JOHN BUTCHER

EROS, ENIGMA AND EUPHEMISM IN THE POETRY OF
SANDRO PENNA*

In Enzo Giannelli's *L'uomo che sognava i cavalli*, a volume gathering together a series of private discourses by Sandro Penna, we possess a remarkable portrait of the artist as an old man. That is, of an eccentric individual burdened with a thousand anxieties and preoccupations, delighted to engage in all variety of gossip, empowered with a sparkling sense of humour and still very much buzzing with life. From the abundant material contained in *L'uomo che sognava i cavalli* it is possible to discover much about Penna's earliest sexual exploits. For instance, the interested party recounts that as a small child, somewhere around the age of two, he found himself alone in a garden with before him an attractive girl and baby boy, probably brother and sister. Suddenly, in an act of exhibitionism, he raised his clothing and displayed his genitalia to these two people. But this was anything but a one-off incident. It would seem, in fact, that as a young child Penna regularly indulged in acts of indecent exposure. The poet goes on to inform Giannelli that once, when he was around ten or eleven, a lady asked him if he felt ashamed about his deviant behaviour. "Mah, può darsi che sia una cosa vergognosa" (98), thought Penna, but in reality he found the whole thing enjoyable. It was then that the budding poet dreamt up the ensuing ditty in rhyming *ottonari*, reproduced by Giannelli in the course of his book:

Sono un bambino moccioso
terribile e capriccioso
sempre mi penzola il coso
che non trovo vergognoso. (98)

Needles to say, the noun "coso" is intended to refer to the subject's phallus. It is worth pointing out that whilst the sexual organ is camouflaged behind a euphemism, it is at the same time placed in a structurally marked position at the end of the penultimate verse in rhyme with the other three

lines in this poem, set out in full view before the reader in what might be deemed a poetic act of exhibitionism.

For further information regarding Penna's early sexual experiences, the interested reader may turn to Elio Pecora's highly informative biography *Sandro Penna: Una cheta follia*, like *L'uomo che sognava i cavalli* published in 1984. There we learn that when Sandro was twelve and his brother Beniamino ten and a half they slept in separate beds in their parents' room. During the night their father would turn on the light and, facing his sons, urinate in a bedpan. The two brothers, pretending to be fast asleep, spied on their father and then, more than once, "con una certa ammirazione oltre che con voluta impudicizia" (32), discussed the large phallus of this same. Pecora also tells us about the early targets of the poet's amorous passions, amongst which Quintilio, a boy who lived in the Umbrian countryside and used to vanish for entire days, roaming amongst the mountains and the woods, and Ernesto, a fifteen-year-old youth that Penna met on a tram in Rome in distant 1928. The biographer quotes from an unsent letter to this Ernesto that vividly manifests the energy of Penna's homoerotic infatuation: "Non ho amato al mondo che te, per la prima volta e nel modo più sublime, nel modo che io stesso non sapevo esistesse sulla terra. A te avrei sacrificato tutto: i miei genitori, la mia stessa persona" (81). Interestingly, on more than one occasion in the extracts from Penna's diaries transcribed by Pecora, the besotted poet refers to Ernesto using not the pronouns "lui" or "egli" but, instead, "lei," possibly in an effort to mask to himself the fact that his lover belongs to his own sex and/or to conceal this same fact from prying eyes. And, of course, in the years of the Fascist *ventennio* social conventions firmly dictated that a sexual relationship between two males was abnormal and sinful: so much more the case when one of the couple was not an adult. Whether it be right or wrong, this last veto, typical of modern European culture but not always widespread in the great civilisations of old, remains very much in place today. To quote from a poem published in *Poesie* 1957, for Penna, just over a quarter of a century after his decease, "[n]on fuggono i divieti / alla felicità" (72).

Thanks to the above-mentioned Pecora, in 1980 there appeared *Confuso sogno*, a volume of Penna's poetry including previously unpublished material. Undoubtedly, the most important section in this collection is the last, incorporating verse texts composed between 1922 and 1929. In fact, although Penna used to claim that the first poem he ever wrote was "*La vita... è ricordarsi di un risveglio*," penned at Porto San Giorgio in August 1928 and first published on the front page of *L'Italia Letteraria* in 1932, in real-

ity he had written several poems prior to this date. In these early texts, where Leopardi meets Futurism and Wilde sits alongside Baudelaire, there is certainly no lack of homoerotic moments. Take “*Acrobata adolescente! In te*,” for example. Addressing his acrobat, Penna writes: “e danzi, e salti, e muori / di amore; e non sai per chi!” (CS 119). The second person protagonist believes that he loves the female dancers that surround him and, between brackets, the author goes on to assert: “furono / certamente loro [le danzatrici] che colsero / la tua acerba carne, per la prima volta” (CS 119), where, naturally, “la tua acerba carne” is to be interpreted as another allusion to the phallus. Why, bemoans the smitten poet, did the acrobat not leave all the other men to these women? How has the gymnast contrived to misunderstand: “quello che meritava / la tua bocca pura / di fanciullo” (CS 119)? Eventually the acrobat turns into a sort of angel reminiscent of the *stilnovismo* tradition, into a being that is capable of rendering beautiful everything in his vicinity: “Tutte le cose volgari / redimi e fai belle / che ti stanno vicine” (CS 121).

In “*Entro al meriggio affocato di luglio*,” meanwhile, the author is not observing an acrobat but admiring the view from that most Pennian of vehicles, the train. He gives voice to his sexual yearnings indirectly by projecting them onto the external world: it is not the first person subject that throbs away, dizzied with “pazza voluttà / sotto l’amore del sole” (CS 124), but, rather, the sea and the land. (Frequently, in Penna, Eros and Mother Nature stroll together side by side.) At a certain point the subject catches sight of an adolescent lying stark naked on the slumbering beach, drowning “nell’orgia del sole / i desideri impuri” (CS 125), or, to translate this image into a more banal language, indulging beneath the sun in an act of onanism. Now, any reader acquainted with Penna’s mature poetry can well imagine what is running through the same person’s mind in this precise instant. However, rather than expressing directly his wish to partake fully of the pleasures that the young man can provide him with, the subject states that he longs to give himself over to Nature: “un ardore folle mi prende / di offrirmi in qualche modo / alla rovente voluttà della natura” (CS 125). Evidently here, as elsewhere in his early verse compositions, Penna is far from ready to let on unambiguously that he experiences an intense attraction towards young males, preferring to hint at his desires, to shroud his sexual libido in a veil of subtlety.

In what follows, we will not examine all those poems by Penna that express their author’s love of the adolescent male: this would necessitate looking at an immense amount of material, almost everything that Penna ever produced. (“Sempre fanciulli nelle mie poesie! / Ma io non so parlare

d'altre cose. / Le altre cose son tutte noiose" (305), once declared the interested party.) Instead, this study will concentrate on reading a generous selection of those texts by Penna that allude in one way or another to sexual organs or actions. It will be seen that there exists in the Perugian poet a tendency to present the more erotic aspects of his existence in an enigmatic light, that when it comes to all things sexual Penna can be quite a cryptic writer, sometimes deliberately leaving a great deal to his reader's imagination. In Penna's verse sex abounds but it is rarely presented in an especially forthright manner: in the words of Cesare Garboli, "[i]l sesso è ovunque presente, nella poesia di Penna, come un dio selvaggio e discreto. Lo si sente volare nelle stanze, si sente palpitare la sua infinita vita di uccello che sbatte le ali, senza vederlo mai" ("Stranezze" 37). Penna, it will be observed, tends in his writing to mitigate his more sexually orientated experiences; there exists in his poetry, to quote this time from a seminal article by Pier Paolo Pasolini, "uno strutturale processo eufemistico" (437).

1. "Le tue poesie sono così caste, così piene di pudore": *Poesie* 1939

It should not be forgotten that during the years of Fascism censorship on works of literature was fairly severe and certainly a long way away from what we are used to in the present-day cultural climate. It would appear that the censor did not interfere with poetry destined for publication in periodicals, given that Penna was able to publish one of his then more "scandalous" works, "*Nel fresco orinatoio alla stazione*," in a 1933 issue of *Circoli*. However, when Penna, someone who was far out of tune with the prevailing moral atmosphere, came to think about getting a book printed, he quite definitely had much to fear from the bureaucratic apparatus of state censorship. Suffice it to say that in the exchange of letters between Penna and the liberal-minded Montale, who had at a certain point resolved to assist the former in publishing his first volume of poetry, one of the recurrent themes is the problem of avoiding censorship, a problem that was, in the words of Montale, "assai grave" (47) in the case of Penna. Just how much of a role, be it direct or indirect, issues of censorship played in what did and did not go into the definitive text of Penna's first collection is not entirely certain. Whatever the case may be, in the Perugian poet's first volume of verse, *Poesie*, as it was when it finally came out in 1939, published thanks in good part to the efforts of Montale's close friend Sergio Solmi, it is indeed arduous to find any glaring allusions to sexual matters. In a letter dated 2 November 1932, Saba, someone who must have felt affinities with Penna's verse for a whole series of motives, described the

poems of the latter as “così caste, così piene di pudore” (5). The same might be said for practically all of the material in *Poesie*.

In Penna's first collection erotic objects and actions are deliberately cloaked in mystery and as a result it frequently requires a certain degree of perceptiveness on the part of the reader to get to the bottom of the poems. Consider the text below, like the majority of Penna's verse lacking in any title:

Sole senz'ombra su virili corpi
abbandonati. Tace ogni virtù.

Lenta l'anima affonda – con il mare –
entro un lucente sonno. D'improvviso
balzano – giovani isolotti – i sensi.

Ma il peccato non esiste più. (10)

As so often in Penna, this poem is pervaded by an insistent alliteration, the rapid heartbeat of a male who is highly aroused. In fact, the alveolar fricative and the dental lateral pound their way through the above verses: “Sole senz'ombra su virili [...] Lenta l'anima [...] i/ [...] lucente sonno. D'improvviso / balzano [...] isolotti [...] sensi [...] i/ [...] esiste” [my italics]. That there is something risqué about the scene of “virili corpi” described in the first sentence is hinted at straight away in the second verse by the words “Tace ogni virtù” (cf. Montale's “tace ogni voce”), not by coincidence rhyming with the last verse.¹ The climax to “Sole senz'ombra su virili corpi” comes with the penultimate sentence, which offers us one of those characteristic Pennian epiphanies, erupting unexpectedly out of the blue: “D'improvviso / balzano —giovani isolotti— i sensi.” What, one might wonder, is the author alluding to with these words? It requires a certain amount of thought to work out the answer to this question but it would seem, in fact, that this esoteric sentence is evoking a penal erection. This same erection, as Garboli writes with typical verve, “viene avvolta da una specie di nube, la nube omerica che, nei momenti più cruciali, inghiotte e fa sparire gli eroi, al punto che “giovani isolotti” non è una realtà ma non è neppure una metafora” (Penna, *Montale e il desiderio* 18-19). As for that “Ma il peccato non esiste più” which brings “Sole senz'ombra su virili corpi” to a close, we may interpret this verse as the subject's anarchic rebellion against social conventions and their dictate that homosexual libido is morally reprehensible (in Penna's poetry eroticism and ethics regularly combine).

Just a few pages after “*Sole senz’ombra su virili corpi*” we find “*Il mio Amore era nudo*,” reproduced here in its entirety:

Il mio Amore era nudo
in riva di un mare sonoro.
Gli stavamo d’accanto
– favorevoli e calmi –
io e il tempo.

Poi lo rubò una casa.
Me lo macchiò un inchiostro. Io resto
in riva di un mare sonoro. (16)

There can surely be little doubt that in the above verses Penna has in mind that being which haunts almost all-pervasively his poetry, the “ragazzo” or—to adopt an exquisitely Pennian literary lexeme—the “fanciullo.” Still, it is noteworthy that the author should opt to mask completely the identity of the target of his amatory gaze, effectively rendering this same asexual by describing him as simply “[i]l mio Amore”: it is as if Penna is reluctant to reveal the gender of his love to the reading public at large. As with “*Sole senz’ombra su virili corpi*,” we encounter here a particularly enigmatic passage in the penultimate sentence: “Me lo macchiò un inchiostro” (observe the appearance of the past historic tense, something of a rarity within *Poesie*). One feasible exegesis of this sentence might read as follows: the act of writing about this naked being by the seaside somehow denigrates the wonder of the moment; literature can only humiliate reality. But let us put forward here an alternative interpretation. Could not Penna’s “inchiostro” be an obscure metaphor for semen? Furthermore, could not the above sentence represent a veiled confession on the part of the subject that he has defiled the image of his lover by setting him up as the object of a masturbatory act? If this is indeed the case, then after the instant of sexual self-gratification—ostensibly a long time after, seeing that the verb “restare” is in the present tense—the poet seems to remain all by himself, without even time to keep him company. And, indeed, loneliness is often associated with the poet’s erotic experiences. In this context we might well recall an important article on *Poesie* by Elena Gurrieri where we read that Penna’s is “un tipo di poesia orientata a trasporre sulla pagina la fondamentale condizione di solitudine” (401).

Let us take another piece from *Poesie* in which one may unearth an allusion to a carnal act. The text in question, dated “Roma, primavera ’37” and published the same year in *Circoli* under the title “La gara,” is transcribed below²:

Sotto il sole vivace e rumorosa
 fu la gara. Rimane solo il campo.
 E si prepara ad ascoltare il fiume
 nascosto
 come il lento ragazzo si allontana
 ultimo, ancora non vestito bene. (53)

So, after a “gara” a personified field gets ready to listen to a hidden river whilst a boy wanders off. Judging solely by the verbal tenses—once more, the past historic (“fu”) followed by the present (“Rimane [...] si prepara [...] si allontana”)—much time has drifted by between the lively “gara” and the actions described successively. And yet here, as with “*Il mio Amore era nudo*,” one somehow senses intuitively that the temporal gap between the past and the *hic et nunc* is far briefer than the grammatical tenses would have us believe, that we are dealing in reality with the lapsing of minutes or hours rather than of months or years: in both poems one is tempted to hypothesise that Penna has put the anterior events in the past historic in order to convey how infinitely far away they now seem to him. If all this is indeed the case, then it becomes eminently likely that the boy’s state of undress in “*Sotto il sole vivace e rumorosa*” is due to his participation in the “gara” of the poem’s opening sentence. And at this juncture, knowing Penna’s verse and with before us an animated and noisy contest out of which a “ragazzo” comes improperly dressed, we can quite easily suppose that the “gara” consisted not of a game of football or similar but, instead, took the form of a homosexual encounter: “gara,” in other words, might very well represent another erotic euphemism. Meanwhile, the verse “nascosto” is particularly noteworthy, given that, apart from the “meravigliati” (4) of “*Mi avevano lasciato solo*,” it is the only line in *Poesie* in which there appears just one word (leaving aside final verses and verses “a scalino”). Isolated as it is, this adjective, in enjambment with “il fiume,” takes on a value that it would hardly have possessed if it had sat at the end of the previous verse or at the beginning of the next: it is as if Penna is cleverly declaring “there is something hidden in my poem,” as if he is inviting his reader to uncover the sexual message that would seem to be concealed in his text.

A fourth and final analysis of a poem from *Poesie*, this time blending in our hermeneutic approach sexuality and intertextuality. Penna commences his “Il vegetale” by stating that he has abandoned animals and their futile changeable forms.³ Instead, “[r]espiro accanto a te, ora che annotta, / purpureo fiore sconosciuto: assai / meglio mi parli che le loro voci” (57). Now, the mention of a “purpureo fiore sconosciuto” instantly conjures up in the mind of any seasoned reader of modern Italian verse

one specific text, a poem that justly features amongst the most famous works by Pascoli, “Digitale purpurea” (*Primi poemetti*). In fact, with this vocative we are before a premeditated literary allusion. As is well known, in “Digitale purpurea” the purple foxglove symbolises the taboo and, in particular, sex: in the course of this poem Rachele —representing Ida, the sister who shattered the family “nido” by getting married— confesses to Maria —i.e. Mariù, another of the poet’s sisters— that she dared to approach this flower or, on a symbolic plane, that she ceded to the attractions of Eros. By having himself breathe alongside a “purpureo fiore sconosciuto,” Penna suggests to the reader that he resembles Rachele, that he too cannot resist the perilous charms of sex. But the story does not end here, for immediately after the above verses the Perugian author writes that his mysterious purple flower, sleeping amongst its green leaves, is alive “come il lieve fanciullo che ho lasciato / dormire, un giorno, abbandonato all’erbe” (57). By going on to associate the sleeping purple flower with a boy he left slumbering on the grass, Penna succeeds in hinting with fine subtlety at the nature of his relationship with this same male.

2. “Unleashed Eros”: From *Appunti* to *Il viaggiatore insonne*

In general, whilst erotic references frequently tend to be quite enigmatic and the use of euphemism continues, compared to *Poesie* 1939 in the successive collections there can be no doubt that Penna becomes rather more explicit in his allusions to sexual organs and acts. Indeed, in one of the very few articles on Penna that currently exist in English, Hermann Haller, describing the texts from 1927 to 1938 as a “more or less platonically erotic poetry” (48), goes as far as gathering the later material from 1938 to 1955 under the heading of “unleashed Eros” (48).⁴ In the ensuing paragraphs, leaving behind *Poesie*, we will examine the collections posterior to 1939 published under the direct supervision of Penna, highlighting some of the many instances in which Eros rears his head.

We might initiate this survey of eroticism in the post-*Poesie* verse with the modestly entitled *Appunti*, published in 1950 over ten years after Penna’s first collection and containing poetry from 1938 to 1949. Let us read together the following text where the author’s lust is ennobled through the use of a substantive very much pertaining to the high literary tradition, “brama”:

Ho puntato la brama in ogni luogo.
Sotto la pioggia ho perduto il mio seme.
Ora si gonfia il fiume e in me fiorisce
– straripa il fiume – un desiderio nuovo. (183)

An expression such as “ho perduto il mio seme” would have been unimaginable in the earlier *Poesie*: from the point of view of sexual explicitness Penna goes some way beyond his first collection with these words. At the same time, it should be underlined that rather than a blunt, straight to the point affirmation of the type “ho eiaculato” or even “ho perduto il mio sperma”—and neither “eiaculare” nor “sperma” appear anywhere in Penna’s corpus of poetry—, the reader is presented here with a quite delicate expression that almost smacks of the Biblical.⁵ Furthermore, thanks to the words “ho perduto il mio seme,” we encounter little difficulty in making sense of the third and fourth verses of “*Ho puntato la brama in ogni luogo*”: in all likelihood, the phrase “si gonfia il fiume” refers to a phallic erection, whilst “straripa il fiume” represents another ejaculation.

Yet perhaps the most daring piece in *Appunti* is the following epigram: “È bella giovinezza e basta un poco / di vino e poi vedete cosa fanno. / I miei ragazzi dapprima sì fieri” (193). Certainly with these verses Penna is trespassing beyond the bounds of popular taste. The author does not state outright what his lads get up to after a drinking session but it does not take a great deal of imagination to figure out fairly accurately what he has in mind. What is interesting here and in the rest of Penna’s verse is that a genuine transgression before the moral codes of the time is flanked by a strong degree of conventionalism on the formal plane, by a style that one might legitimately define as being classical. In Penna we find, in the words of Giuseppe Giacalone, “[u]n perfetto rispetto della lingua comune e della tradizione poetica, per cantare un tema assolutamente trasgressivo, che entrava ora per la prima volta nella lirica italiana moderna” (260). In the case of “È bella giovinezza e basta un poco” we are dealing with three hendecasyllables, the Italian metrical verse *par excellence*. The opening verse is a *maiore* with an ictus on the second, sixth, eighth and tenth metrical syllables; the second verse presents the same series of accents as the first with the addition of an ictus on the fourth; finally, the third verse is a *minore* with an ictus on the second, fourth, seventh and tenth. Leaving behind questions of prosody, it is also worth drawing attention to the phonic structure of “È bella giovinezza e basta un poco” and, in particular, the alliterative pairings: “bella” and “basta” in the first verse, “vino” and “vedete” in the second verse and “fanno” and “fieri” at the end of the second and third verses. Finally, whilst examining this short poem one should not overlook the enjambment “un poco / di vino” which has the effect of suggesting the adjective “divino,” thereby adding a mystical fringe to the entire erotic scene.

Let us move on to *Una strana gioia di vivere* (1956), containing poems from 1949 to 1955 and, at least going by the testimony of Elio Pecora,

Penna's favourite collection ("Sandro Penna" 433). One of the most impressive poems in this short work is the eleventh piece, "*Il fanciullo magretto torna a casa*":

Il fanciullo magretto torna a casa
 un poco stanco e molto interessato
 alle cose dell'autobus. Pensa
 – con quella luce che viene dai sensi
 dai sensi ancora appena appena tocca –
 in quanti modi adoperar si possa
 una cosa ch'è nuova e già non tiene
 se inavvertito ogni tanto egli tocca.
 Poi si accorge di me. E raffreddato
 si soffia il cuore fra due grosse mani.

Io devo scendere ed è forse un bene. (214)

More than virtually any other Italian writer of the Twentieth century, a poem by Penna is instantaneously recognisable, as if clearly stamped with its author's particular hallmark. Putting to one side the actual subject matter of this text, we discern that the above verses derive from Penna by way of formal elements such as the repetition of words, "cose [...] cosa," "dai sensi / dai sensi" (an instance of anadiplosis), "appena appena" and "tocca [...] tocca"—Penna, alongside the Campana of *Canti orfici* and the Sereni of *Gli strumenti umani*, is one of the most felicitously iterative writers of the Novecento—, and the anastrophe between verb and infinitive: "adoperar si possa" rather than the more usual "si possa adoperar" (for an analogous phenomenon, see the famous "Io vivere vorrei addormentato / entro il dolce rumore della vita" (59)).⁶ At the risk of stating the obvious, the "cosa ch'è nuova" in "*Il fanciullo magretto torna a casa*" is the slim boy's infant organ of copulation. The generic noun "cosa," it might be noted, surfaces elsewhere in Penna as a euphemism for the phallus: see "*Lasciavo l'ospedale. Rivestivo*" where the subject, getting dressed, exposes "una semplice cosa" (69), as well as the quasi *stornello* "Poi fu una cosa povera, avvilita, / nascosta da una mano, il segno della vita" (186) and a "Variante" in *Confuso sogno* where there appears "[u]n tenero / garzone di fornaio con sua [*sic*] tenera / cosa che a tratti lievita" (CS 99).⁷ Returning to "*Il fanciullo magretto torna a casa*," the young lad, engrossed in his sexuality, finds out that he is being watched—"Poi si accorge di me"—and, probably embarrassed, blows his nose between his hands (curiously, further muddling anatomical questions, the author writes "cuore" rather than "naso"). Finally, in a strophe consisting of just one verse, cut off from the rest of the poem as if to herald

the subject's imminent parting from his "fanciullo," we read: "Io devo scendere ed è forse un bene." In this hendecasyllable, marked by a "forte risonanza morale" (Pasolini 438), the subject declares that the fact that he has to get off the bus may well be a good thing because, reading now between the lines, otherwise he might cede to the temptation of trying to lure the slim boy away to some place or another in order to engage in a sexually gratifying act.

Staying with *Una strana gioia di vivere*, in the first strophe of "*Un po' di pace è già nella campagna*" Penna affirms that "[l]'ozio che è il padre dei miei sogni guarda / i miei vizi coi suoi occhi leggeri" (216). But what are these vices? For an at least partial answer to this query, the reader need look no further than the second and final strophe of the same poem:

Qualcuno che era in me ma me non guarda
bagna e si mostra negligente: appare
d'un tratto un treno coi suoi passeggeri
attoniti e ridenti: ed è già ieri. (216)

The exact sense of this quatrain is not immediately manifest but, fortunately enough, it is possible to turn here for assistance to an exceptional reader of Penna's verse, Pier Paolo Pasolini.⁸ What we are dealing with in "*Un po' di pace è già nella campagna*," in fact, is "la soddisfazione di un bisogno, adempiuta con negligenza evidentemente finta, davanti a un treno fuggente per la campagna" (440): we are faced here with "un atto che in termini clinici si dice di esibizionismo" (440). (Earlier in the present study it was seen that Penna was anything but adverse to perpetrating such acts.) What is especially striking about the text in question is how the author takes pains to estrange himself from his erotic exhibitionism at the precise moment in which he confesses this same to his reading public: "Qualcuno che era in me ma me non guarda." The person that exposes his genitalia to the passengers on the train is not an "io" but "[q]ualcuno che era in me" who, moreover, does not even look at this "me." Observe in addition that instead of "orina" or the far rarer "minge" or even the vulgarism "piscia" we have here "bagna," a euphemism for the bodily discharge of urine that resurfaces in other poems by Penna: see "*Il cielo è vuoto. Ma negli occhi neri*" with its "il mio dio se ne va in bicicletta / o bagna il muro con disinvoltura" (64) and "*Mentre lascio l'acre espansione*" with its "[b]agnavo il muro" (395).

A close relative of the verb "orinare" does appear, however, in the very last poem in *Una strana gioia di vivere*, as so frequently in Penna a single rhyming quatrain without any title:

La rosa al suo rigoglio
 non fu mai così bella
 come quando nel gonfio orinatoio
 dell'alba amò l'insonne sentinella. (221)

The “rosa al suo rigoglio” in the first *settenario* is evidently the turgid phallus: in this case the euphemism is particularly delicate—what could be more sublime than a blossoming rose?—but also somewhat surprising. In the Italian lyric tradition the rose is conventionally associated with the female. To furnish just two illustrations from a veritably immense repertoire of possible examples, consider the famous sonnet by Guinizzelli that opens “Io vogl’ del ver la mia donna laudare / ed asembrarli la rosa e lo giglio” or poem CCXLIX in *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* where Petrarch writes: “T’ la riveggio [Laura] starsi humilmente / tra belle donne, a guisa d’una rosa / tra minor’ fior.” It is, therefore, vaguely disconcerting to witness the rose being adopted as a symbol for the penis. Indeed, thanks to this state of affairs, as well as to the fact that the sexual partner, the sentry, is referred to using a feminine noun (“sentinella”), the entire homoerotic encounter takes on a positively effeminate character. Moreover, in addition to all these observations, it is worth commenting on the utilisation of the adjective “gonfio,” one of Penna’s favourite words. The fact that the phallus is erect is communicated in the very first verse by way of the periphrasis “al suo rigoglio.” Yet it will be noted that the poet opts to emphasise this anatomical feature in the third verse where, in a sort of hypallage, the adjective “gonfio” is attributed to the “orinatoio.”

Moving ever onwards in the complex editorial itinerary of Penna’s verse, in 1957, thanks in part to Pasolini, there appeared *Poesie*, a volume that gathered together the three collections published up until then, i.e. the homonymous *Poesie*, *Appunti* and *Una strana gioia di vivere*, as well as, in its second section, a very large quantity of poems not inserted in the previous three volumes. At the beginning of this second section we come across seven poems belonging to the period of composition of Penna’s first collection. Here one is faced with a sexual innuendo that easily surpasses what is to be found in *Poesie* 1939. Take “Paesaggio,” for instance, with its “umida amicizia” (67) between two boys. Or consider “Porto con me la dolce pena. Erro” where the author writes: “Solitario un fanciullo scorgo assorto / in qualcosa di oscuro ch’io non oso / indovinare...” (66). If the first person dares not conjecture as to what the “fanciullo” is up to, then the reader can only really make an educated guess with regard to the same after he has meditated upon the next and conclusive sentence of “Porto con me la dolce pena. Erro”: “Poi, scoperto, un guizzo / e un salto lo riportan fil

fanciullo] gaiamente / a nasconder nel mare il suo peccato" (66). This sentence and in particular the noun "peccato," which we will meet again later in the title of a 1989 collection, rather leads us to believe that the boy was engaged in masturbating.

As to the remaining poems in the second section of *Poesie* 1957, ascribed to the period 1938 to 1955, i.e. to the years of *Appunti* and *Una strana gioia di vivere*, one novelty here compared to the previous three collections is the appearance of the less than polite verb "pisciare." Thus, in "La tomba del padre": "Un ragazzo si stacca dalla mamma / e pischia verso il coro dei soldati / su i campi desolati lieto e triste" (82). All the same, the rhetorical device of euphemism certainly maintains a presence. In "Il fattorello" the young farm bailiff's "zampillo" (91) (of urine) steams away betwixt dawn and mist, elsewhere "il suo segreto / di carne" (121) is surely the phallus, whilst in yet another poem the request of a "fanciullo" for Penna to gratify him sexually is rendered with an enchanting obliqueness: "Come il vento di aprile è il mio fanciullo / chiaro e leggero, mutevole un poco. [...] Invano / invoca una carezza più costante" (83). We also have for the first time the substantive "sesso" employed not to indicate generically all males, as it obviously had done in "*È il nobile sesso. E poi, di questo*" (*Appunti*), but, instead, to denote either sexual intercourse or the actual anatomical organ: "Nel silenzio / la ferma confusione: panni e sesso" (122) and "Io non verrò alle calme / corse nel verde antico ove si sgrana / talvolta il sesso di un fanciullo [...]" (132), where the rolling back of the foreskin acquires a religious aspect thanks to the phrase "si sgrana" ("sgranare" is, of course, used in Italian not just to mean "to shell" or "to husk" but also, in conjunction with the noun "rosario," to communicate what in English would be "to tell one's beads"). From the point of view of so-called "parolacce," another noteworthy poem in the second section of *Poesie* 1957 is the following:

Malato nel meriggio in un solfeggio
di monete che battono il selciato.
Su questo letto quali dolci fichi
nel sole delle donne indi appassiti. (123)

It would be fair to presume that in this esoteric text's second sentence, with its "letto" and its "donne," the author is jesting with the phonic similarity between "fico" and one of the most obscene words in the Italian language, a noun in the feminine case that differs from "fico" solely in its final vowel.

In *Croce e delizia*, meanwhile, published the year after *Poesie* 1957 and containing poems from 1927 to 1957, we come across another unambigu-

ous swearword: “Resta un odore come merda secca / lungo le siepi cariche di sole” (263). But in this revealingly entitled collection—“croce” and “delizia” refer most obviously to Penna’s passion for adolescent males, something that can transform a proud man into “una mosca / impigliata nel miele” (307)—there is much more to stimulate us. We might single out two poems for a close-up analysis: “*«Prenditi una ragazza, e piano piano»*” and “Solfeggio.” Below the first of these two poems is reproduced in its entirety:

«Prenditi una ragazza, e piano piano
vai con qualche bacetto. E invece...» calmo
oltre il verde bigliardo e il fermo giuoco,
così tenero ancora, uno parlava
paternamente, con attenta grazia.
E l'altro l'ascoltava, egli nei gonfi
occhi colpevoli. L'orribile disgrazia! (242)

We are presented here with a masterpiece of reticence and ambiguity; these enigmatic verses might be interpreted in any number of different ways. What ensues is one possible reading, an exegesis that in the eyes of the author of the present investigation reflects accurately Penna’s semantic intentions. One male is recounting to another something to do with girls. The direct speech of the opening two verses ends abruptly with suspension points but it would be reasonable to hypothesise that the speaker carried on his discourse and, basing ourselves on the first sentence and the snippet that follows, that he proceeded to clarify for the benefit of his listener what to do and what not to do in order to bed a young lady. The other person, presumably someone around the age of adolescence, would seem to be filled with guilt as he listens to the paternal voice: “egli nei gonfi / occhi colpevoli.” At a guess, the cause for this guilt is that the listener, rather than making love to a girl, has indulged on one or more occasions in intercourse with a member of his own sex, maybe even with Sandro Penna himself. The concluding exclamation “L’orribile disgrazia!” represents the opinion of the author, perhaps sickened by the fact that the listener is convinced that his homosexual experience is blameworthy. Yet, it must be reiterated, the above poem is open to a variety of interpretations. Who can be certain as to what exactly Penna intended us to understand? Did he really hope that his reader would come up with a continuation of the speaker’s discourse? Was his aim really to have us believe that the guilt-ridden listener had previously taken part in one or more homosexual exploits or did he, on the other hand, expect his reader to come to a very different conclusion before those “gonfi / occhi colpevoli”? One

thing is certain: anybody who enters into a hermeneutic dialogue with “«Prenditi una ragazza, e piano piano” is left with a series of unanswered questions, of doubts, of insoluble quandaries that ultimately serve to reinforce the fascination of this piece.

The other text from *Croce e delizia* especially worthy of attention here is “Solfeggio,” one of the longest and most unusual poems by Penna that we possess. The Perugian writer, we discover, has experienced “la mia prima / tregua nel mondo del mio disonore” (257): he has been two days without love, without, that is, any young male paramours. He has seen “il più bello dei fanciulli / morire nel mio cuore senza un guizzo / come fa la candela senza cuore” (257) and a tender blush on a hot cheek, a blush that he allowed to die away. “Solfeggio” continues:

Sorpreso ho infine casualmente il sesso
di un biondo marinaio aperto e onesto
(non domandate, cittadini, dove)
e non gli ho detto che non era solo.
Non domandate, amici, perché tace
anche il biondo battello sotto il sole;
nel suo beccheggio sono le sue parole
ma il mio silenzio era privo di sole. (257)

That “biondo marinaio” inevitably takes us back to Penna’s most famous and most studied poem, “*La vita... è ricordarsi di un risveglio*,” where sudden liberation is having close at hand a young sailor, “l’azzurro / e il bianco della sua divisa, e fuori / un mare tutto fresco di colore” (3). Yet, amongst all the other differences, in the later poem Penna mentions not the sailor’s blue and white uniform but, far more intimately, his phallus. Quite probably, in fact, the “io” caught sight of his blonde sailor whilst this last was involved in the act of urinating (Vera Saura 212). One of the most interesting and distinctive features of “Solfeggio” comes at just this point when, most uncharacteristically, the author would seem to address himself directly to his readers using the second person plural, instructing them to abstain from enquiring where he saw his sailor. (For other occasions upon which Penna addresses his public in the “voi” form, see “*Quando su la città, beata, antica*,” “*Avete mai provato, in un’aria serena*” and “*S’andava verso il mare di Civitavecchia*.”) Right after this imperative, Penna goes on to recollect that “non gli ho detto che non era solo” or, reading into these words, that he did not make his presence known and thus gave up any immediate possibility of seducing the sailor. Moving on, in the second half of the above extract it is implied that a relationship with this sailor would have meant

happiness, for the “biondo battello,” surely a symbol for the “biondo marinaio,” lies “sotto il sole.” Moreover, a relationship with the sailor would inevitably have yielded the prospect of sexual intercourse, something that is hinted at by the noun “beccheggio”: indeed, “[s]e il sostantivo «beccheggio» ci rinvia nella sua immagine all’oscillazione della nave da poppa a prua e viceversa,” writes Carmelo Vera Saura, “e nella sua sostanza semantica all’atto di beccare e quindi a un’altra oscillazione istintiva, vitale, ambedue i movimenti da su in giù e viceversa acquistano una evidente iconicità erotica” (213). Yet the poet rejected all this with his decision not to make his presence known; he condemned himself to gloom: “il mio silenzio era privo di sole.”

The Sixties did not witness any new collections by Penna. One may almost certainly rule out the hypothesis that no publishing house was interested in producing a new book of his and it is unlikely that this silence was motivated by external cultural or political events. It would be extremely difficult to imagine, for instance, that Penna’s long silence was inspired by any sense of disillusionment before a literary scene dominated by the *neo-avanguardia*. Whatever the case may be, admirers of the poet had to wait until 1970 for the appearance of *Tutte le poesie*, containing the material from *Poesie* 1957 plus *Croce e delizia* and two other sections, “Giovanili ritrovate” and “Altre,” offering a number of poems up until then unpublished in book form.⁹ The first fifteen of these texts belong to the period 1927–1936, the other nineteen to the years 1936 to 1957. We might focus our attention here on any one of these pieces: “*Entro nell’ombra ove si muove incerta*,” “*Al di là dell’ortaglia ove nell’ombra*” and “*La luna che nel cielo era assopita*” are particularly noteworthy within the context of the present study. Still, rather than delving into *Tutte le poesie*, let us look in the last paragraphs of this section at the final two collections to have received the authorial imprimatur, *Stranezze* and *Il viaggiatore insonne*.

Stranezze (1976) is divided into three sections: the first of these is dated 1957 to 1965, the second 1965 to 1970 and the third 1970 to 1976. However, it should be stated that in *Stranezze*, possibly more than in any other collection by Penna, the temporal indications are quite unreliable. To cite just three cases, “Lavoro di pescatore,” inserted in the first section of *Stranezze*, was previously published in *Circoli* in 1937, whilst “La madre” and “*A un sole scolorito*,” both situated in the second section of *Stranezze*, were published just a few years later in 1941 issues of respectively *Prospettive* and *Primato* (see Vermicelli 95). Confronted with such imprecision, not to say deception, on the part of the author, any critic dealing with Penna and looking to discover an evolution in his poetic itinerary would

be well-advised to advance in his research with extreme caution. As Roberto Deidier has affirmed: “Se i testi [di Penna] sembrano rifiutare ogni tentativo di “addomesticamento” cronologico, essi sono in grado di fuorviare il critico che voglia vedervi qualsiasi sviluppo interno” (““Ma chi perdonerà questo discorso?” Questioni di filologia penniana” 34).¹⁰

By the time of *Stranezze* Penna was an old man with little to lose and, as for censorship, if not extinct, it was certainly a world away from what it was during the Thirties. No doubt about it, the legal publication of a volume such as *Stranezze* would have been quite unthinkable during the dark days of the Fascist *ventennio*. How could the censor have approved of a poem such as the eighth piece where we find for the first time in Penna's verse the verb “masturbare,” albeit that this same verb is employed allegorically rather than realistically: “Forse l'ispirazione è solo un urlo / confuso. Ma entro le colonne della / legge, ridendo si masturba ogni fanciullo” (318)?¹¹ And would the censor have been able to turn a blind eye to “*Lontano dal mio letto*” where the reader comes across the vulgarity “culetto” (402), another novelty in *Stranezze*? (But note that Penna prefers here the diminutive “culetto” to the far harsher “culo.”) Furthermore, the rules of censorship would surely never have allowed the publication of that poem from *Stranezze* which goes by the title “Omossessualità”? Still, leaving aside questions of censorship, on the subject of this last text it is worth pointing out that if there is no euphemistic beating about the bush in the title “Omossessualità,” then the ensuing verses are far from explicit with regard to the more carnal aspects of homosexuality. Indeed, actual sexual relations, whilst present in these verses, are only alluded to in the vaguest of terms: “Le loro brame segrete, le loro / selvagge vittorie sulla carne / si confidavano” (398), “All'alba s'incontrarono / i loro corpi nudi. / Fu una cosa del tutto naturale” (398).

Unusually, in “*Alfio che un treno porta assai lontano*” (*Stranezze*) Penna, somebody who as a general rule does not supply place-names or the names of people, transcribes immediately the name of the object of his libido:

Alfio che un treno porta assai lontano.
Dove porti i tuoi occhi dolorosi
e tanto lieti insieme? Adesso è l'alba
e già tanto lontana pare la sera
che da poco è trascorsa con noi. La sera
in cui non hai voluto darmi
quello che solo meritavo, quello
che non dato m'incendia cuore e mente
a tal punto che l'alba o la sera od il giorno

fanno una confusione
in cui vedo soltanto il tuo lume. (341)

What is that something that Alfio did not want to give to the "io"? Quite typically, Penna chooses to leave his reader in the dark. Nevertheless, knowing the man and his poetry, our best bet in response to the above query would be not so much a friendly peck on the cheek or a fraternal embrace as, to put it bluntly, sex. If it is indeed sexual intercourse or something akin to this that we are dealing with in the case of the above poem from *Stranezze*, then it is well worth underlining how Penna sublimates his primitive instincts so that the lack of erotic gratification becomes something that "incendia cuore e mente" to such an extent that dawn or dusk or daytime form a chaos in which the "io" can only make out Alfio's "lume." And, as so often, the reader finds himself catapulted into the poetic universe of Petrarch.

Stranezze was followed by *Il viaggiatore insonne*, published in the early weeks of 1977, just a short while after Penna's death on 21 January of the same year. It offered to the reading public some of the pieces closest to the Perugian writer's heart. Onanism, a recurrent theme in Penna's verse, seems to surface again in this short collection. Surely, in fact, the poet is alluding to just this practise in the following two-verse poem: "Immobile e perduto, lentamente / animava nel buio la mano" (VI 27)? Still, in what is left of this section we shall concentrate our critical gaze not on this epigram but, instead, on two other poems from *Il viaggiatore insonne*: "*Quando discese la svelta lattaia*" and "*Grava, sulla città, colma l'estate*."

It is interesting to compare the first of these two texts, quite definitely one of the most powerfully erotic works that Penna ever consented to be printed, with a slightly longer piece probably dating back to the mid Thirties but not published in book form until *Poesie* 1957 (see Deidier, *L'officina di Penna* 132-33):

La mattina di estate è ancora fresca.
E giunto è il giovinetto adesso a questo
verde paese nuovo alla sua gioia.
Risale la collina sovra il mare.
Indi si ferma trepido ad osare
una semplice cosa: ora al suo cuore
dolcissimo peccato poi che scende
la giovane lattaia e lo vedrà. (65)

Quando discese la svelta lattaia
un cespito senti crescere nell'aia
l'assonnato garzone, e in sulla cima,
aperta come rosa mattutina,
ma quale una rugiada assai più calda,
il latte a lui restò, non la lattaia. (VI 25)

Certainly the text on the left from *Poesie* 1957 might be deemed to be somewhat racy and, indeed, Penna himself in the draft of a letter to

Montale wrote that, “volendo essere molto cattivo,” this poem could be considered “audac[e]” (Montale and Penna, *Lettere e minute* 49). Typically, the nature of the “semplice cosa” that the young lad ventures is not made entirely clear but the reader, even if unaware of “*Quando discese la svelta lattaia*,” could be tempted to hypothesise, spurred on by that “dolcissimo peccato,” that Penna is alluding yet again to male masturbation. Still, the eroticism of “*La mattina di estate è ancora fresca*” looks all but tame before “*Quando discese la svelta lattaia*,” which might very well have been inspired by the same incident that triggered off the composition of the former poem. At the descent of the “svelta” dairymaid (an intentional *double entendre*?) the drowsy farm-boy experienced an erection, described in botanical terms: “un cespo senti crescere nell’aia.” On top of this “tuft,” i.e. on the glans penis, there remained milk or, symbolically speaking, semen. (Note that there is not even the faintest mention of any act of masturbation or sexual intercourse which, barring the possibility of spontaneous ejaculation, presumably took place between the erection and the semen on the phallus.) In this poem, as elsewhere, Penna makes use of imagery pertaining to the natural world to paint an erotic scene in a simple and unaffected light. Thus, alongside the above-mentioned “cespo” and “latte,” the glans penis with its prepuce drawn back is likened to a morning rose, reminding us of the earlier mentioned “*La rosa al suo rigoglio*,” and, in a memorable simile that carries on the morning theme, the semen is like “una rugiada assai più calda.” To round off our discussion of this poem, if in Penna the carnality is “tanto più esplicita proprio in virtù dell’eccesso di pratica eufemistica e di sottaciuto,” to quote from an article by Deidier (“Il «dolce rumore della vita». La poesia di Sandro Penna” 360), then rarely is this so true as with “*Quando discese la svelta lattaia*.”

Let us now hone in on another text from *Il viaggiatore insonne*, a piece that in a very similar form was originally destined for *Poesie* 1939, before being eliminated from this collection at the very last moment, probably for reasons of censorship (see Deidier, *L’officina di Penna* 138):

Grava, sulla città, colma l’estate.
 Nell’orto di una villa c’è un ragazzo
 brutto, che guarda trasognato il suo
 sesso innalzato. Indi sospira e prende
 di nuovo un suo poeta. E l’ora scende. (I T 35)

Elements of the ludic and the ironic are far from rare in Penna’s verse: indeed, to pigeonhole the Perugian writer as a purely lyric poet would be to amputate a fundamental limb from his literary corpus. One of the ways

in which Penna jests with his reader is through the use of end rhymes. In "*Grava, sulla città, colma l'estate*" there appears just one instance of this phenomenon, "prende" / "scende" in the final two verses. But this lone end rhyme is sufficient to spark off a train of thought. If these two contiguous verses rhyme, then, working backwards, we might legitimately wonder about the fact that the previous two verses do *not* form a *rima baciata*. Or, to put it another way, should not the third verse terminate in the sound "-azzo" or the second in "-uo"? Now, in the case of "*Grava, sulla città, colma l'estate*" the phallus is referred to quite explicitly as "il suo / sesso" (end of the third verse, beginning of the fourth). But what equivalent term could Penna have inserted at the end of the third verse to create a rhyme with "ragazzo"? The answer goes without saying. In fact, whilst Penna never writes in his poetry that most taboo of sexual vulgarisms "cazzo," on this occasion he succeeds all the same in conjuring it up in the mind of his more inquisitive reader. As for the penultimate sentence of "*Grava, sulla città, colma l'estate*," "Indi sospira e prende / di nuovo un suo poeta," maybe there is more to these words than immediately meets the eye. The most obvious interpretation of the above sentence would be that after a sigh the ugly boy goes back to reading some poetry. Yet, spurred on by the presence of that "sesso innalzato," could we not perceive a *double entendre* here? Could it not be that the boy is taking again his "poeta" in the strictest sense of this last word, i.e. a male who composes verse or, better still, Sandro Penna himself? If this is indeed the case, then the reader will make of that present indicative "prende" what he will...

3. Posthumous Penna: "The Penna Papers" and *Peccato di gola*

Predictably enough, the death of Sandro Penna did not signal the end of the publication of new verse. We have already mentioned the important volume *Confuso sogno*; this final section will take a look at two other corpuses of Pennian writing, that contained in "The Penna Papers" and *Peccato di gola*. With regard to the former, in his article "The Penna Papers," printed in a 1981 issue of *Paragone* and subsequently included in the almost homonymous volume from 1984, Cesare Garboli rendered public a substantial group of poems in his possession that had not appeared in any of Penna's collections up until then. Amongst this material, relates Garboli in the above-mentioned article, there feature several texts belonging to the series that Penna himself deemed "oscena" (64) and did his best to keep secret. It would appear, in fact, that questions of "decency" played a vital role in Penna's decisions as to whether to publish or not: indeed, Garboli affirms that the poet was "sensibilissimo" when it came to "castità e [...]

decenza" (53). Bearing this in mind and before proceeding to examine the verse included in "The Penna Papers," it is well worth taking a glance at the very beginning of the "Nota" to *Poesie* 1957 where Penna declares that "[il libro è composto di una larga scelta delle poesie scritte fino al 1955. Quelle che mancano, non sempre sono assenti per ragioni estetiche" (*Poesie* 222). It might be conjectured that some of the poems that were not printed in *Poesie* 1957 were left out of this collection because their author considered them to be "indecent."

On numerous occasions in the verse of "The Penna Papers" the reader is faced head on and quite openly with Penna's interest in all things sexual. Here the subject of urination, which evidently fascinated the writer from Perugia, surfaces repeatedly: see "*È tardi. Il tempo vola,*" "*I disegni di Maccari che ho nascosti in un cespuglio,*" "*Era vicino il cimitero. Fabio*" and "*Pisciare, non amare, fare.*" We also encounter in "The Penna Papers," in the above-mentioned poem regarding Mino Maccari, a swearword that is nowhere to be found in Penna's previous verse collections: "frocì" (PP 65). And consider the two titleless quatrains below:

La primavera rende prominente
l'angolo dei calzonì ai giovanotti.
Non è una cosa oscena, non è niente,
niente di male se tu non li tocchi.

(PP 67)

Odorano di sole i miei testicoli
belli rappresi al loro albero antico.
Tornano le battaglie clamorose?
Amorose battaglie senza amore.

(PP 67)

Both the above poems "furono scartate da Penna, per un ripensamento, dal dattiloscritto di *Stranexxe* già pronto per la stampa" (Garboli, "The Penna Papers" 67). Quite likely, the principal motive behind this change of heart on the part of the author was the sexual explicitness of these two pieces.

In the new poetry published in Garboli's article we find Penna playing once more with rhyme, not pronouncing a taboo word but suggesting it to his reader. Anyone glancing at "*La fanfara col sole*" will have scarce difficulty in supposing the identity of the censured words at the end of the verses "e una leggera pena ai c..." (PP 68) and "poso la calda pena ai c..." (PP 68) when he learns that the lexemes with which these same words ought to rhyme, following an ABAB pattern, are "ottoni" (PP 68) and "ormoni" (PP 68). All the same, this partial substitution of a swearword with dots, a *bapax legomenon* in Penna, is worthy of note if for no other reason than that it further illustrates the poet's propensity to conceal but not eschew in his verse the sexual. Staying with the theme of rhyming, let us take a fleeting look at the text reproduced below, again taken from "The Penna Papers":

Amoreggiar con te, mio bel fanciullo
 è come dire al mondo: in te mi cullo.
 E il mondo mi perdoni questo amore
 se la rima minaccia il suo pudore. (PP 70)

What exactly is Penna alluding to with that “rima” in the fourth and final verse? One possibility is that he is referring specifically to “cullo,” rhyming with “fanciullo”: an imprecise pronunciation of the former word, employing not two “l”s but just one, would lead to a “parolaccia.” More likely, however, Penna’s “rima” is a synecdoche for the entire first sentence which does, of course, form a *rima baciata*. With a potent dose of irony, he begs the world’s forgiveness if it is disconcerted by the previous affirmation regarding flirtation with a good-looking young lad.

Lastly, *Peccato di gola*. This slim volume, first published by Scheiwiller in 1989, contains a number of poems extracted from letters to a certain “G.,” the son of one of Penna’s friends: the precise dates of composition are currently unknown but the fact that there appears a “lambretta” (PG 33) might lead us to suspect that some or all of these pieces go back to sometime around the Fifties, i.e. to the decade of *Appunti, Una strana gioia di vivere, Poesie* 1957 and *Croce e delizia* (see Garboli, “Penna postumo” 302). The context is private and therefore one of the possible barriers against so-called “obscenity,” public decency, is absent. Perhaps encouraged by this, Penna gives here full vent to his libido, going further than in any of the collections published during his lifetime. To illustrate the erotic energy of *Peccato di gola*, we might recall the two-verse epigram that reads “Era maggio, tremavo [*sic*] l’esplosione / dello zufolo sotto la cerniera...” (PG 25) or the following lines from the seventeenth text: “un’upupa grifagna / cerca nei tuoi calzonni la compagna” (PG 49).¹² Leaving aside the issue of the influence on the first of these poems of Leopardi’s “A Silvia” (“Era il maggio odoroso: e tu solevi / così menare il giorno”), with regard to the latter text it is helpful to point out that in colloquial Italian the penis is commonly referred to euphemistically as the “uccello,” not to mention the fact that by choosing the feminine noun “upupa” as his phallic symbol and then having this “upupa” hunt for its “compagna” Penna effectively endows his entire scene with a rather effeminate quality (*cf.* the previously mentioned “*La rosa al suo rigoglio*”).

On the subject of birds, sexuality and euphemism, one can hardly pass by the ensuing text from *Peccato di gola*, organised into that classic Pennian form that is the quatrain:

Era giugno, io spiavo, era la sera
 che nascosto portasti una smorfiosa

su da noi: la tua mano scomparsa nelle sete
cercava il nido della capinera. (PG 27)

This poem, dominated on the acoustic plane by a memorable sibilance, is not the only piece in which the Perugian author turns into a spy: compare, for example, the above verses with “*Alta estate notturna*” in *Stranezze*. What is unusual is that the second person “tu,” Penna’s lover, is in the company of a female, described spitefully as a “smorfiosa.” Furthermore, in all the verse material currently available this might very well be the sole occasion upon which Penna alludes openly to the female genitalia.¹³ As with the earlier discussed text, the sexual organ is represented through ornithological imagery: not as a bird this time but, more appropriately, as a bird’s nest: “il nido della capinera.”

To round off this discussion of the posthumous Penna, a *stornello* from *Peccato di gola* which could legitimately be adjudged Penna’s most risqué poem of all: “Mi inginocchio e ti prendo, anima sola, / non è preghiera, è peccato di gola” (PG 51). Now, up until this short text the subject of fellatio had been either absent from Penna’s poetry or so well veiled as to make the reader unsure exactly what he was dealing with. In “*Era l’alba su i colli, e gli animali*”, when we encounter the words “Ma l’ospite alla terra, nuovo, / già chiedeva l’amore, inginocchiato” (79), are we or are we not supposed to picture a prelude to oral sexual intercourse? What about this two-verse epigram: “Come beve alla fonte il bel fanciullo / così abbiamo peccato e non peccato” (135)? Or the following sentence at the end of a “Variante” from *Confuso sogno*: “La luna ricordava, assai lontano, / mezz’ora prima quel profilo uguale / sopra la gioia mia chinarsi intento” (CS 98), where “gioia” might stand for the phallus? Or this passage from the thirtieth poem in “The Penna Papers”: “Lo ritrovavo poi con la testina / piegata, in attesa del «gelato»” (PP 73), where the penal euphemism this time would be “gelato”? In the above poem from *Peccato di gola*, on the other hand, Penna for the first time refers without a shadow of a doubt to an act of fellatio. Two brief points before bringing this investigation to a close. Firstly, note how craftily the poet substitutes one of the seven deadly sins, lust, with another, gluttony. Secondly, observe how by writing “[m]i inginocchio,” “anima,” “preghiera” and “peccato” Penna paints his scene in a religious light, thus sublimating the most carnal of experiences.

At the end of a short article published in 1974 to introduce two new poems by Penna, “La battaglia” and “La rinuncia,” Cesare Garboli wrote: “Con la voce allappata dai tranquillanti, Penna si lagna, oggi, della sua lunga fortuna di poeta «alessandrino». Lamenta che si parli della «magica fluidità», della «divina semplicità dei versi penniani». Preferisce essere, dice,

un poeta del mistero" ("Penna inedito" 26). In fact, all things said and done, it would not be far wide of the mark to define Penna as a "poeta del mistero." Frequently, the sense of his verse, be it highly erotic or otherwise, is indeed shrouded in a veil of mystery and not at all transparent. No doubt, that "strutturale processo eufemistico" (Pasolini) in Penna's verse regarding sexual organs and actions is to be attributed in part to the poet's overall penchant for a certain amount of deliberate poetic obscurity. But the matrix for this practice may also be located in the writer's general attitude towards the overarching passion in his existence, pederasty. Consider the following poem taken from *Confuso sogno*:

Ragazzo: Un grido sveglia questo nome.
 La dolcezza legata all'avventura.
 L'innocenza alla cupa passione.
 Vivo nell'alba se la luna dura,
 ragazzo, un grido sveglia questo nome. (CS 23)

In Penna's mind his erotic love for pubescent boys is essentially not something nefarious or criminal. Quite the contrary, Penna associates sweetness and innocence with his pederastic relationships. To have expressed on an artistic plane his more sexual thoughts and actions in a crude and direct fashion would, aside from alienating immediately a good part of his audience, have meant severely jeopardising this sweetness and innocence, that atmosphere of peaches and roses which Penna mentally associates with everything to do with his beloved "fanciullo." All this would go to explain why the poet tends to mask and sublimate the more carnal details, offering his reader a subtle and allusive verse.

To conclude this study, a final thought. It is not easy to imagine a more thematically restricted writer than Sandro Penna. His verse revolves principally around love or, more precisely, erotic love for young men. In addition to this, the poet devotes ample space to the natural world, perhaps the only other thing that impassioned him as much as his "fanciulli." As for the rest, Penna for the most part hardly seems to bat an eyelid. History, above all, barely exists anywhere from *Poesie* 1939 to *Peccato di gola*. True, the reader can catch the occasional glimpse of a train, a tram or a bus but all the same Giacomo Debenedetti was quite right when he declared that "Penna si mette fuori della storia, ignorandola" (177). The people, events and objects of the Twentieth century in all its immense chaos find very little room in Penna's poetry. Now, as the world changes at a rapid pace, much of the verse penned in the last few decades or so is doomed to become ever more difficult to comprehend. Without wishing to mention

any names, it is reasonable to presume that many of the poems published in recent times, brimming with details specific to contemporary living, are destined to meet with severe exegetic problems as the decades and centuries pass by, to become so obscure that only with the aid of lengthy glosses will it be possible for the average reader to appreciate them fully. Penna, on the other hand, will suffer perhaps less than any other major Italian poet of the Twentieth century from this point of view. As long as humanity survives and continues to be "human," people will be deeply moved by Penna's amorous passions; as long as Nature holds out against man's incessant violence and there go on existing trees, fields, birds, animals, the sea, the wind, the rain, people will be able to relish Penna's wildlife and natural landscapes. In short, the Perugian poet looks to be well immunised against the effects of the passing of the years, packed and ready to be appreciated not just by a select few but by the masses of the near and distant future. If, of course, tomorrow's generations choose to read him. Time will tell...

University College London

NOTES

*For page references to Penna's verse, the following abbreviations have been adopted here: *VI* = Penna, *Il viaggiatore insonne*; *CS* = Penna, *Confuso sogno*; *PP* = Garboli, "The Penna Papers"; *PG* = Penna, *Peccato di gola*. Where there appears no abbreviation, the page reference is to Penna, *Poesie* 1989.

¹On "*Sole senz'ombra su virili corpi*" and Montale, see Marcuz 312.

²For information on the dates of composition and places of publication of the poems belonging to *Poesie* 1939, see Deidier, *L'officina di Penna*.

³For a recent reading of "Il vegetale," see Marcheschi.

⁴On Penna's poetry in the English-speaking world, see Rivière and Fontanella.

⁵The word "seme" is employed elsewhere in Penna with the meaning "semen": see, for example, "Estrosa inettitudine infantile / a me ti lega incerto. E certo vola / con il mio seme il tempo" (189) and the rather Petrarchan "Andavo già piangendo fra la gente / il mio perduto seme senza amore. / Raccolse le mie lacrime un pastore / leggero, attento, intatto, indifferente" (246) (cf. the penultimate poem of the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (CCCLXV), that which commences: "I' vo piangendo i miei passati tempi / i quai posi in amar cosa mortale, / senza levarmi a volo, abbiend'io l'ale, / per dar forse di me non bassi exempti").

⁶On *repetitio* in Penna, see, for example, Di Fonzo 39-49, Iacopetta 103-05 and Turolo 2148-54.

⁷For another case where “cosa” is employed to signify the phallus, see “La morte,” the last short story in *Un po' di febbre*: “Nel pisciatoio un buco lascia vedere l'altro «cittadino». Non vorrei ma guardo la povera cosa solita” (159). On the phallus and corporeality in general in Penna's verse, see Macrí 541-46.

⁸For a discussion of this poem, see also Gramigna.

⁹For the contents of the various cumulative volumes by Penna, see Deidier, *L'officina di Penna* 37-40.

¹⁰On the extremely thorny problem of dates in Penna, see, by the same scholar, “L'ultima poesia,” as well as Garboli, “Stranezze” 35 and “The Penna Papers” 76-81.

¹¹Incidentally, the verb “masturbare” may be found on more than one occasion in *Un po' di febbre*, e.g. “E sentirmi raccontare che un suo amico di vent'anni si masturba con lui, pure essendo un uomo normale che va con le donne” (128) and “Si sdraiò supino sul letto e cominciò a masturbarsi” (140).

¹²The rare adjective “grifagno,” again in the feminine case and again in rhyming position, also features in one of Penna's earliest poems, “Alla mia cara madre sull'imbrunire”: “Si volge il guardo alla campagna, / al ciel, alla città; e con grifagna / vista la natura scruto: le stelle / ben visibili già son. [...]” (CS 107). Here the end rhyme is not with “compagna” but, instead, with the phonically very close “campagna.”

¹³The enigmatic “Cimitero nel sud” (*Stranezze*), with its “farfalla” (401), might conceivably contain an oblique allusion to the female genitalia. Note furthermore that in “Adolescenza” (*Confuso sogno*) one finds “Nelle notti d'inverno mi tuffavo / nella campagna buia: mi perdevo / come nel caldo di un grembo di donna” (CS 9), whilst a piece from *Appunti* reads as follows: “Viaggiava per la terra / come un giovane Iddio / colui che non aveva / amori sulla terra. / Tornava dalla festa / la giovane animale / molti colori in testa / e frutti nel grembiale” (182).

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