

Minimalism in the Lyric Poetry of Luisa Famos:

A Translation from Romansh

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Notes on Contributors

Alessandra is a philologist and literary scholar, her research is marked by comparative methods and interdisciplinarity; she works on textual traditions of different languages and from several genres, as well as across a number of fields and periods. Alessandra is also a literary translator.

1. Life

Luisa Famos was born on August 7th 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 28th 1974 at the age of 44 years old. 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

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).

mother; her second poem compilation, *Inscunters* ('Encounters'), was published posthumously in 1974.⁵ After thirty years, 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 inedited 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 literary 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 of

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

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*, eds. Adam Ledgeway and Martin Maiden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 169–183. 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*, eds. Rebecca Posner and Kenneth H. Rogers (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1953), 231–252.

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.

observation and innermost reflection: the sequence of seasons, the course of the day and night, a flower—the simplicity and mystery of life:⁹

Sunasoncha

Ver saira

Cur sunasoncha

Rebomba tras cumiün

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 bügl d'larsch

Tuot dvainta nouv

Fa cha dvaintan nouvs

Eir no

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

Stailas lasü

Dalöntschi dalöntschi

Ögls gronds averts

Sailas dal tschêl

La not

Fluors da la terra

Stars up there

Distant distant

Wide open eyes

Stars of the sky

The night

Flowers of the earth

⁹ *Poesias*, 2003, 16, 28, and 18.

Di d'inviern*Chomps**Culur da pirantiüm**Marvs**Corvs fond gös**Da fanzögna**Laschan sur il glatsch**Sbraj racs**Il bös-ch es üna chà**Chi spetta**E suravi un tschêl**Abandunà**Sco cling d'ün sain**Pierla**Il rier d'ün uffant***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 sake:¹⁰

¹⁰ *Poesias*, 2003, 20, and 70.

I chatcha di*Cun bratscha nüida**Sainza pais**Il di**Branca**La not**Cullanas d'stailas**Stüdan**Sfuondran**Aint ils vouts**Albs**Dal tschêl**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 are 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

¹¹ *Poesias*, 2003, 32.

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

Il rudè*Batterdögls**Sco serpaischems**Chi schmütschan**Laschond insajar**Fin giò 'l fuond**Nossa vita***The course**

Instant

Like a lizard

You run

Letting us to feel the flavour

Of nothing

But life

*Sco ün fluid**Van tremblond**Tra e tras*

Just as

Water which shaking

Flows

¹² *Poesias*, 2003, 8.

<i>Batterdögl</i>	Instant
<i>Voss cumgiats</i>	Your goodbye
<i>Sun asprezza</i>	Is Abrupt
<i>Il revair</i>	The meeting
<i>Rasain</i>	Full
<i>D'ajer viv</i>	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 lesson:¹³

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: ollà

Carmencita cuorra sun via
Il camiun
Cul plumb da la miniera
Nu's ferma

Pitschna indiana
cul binde cotschen

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

Little Indian girl
With the red ribbon

¹³ *Poesias*, 2003, 114.

Dasper teis man brün

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 generates an experience of a moment charged with emotional significance. The author's crafted use of a transparent, fluid language creates a mystical atmosphere:¹⁵

Eu vögl cunfessar

E sch'eu fuoss

Suletta creatiira

Siin quaist muond

Trametta Segner

Teis figl

Per am salvar

I wish to confess

If I were

The only being

On earth

Send oh my Lord

Your son

To save me

E chi t'il cundanna

Eu

Chi t'il schneja e bastuna

Eu

Ingio es il güdeu

Per t'il spüdar in fatscha

Qua

And who will sentence him

Me

Who will betray and beat him

Me

Where is the Jew

Who spits on his face

Here

E chi l'ama

And who loves him

Eir quel chi t'ama

The one who loves you

Sun eu

It is me too

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).

¹⁵ *Poesias*, 2003, 48.

The poem below was composed when Luisa Famos came to know that she was seriously ill; the poet seems to 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 them.¹⁷

<i>Eu nu sa sch'eu sun buna</i>	I do not know whether I could
<i>Da ramassar</i>	Collect
<i>Tuot las spias</i>	All the spikes
<i>Da meis champ</i>	Of my fields
<i>Da liar tuot la mannas</i>	Tide them in wheatsheaf
<i>Per tai</i>	For you
<i>Ant cha 'l sulai</i>	Before the sun
<i>Va adieu</i>	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 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

¹⁶ See Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp. 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.

comparisons. In presenting the first English translation of selected poems to English readers, I hope this brief paper has justified the attention they fully deserve and stimulate further discussion on Luisa Famos' literary production.

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