

The Earth and its Satellite

Matteo Terzaghi

Essays

Italian



This is a collection of short prose pieces, some very short indeed, that seeks to describe the complex system of relationships in which human beings now live their lives. Drawing inspiration from astrophysics, the myriads of galaxies and stars, their interdependence and their mystery, Matteo Terzaghi celebrates the exceptional quality of our daily life on Earth, immersed as we are in minor miracles of nature (rain, eclipses, the regenerative capability of worms) and continual wonder at the products of our culture.

"When we woke up the city was entirely white, so silent that when you opened the window you could hear the sound of the flakes falling slowly and abundantly, each along its own trajectory. It went on snowing like that for a good part of the day, until the evening. How beautiful it is to go out in the middle of the streets, in the middle of the snow, in the nocturnal light of the snow!"

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Matteo Terzaghi was born in Bellinzona in 1970. He studied philosophy, and is the author of *Il merito del linguaggio* (*The Merit of Language*); he has also been responsible for many exhibitions and publications in conjunction with the artist and illustrator Marco Zürcher, including such works as *The Tower Bridge e altri racconti fotografici* (*The Tower Bridge and Other Photographic Tales*) and *Hotel Silesia*. For *Ufficio proiezioni luminose* (*Light Show Office*) he won a Swiss Literature Award in 2013.

Photo: Sébastien Agnetti

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Excerpt translated by Shaun Whiteside

The concert

I once went to a piano concert without a piano. That is to say, some very famous pianists played, but they were all dead. I was sitting in the front row and I had a clear view of the piano keys moving on their own. Introducing the pieces, and the pianists, was a little man with bright eyes and a paunch that protruded from his jacket. For example, he said, "You know who Paderewski was? Well, Ignacy Jan Paderewski was one of the most famous and greatly admired pianists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His concerts in Vienna, Lviv, Berlin, Paris, London and New York were incomparable events, I don't know, let's say... oh, how should I put it, they were musical triumphs... Apart from that, Paderewski was a very courageous and influential politician, a kind of Polish Mazzini. He fought for his country's independence and in 1919 he was appointed Prime Minister: an exceptional case in music history. I don't think there are any other musicians of Paderewski's stature who have occupied such an important political position. In any case, as you can imagine, this national Polish hero was a great interpreter of Chopin, perhaps the greatest after Chopin himself."

At this point the presenter adjusted his hair and his jacket – a jacket which was narrow at the waist (it had a button missing) but decidedly too wide around the shoulders – and he withdrew into a corner, the ghost of Paderewski took up position on the stool and after a moment's silence the music began.

Listening to Chopin live, a couple of feet from the piano, is already enough to make you shiver; if it is then played by the ghost of Paderewski, you might have a sense that you're dying on the spot. Gentlemen, I had never heard such an intense and moving performance of Chopin, and if anyone considers me a bit too suggestible, have patience!

Then the bright-eyed man would re-emerge from the gloom and announce another piece and another pianist; one of these was Dante Michelangelo Benvenuto Ferruccio

Busoni, whom I remember because the name made me think of a man with four heads and then, my next thought, an encyclopaedia in several volumes. While the presenter talked and smoothed his moustache, a little boy with long fingers opened a little door above the keyboard of the piano, took out a roll of perforated paper and put in another one.

Now the little man announced a piece by Edvard Grieg played by... Edvard Grieg: "*Butterfly*, from the *Lyric Pieces*, opus 43, no. 1. Who doesn't know it? You will feel the broken and unpredictable flight of the butterfly, the essence of freedom expressed in a kind of squiggle drawn in the air..."

The piano keys began moving by themselves and yes, it was in fact like seeing a butterfly fluttering between the invisible hands of the pianist-composer. A butterfly calling to other ones: two butterflies, three butterflies...

I listened, and as I did so I said to myself that I was witnessing the imprint of a musical genius, because what was reproduced by the roll was in fact the mechanical movements that Grieg in person had imprinted on the instrument, as attested by the signature that could be seen, if one stretched your neck a little, on the label stuck to the box from which the roll had been taken. I had already seen, for example, Beethoven's death mask, but that was a fixed, static, massive imprint, while this one unfolded in time and could be defined as a *dynamic imprint*. So what relationship was there between the features of a face and a musical phrase?

Leaving the drawing-room where the ghost concert had been held, I paused to take a close look at a small oil painting that had attracted my attention. A girl dressed in white was weeping with her eyes hidden in a handkerchief, bent over a piano keyboard. The young and elegant music master sitting beside her was pretending he wanted to comfort her, but his expression betrayed a cruel satisfaction.

I had just begun to fantasise about that painting when I was approached by a lady who had very much the appearance of being the lady of the house, or the organiser of the concert or perhaps even the wife of the presenter, and she said, "The painting is called *The Piano Lesson*. It is precisely in order to avoid these sorrows, and these dangers, that mechanical pianos were invented.

What we have been lucky enough to listen to that evening, a Bechstein-Welte, is still in excellent condition and it is a model that is well known throughout the world, amongst music-loving circles, of course. I hope the concert gave you pleasure, and hope to have you among us again soon.”

Then I realised that the room was empty and that outside too, in the dark street, there was nobody there.