

Notes and Documents

Vincenzo Ancona (1915–2000): A Remembrance

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One November day in 1954 a tempest swept through the land and sea of Castellammare del Golfo (Trapani province), a small town in the northwest corner of Sicily.¹ Eight people on a fishing boat, all from Castellammare del Golfo, perished in the middle of the gulf. Two days later, a funeral was held in the main church. At the end of the service, in a massive procession, practically the entire town walked to the small seaport. There, silently, an enormous offering of flowers was placed in the water. I was holding my father's hand in the crowd, as schools were closed for a day of mourning. I was ten years old. All of a sudden, the crowd turned to face the same direction. My father said to me, "Vincenzo Ancona the poet is about to speak." Ancona looked at the crowd and said, "I need five minutes of your attention." There was silence. The only noise was the sound of the waves of the now calm sea breaking on the shore. There stood this man. In silence, he looked at all those flowers, and then he stretched one arm toward the sea and began to recite. I remember six lines of his long poem.²

Mari teccà sti ciuri e sti pinseri.
Va portaccilli e consaci n'artari.
Portali n'funnu dunni chi risedi
Sta varca chi si spera di truvari.
E 'nsemi a sti ciuriddri scunsulati
Porta un salutu a sti 'nuccenti frati

Powerful sea, take these flowers and these thoughts.
Go take them and set up an altar.
Take them into the deep waters
where rests the boat we long to find.
And along with these sorrowful flowers
bring our tears to our innocent brothers.

Tears were on every person's face. At the end of the poem, Vincenzo Ancona in a broken voice asked the crowd to buy his one-page, printed poem. "It is only ten *lire*," he said. "The money will go to the families of our brothers who lost their lives for a piece of bread."

A couple of years later, Ancona emigrated with his family to the United States. The next time I saw Zio Vincenzo, as most of his younger friends called him, was in 1967, after I arrived in this country. I was very familiar with his writings because he was a contributor to a poetry magazine published in Palermo, *Po' Tu' Cuntu*, to which I was also a contributor. More than 200 Sicilian poets had their work published in this bi-monthly magazine. In spite of the fact that I was about thirty years younger than Ancona, our friendship was not affected by the generation gap.

Ancona lived in the United States for more than thirty years and never mastered the English language. He had love for his adopted country, but his life needed no change. He lived in the Sicilian neighborhood of Gravesend, Brooklyn, among his Sicilian friends, ate the same Sicilian food he ate in Sicily, and wrote Sicilian poetry. Ancona provided a lifeline to the Sicilian emigrants, who relived the past when listening to his passionate, nostalgic poems.

He was strongly anchored to his traditional way of thinking, and it was never easy to convince him otherwise. I once gave him a book by the great Sicilian poet Giovanni Formisano. I knew Ancona liked him a lot. At that point he said to me, "Nino, I will read it and then I will give it back to you." I protested saying that he should keep it as it was a gift from me, to which he replied "I never read a poet that I like more than once. If I do, I end up being influenced by his work and without knowing it, I would copy him. I don't like that!"



Ancona reciting at the Castel del Golfo Social Club, 1987. Photograph by Martha Cooper.

Ancona firmly believed that poetry had to have meter, rhyme, and accents, and there was no poetry outside those rules. At times I used to engage in contradicting him for no other reason than to have him state his views in stronger terms. So, I tried to convince him that free verse poetry could also be real poetry. As he said “impossible,” I brought up a comparison. I said, “Suppose that one of your daughters makes a cake that has a beautiful shape and a fine design, but the taste is only so-so. Now suppose your other daughter makes a cake with no particular shape or design, but the taste is out of this world. Which of the two would you eat and appreciate more?” With a half smile Ancona looked at me, shook his head, and replied, “I would throw both of the cakes out the window. A good cake has to look good and taste good, or it is no cake!” The innocence and the firmness of his belief always amazed me.

One day in the early 1970s, I invited him to a friendly debate in verse known as a *contrasto*. We established the rules and traced a map of the subjects we were to discuss. He took the role of the father, and I took the role of the son. The poem would be called “Lu patri anticu e lu figghiu modernu” (“The Old-Time Father and the Modern Son”). I advocated more freedom from the old Sicilian traditions, praised progress, technology, and the will to explore the unknown. Ancona, then in his late fifties, like most fathers was very conservative. No need for change, the world is good the way it is. He stated that “the more changes we have, the worse things get.” He began writing the first two octaves, telephoned me and dictated what he had written. I would prepare my answer, debating his points and stating my position. Then I would call him back and dictate my response. This *contrasto* became a fifty-six octave poem that was later published in *Malidittu la lingua/Damned Language* (Ancona 2010). Published in this same volume is another *contrasto* between Ancona and me on the subject of divorce.

In the *contrasto* “Lu patri anticu e lu figghiu modernu,” excerpted liberally below, the subjects debated range from old traditions, family values, politics, and moral and religious issues to the effects of modern science and instant communications.

Figghiu: Li patri antichi eranu dittatura.

Patri: La paura pruduci rispettu.

Figghiu: La scola arricchisci lu sapiri e grapi la menti.

Patri: La scola aiuta, ma un fa megghiu l'omu. L'odiu, l'invidia e li crudeltà su peggju di prima.

Figghiu: Li matrimoni eranu affari fatti fra patri e patri.

Patri: Era megghiu prima di comu è ora, chi li matrimoni accumencianu e finiscinu cu l'avvocati.

Figghiu: L'omu mudernu lassau li superstizioni. Ora li cosi su chiù facili, chiù veloci, e chiù salutivi.

Patri: L'omu mudernu ha già capitu chi tutti li cosi chi tu criri su boni, stannu causannu la distruzioni di 'stu pianeta. Lu manciari chi ora si chiama gourmet era chiddu chi li poviri manciavamu.

Figghiu: Lu iri a la luna fu unu di li chiù grossi successi di l'umanità.

Patri: Chissu è lu prodottu di l'epuca atomica, ed è chidda chi metti in periculu stu munnu. All'omu un si po' aviri fiducia.

Figghiu: Un criri tu chi stu munnu avi nudda spiranza di salvizza? Si ni 'nsignamu a tollerari e aviri rispettu l'unu pi l'altu, chissa un putissi essiri la risposta?

Patri: Po' essiri! Ma comu si dici tuttu chissu a lu munnu?

Figghiu: Usamu arti, musica, puisia, ed ogni mezzu ch'è a disposizioni pi dirici a lu munnu a forti vuci, "Ama la vita, lu campari è duci."

Son: Fathers of old generations were like dictators.

Father: Some fear produces respect.

Son: Education today makes everybody more knowledgeable and open minded.

Father: Maybe more knowledgeable but not better human beings. Envy, hatred, and cruelties are worse than ever.

Son: Marriage between young couples used to be a business deal between fathers.

Father: It was better that way than the way it is today, which is a business deal among two lawyers with a prenuptial agreement, and then the divorce.

Son: Modern men got rid of all superstitions of the past. Things are easier, faster, and healthier.

Father: Modern man has already realized that all those things that you think are good are causing the destruction of the planet. All the gourmet dishes that you now pay an arm and a leg for are what we poor people used to eat.

Son: The landing on the moon was one of the greatest achievements of the human race.

Father: That was a bi-product of the atomic age, which is the most dangerous stage that the world has ever faced. Man cannot be trusted with these tools in his hands.

Son: Don't you believe that this world has any hope of being saved? If we learn to tolerate and respect one another, could that be the answer?

Father: Yes, that could be the answer, but how are you going to tell this to the world?

Son: Let's use the arts, music, and poetry to cry out to the world to love life, to love every people on the face of the world.

I had great esteem for Vincenzo Ancona, the man, the friend, the poet. What I admired in him was not his money, his education, or his fame. What I admired in this working man was his simplicity, his humility, his humor, and his being a fully grounded human being. A friend of mine from Castellammare, Professor Francesco Leone, who knew Vincenzo Ancona very well, had this to say: "Ancona looked at the world with his heart and painted it with his soul." I could not agree with him more.

Notes

1. This talk was originally presented at the *Malidittu la lingua/Damned Language* book presentation on December 15, 2010, at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute.
2. The English translations provided are my own.

Works Cited

Ancona, Vincenzo. 2010. *Malidittu la lingua/Damned Language*, edited by Anna L. Chairidakis and Joseph Sciorra. Translated by Gaetano Cipolla. Mineola, NY: Legas.