
this life that walks
into the arms of death.

Today and tomorrow: yesterday.
For ever.)

Emblematic of this eternal, metahistorical cycle of toil and misery and of the stoical, uncompromising acceptance of universal suffering, is the flesh and blood, yet archetypal, figure of Zi Minche in the poem "Camina", for which Cirese took second place in the Cattolica Prize in 1951: "D'estate e dentr'a vierne,\semprè la stessa via,\lisse la zappa e la fatia\" (In summer and winter\always the same road\he, the hoe and the toil\). The search for an essential language, already implicit in some of the earlier poems, in Lucecabelle produces verses of extreme semantic density, which attest Cirese's life-long preoccupation with finding the etymological unity underlying the various dialects of Molise, the original, irreducible, semantic core, still present and recoverable. It is in the context of his philological studies that Cirese's movement toward lexical sparseness and bareness can be inscribed in the neo-romantic (and Hermetic) search for a remote arké, an inner dimension, outside of memory and history, of edenic innocence and clarity. "A una certa età è fatale che ci colga il mal della pietra" (At a certain age we are destined to catch stone-sickness), Cirese used to repeat to his friends a short time before his death. In fact, he felt he had reached that stage of extreme tension in which words emerge hard and essential, like stones, a process succinctly analyzed by Ferruccio Ulivi in a well-known passage: "Di un lessico così povero, Cirese seppe intendere d'istinto ciò che doveva fare: addensare i valori fonici, stringere la scansione metrica, e così infondere all'espressione quel tono di costretta melodia o di epigrafica schiettezza che hanno fatto pensare, di volta in volta, a squisiti greco-napoletani, o ad arditi novecentisti " (Cirese instinctively understood what he had to do with such a poor lexicon: crowd the phonic values, tighten the metric scansion, so as to infuse into the expression that tone of compressed melody or epigraphic purity which have brought to mind, from time to time, refined Graeco-Neapolitan melic poets or bold moderns) (in La Lapa, special number in honor of Cirese, June 1955). In the somber and unrelentingly austere "Niente" (Nothing), for example, the process of resemanticization is clearly evident:

"Né fuoche nè liette nè pane
né sciate de vocca
né rima de cante
né calle de core.

Niente.

- E tu? e tu? e quille?

Niente.

Finitoria de munne.

L'uocchie sbauttite

iè ssutte."

(Neither fire nor bed nor bread
nor breath from a mouth
nor rhyme from a song
nor warmth from a heart.

Nothing.

- And you? and you? and him?

Nothing.

End of the world.

The eyes, bewildered,
are dry.)

The simple, familiar objects, deprived of any reassuring modifier, of any historical and social reference, preceded by an obsessive negation which denies them, along with their very existence, their traditional role as comforting presences, become the negative signs of a cosmic disintegration, of a regression into nothingness. And in "E mo?" (And now?) the presence of death is revealed through a threatening, nightmarish landscape, in the similarly relentless nominal progression of the polysyndeton:

"Nu ciele abbrevedite
e nire come a la paura.
E fridde e puzza e lóta,

e sanghe e fame e arzura
e tritteche de morte."

(A shivering sky

as black as fear.
And cold and stench and mud,
and blood and hunger and thirst
and shuddering of death)

If death is a pervasive element in this book, as in the beautiful funeral lament of "Repuote" or the mournful meditation of "N eterne", the otherwise arid landscape, internal as well as external, is also inhabited by consolatory presences: the moon, the stars, the mountain, the "fireflies" of the title, whose faint glow seems to reach the poet from a dimly perceived place of forgotten innocence or unattainable perfection: "\Tu me fai crede che lu munne è buone,\i' pe te sacce come se sta 'n ciele\" (You make me believe that the world is good,\for you I know what it is like in heaven\). Existentially defeated in life's journey toward death, tied only by a very slender thread to a Christian acceptance of destiny, it is in the voices from the past, the lullabies and fables of his childhood, or in the openness of the sky that the poet seeks redemption. A few compositions -"Lucecabelle", "Vulà", "L'astore"- express this ethical and spiritual tension in a verbal lightness aiming at absolute purity:

"Vulà come a n'astore
che fa la rota attuorne a le muntagne,
vénce lu viente e segna ru cunfine
da cima a cima."

(To fly like a hawk
that circles around the mountains,
conquers the wind and marks the boundary
from top to top.)

In 1953, the year of his retirement, while concluding his long career as an educator, Cirese was finally able to publish the first volume of the Canti popolari del Molise (the second volume was published posthumously in 1957 by Cirese's son, Alberto Mario Cirese), containing the folksongs he had been collecting all his life, touching, in the introduction, on the complex reasons that had prompted him to collect the songs that had so enchanted him in his youth: "...allora cominciai a raccogliere canti per imparare a cantarli: più tardi per riunirli e per cercare

una voce mia nel linguaggio popolare" (...so I began to collect songs to learn how to sing them: later to assemble them and to find my own voice in the language of the people). The work won the critical praise of Pasolini, who compared it to the two greatest collections of the past, the Tuscan folksongs of Tommaseo and the Piedmontese songs of De Nigra, and understood that in Cirese's folksongs was implicit a biography, in an absolute, antifolkloric sense, of the people of Molise. It is with a clear awareness of the importance of this work and of its implications for his evolution as a poet, that Cirese called it "la più bella strofe della mia vita" (the most beautiful stanza of my life).

Also in 1953, his failing heart notwithstanding, Cirese founded the journal La Lapa, which he edited until his death in 1955, and which was conceived, in keeping with his life-long effort to reconstruct an authentic regional image, free of the old georgic and folkloric stereotypes, as "un luogo d'incontro di critici e storici del mondo 'illustre' con critici e storici del mondo che è stato detto dei 'semplici'" (a meeting place for critics and historians of the 'illustrious' world, with critics and historians of the world of the so called 'simple' people); the declared objective of the publication would be to divulge "la coscienza della umanità del mondo popolare, fatta pur essa di pensiero, di patimento e di gioia" (the awareness of the humanity of the popular world, also made of thought, suffering and joy).

Just before his death, which took place on 8 February 1955, Cirese wrote to his friend Vann'Antò: "Ma è tardi, caro Vann'Antò: anche se il cuore è sempre quello, la mano è stanca" (But it's late, dear Vann'Antò: even if the heart is still the same, the hand is weary). A few months after Cirese's death a new volume appeared in print, Poesie Molisane, edited by Ferruccio Ulivi and Alberto Mario Cirese, which contained, in addition to the poems in Lucecabelle, two groups of new lyrics, one of which, Nuove poesie, had already been approved for publication by the author while the other, under the title Varie, consists of finished and unfinished poems found among the poet's papers. In the new poems Cirese continues the process of sensibilization of the word begun in Lucecabelle, filtering it and refining it even more, and aiming at more intense and subtle effects, such as the epigraphic terseness of the last poems. Salustre (Lightning), are those rare occasions, like the fireflies of Lucecabelle, when the meagre signs of a life without illusion are suddenly illumined: "\Éie mannate a spasse la memoria,\iè festa\" (I have sent memory out for a stroll,\it's a holiday\), until the revealing moment of death: "\Quande tu rrive, quille iè lu tiempe.\Nu salustre\" (\When you arrive, that is the time.\A flash of lightning\). More than ever, death is an ever-present reality, accepted without

pathos or anguish, and in the doleful lines of La svota (The turning point), one of Cirese's last and most powerful poems, its palpable presence is felt in the soberly mournful meter: "Z'affonna\com'a chiumme\pesante lu passe.\" (Like heavy lead\the step\sinks down\).

Cirese's evolution as a poet, as we have seen, unfolds through various stages, characterized by a constant, tormented labor of linguistic and stylistic refinement. His first period, from the early poems to Rugiade, while steeped in the melic tradition of the folk song, is marked by the all-pervasive intention to restore an unbiased, objective image to his native region, through a self-limiting strategy of cultural mediation. The existential turmoil of the war, the proliferation and reshuffling of cultural perspectives in its aftermath, born out of the need to break the bounds of provincialism, and the physical separation from regional reality all had a hand in laying the groundwork for a new poetic season. While the earlier poetry is neither rejected nor forgotten, only those poems which suggest the new direction to be taken are preserved. In Lucecabelle and Nuove poesie the innovations of twentieth century poetry allow Cirese to explore the original, mythical purity of his dialect, yet they do not constitute a precise referent for his style, but rather a place of convergence, a confirmation of his long quest for the primal fullness of the word.

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