



Voices

Antonio Porchia

W.S. Merwin, Translator

Copper Canyon Press (April 2003)

Unknown \$14.00 (128pp)

978-1-55659-189-1

“Mosca no entra en boca cerrada.” (Flies don’t enter a closed mouth.) Everyone who grows up in Spain starts out conscious life with a collection of such dichos (sayings)-pithy aphorisms that make use of a kind of mild irony to encapsulate the obvious-in much the same way that most English-speaking children learn to be adults down a path of nursery rhymes. The dicho cited above is a rather famous one, familiar not only throughout the Hispanic world but by translation available to the rest of the literate population of the planet.

The author, who self-transplanted to Argentina from Italy as a young man in the early twentieth century, seems to have wished to carry the tradition of dichos a step further by formulating his own aphorisms, although he apparently accomplished little else of note. Among Hispanic literati he might be described as a kind of spiritual, linguistic, and literary idiot savant.

Widely known for its discriminating selection of unusual works in translation, Copper Canyon Press offers this bilingual edition of Porchia’s writings, with the English by W. S. Merwin, the well-known American poet and translator of texts originating in widely varying languages. As an introduction to this revised and enlarged edition of the original work, Merwin presents not one but two interesting prologues with useful information about the life and works of Porchia, including how his work was noticed and discussed by the French critic Roger Callois, who made much of the fact that Porchia’s wisdom, for whatever it was worth, apparently derived from his own inner mythos, rather than from scriptural or literary influences.

The text of Porchia’s commentaries includes almost 300 aphorisms, from “I found the whole of my first world in my meager bread,” to “The important and the unimportant are the same only at the start.” Enough topics are presented for a seeker to choose one a day as a theme for meditation, perhaps taking off Sundays for exposure to more traditional counsels of perfection.

Friends who reported on Porchia’s condition during his declining days remarked that he still seemed to have something of an accent. The same might be said of the aphorisms, as though that Italian immigrant might have thought up his ideas in a familiar multiple-apostrophied Italian and regretted that the simple orthographic Spanish was hardly dashing enough for the desired refinements. The same is true of translation into English, as the language seems to lose much of the musicality of the original Spanish, where the aphorisms often rhyme and certainly always have a repetitive linguistic pattern. Merwin must have had a doubly daunting task.

Porchia’s aphorisms, although didactic in intention, are far from being linked to the quotidian and seem rather to emerge from a rarefied mental world where behavior is orchestrated less by exigency than by pure principle and where action is often forestalled by the fact that every thought, when examined thoroughly, ends up by canceling itself out. According to Porchia, “In full light we are not even a shadow.” If everything exists only to negate itself, we are left with very little firm ground to stand on, a condition that appears, according to his biographers, to have mattered little to the essentially untutored and ascetic aphorist, who seems to have lived content with a crust of bread, a glass of wine and Tao.

SANDY MCKINNEY (November / December 2003)

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