

Caterina Ricciardi 1947-2020

by Massimo Bacigalupo

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Caterina Ricciardi (Bitonto, Bari, November 25, 1947—Rome, February 15, 2020) was an indefatigable educator and scholar who devoted much of her work to Ezra Pound. In the late 1970s, after a Fulbright scholarship at UC Santa Barbara, she participated in a research group overseen by Elémire Zolla (1926-2002), an eccentric cultural critic and professor of American literature very remote from the political conflicts of post-war Italy and in particular of the Sixties (when Ricciardi was at school), as well as from historicism, i.e., a consideration of culture as determined by, and reflecting, its historical context. Likewise, Ricciardi was chiefly interested in tradition, myth and art as sources of fiction and poetry, and her scholarly contributions investigate complex networks of influences and allusions, revealing extensive reading in her fields.

Her first and major work on Pound, with the Greek title *EIKONEΣ*, and the subtitle *Ezra Pound e il Rinascimento* (1991), brings together her passion and scrupulous research. With 330 pages, and a useful index, it is well written and well organized in six chapters, with titles like “The Renaissance in ‘Three Cantos,’” “The Hermetic Approach and the Iconological Code,” “Venus/Hilda: the Botticelli of H.D.,” “Venus in Poundian Iconography,” “Venus/Venice: Poundian *ekphrāseis*,” “The Venus of Pisa.” *EIKONEΣ* is the fruit of genuine passion and of a fascination with complexity, with one thing leading to another. Ricciardi revealed herself immune to concern with Pound’s political blunders, as well as to the critical jargon of the day, though she was widely read in theory. But she was also interested in minuscule connections and facts. She ran the risk of reading into Pound’s texts more than is actually there, and perhaps ignoring some of their topical and historical implications. Her Pound was a sage, a master like an old Renaissance imitator of the antique, not a fulminating reformer very much of his time.

In 1991 Ricciardi also edited *Idee fondamentali*, a selection of Pound’s wartime *Meridiano di Roma* articles, some of which were surely incendiary in theme and treatment. However, in her introduction she stressed chiefly the poet’s mythical concerns—Rome, grain, Venus, etc. She was tactfully taken to task for this by a prominent older scholar, Guido Fink (1935-2019), in a review for the Roman newspaper *Il Messaggero* (August 26, 1991). (For details see Bacigalupo, “Pound Studies in Italy,” 17-18.) Surely the tenor of Ricciardi’s writing was independent from the climate of the period, especially of the previous years, when young Americanists, like Franco Moretti and others, were all ipso facto politically conscious, rebellious and active (and essentially Marxist). But many of her contemporaries had studied (as I did) in the Faculty of Letters of the “Sapienza” Rome University with Agostino Lombardo, whereas Caterina came from another Rome campus, the Faculty of Education (“Magistero”), where Zolla and Giorgio Melchiori taught, and which would eventually become Roma Tre. This is the university in which, after teaching some years in Viterbo, she eventually became a full professor of American studies in 1994.

In 2004 she published with Raffaelli, a small Poundian publisher in Rimini, an annotated translation of *Indiscretions*, the product of much minute scholarship; some of her findings were

presented in “Pound and Henry James’s ‘Small Boy’ Persona,” her contribution to the proceedings to the 2005 EPIC, *Ezra Pound Language and Persona*. She even posited some connections with Hawthorne’s “The Custom House”—of which I am skeptical. For us Americanist well-versed in the classics, it is easy to see allusions to our favorite and most studied authors where none are intended.

Caterina had of course exceptional competence and in a way lived in her own Poundian chamber of echoes. Her next book with Raffaelli, *Ghiande di luce* (176pp., 2006), i.e., “Acorns of Light,” contained seven masterful readings in and around Pound: Adrian Stokes, Venice and the Ducal Palace, Jefferson and Adams, the goddess at Terracina, “Beauty’s Rose: Shakespeare at Stone Cottage.” These pages show the freedom of the mature scholar and essayist, who does not tire to investigate and study her loved sources. I confess that I wrote a short review (“Poundiani raccordi”) in which I questioned her reading of the close of Hemingway’s story “Cat in the Rain.” But Caterina did not mind, and I enjoyed seeing her ferreting out interpretations and working at length to offer her version to readers—and I was probably one of the few readers in Italy whom she could address with some confidence of being understood.

As a Roman, living near Piazza Navona, and an antiquarian by character, she was uniquely qualified to discover Pound’s Roman traces, which she presented most usefully in the handsome *Ezra Pound and Roma: Roma Amor. A Roman Album*, prepared for the 2012 Rome EPIC. And to the *Roma/Amor* volume that came out of that conference, and which she undertook to edit with Bill Pratt, she contributed a fascinating note on Pound and the Centro Studi Americani, the library where the Rome conference was held and where all of us Italian Americanists of the 1960s and after did our spadework. These bits of minor Poundiana that Ricciardi was good at investigating are I find some of her more lasting contributions. Yes, footnotes.

Caterina had become over the years a fluent writer and reviewer, in spite of the academic chores she did not shy away from. (She was often on national committees for promotions and new appointments.) She became a frequent contributor to *Alias Domenica*, the Sunday supplement of *Il manifesto*, the “Communist Daily” (as its masthead unabashedly proclaims). The Sunday *Alias*, however, is quite innocent of an explicit political agenda and through Caterina has become a vindicator of the example of Pound at a time when his name has unfortunately been hijacked by the self-proclaimed disciples of Casa Pound (a sort of Italian Alt-Right, with open neo-Fascist sympathies). Quite undaunted, Ricciardi spoke for Pound, her Pound. But interestingly she was able to reveal her catholic interest in all things American and Canadian by sensitively reviewing Plath, Munro, Strout, Mantel, Atwood, Robinson, Agee (her very last article, published the Sunday after her sudden death), Sexton, Glück, Levine, Strand, Charles Wright, and many many others, including Shakespeare (in recent years she produced a translation of *Measure for Measure* for a new collected edition).

Shortly before her death Ricciardi compiled for Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura (Rome) a collection of reviews, *Novecento poetico americano*, which opens with D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in American classics and George Santayana, and closes with Jorie Graham and Susan Howe. This promises to be a well-informed survey of modern classics and contemporaries. Few scholars have been able to cover so much ground.

She lived alone since the death of her older companion in 1996 and was a solitary and private person, somewhat child-like according to the sensitive obituary by her brilliant colleague Viola Papetti. In 2013 she acquired a small dog, Tatum, and sent me a photograph of him near the cover photo of a book on H.D.—a writer with whom she had much in common, chiefly her otherworldliness. In 2019 she published a scholarly essay on H.D.'s *Hymen* as “false epithalamium,” and a handsome artist's book of translations chiefly from *Hymen*, [*Divae*], of which only fifty copies were printed for Gabriele Stocchi, an old and staunch Pound associate.

Caterina pursued her passions to the end. One of her last reviews took issue with a new (and unnecessary) translation of the Pound/Joyce correspondence, defending E.P.'s passion and indignation against J.J.'s skepticism. (Pound, she wrote, is “the prophet of the century (or of the two centuries),” who “may rest secure.”) And on January 12, 2020 she published a glowing appreciation of a small and fine selection of Mary de Rachewiltz's poems, *L'economia amorosa*.

To some extent Caterina can also be said to be a faithful daughter (or grand-daughter) of Ezra. She was lucky to be working until the end, and still wrote me on February 11, in answer to my question, that she was “always better, even a little fatter”. Despite her diffident character, she had a fruitful and happy life among the beautiful things and writings she loved.

When I learned of her death on Sunday, February 16, I phoned Mary de Rachewiltz with the news. The following day Mary sent me a short poem in Italian for publication in *Alias Domenica*, where it duly appeared with Caterina's final review—of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. An appropriate valediction!

This is a tentative translation of Mary's poem, with her footnote:

FOR CATERINA

by Mary de Rachewiltz

It isn't at all easy, Caterina
to recall you from the depths of the earth
 (“black” in Carducci's words)
so as to thank you for the chocolates
of Sant'Eustachio, Café
(but to me Church with antlers and cross).

Ivory-like, you hold sway
with Hilda over Circeo
in eternity custodian
of a castle brimming
with soulmates and
their works.*

*The allusion is to a poem by Carducci on the death of his little boy (a vague high-school memory?). Sant'Eustachio, with a deer (if I mistake not), is the fine Church in Rome (funeral service for Boris). I believe Caterina spent her

summers on Circeo. And the strange “coincidence” that I should have heard of her passing at yesterday’s Sunday tea with the students.—MdR, Brunnenburg, February 17, 2020

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