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Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

**Francesco Benozzo, *Sciamanica: Poems from the Borders of the Worlds*
(Forum, 2023)**

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A new collection of poetry by Francesco Benozzo, the Italian Professor of philology, poet and musician, is a powerful body of work that stirs emotions and invokes humility. *Sciamanica*, which won the 2022-23 International Prize Poets From the Frontier, is a body of work that bears a stark relevance to today as it leads us on a journey through the natural geological and biological world that arose from primordial beginnings, and that existed and still exists on our planet, a world before Homo sapiens crystallized into their present form with a flawed sense of primacy. The poems strive to describe natural wonders in language that can frequently feel as if Benozzo's observations and phrases preceded the rules and norms of civilization. The title, an homage to shamanism, boldly invites a reader to travel with him through the natural world and become a participant in the tradition. The book adds to a large body of writing and music that Benozzo has produced (<https://www.francescobenozzo.net>), including his thought-provoking 2022 work on the origins of poetry itself during human evolution, *The Ridge and the Song: Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry*.

Written over a period of ten years, *Sciamanica* is comprised of seven major poems that took form following treks Benozzo made on several continents. Many were composed orally, adding to the feel that they are poems written before poetry as we know it existed. Translated from Italian to English by the Canadian poet and translator, Gray Sutherland, the book pulls all seven works together with a coherence created by the imageries of rocks, trees, birds, insects,



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fish, water, air, space and more. And while it has the feel of an epic body of work written for the ages, it simultaneously is very much a collection for our times. It challenges us to rethink who we are on this third planet from the sun and confronts us with the boredoms and constraints and pressures that civilization presses upon us.

The first poem, *Oneiric Geological*, as its title promises, is a dreamlike depiction of bewilderment and amazement at natural structures. In describing mountains and shores and more, with the absence of human manipulations, Benozzo begins to take us on his walking journey. The language is rich and deep, with unexpected juxtapositions of images and words. In describing the Apennine mountains of Italy, he refers to them as “the longed-for sandstone headland” and “the gates of the flood and time”. In the same way that what he describes evokes a *mélange* of imagery, the emotion of his words brings on a spectrum of feelings ranging from joyful awe to quiet melancholy. Benozzo himself captures a fragment of how he himself is being affected by what he sees with a beautiful passage: “in the eloquence of the cliffs I hear the humming of my blood beneath the skin”.

In the second poem, *Ferns in Revolt* (who can't be curious about a poem with that title!), Benozzo takes a slightly darker turn, writing about observations that are more disconcerting. He realizes that not all is good and not everything unfolds with a happy ending. His lines project a frustration and a loneliness of being a poet in the modern world, constrained by norms. When he writes “the poet loves the lines that kill him” I hear references to the human trap of self-pity. Benozzo writes as if he struggles to be free of this, and indeed free of all entrapments. This poem is one that reveals more about Benozzo and more about humanity each time it is read.

Each poem in *Sciamanica* leaves the reader with lines that are like a sphere with a million facets. In the third poem, *The Castaway's Shack*, he positions himself on a shore, directly in the centre of the geological and biological world he is drawn to. There are challenges of survival



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to be overcome and much to learn about the dynamics of change caused by natural events, be they tides or storms or more. Much of this turmoil he anchors with a passage that resonates deeply with anyone who is navigating potentially damaging events: “Nothing falls without first fading into something else, nothing vanishes just like that, not even thunder or lightning”. The imagery of those words can readily be superimposed upon the trials and tribulations of life in our charged and fraught modern world.

In *Poem from the Edge of the World*, Benozzo retreats back to the oneiric sentiments of the first poem, but in doing so reminds us that everything is ephemeral: “all of you, without exception, are disappearing ... for no reason, meaninglessly, or maybe without having really come to terms with the snowfall flights of moths and the static outlines of nothing”. Benozzo’s writing is either as bleak as you want it to be or as liberating as you want it to be. The final poem, *Poem of the Suicide*, invites a rethinking of our transience. But at moments in it Benozzo does so with touches of wry humour. He opens it by saying “I’ll kill myself to give body to my shadow”, and later compares himself to a chestnut being damaged as he steps on it, creating a discordance that reminds him of his carefree nature and how death might be seen as “the exile of having come into the world”. Yes these are weighty words, but they dance with a lightness that reminds one of the wonderful and playful notes that Benozzo the musician can draw from his harp.

Sciamanica is a book that deserves to stand whatever test of time can be thrown at it. It should be taught to students of writing. It has passages that should be read at births and at funerals and at every one of life’s occasions where humans confront their limitations and seek meaning. For Benozzo, meaning is to be discovered in the natural world, and discovering it requires that we remove ourselves from the centre, where *Homo sapiens* like to congregate, and that we become observers. By removing ourselves from the centre, we can see more clearly the warrens within which we cloister ourselves and the misunderstandings we pursue.



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Bio-bibliographical note

Alan Wildeman (PhD) is President Emeritus of the University of Windsor in Canada. His academic degrees in biology are from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Guelph. His research career focused on molecular genetics and biotechnology, and in addition to Canada he has worked in research institutes in France and Germany. He has released two albums of original songs, *The Apologist* in 2016 and *Unsheltered* in 2020, both available on all major streaming outlets. The albums have been described as prairie surrealism.

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