

Aspects Of Italian Buddhist Presence and Poetry

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1. Introduction

The theoretical background of this paper, in addition to texts on the diffusion of Buddhism in the West (Batchelor, Baumann and Prebish, Harvey, MacMahan), confronts the Asian Conference on Cultural Studies's theme of sharing through the concepts of hybridization (Kraidy), neo-Orientalism (Said), and intertextuality (Bloom). The first section of the paper will briefly inform on how Buddhism was imported to Italy (Bertoni, Pasqualotto, Stortini) – the theme of becoming is implicit here in the practice of conversion. The second section will touch on belonging under the guise of the new spiritual and cultural identities that can be seen among contemporary poets inspired by Buddhism (Candiani, Carifi, Niccolai). In general, Buddhism in a Western country like Italy can be seen as a borderland, since it takes place against a cultural background that included this vision of the world only very marginally until recently, as it will be briefly hinted below. Let us start with some considerations on Buddhism in relation to hybridization and neo-Orientalism.

2. Buddhism as an Oriental import

The presence of Buddhism in Italy dates back to Marco Polo's time, and onward to Matteo Ricci and other missionaries who commented upon Buddhism partly in favorable but mostly in unfavourable ways. Some more detailed and sympathetic commentaries were written in the 19th century, when the first properly Orientalist studies were published in Italy (Pasqualotto). In the 20th century, a number of scholars wrote about Buddhism in informed ways and within the context of a scientific view on East Asia - namely Tucci who explored Tibetan culture in depth, and Maraini, originally his pupil, who lived for a time in Japan. The latest and most prolific import of Buddhism into Italy, however, has taken place in the last five decades. Buddhism in Italy presently appears to involve about 89,000 Asian migrants, and 100,000 Italian nationals (Stortini). Some comments follow below on this recent phenomenon.

An aspect of cultural borderland, and partly also hybridization, is that Italian Buddhism, like all Western Buddhism, implies adaptation to living abroad for Eastern Asian migrants; and conversion from Christianity, or at any rate to a new religious dimension, for Westerners.

There are actual differences in religious mentality and loyalty to traditions as expressed by practitioners from countries where Buddhism is an official religion, and by newly converted Italians who hybridize the Dharma teachings to a higher extent with Western philosophies.

On the one hand, to cite a statement by Weber (1918, p. 139), in modernity “the world is disenchanting. One needs no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits”. By contrast to this well-established interpretation of modernity, Beck maintains that it has become apparent that the pairing of modernization and secularization is not as accurate as it seemed to be only a few years ago. This is due a process of “re-enchantment” that consists in the appearance in the West of new types of spirituality, i.e. of social and personal systems of feeling and thought other than Christianity. Such an interpretation is rather interesting in general, and perhaps newly converted Buddhists are indeed

motivated, in Italy like elsewhere in Europe, by a need for a re-enchantment of the world. Yet, one wonders to what extent this hypothesis is fully tenable, given the need for an uprooting of delusionary visions of reality and a confrontation with the sheer fact of suffering as a starting point in meditation on the Four Noble Truths.

On the other hand, with its insistence on impermanence, and because it is a non-theist religion, Buddhism appears to respond, once again in terms of borderland hybridization with Western theories, to the rather secular need to come to terms with modern temporariness and flexibility in liquid modernity (Bauman), and with a non-strictly religious need for spirituality. In the last thirty years, some of the interest in Buddhism has been caused by its capability of “communicating with a post-industrial modern society” (Obadia, p. 19). Buddhist persuasions would appear to coincide, at least in some respects, with anti-materialism and rejection of consumerism by social groups and individuals, while also responding to the need for happiness expressed by Western late-modern ideologies. In brief, Buddhism would seem to combine social “well-being” and “spirituality” (Obadia, p. 93).

Some scholars go as far as to doubt that Western Buddhism is motivated by typically religious needs, and they maintain that at its roots we find an undefined quest for spirituality:

“It might as well be that the attraction of Buddhism in the eyes of Westerners is rather a push towards spirituality than a way back to religiousness, and this Buddhist-like type of spirituality offers a credible response to the anxiety created by the modern world. This idealized and purely spiritual variety of Buddhism is what I call ‘neo-Buddhism’ as distinct from other types of Buddhism which have kept contact with tradition, in the bad and the good, in Asia” (Faure, p. 113).

This may be seen either as a fact, or merely an opinion, however what one can say is that Buddhism is a religion but in the West a number of sympathisers emphasize the moral rather than metaphysical teachings. Even the Dalai Lama does not seem to exclude this possibility when he explains that a life based on ethical principles is not necessarily founded on religious convictions: “I have come to the conclusion that whether or not a person is religious does not matter much. Far more important is that they be a good human being” (Gyatso 1999, p. 20).

One aspect of Buddhist moral behaviour that is compatible with Western mentality is a practical attitude, based on the persuasion of usefulness of certain acts. Goodness, in brief, is not only morally and psychologically rewarding, but also useful, and acting well is beneficial because it creates well-being by making one feel at harmony with the universe.

The ideological context, in particular for Italian converts, is connected to the reworking of identity in terms of neo-Orientalism. A revival of Eastern religions took place in Europe, the US and other Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s in connection with liberation ideologies, the hippy movement, and other anti-institutional philosophies. Hinduism, yoga, Buddhism, among other religions, were adopted by admirers of Asia who idealized *ahimsa* by presuming peacefulness existed in countries that in reality were not too rarely pervaded in those decades by

social conflict and violent political strife. Asia, in line with Said's concept of Orientalism, at times provided a supposedly exotic framework of reference to Italians. Marginal communities and individuals additionally adopted Asian religions as an attitude of protest, in opposition to a Christianity that seemed to have links to vested power and tradition.

Some Western interpretations see Buddhism as more tolerant than Christianity. Discussion has taken place, for example, on the Buddhist concept of error, or blindness, as different from the Christian concept of sin (Kornfield). This obviously applies to Italy, too, since the hegemonic religion there is Catholicism.

Beck has also identified the search for a "personal God" that for a number of Western people would seem to have replaced collective formal representations of Christianity. An embryo of rediscovery of Buddhism took shape and continued to develop in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s in connection with new types of spirituality such as the Aquarian Age and the New Age accompanied by imaginative and not explicitly political traits. In the 21st century, though, Buddhism in Italy, as well as more in general in Europe, took distance from these practices and developed in independent and more conventional ways as it kept growing in numbers.

In short, in a number of cases, the West has developed modes of approaching and importing Buddhism that are not only suitable for religiously oriented people but for secular mentalities influenced by the Enlightenment.

Nonetheless, Buddhism and Catholicism in some measure share aspects on a borderland. For instance, there are similarities and common features between Buddhism and Catholic monasticism with regard to the configuration of communities of the practising religious and the need for meditation. The Dalai Lama (Gyatso 2012) states: "Christians are very close to the Buddhist spirituality. I am thinking, for instance, of Christian monastic life where attention and time are devoted to meditation". We can find further connections between the evangelical concepts of charity and altruism, and the Mahayana tradition of the Bodhisattva.

Concerning re-working of identity from a more politically oriented perspective, after the wavering of neo-Marxist utopias in the 1980s, Buddhism was one of the ways to provide some Italian radicals with a forward-looking vision of the world, based on a consideration of human beings as unhappy, and yet on an ability to progress towards a socially positive dimension.

In this respect, in the 1980s and 1990s, Buddhism configured itself in Italy as a predominantly socially aware approach, and Buddhist organizations have increasingly become involved with ecological issues, peace movements, protection of human rights at home and abroad, as well as with specific Asian issues such as the Tibetan diaspora.

Sharing, in the above context, is therefore shown by social participation, while a sense of community is also noticeable both in Buddhist *sanghas* and secular associations, with varying accentuations of theory and practice depending on the particular schools chosen – Tibetan and Zen schools, but also other Mahayana traditions and Theravada teachings. These were either imported from Asia, or they

were now and then introduced into Italy via European monasteries. A particular case is that of Soka Gakkai, originally from Japan, inspired by Nichiren Daishonin's teachings, but developed autonomously on the peninsula in Italy in the last decades.

Individual becoming is relevant, since a Buddhist spiritual itinerary is one of personal transformation of negativities into positive attitudes (selfishness into altruism, and so on). On this level, interconnections, mutual borrowings and shared views are visible between Buddhism and psychology. In Italy, like in other Western countries, a number of psychologists use the Buddhist meditational practice of mindfulness in depression therapy. Italian analytical psychologists inspired by Jung adopt symbols such as the mandala and other Buddhist notions within the therapeutic framework of the process of individuation, on the ground that both Jung and Buddhism aim at the transformation and rebirth of the individual (Moacanin, 1986). Bonecchi maintains that non-Buddhist therapy is probably preferable to meditation in order to deal with psychosis, but Buddhist awareness of suffering, due to disease, getting old and disappointments of all kinds, are useful in the treatment of neurosis.

3. Italian contemporary Buddhist poets

The second section of this paper focuses on a particular case of borderland identity that can be seen among contemporary poets inspired by Buddhism.

One premise here is that, in relation to mentality studies (Sorokin), whereas in Asian countries Buddhism permeates the attitudes and reflections of people consciously and unconsciously since it has shaped those civilizations, in Italy it is a relatively recent acquisition and it influences writers in more oblique and perhaps superficial ways due to their more limited knowledge of this religion. The mentality of Italian poets, willingly or unwillingly, and by acceptance as well as rejection, is receptive of several nuances of Christian philosophy. Nevertheless, it is more of a *tabula rasa* (or colloquially a clean slate) towards Buddhism, the principles and ideas of which have penetrated literary culture gradually and often incompletely for reasons of non-traditional belonging of Italians in this vision of the world.

Yet, philosophical concerns are frequent among Italian Buddhist poets. A question is also posed on how a neophyte can propagate his new beliefs. On this plan, some neo-Buddhist writers exhibit the intellectual freshness of newly received ideas.

With reference to intertextuality, understood here as an aspect of cultural borderland sharing, some of the Italian Buddhist poets have acquired new Asian-influenced writing identities, and in this field the *haiku* is particularly conspicuous with cross-reference to classics such as Basho but also to more modern Japanese verse. Buddhist poetry from a number of other Asian traditions has been translated into Italian and has influenced local writers – just to mention two illustrious intellectuals, 11th/12th-century Milarepa from Tibet and 20th/21st-century Ko Un from Korea.

Certain Italian poets leave Buddhist spirituality mostly in the background as an

additional aspect of their poetics, as is the case with Candiani. Intertexts have been built from Italian classics and Asian spiritual texts, as it occurs with Carifi who reads the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol* (*Liberation through Hearing during the Intermediate State*) through the linguistic mediation of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. Others have moved from a previous variety of secular poetics to a different one based on spiritual themes, as Niccolai did. More details on some of the works of the three authors just mentioned will be given below, accompanied by the present writer's translations of the poets' statements and texts from Italian into English.

Chandra Livia Candiani (born in 1952) practices Theravada Buddhism, teaches Vipassana meditation, translates Buddhist texts, and writes poetry. Her identity as a resident in Italy with Russian ancestry, and a user of different languages, belongs in a borderland accentuated by her cross-reference to Western and Eastern intellectual persuasions.

She stopped writing for some periods when Vipassana meditation seemed in conflict with the act of producing literary scripts, and at those times it was "important to understand what counted most in my life" (Candiani 2014, 2), yet poetry always re-emerged, and in fact her process of growth in Buddhism helped to also renew her poetical language and ideas.

Even though she states that Buddhism does not explicitly pervade her poems, "or else my poetry would be strictly ideological", this religion is clearly her predominant view of the world even though what she seeks for is essentially "human qualities" (Candiani 2014, 2). With regard to solidarity, she expresses a concept of mutual charity that seems somehow shared with Christianity (Candiani 2014, 1, p. 11):

"The universe has no centre,
But humans, in order to embrace, act as follows:
They approach one another slowly
And yet without any apparent reason,
Afterwards they open arms,
Show the disarmament of wings,
They finally disappear
Together
In the space of charity
Between one
And the other".

Buddhism and poetry interact in her view of the latter as nothingness (Candiani, 2005, p. 81):

"In the light bones
The vacuum is written,
In the immature voice
An unattained life is written,
Due neither to premature death
Nor to laziness or cowardice
But to devotion to the nothingness

Of poetry”.

The most evident aspect of a direct influence of Buddhism on her poetry is probably impermanence, underlined by the alternation of life and death (Candiani, 2005, p. 17):

“Dust already chases
The Lady who was born yesterday
In order to return her to dust
As though she is a cloud –
This is an evening when the Lady is October
That occurs to someone
Because leaves fall”.

Another clear reference to Buddhist teachings is the diminishing of the ego through the principle of the non-self and a projection into the wholeness of nature (Candiani 2014, 1, p. 119):

“At times
I am just not there
I am the entirety of the air
And specks of dust
Vibrating under the impact of others,
Under the impact of others’ gestures and breath
[...].”

Related to her Buddhist views are also, of course, some of her outlooks on life. She says that Buddhist “practice coincides with welcoming life as it is, and us as we are” (Candiani 2014, 2).

Her minimalist style touches upon deep existential areas in light language and imagery that are at times reminiscent of the haiku. One example (Candiani, 2005, p. 27):

“Black
Birds
Across the glass of the window
It looks as though they are driven
The Lady teaches them how to fly
And then forsakes them –
Let it snow
On the Japanese magnolia
On the gate
On the shadows of the meadow”.

Summing up on Candiani, we notice several Asian/European interactions in her work, an exploration of the unconscious, and a sense of belonging in the meditative tradition of Buddhism but also a claim to freshness, simplicity and originality. In her view, poetry appear to discover and renew rather than express sheer theological truths.

A somehow different case can be made for Roberto Carifi (born in 1948), one of the members of a school of poetics called myth-modernism (Bertoni 2006). In the 1980s and 1990s he formulated his interest in spirituality discerned as myth and as an intertext including reference to European 19th-century Romanticism and early 20th-century Western Modernism. In the last two decades, after conversion, he has often devoted his work to Buddhism.

His *Tibet* is a collection of poetry inspired by Tibetan philosophy and landscape, and in particular, as mentioned above, by the *Bardo Todol*, or the book exploring the borderland between the word of the dead and rebirth.

Tibet is a cohesively spiritual volume that avoids any trite approach to becoming, makes the transition to death/rebirth both personal, enigmatic, and somehow coherent with Buddhist teachings (Carifi, p. 9):

“Find out where nothingness is,
Where your disguise and your snow are,
Then start climbing
Upper and upper, until you reach an open space
Where you hear a weeping,
A weeping howling -
You feel transformed,
The arms wide open”.

One culturally shared link between West and East is the term “souls”, depicted as a memory of Dante’s *Inferno* but also as Buddhist entities dispersed in plural Hells, and Jungian symbols situated in the depths of the unconscious (Carifi, p. 30):

I set camp by the stupa,
There seemed to be live souls
While they were transporting me towards the heights.
From up there they showed me the Earth.
Close to the stupa there is a gaze
That teaches how to look from near
Under Hells and swamps, under illnesses
Under strokes that take root and skulls that break,
But elsewhere souls pass
Into the indiscriminate deep end of things”.

The Buddha comes as a borderland figure into the dreamy, mountainous landscape. Defined by being undetermined in terms of matter, the Buddha asserts his identity, and asks to be just one of us. By doing so, he provides a new identity: “[...] / He who comes is neither earth nor water / But says I am the Buddha, / Take me among yourselves”.

The route of this book includes the achievement of “Samadhi” (Carifi, p. 35), a disembodiment when “the body [...] became prayer” (Carifi, p. 38), the overcoming of suffering by “Embracing all wounds / Mine as well as the blood of other. / There will be no suffering in all of this. / There will only be endless conifer trees” (Carifi, p. 51).

Finally, peace takes over through rebirth of the narrative voice as a follower of Bodhisattvas:

“The country is full of deeds, yaks
Sheep and Kumbum smile, the one hundred thousand images of the Buddha,
I find myself there and listen to the silence
After having seen cliffs, followed the images of evil,
Eavesdropped at doors that open onto the dead.
Later on, snow falls slowly. The bodhisattvas,
Those enlightened beings, show the path to all,
Men and animals, and I follow them, too”.

In brief, becoming is a strong dimension of Carifi's *Tibet*, and it takes place through transmigration and rebirth as a spiritually oriented being after the Bardo. This is both a metaphysical persuasion that life continues after death, and a symbolic dimension that might be applied to metamorphosis of human beings into better persons during the course of their earthly lives.

Such an emphasis on becoming is also accentuated in Giulia Niccolai's work. Born in 1934, she belonged in the Italian neo-Avantgarde literary movements in the 1960s and 1970s when she wrote experimental poetry concerned with language innovation, anti-establishment satire, and expression of extraverted vitality. A major change took place in her life and texts in the 1980s. She converted to Buddhism, and she finally became a Buddhist monk from a Tibetan school in 1990.

Buddhist meditation acted on Niccolai's creativity initially as a block to writing in general and in a second phase to writing in her previous humorous and secular register. In the latter stage, she wrote prose work, for instance essays including texts on her motivations to become a Buddhist and on coincidence and synchronicity (Niccolai 2001), and some spiritual poems. One example of these is “Three meditations” (Niccolai 1999-2001), where we find lines such as the following:

“A mole in its den,
A seed in a pumpkin,
Isolate from any external stimuli,
Slowly calm down
The tyrant blazing
Of the five senses, and become acquainted
Sweetly with death
[...]”.

However, she has more recently returned to her original inspiration in a new light by expressing jovially ironic observations on daily life in old age, this time, rather than in polemical ways, in terms of acceptance of things as they are and of a joyful presence in a content existence (Niccolai 2012).

4. Conclusion

The present essay had the main purpose to show how Buddhism has become a relevant cultural reality in Italy. Within the framework of borderlands of becoming, belonging and sharing, Italian Buddhists, and the poets mentioned here, have added interesting cross-cultural and transnational dimensions to the Italian literary canon and to society at large.

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