



**UNIVERSITÀ  
DI PARMA**

Awarding of the title of Honorary Doctor in

**“Classical and Modern Philology  
and Literature”**

to

**Patti Smith**

***Laudatio* to Patti Smith**

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Cultural Industries

Parma, Auditorium Paganini

3 May 2017

Rector,

Distinguished Members of Academic Staff,

Civil, Military and Religious Authorities,

Technical and Administrative Staff of this University,

Dear Students,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

New York. The lobby of the Chelsea Hotel. At the end of the 1960s:

“I sat in my usual spot, bent over my orange composition book [...] and was hammering away at the same set of phrases when I was interrupted by an oddly familiar voice:

‘Whatcha doin’ darling?’

I looked up into the face of a stranger sporting the perfect pair of dark glasses.

‘Writing.’

‘Are you a poet?’

‘Maybe.’”

Patti Smith records this brief exchange with Bob Neuwirth, the then friend and associate of Bob Dylan, in her book of memoirs *Just Kids*, thus capturing a moment of explicit and forthright questioning of her own poetic vocation. Her answer is only seemingly vague, as that ‘maybe’ hints at the vast range of possibilities implied by the notion of being a poet.

In the same volume, Smith also offers us us the following illuminating fragment: “In *Poems a Penny Each* James Joyce wrote a line that dogged me – the signs that mock me as I go”. This quotation is from the short poem entitled “Bahnhofstrasse”, contained in Joyce’s *Pomes Penyeach*, a collection of 12 compositions published in 1927. Appropriating the line and weaving it into her own reflections on her lifetime of artistic creation,

Smith removes it from its modernist context, but does not separate it from that literary movement's distinctive exploration of reality through the word, the *created* word that encapsulates and explains the *world* – modernist “glossopoeia”. By the same token, through this line, Smith points out one of the pivotal concerns in her artistic research, visible in the conjunction of “signs”, “mocking” and “going” – that is, an image in which signs are like clues to an enigma that, by constantly eluding decoding, compel us to keep writing and rewriting, reading and re-reading, the real.

A composer, singer and performer, photographer, cultural icon, Patti Smith began her artistic career as a writer and a poet; she began from a struggle with signs and their enigmatic cores, their provocative questions and silences. All of her multifarious artistic engagements spring from this initial encounter, attraction and fight, with signs that mockingly interrogate a poet on the move.

The closing composition in her collection *Auguries of Innocence* is entitled “The Writer’s Song”, and there Smith has the “writer” confess:

“I had a horn I did not blow

I had a sake and another

I could hear the freemen

Drunk with sky

What matter my cry

Will the moon swell

Will the flame shy

Banzai banzai

It is better to write

Then die

In the blue crater

Set with straw”

It is clear from these lines that the “signs that mock” urge the poet to see and write, yet also ironically (or cruelly) point to the impossibility of doing so. Yet, for Smith, writing is always the answer: it is “better to write” against all odds, even if the “cry” may not matter. In addition, saying and

writing are inextricably linked to death. In the poem, the “writer” notes: “I wrote my name upon the water”, an echo of John Keats’s heart-breaking epitaph on his gravestone in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, which reads: “Here lies one whose name was writ in Water”. Indeed, we can read Smith’s literary production as an ongoing conversation with the dead, as emerges for instance in a passage about her coat from *M Train*:

“I had a black coat. A poet gave it to me some years ago on my fifty-seventh birthday. It had been his – an ill-fitting, unlined Comme des Garçons overcoat that I secretly coveted. On the morning of my birthday he told me he had no gift for me.

- I don’t need a gift, I said.

- But I want to give you something, whatever you wish for.

- Then I would like your black coat, I said.”

The passage concludes with the following, resonant words, addressed to us, her readers: “Have you seen my coat? It is the dead speak coat”. The garment therefore transmutes into a talisman enabling a conversation with

generations of predecessors, and poets above all, who are dead but remain alive through their voices, and more generally writers from the literatures of the world. Patti Smith's experience as a reader and a writer is made up of a web of references, memories and echoes from Pasolini, Roberto Bolaño and Federico Garcia Lorca, to Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, Albert Camus, Fernando Pessoa, JD Salinger, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Jean Genet, Oscar Wilde, Gogol, Baudelaire, Byron, Wordsworth and of course Arthur Rimbaud and William Blake.

Smith evokes this intertextual web, opening the introduction to her 2007 Penguin edition of Blake's verse as follows: "The eternal loom spins the immaculate word. The word forms the pulp and sinew of innocence. A newborn cries as the cord is severed, seeming to extinguish memory of the miraculous". Here she conjures up a collective human destiny of loss that Blake, however, resisted and counteracted, as he "never let go of the loom's golden skein". Blake, for Patti Smith, is a beacon and a guide, because "To take on Blake is not to be alone". "Walk with him", she enjoins us.

In Smith's conception of art, writing and reading are both keys and pathways. Through a conversation with the voices of the past, we reach something higher – "Blessedness is within us all", she writes in "Reflecting Robert" from *The Coral Sea*, her book of poems in prose in memory of Robert Mapplethorpe. At the same time, her writing is a conversation with the living who, in the present, cross her path and help her creativity flourish and grow – Robert Mapplethorpe, of course, but also Sam Shepard, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and many others. Forged through, and electrified by, an intersection of past and present, her writing is sustained by a search for new forms of expression and new combinations of tradition and innovation, stemming from the restless experimentalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and already visible in her early series of "Rock and Rimbaud" performances of songs and poems dedicated to her favourite French poet.

From the outset, Patti Smith's literary writing has been inextricable from her other creative investments, resulting in what may be termed an inter-



artistic project. Her earliest poetry readings saw the intervention of Lenny Kaye to add a musical edge to her text-based performances. One of her earliest poems, “Ballad of a Bad Boy”, was written for the playwright Sam Shepard. Her literary creations are shaped by an ongoing dialogue with painting, photography, music and film. The visual, the aural and the verbal intermingle in her texts, as is clear from her description of the moment of inspiration for her first poem on Robert Mapplethorpe’s death:

“[...] by the sea, where God is everywhere, I gradually calmed. I stood looking at the sky. The clouds were the colors of a Raphael. A wounded rose. I had the sensation he had painted it himself. You will see him. You will know him. You will know his hand. These words came to me and I knew I would one day see a sky drawn by Robert’s hand [...] Words came and then a melody [...] I had transfigured the twisted aspects of my grief and spread them out as a shining cloth, a memorial song for Robert.”

Closely interconnected, illuminating key words punctuate this passage: looking, colour, painting, drawing, words and, finally, melody. There is no

actual separation between the moment of inspiration and the attendant act of creation. They are part of the same seamless texture, and they are illuminating in a very specific sense, as the passage makes plain the relevance of the moment of intuition or revelation to Smith. Suddenly the poet gains unexpected access to reality and sees “into the life of things”, carrying away one precious nugget of truth – or the possibility of a truth. This is what she calls “Working on a string of impulses, bordering illumination”, a notion that is deeply rooted in the poetics of Arthur Rimbaud, as well as in English-language literature from William Wordsworth’s “spots of time”, through James Joyce’s “epiphanies” and Woolf’s “moments of importance”.

More recently, Smith’s unflagging exploration of new forms of artistic interaction and new expressive means has led to an interest in television detective series, and especially her passion for *The Killing* and the figure of detective Sarah Linden. This fascination has not only brought her actually to perform in one of these series as an actor, but has also impinged upon her ideas of writing and poetry. “Yesterday’s poets are today’s detectives”,

she notes, because poets, like detectives, seek to unpack the mysteries of the “mocking signs” that make up the real, eternally looking for “illuminations” in the way of Rimbaud or “moments of importance” like Woolf.

However, Patti Smith’s idea of writing as exploration takes yet another form, that of physical movement, as suggested by the reference to the “train” in the title of *M Train*. Movement takes a variety of shapes in her life and writings: flying around the world, walking around a city centre like a Baudelairian *flâneur* or taking a train from London to Yorkshire.

I “believe in movement” she declares. And her artistic output is bound up with journeys that frequently double as actual pilgrimages to seek out the presiding figures of her imagination: a trip to Charleville for Rimbaud; to Coyoacán for Frida Kahlo; to Blanes for Roberto Bolaño; to Heptonstall for Sylvia Plath. Smith also sets store by movement without any apparent goal, as she feeds her inspiration by immersing herself, through movement, in the world’s polyphony and cacophony of signs. In addition, this idea of the

journey as a pilgrimage opens up the question of her idea of writing as a sacred practice, a holy act. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, one of her favourite books of all times, is particularly significant in this respect. Smith takes the epigraph for her volume of *Collected Lyrics 1970-2015* from the footnote to this iconic poem, the manifesto of a whole generation, an epigraph that reads: "The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!". The sacred nature of the entire process of production and reception of the written text is crucial for Smith, whose works are pervaded by a belief in the holiness of the real and of human existence: "by the sea, where God is everywhere", she writes in her reconstruction of the moment of inspiration for the poem to Robert Mapplethorpe quoted above. And, once again, she finds this sense of sacredness deeply embedded in the figure and work of William Blake, whom she describes as "a messenger and a god himself. Deliverer, receptacle and fount".

However, it would be limiting to see her poetic, and more generally literary, activities as exclusively focused on aesthetic experimentalism or

even a cultivation of abstraction, that is, a way of transcending the real and projecting oneself into spiritual, immaterial dimensions. The materiality of her writing is everywhere palpable. Hers is writing *in* the world and *for* the world. We can see this in the way she lovingly examines the practical, material features of writing as a craft. If Allen Ginsberg wrote “The typewriter is holy”, she dedicates some resonant sentences to her own typewriter and other writing tools in *M Train*, as well as some highly emotional reflections on Mapplethorpe’s writing desk in *Just Kids*, which cast it not as a sentimental object but as a space of creation, a place of explosion of the power of imagination.

These passages are not mere circumstantial descriptions. They also reveal how, for Smith, writing is caught up in the materiality of existence, the flow of history, the social and the political. Created with tools, poetry and writing are themselves tools – to throw light on reality and to do things *in* it and *to* it. In *M Train*, Patti Smith reflects about what happens when we, as readers, fall so deeply into a writer’s fictional universe and characters, that they end up “commingl[ing] with our own sense of self”. This is not an

exclusively intra-textual phenomenon, but it also affects the relation between the self, the text and the world in which they exist. In other words, the self, the individual, achieves a higher sense of being in the world through the text, a sense of being that may then translate into acting.

If writing and reading, from Smith's perspective, are about being *in* and *for* the world, it is in this respect that what we may call the politics of her imagination become visible. Her texts explore and transfigure the tragic developments of the present in order to call us to reflection and action. She makes this clear in the lyrics to her song "Jubilee", from the album *Trampin'* of 2004:

"We are love and the future

We stand in the midst of fury and weariness

Who dreams of joy and radiance?

Who dreams of war and sacrifice?

Our sacred realms are being squeezed

Curtailing civil liberties

Recruit the dreams that sing to thee

Let freedom ring”

In other words, Smith’s writing is pervaded by optimism and hope. Even as it contemplates a world fraught with terror and fear, it proclaims that darkness is never absolute when light is what you believe in.

In an interview with *The Guardian* of December 2016, Patti Smith talked about her reverence for a “higher learning” that she sees as inseparable from the notion of a “higher sacrifice”. With deeper knowledge and awareness come the higher sacrifices demanded by our being responsibly in the world – indeed, a higher responsibility. So, when Patti Smith, in *M Train*, expresses the wish “to be reborn within the pages of a book”, she is not voicing a desire to lose herself within a purely imaginative, escapist, dimension; but rather, she aspires to immerse herself entirely in that “higher learning” that forces one to become a more fully conscious, more deeply engaged and embattled individual. To be reborn in books is to achieve complete awareness of who we are, where we are.

Through her literary writings, Smith invites her readers to be similarly reborn – to enter a more intense, more authentic, reality. Poets give us words. And not just poets – also writers, singers and performers, and artists more generally. They lend us words. For a while or for ever. Through them, we can be and act differently – in this world, but also looking beyond it. With her literary and other artistic productions, Patti Smith – a poet, maybe, as she said to Bob Neuwirth in the late 1960s – does exactly that. For us.

Prof. Diego Saglia

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