

Minimalism in the Lyric Poetry of Luisa Famos: A Translation from Romansh

ALESSANDRA PETROCCHI*

1. LIFE

Luisa Famos was born on August 7, 1930, in Ramosch, when this was a municipality in the district of Inn in the canton of Graubünden (Switzerland).¹ Luisa was the daughter of a family of farmers; she spent her youth studying at the local schools and living a simple life among the Swiss mountains. In 1950, she completed the teacher training school in Coira and held a place as a teacher in Davos-Dischmà and in Vnà. After a year of study in Paris, she spent three years in Guarda. Probably stimulated by the enormous effervescence of the French capital at the time, Luisa returned to Paris, deepened her knowledge of literature, and started writing poetry. In 1962, she was a teacher in the canton of Zürich, and the year after she married an engineer; they had two children. Between 1969 and 1972, the family travelled to Latin America for work, first in Honduras and then in Venezuela. In 1972, Luisa became ill and died of cancer on June 28, 1974 at the age of 44 years. Some of her poems are translated here for the first time into English.²

2. HER PUBLICATIONS

Luisa Famos' early poems (1958–1959), religious in nature, were published in *Chalender Ladin* under the pseudonym *Flur da Riva* ("Shore Flower").³ *Mumaints* ("Moments"), a collection of twenty-one lyrics, was the first publication under her real name (1960).⁴ Once married, Luisa was a busy wife and mother; her second poem compilation, *Inscunters* ("Encounters"), was published posthumously in 1974.⁵ After thirty years,

*Alessandra Petrocchi, Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow, Faculty of Linguistics Philology and Phonetics, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. E-mail: a.petrocchi@cantab.net

¹ In 2013, the municipalities of Ramosch and Tschlin merged to form the new municipality of Valsot.

² It must be mentioned that in translating her poetry, phonological differences between some Romansh and English words emerge; the translation does not always reflect the terseness of the original, and this in turn may affect the duration of a line.

³ *Chalender Ladin* is a periodical published by the language association *Uniun dals Grischs*. One of the founders, Peider Lansel, was a Swiss Romansh lyric poet; he is most known for having revived Rhaeto-Romansh as a literary language.

⁴ Luisa Famos, *Mumaints*. Poesias (Bischofberger, Chur: Ediziun da l'autura, 1960–1961).

⁵ Luisa Famos, *Inscunters*. Poesias (Bischofberger, Chur: Ediziun Jürg Pünter, 1974).

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two recent publications—with a German translation— have brought attention to Luisa's work; among these, in 2004 the publishing house Limmatverlag of Zürich published her unedited poems.⁶

Luisa Famos wrote in Romansh, more exactly in Vallader, a variety of the Romansh language spoken in the Lower Engadine valley of southeast Switzerland.⁷ Romansh derives from Latin (like Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French, Provençal, and Romanian) but displays a Germanic influence; it is a Romance language spoken predominantly in the southeastern Swiss canton of Graubünden. Vallader is currently the second most widely used variety of Romansh, and together with Puter is sometimes indicated as one specific variety known as Ladin. Traditionally, five different Romansh idioms have been spoken in the southeastern canton of Graubünden (Sursilvan, Vallader, Surmiran, Sutsilvan, and Puter).⁸

3. LUISA FAMOS' LYRICS: AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The theme of nature underlies most of Luisa's lyrics; it is, in fact, a major source of inspiration. Moments of intense awareness of nature and human beings existing within it are illustrated by vivid words and a minimalist poetic style. I refer here to minimalism as an aesthetic (perhaps existential too?) modality rather to Minimalism as the literacy movement prominent in the mid-twentieth century and mostly represented by Ezra Pound and other American writers. Minimalist aesthetics in Luisa Famos' poems is an approach to an intense, condensed minimum; an English translation would hardly reflect the conciseness and precision of the original formulation. Her compositions consist of lines of few words which are able to express a vast range of emotional subtleties. Nature becomes a reason for observation and innermost reflection: the sequence of seasons, the course of the day and night, a flower—the simplicity and mystery of life⁹:

⁶ Luisa Famos, *Poesias*. German Translation by A. Kurth e J. Amann (Zurigo: Archeverlag, 2003). Luisa Famos, *Ich bin die Schwalbe von einst/Eu sun la randolina d'lünsacura*. German Translation by M. Puorger e F. Cavigelli, (Zurigo: Limmatverlag, 2004). In 2002, Edizioni Casagrande published an Italian translation of some of Luisa Famos' lyrics, see Luisa Famos, *Tutto si rinnova*. Italian Translation by Marisa Keller-Ottaviano (Bellinzona: Edizioni Casagrande, 2002).

⁷ Linguistic features of Romansh are investigated by Stephen R. Anderson, "Romansch (Rumantsch)," in *The Oxford Guide to the Romance Languages*, ed. Adam Ledgeway and Martin Maiden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 169–83. For a discussion on Romansh and bilingualism in Switzerland, see Rebecca Posner and Kenneth H. Rogers, "Bilingualism and Language Conflict in Rhaeto-Romance," in *Bilingualism and Linguistic Conflict in Romance*, ed. Rebecca Posner and Kenneth H. Rogers (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1953), 231–52.

⁸ Following the works by Ascoli (1873) and Gartner (1883), Romansch is grouped with Friulian and Ladin as a Rhaeto-Romance branch of Romance; their relationship remain, however, a matter of debate among linguists. Rhaeto-Romance derives from the rustic Latin spoken by Roman soldiers; it denotes a cluster of linguistic varieties spoken in north and north-eastern Italy and in Switzerland.

⁹ *Poesias*, 2003, 16, 28, and 18.

Sunasoncha

*Ver saira
 Cur sunasoncha
 Rebomba tras cumün
 Tuot dvainta nouv*

*La prada e 'ls chomps
 La jassa e'l balcun tort
 Suot la pensla
 Il gnieu da randulinas
 La saiv da l'üert
 E l'aua dal biügl d'larsch
 Tuot dvainta nouv*

*Fa cha dvaintan nouns
 Eir no*

Stailas lasü

*Dalöntschi dalöntschi
 Ögls gronds averts
 Sailas dal tschël
 La not
 Fluors da la terra*

Di d'inviern

*Chomps
 Culur da pirantiüm
 Marvs
 Corvs fond gös
 Da fanzögna
 Laschan sur il glatsch
 Sbraj racs
 Il bösch es üna chà
 Chi spetta
 E suravi un tschël
 Abandunà*

*Sco cling d'ün sain
 Pierla
 Il rier d'ün uffant*

The sound of bells

In the evening
 When the sound of bells
 Echoes throughout the village
 Everything awakens again

Meadows and fields
 Alleys and terraces
 The swallow's nest
 Under the eave
 The bush in the garden
 And the water in the fountain of larch
 Everything awakens again

It also makes us reawaken
 To new life

Stars up there

Distant distant
 Wide open eyes
 Stars of the sky
 The night
 Flowers of the earth

A winter day

Meadow
 Ice coloured
 Vitreous
 Crows playing
 In a rapture
 Leave on the ice
 Their rasping voice
 The tree is a home
 Waiting
 Under the sky
 Vacant

High like the sound of a bell
 Resonates
 The laugh of a child

There is clarity, intensity, and economy of language in Luisa Famos' lyrics; they capture the essence of life and relationship or convey a particular thought by relying on the power of suggestion. Some of her condensed pieces are short stories that achieve a high level of profundity. The "meaning" is primarily an intense feeling which induces an experience in the reader. Her poems are a meditative celebration of the natural world; impressions are not described in full by the poet, but actively constructed by the reader from a few spare images. The seasons and the time of day are evoked as important, if not essential, aspects of a particular human experience. Natural elements are indistinguishable from the human condition—they are not intended to glorify nature and be valued for their own sake¹⁰:

¹⁰ *Poesias*, 2003, 20, and 70.

I chatcha di*Cun bratscha nūda**Sainza país**Il di**Branca**La not**Cullanas d'stailas**Stüdan**Sfuondran**Aint ils vouts**Albs**Dal tschël**Sun l'orizont**Nascha il sulai****Utuon****Meis di dvainta cuort**Mia not plü stailida**Cun profuonds desideris***When the daylight comes**

With bare arms

Without any weight

The day

Embraces

The night

A necklace of stars

Fade away

Vanishing

In the white

Vault

Of the sky

On the horizon

The sun is arising

Autumn

My day becomes shorter

My night starrier

Of innermost wishes

Luisa's rich repertoire of metaphorical images is mostly derived from the natural world. Every word is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance in the construction of a nature imagery. Below is a love poem; the direct but allusive language recalls again nature as a metaphor of life:¹¹

Aint illas fluors*Aint illa plövgia**Aint il sulai**Aint illa puolvra**Sduvlada sü dal vent**Viv mi 'amur per tai**Mei lefs nu tschantschan plu**Da quel giaviüschamaint**Suogliada in meis cour**Sögna l'amur per tai***In the flowers**

In the rain

In the sun

In the dust

Which the wind raises

My love for you lives

My lips do not say anymore

Of my desire

Hidden within my heart

I preserve my love for you

Luisa Famos demonstrates the excellent ability to capture and describe the present moment with a thoughtful, gentle voice. Allusion and implication by omission are employed as a means to compensate for limited exposition and add depth. Simplicity and absence: the poet does not often use ornate adjectives and rarely offers effusive descriptions of scenery or extensive detail about backgrounds:¹²

¹¹ *Poesias*, 2003, 32.

¹² *Poesias*, 2003, 8.

Il rudè

Batterdögl
Sco serpaischems
Chi schmütschan
Laschond insajar
Fin giò 'l fuond
Nossa vita

Sco ün fluid
Van tremblond
Tra e tras

Batterdögl
Voss cumgiats
Sun asprezza

Il revair
Rasain
D'ajer viv

The course

Instant
 Like a lizard
 You run
 Letting us to feel the flavour
 Of nothing
 But life

Just as
 Water which shaking
 Flows

Instant
 Your goodbye
 Is Abrupt

The meeting
 Full
 Of life

The lyric which follows was probably written during her time in South America; the poet induces in the reader the experience of grief by an efficient and implicative lexical choice. Her narrative is non-intrusive in that she tells a story without drawing attention to herself. The tragic death, the death of an innocent, figuratively reminds of social inequality, injustice, and a cruel fate. It is a mother's cry. As in Impressionistic works, the entire piece is reported in sensory detail. This poem is strikingly visual, emotionally intense; it transmits an overwhelming sense of grief and hopelessness—the poet offers no reason or lesson¹³:

Pitschna indiana

Carmencita has set ans
Ed ün bindè cotschen
In sia tarschoula

Cur ch'eu pass speravia
As zopp'la
Davo la chamanna
E clama: olla

Carmencita cuorra sun via
Il camiun
Cul plumb da la miniera
Nu's ferma
Pitschna indiana
cul binde cotschen
Dasper teis man briin

The little Indian girl

Carmencita is seven years old
 And a red ribbon
 On the braid

When I cross by
 She hides
 Behind the woodshed
 And says: hello

Carmencita is running on the street
 The truck
 With lead from the mine
 Does not stop
 Litte Indian girl
 With the red ribbon
 Next to your dark hand

Minimalist authors select words and allusions carefully.¹⁴ Luisa Famos' minimalism works in an almost postmodern manner; the final effect of a poem depends almost completely on the reader's creative interpretation of the relations among its parts. It

¹³ Poesias, 2003, 114.

¹⁴ Botha provides a thorough investigation of Minimalism in different arts and throughout history, see Marc Botha, *A Theory of Minimalism* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

generates an experience of a moment charged with emotional significance. The author's crafted use of a transparent, fluid language creates a mystical atmosphere¹⁵:

Eu vögl cunfessar

E sch'eu fuoss

Suletta creatüra

Sün quaist muond

Trametta Segner

Teis figl

Per am salvar

E chi t'il cundanna

Eu

Chi t'il schneja e bastuna

Eu

Ingio es il güdeu

Per t'il spüdar in fatscha

Qua

E chi l'ama

Eir quel chi t'ama

Sun eu

I wish to confess

If I were

The only being

On earth

Send oh my Lord

Your son

To save me

And who will sentence him

Me

Who will betray and beat him

Me

Where is the Jew

Who spits on his face

Here

And who loves him

The one who loves you

It is me too

The poem below was composed when Luisa Famos came to know that she was seriously ill; the poet seems to be preparing herself to die. Its suggestiveness and condensation reminds the tradition of Japanese haiku. As a genre, haiku evokes but does not explicitly offer narrative totality; it delineates only a brief outline of selective parts, and the reader must complete the vision. A haiku could often be perceived as a fragmentary piece, it aims to evoke spiritual sublimation by allusion and implication by omission.¹⁶ Here too omission and brevity force readers into a deeper engagement with what is before them¹⁷:

Eu nu sa sch'eu sun buna

Da ramassar

Tuot las spias

Da meis champ

Da liar tuot la mannas

Per tai

Ant cha 'l sulai

Va adieu

I do not know whether I could

Collect

All the spikes

Of my fields

Tide them in wheat sheaf

For you

Before the sun

Descends

These laconic poems and their simplified verbal style may also bring to mind the sharp language of Imagism. Omission works, in fact, as a means to create a heightened sense of implication; it is the aesthetic of exclusion and suggestiveness: language in poetry should use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something—paraphrasing Ezra Pound. Luisa's poetic imagery is distinctively contemplative, introspective, and reflects her innermost experiences; there is indeed purity of texture and concentration

¹⁵ *Poesias*, 2003, 48.

¹⁶ See Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 2–3. With regard to Haiku and Imagism, see Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Imagism," *Modern Philology* 90, no. 1 (1992): 47.

¹⁷ *Poesias*, 2003, 84.

of meaning in her lyrics. Something profoundly intimate and spiritual comes forward: a timeless wisdom, and the integrity of an ordinary life.

Luisa Famos' always lucid, grounded language may to some degree share hallmarks of the aforementioned acclaimed literary movements and genres, such as Haiku poetry, Impressionism, or Imagism; it is not, however, the intention of this contribution to make out a case of any such comparisons. In presenting the first English translation of selected poems to English readers, I hope this brief article has justified the attention they fully deserve and stimulate further discussion on Luisa Famos' literary production.