



*Essere matita è segreta ambizione.  
Bruciare sulla carta lentamente  
e nella carta restare  
in altra nuova forma suscitato.*

---

To be a pencil is the secret ambition.  
To slowly burn up on the paper  
and in the paper remain,  
stirred into a brand new shape.

Valerio Magrelli

---

The Secret Ambition

selected poems

The publication of this book has in part  
been made possible by the generosity of

Mr David Cheyne



Valerio Magrelli

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Douglas Reid Skinner  
& Marco Fazzini



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# The Secret Ambition

selected poems by Valerio Magrelli

Translated from the Italian by  
Douglas Reid Skinner and Marco Fazzini

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## Foreword

“...I’ve seen things by a young poet that I like very much.  
His name is Magrelli.” ~ *Joseph Brodsky*

Valerio Magrelli was born in 1957 in Rome, where he was educated and lives today. He is Professor of French Literature at the University of Cassino and a regular commentator in a number of journals and Italian daily newspapers.

He studied philosophy, music and German literature at the University of Rome, graduating with a degree in Letters & Philosophy. Awarded a grant by the Bibliothèque Nationale, he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and was awarded a Ph.D. in French Studies. Amongst others, he has translated the work of Valéry, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Debussy into Italian, and has published critical works on Dadaism.



Magrelli’s first collection, *Ora serrata retinae* (1980), was published by Feltrinelli. (The title is Latin, and refers to the retina of the eye, when it is closed.) It soon came to prominence, was widely commented on and was awarded the Mondello Prize. A singularly coherent book of poems, it works around a central theme, the act of seeing and writing what the human eye can perceive of the external world. Magrelli digs out buried veins of self-reference that lie beneath the world of appearances and repeatedly bends the poems back on themselves, often concerning himself with the very linguistic composition of the poem he is in the act of writing.

Magrelli's second collection, *Nature e venature* (*Nature and veins*), was published by Mondadori in 1987. As before, the new collection attracted a great deal of attention and was extensively reviewed and praised. It quickly sold out and was awarded the prestigious Viareggio Prize. In it, he revisits the overarching theme of the first book in many poems, while ranging more widely thematically. Increasingly, he displays a desire to capture the essence and texture of things by tracing the linkages and connections that underlie the surfaces of the world.

Magrelli himself describes his first two collections in the following way: "Whereas *Ora serrata retinae* represents stasis and concentration, *Nature e venature* locates itself in a landscape that, beyond the appearance of clarity and calm (the line, veins in stones and organisms), unveils itself as a path threatened by collapse, landslide and fracture (night-nature hidden in geological depths)... Even literally, according to a hypothetical etymology, I have imagined that inside the sweet and reassuring 'veins' a mute and abyssal 'nature' is threatening, and that behind harmless and familiar actions one can glimpse the vertical, potential, tragic and contumacious feeling of danger lurking. Yet, in this word game, I have also tried to propose a possible definition of poetry itself: nature—that is the experience, thought and emotion of the person writing—read through the veins of a page, his or her lines." (Notari 1996: 106)

In 1992, a third collection, *Esercizi di tiptologia* (*Exercises in tiptology*), was published by Mondadori. Here, Magrelli ranges even further afield, melding poetry, prose and translation—he includes some of his translations of the French writers, Colletet, Péguy,

Prudhomme and Artaud—suggesting at one level, as Valéry observed, that translation is the model of all writing. Many poems are prefaced by a quotation from other writers, the poet often extrapolating in ‘imaginative conversation’ with that writer. *Esercizi* was awarded the Montale Prize. Magrelli observes: “It’s not a model of poetic prose but an idea for a platypus book. *Esercizi di tiptologia* in fact exists thanks to both a strong attraction for non-poetical materials (reportage and reports) and the technical and compositional forms that one can traditionally associate with a lesser genre (occasional poems and commissioned texts). It’s the spool of unhinged lines, the broken spring, the jammed machine, the old record player stuck in a loop.” (Notari 1996: 106)

In 1996, a volume of collected poems, *Poesie (1980-1992) e altre poesie (Poetry 1980-1992 and other poems)*, was published by Einaudi. It consisted of the first three collections plus eight previously unpublished poems. In 1999, *Didascalie per la lettura di un giornale (Instructions for reading a newspaper)* was published by Einaudi, a unified work consisting of poems relating to each section of a newspaper—such as Sport, Obituaries, the Letter Pages, and so forth. There is an elegiac note to this book as Magrelli laments the declining importance of newspapers in human affairs.

In November 2003, the Accademia dei Lincei awarded him the Premio Antonio Feltrinelli. *Disturbi del sistema binario (Disorders of the binary system)* appeared in 2006, published by Einaudi. His latest collection, *Il sangue amaro (The bitter blood)*, was published in 2014. Commenting on the writer and his poetics, Massimo Onofri has noted that Magrelli

has, “at least from a generational point of view, and better than any other poet, offered words for our daydreaming, our confusion... Magrelli’s barely sentimental poetry seems to be informed by a peculiar feeling, the feeling of epistemological discomfort, the feeling that was on the rise at the beginning of the 1980s...” (Onofri 1995: 84-5)

---

While still only twenty years old, Magrelli paid a visit to the offices in Rome of the journal *Nuovi argomenti*, where he showed his poems to the editor, Enzo Siciliano, a widely regarded critic, translator, writer and reviewer. In his preface to *Ora serrata retinae*, Enzo Siciliano recounts how he “...was surprised by the steadiness of...[Magrelli’s]...hand, the clarity of the design, and a painful density of expression.” In Magrelli’s lines he sees “...a precise Italian luminosity. Not the light of baroque amazement, of D’Annunzio’s wonder; but the light of Morandi, derived from the exact use...of dry-point etching, of silver-point drawing.” He suggests that Magrelli’s poetry is born “of one of Leopardi’s ribs...” In terms of language, what strikes Siciliano is Magrelli’s “...use of the everyday lexicon, suspended *in vitro* because everyone understands it...”

In 1988, Italian critic Bruno Arcurio noted in *Viaggio nella poesia* that the great poet Mario Luzi liked Magrelli’s poetry from the beginning, wondering only if he’d be able to maintain his strength through the years. Antonio Porta remembers having heard Federico Fellini repeat, with strong conviction, that it is impossible not to read Magrelli’s work.

“His poetry,” notes Arcurio, “is certainly a new combination of exactness and sentiment where the syllable measures its own dimension and reality, being porous, is as ‘fluid and fixed as matter is...’ and where a subject ‘is the casual fruit of arithmetical combinations’.”

In those years, while putting forward a “manifesto of emotional thought”, the critic and poet Giorgio Manacorda discerned a common direction in a group called ‘Poets of No Man’s Land’. They were more concerned with creation than poetics, expression than searching, more with the ‘here and now’ than with evoking aspects of a more or less distant past. Among them were Valentino Zeichen, Alfonso Berardinelli, Dario Bellezza, Patrizia Cavalli, Gilberto Sacerdoti and Valerio Magrelli. Despite being omitted from certain neo-avantgarde anthologies in 1989 and 1990, and despite being excluded from a group supporting a different line in contemporary Italian poetry, Magrelli’s poetry became one of the turning points of contemporary Italian writing. As Fo points out, “Magrelli easily manages to achieve, as if by vocation, a task which remains (for me) essential for poetry: that of grasping the most hidden folds of the world and revealing them in a simple and heraldic order...” (Fo 1997: 146)

Magrelli has always seemed to probe the predicaments of being conscious in a world mediated by language, with all of its attendant contradictions and paradoxes. Many poems bend back on themselves, the writer observing himself writing, exploring the unresolvable hall of mirrors that conscious awareness entails, and from which there appears to be no release.

Even so, in a poem towards the end of *Ora serrate retinae*, he presents a precise poetic objective:

For me the reason  
for writing  
is always the writing  
of reason.

Elsewhere, he suggests in ‘*Scrivere come se questo*’ that translating lies behind all writing:

To write as if this  
were the work of translation,  
of something already written  
in another language.

Thus do we see two of the key ideas in his work: that writing is a gradual process of understanding writing, no matter the subject of the poem; and that this process is underpinned by translating.



Translation has been extensively explored and written about and there is little to add here save to reiterate the understanding that no language is a mere mirror of reality, but more a way of being in the world, and that translators are always involved in a forest of complexities, even when approaching the simplest text. What one hopes for, perhaps, is an imaginative conversation with the original that results in an accurate reflection of the original and an effective poem in the target language.

Translations of Magrelli’s work have appeared in journals and anthologies in many countries. Volumes have been published in France, Spain, Croatia, the United States, Portugal and the United Kingdom. From the beginning, Magrelli has not always been best served by English translators. Although translation



is a thicket of opposing opinions and an uncertain process at best, versions of his work have appeared that have left something to be desired. A knowledge of the general context of contemporary Italian poetry is prerequisite, as are seasoned poetic skills.

The authors believe that a combination of native speakers in the two languages offers one the best chance of the least betrayal. The overriding consideration for them has been to carry over the original poems into English with as little interpretation as is feasible—choosing, as far as they could, a course of minimal interpolation of the translator between the reader and the original. That said, translating without some measure of compromise is impossible; the mere act of choosing from the range of words and phrases that might make a fit translation of an original line in and of itself is an act of interpretation. Here and there, decisions were taken to represent in English the intent in the Italian rather than a literal translation, and it is hoped that those particular poems are the better for it.

The ending of ‘To be a pencil is the secret ambition’ (‘Essere matita è segreta ambizione’ in *Ora serrata retinae*) is a useful case in point of one sort of compromise. The last lines,

*C'è chi tramonta solo col suo corpo:  
allora più doloroso ne è il distacco.*

literally translate as

There is he who sets with only his body:  
then more painful is the parting.

This doesn't work in English. Making sense of *tramonta*—to set, as in a sunset—requires one to read

through to Magrelli's use of sunset as a metaphor for death. What he would appear to be suggesting is that death is more painful or problematical for those who die without transforming their lives through art or creativity. The translators chose the following,

For those who go down with only the body,  
the parting is more painful.

Thus are gained associations with loss ('he went down in the fifth round'), death ('the soldier went down under a hail of bullets') and myth (Orpheus descending into the underworld—a central poetic trope). This fits with Magrelli's sense of poems bending back on themselves, and of the poem being a descent into language. As he himself puts it in 'Ten poems written in a month' ('Dieci poesie scritte in un mese' in *Ora serrata retinae*):

...there is only one theme  
and the theme itself is the theme, as now.

---

In his foreword to *Poesie (1980-1992) e altre poesie*, Magrelli wrote: "A new book has to invent its own author and, after it is written, must enable its author to have written it. A new book asks the author of the book previous to it to welcome it, to recognise it as a legitimate son. The book, if new, presents itself to its author as a bastard soliciting for adoption: it asks for the right to take the author's name."

It is the hope of the translators that the poems of *The Secret Ambition* might become a part of the poetic family of their originator.

**Douglas Reid Skinner and Marco Fazzini**

~ Venice/London/Cape Town 2015

(See selected bibliography on page 88)

from

**Ora serrata retinae**

*(Ora serrata retinae, 1980)*

---

Much is subtracted from life by sleep.  
Work pushed to the margins of the day  
glides slowly into silence.  
The mind, subtracted from itself,  
is covered by eyelids.  
And sleep spreads in sleep  
like a second, intolerable body.

Before the final curve of day  
I pick up words to help me sleep:  
in the evening once again they dress  
in heavy and sagacious robes.  
They proceed cautiously  
and like bricks in a line  
are set in the white lime of the page.  
It is a wall descending from above,  
the slow passing of the sign.  
There is no window or aperture,  
only a precious and crowded  
concern for that dense union.  
I wish to be a unique figure,  
that gem which, still hard and closed,  
the gardener picks as a gift for himself.

To be a pencil is the secret ambition.

To slowly burn up on the paper  
and in the paper remain,  
stirred into a brand new shape.

To so become from flesh a sign,  
from an instrument a fine  
skeleton of thought.

But such a sweet  
eclipse of matter  
is not always given.

For those who go down with only the body  
the parting is more painful.

Ten poems written in a month  
is not much, even though  
this might become the eleventh.  
Not even the themes differ;  
rather, there is only one theme  
and the theme itself is the theme, as now.  
This speaks of how much  
is not on the page  
and knocks and cannot enter,  
and shouldn't. Writing  
is not a mirror, but rather  
the shagreened glass of showers,  
where the body crumbles  
and only its shadow is visible,  
uncertain but real.  
And you cannot recognise who is washing,  
only his gestures.  
How important is it, therefore,  
to see behind the watermark  
if I am the forger  
and only the watermark is my work?

The pen should never leave  
the writer's hand.  
It has become a bone, a finger.  
Like a finger, it scratches, grips and points.  
It is a branch of thought  
that bears fruit,  
offering shelter and shade.



## G Berkeley

*A Treatise Concerning the  
Principles of Human Knowledge  
Part one, paragraphs 30, 31, 32*

Experience teaches us  
that in the ordinary course of things  
every idea is accompanied by a further idea,  
and that, therefore, being able to predict  
allows our actions to be ruled  
by life's necessities.

Otherwise, doubt would exist  
and nothing could be known in a way  
which gives or removes  
the pain of the senses,  
every avenue leading  
to a conclusion  
determined by the laws of Nature.  
Without it we would be confused and uncertain,  
and an adult would know no better  
how to live than a newborn baby.  
Yet this uniform mechanics  
which points to the wisdom of the spirit  
doesn't guide the mind toward it  
as it wanders in search of other reasons.

I inhabit my brain  
as a calm landowner his lands.  
All day my labour  
is to make them bear fruit,  
my fruit making them labour.  
And before I sleep  
I appear and look upon them  
with the modesty a man  
has for his own image.  
My brain inhabits me  
as a calm landowner his lands.

It's especially in weeping  
that the soul manifests  
its presence,  
through a secret compression  
transmutes pain into water.  
The first budding of the spirit  
is, therefore, in the tear:  
a slow, transparent word.  
Following this basic alchemy,  
thought truly becomes a substance,  
like a stone or an arm.  
And the liquid remains undisturbed,  
save only for the mineral  
dejection of matter.

Again, the miracle of repose comes to pass,  
the shrewd placing of the legs,  
the care with which weariness scatters  
limbs on the ground, in sealed gestures.  
It's the metaphysical theatre of the bed  
that hides engrossed bas-reliefs:  
a man running and a woman raising her hand  
to greet the dream's passer-by.  
In the regions of the night, the complex  
mechanics of abandonment are unleashed.  
It's a ritual dance that joins  
the terms of sleep, is sleep itself  
in which flesh becomes idea.  
Now the solitude of the arm  
becomes a word, in the line  
traced on the bed like a path.  
So, following a vegetal rhythm,  
life breathes out and in,  
and in the silence of the mind  
its bony roots sing,  
and in the obscurity of the eye  
the hand becomes the pupil.

Now, in this summer sky,  
few clouds are passing,  
fringes of a far-off thunderstorm.  
In silence, the slow caravan  
crosses the distance and dissolves itself  
without touching the arc of the horizon.  
No forms are now filling  
the enormous basin.  
When the air was cold  
immense statues reigned,  
suspended over the earth, roaming  
like mute divinities,  
giving birth to shadow.  
The entire vault was historiated  
with sorrow and calm:  
men were waiting for rain.  
Now, again, the page is clear  
and the light has faded  
the final traces of the day.

I'm agitated by the thought  
that I might fail myself.  
I'm afraid of gradually evaporating,  
of losing myself in the cracks of the day  
and forgetting my train of thought.  
At times I discover myself in the silence  
of the things I have around me,  
an object among objects,  
crowded by objects.  
Pain is, therefore, metamorphosis,  
its causes following one after the other,  
hidden, showing themselves  
for what they are not.  
This, indeed, is the first pain.  
Glasses should, therefore, be worn  
between the eye and the brain,  
since it's there that the error  
of the glance occurs, in the thickets  
and plantations of nerves.  
There, the view is lost,  
decays and declines  
on its way to the mind.  
As if at every step  
it paid a toll  
for the body.

My mind is cultivated  
like a plantation.  
The soil is coloured  
according to seed  
and like a tongue  
each zone has its flavour.  
My thoughts are a terrace  
that opens onto myself.  
Or perhaps only the confusing  
impressions of the senses,  
as crossed fingers make  
of two things, one.

I am sharpening the tip of thought  
as if the thread had worn away,  
the sign become opaque.  
The eyes, like pencils, are worse for wear  
and in the evening draw confused  
and crude figures on the brain.  
Images flicker, the outline grows uncertain,  
and things conceal themselves:  
it's as if they spoke through continuous enigmas,  
each glance obliging  
the mind to translate.  
So myopia becomes poetry,  
a drawing closer of the world  
to separate it from the light.  
Time, too, suffers this slowing:  
gestures are lost, greetings ignored.  
The only thing that's clearly seen  
is the prodigious difficulty of vision.



Behind the images that flash  
on the page there is a rule,  
a geographical point from which I observe,  
a gradation of the mental diopter,  
a fingerprint;  
behind my language  
is the population of the brain.  
Behind me is me, two-faced,  
curved on the mirror of thought.

Once one used to bring to the page  
the day just past, but now instead  
one speaks only of speaking.  
As if vertigo blossoms  
on the journey  
from impression to paper.  
So that in passing  
from one bank to the other  
the merchandise is lost  
and the traveller,  
his journey forgotten,  
can only tell of the danger just passed.

This notebook, too,  
is about to fade,  
its final page vanish,  
its lines disappear in the dark.  
I remain a prisoner  
so long as between me  
and the paper's sky  
the bars of ink keep running.  
All I know to write about  
is this endless captivity,  
my writing thickening  
the warp and weft of my prison.  
On this page is innocently mimed  
the mute segregation of the spirit.

Only Time truly writes,  
using the body as a pen.  
In the streets, in cinemas or in a bed  
this calligraphy gets lost,  
and the carelessness of gods  
and people is atrocious.  
What arrives on the paper is only  
the residual comment  
on a perennially missing poem.  
A frugal footnote, reflection of a story,  
this is the ultimate index of indexes.

To write as if this  
were the work of translation,  
of something already written in another language.  
Words are loaded, hesitate,  
still continue to vibrate  
as notes held on a keyboard  
survive the staccato,  
running through it until it's silent.

I am what is missing  
from the world in which I live,  
of all the people there are  
the one I'll never meet.  
Rotating on myself, I coincide  
with what has been subtracted from me.  
I am my own eclipse,  
the absence and the melancholy,  
the geometrical object  
I'll always have to do without.

I do not know  
what I am writing about,  
in fact I write  
precisely because I ignore it.  
It's a delicate act,  
the threshold where  
prey and hunter  
are confused.  
Here coincidence between  
the object sought and the cause  
of searching is attained.  
For me the reason  
for writing  
is always the writing  
of reason.

Without realising it, I completed  
a circumnavigation of myself.  
I began a story  
but inadvertently  
ended up  
illustrating myself,  
concealing my own image  
in the corner of the painting.  
With the final cabotage  
this geometrical passion is concluded,  
or perhaps one only  
arrives at proposing  
the description of one point  
from an infinity of other points.



from

**Nature e venature**

*(Nature and veins, 1987)*

---

Every photograph of a face  
is an image of war,  
the tangential point  
between the enemy aircraft and the ship  
in the moment that precedes the explosion.  
Stopped in an instant,  
sacrificed in the flagrant contact  
between two glances, recaptured  
as flames brooding  
in the fuselage flare up  
inside its features, lasting  
only as long as it takes  
to accomplish the mission of memory.

Barely modelled,  
the lathe-turned shape of the fingers,  
the leaf of the ear,  
the jointing of the limbs,  
the edifice of the foot.  
As if it was the form of forms,  
the morphological abyss in which  
even aberrations find a place,  
the measured horror of the hair  
the tip of which duplicates.

I have often imagined that glances  
survive the act of looking  
as if they were shafts,  
measured journeys, lances  
in a battle.

Then I think that in a room  
recently vacated  
such features must linger  
for a while, suspended and crisscrossed  
in the equilibrium of their design,  
intact and stacked like wooden  
pick-up sticks.

*Outside, the land is beautiful, white, green and pink,  
but within it is black, darker than death.*

~ WALTHER VON DER VOGELWEIDE

Out of the anatomical night  
nakedness rises.  
Stop on the threshold and look  
at the shining, the smooth,  
polished coin  
on which you can discern  
an embossed face,  
the soft alloy of its complexion.  
The profile doesn't move, holds  
to the line it's been assigned;  
miraculously restrained,  
it keeps the image for itself,  
encloses it in the circle of its own value,  
in supreme decapitation.

*A boat is a lever and nothing  
is more beautiful than a boat.*

~ SIMONE WEIL

A flying city, self-propelled,  
balanced on a forest  
of pilings, moving  
in the magic of its weight,  
by the grace of distribution,  
inclines,  
swaying, trembling slightly, wearing away  
with friction. Along canals  
full of fruit, loaded with fruit salad,  
boats with keels deformed like  
vertebral columns pass by, warped  
by water, skewed  
and barely balancing.

*And the crack in the tea-cup opens  
A lane to the land of the dead.*

~ WH AUDEN

*...like a crack through a cup.*

~ RM RILKE

From you I receive this red  
cup with which to toast my days  
one by one  
in the pale mornings, pearls  
on the long necklace of thirst.  
Should it fall and break and be destroyed  
I will, out of compassion,  
be mindful to repair it  
and carry on kissing without interruption.  
And each time the handle  
or rim is cracked  
I'll stick it back together  
until my love has accomplished  
the long, hard labour of a mosaic.

\*

The dark, unmoving  
crack follows the shining  
white slope of the cup,  
descends like lightning  
into the bright,  
concave interior,  
signature of a storm  
that keeps on thundering  
above the sonorous landscape  
of enamel.

*Let us eschew those spectacles that sadly enclose  
a few people in an obscure centre, keeping them  
fearful and immobile in silence and inertia.*

~ JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

I sit in the cinema, convalescing, devoted  
to a quiet physiotherapy,  
exposed to a reflected glow.  
The exchange is passionate,  
I seek to be healed,  
I am the screen's screen, surrendering  
the vast co-presence of my body  
to lunar work. An absent onlooker,  
I am the patient of my passion.  
Motionless in the shared darkness  
I watch the light's descent,  
its catabasis.  
Stopped in a wood,  
I watch the film of snow  
falling on the landscape, on the crib  
of this artificial night, curved  
over the mute auditorium  
in the narrative flow.  
Fixed on that illuminated window,  
I see those who, in passing behind the panes,  
beckon to me,  
beckon to the sick and invalided  
people posed  
for the group photograph.



If a puff is enough  
to scatter the days  
it's useless to fight  
against the dissent  
of time. The mishap  
is grace, is a form  
of life in which life runs  
counter-current  
to meet itself,  
caught by a slight breeze.  
There is love  
in pain, a malice in  
the reluctance that drives  
things, the indocile, backwards.

I am divided into two sides  
by the kind of fissure  
left in forms  
moulded in plastic.  
One side manoeuvres  
spontaneously  
as the impulse takes it, is impulse itself,  
happy activity.  
The other is inept,  
an invalid who suffers  
without ever recovering,  
convalescent space.  
Once, people were punished  
by being bound alive to the corpse  
of another. The  
paralysis that afflicts one half  
of the body may explain, therefore,  
the inclination  
and slope of the soul.

It's late in the morning,  
the height of the day,  
and someone's still lingering in bed,  
showing signs of hypnosis,  
intent on the restoration of sleep.  
As if one were able to mend  
the night,  
the shattered vase,  
the injured sky.

## Rosebud

I do not claim to say the word  
that, loosed from the heart, can pass through  
the twelve axes with holes  
and finish up piercing the suitor's heart.  
I trace my target  
around the object that's been hit,  
not hitting the mark, but marking  
what I hit, cheating,  
choosing my bull after the shot;  
and, as with a defective weapon  
whose angle of error  
I already know, I now  
take aim at the aiming.

With gears, hands and teeth  
the clock seems to be a falcate cart  
that ruins the day, rips up the corpse,  
damages ligaments and joints,  
chops up the hours, removes the bones, just as  
the rotation of night tears the sky's  
clarity apart, exposing  
numbers, membranes, figures,  
the brilliant, nebulous skeleton  
of the constellations.  
Thus, X-rayed, the body  
withdraws, in the low tide,  
discovers the depths, the under-  
world, the mountains,  
fossils fast asleep  
beneath the complexion of the light.

Which is the left side of a word,  
how does it move in space,  
where does it cast its shadow  
(can a word have a shadow?),  
can it be seen from behind  
or placed so that it is foreshortened?  
I'd like to render in poetry  
the equivalent of pictorial perspective.  
Give to a line the depth of a rabbit  
running across fields, make it grow distant  
as the distance between it and the observer grows  
as it heads towards the frame  
getting smaller and smaller  
though it never moves.  
The countryside observes it  
and arranges itself around the animal,  
the point of vanishing.

from

**Esercizi di tiptologia**  
*(Exercises in tiptology, 1992)*

---

It's the spool of verse,  
the loom of evil,  
the smiling zigzag  
of stitches.  
If the world is a drenched cloth  
imbued with death  
sew gently,  
don't squeeze it,  
don't force the substance out  
that holds it all together,  
hold your breath,  
let the thread pass through,  
link, if you can, that water  
to the visible darn  
that spoils my jacket.



## In labour

Presence and absence.

Geological mutation.

I give way under its weight.

Subsidence,

and my gradual sinking.

And yet, in truth, I don't give way

under the weight, since I am above it,

descending, I am above and descend, Toboggan,

the weight a pulling

from below, an assuming of form as it pulls

me down, sand from sand,

so that I reappear upside down like

a branch of myself

at the opposite end

of this genetic hourglass.

## The gamble

The tombola, the two dice,  
the slot machines, the bingo,  
the crowd mutely waiting  
for lined-up numbers  
or fruit, the price  
of a magical meal.  
It resembles funeral vigils,  
wheels of the orphanage or of torture  
(hope springs eternal).  
Destiny goes round, the wheel  
of wheels rotates, the lottery  
wheel or Russian roulette  
(fruit of the Orient,  
compass of death),  
the bullet and the cylinder  
of Truth, the head  
and cross of Nothing,  
red and black.

## *Aperçu*

*“Only the mad excrescence...”*

~ OSIP MANDELSTAM

The tapeworm, the parasite,  
the sponger and the profiteer,  
cancer, all born of organisms  
that, like Western music,  
breed their own ending.  
First comes the gemmation  
of shy dissonances, then the metastases  
that invade the sonorous body, breaking it up,  
admirable corruption and orchard  
of death. It's the history of a tonal catastrophe,  
arrhythmic cells, superfetations,  
it is the Hijacker (and cancer  
always hijacks its own vehicle).  
Here is the world, an unfortunate aircraft  
taken hostage by an armed passenger.

## The embrace

As you sleep beside me, I bend to your shape  
and, having drawn close to your face, fall asleep,  
the way the wick of one candle  
is ignited by another.

The two night-lights stand  
while the flame is handed on and sleep spins.  
And while it spins, the boiler  
vibrates in the basement.

Fossilised nature's being burned down there,  
Prehistory is burning below;  
dead, submersed, fermented peat  
flares in my radiator.

In a dark halo of oil  
the small room is a nest heated  
by organic deposits, by pyres, by sewage.  
And we, the wicks, are two tongues  
of one Palaeozoic torch.

# The packer

*What is translation? On a platter*

*A poet's pale and glaring head.*

~ VLADIMIR NABOKOV

The packer who bends  
emptying my room  
does the same work as I do.  
I, too, make  
words relocate,  
words I do not own,  
putting my hand to what  
is unknown, not understanding  
what I am moving.  
I am moving myself,  
translating the past into the present  
that travels, sealed,  
enclosed in pages  
or in boxes labelled  
'Fragile', not knowing what's in them.  
This is the future, the shuttle, the metaphor,  
time labouring here and over there,  
transfer and trope,  
the removals firm.

## Saint Eustorgio

I no longer remember the name of the church,  
but know that it opened onto an expanse,  
a ruined meadow, and that below,  
spreading out below the meadow,  
stood a crypt. Spreading out,  
Jesse tree or monstrance,  
this buried relic, heraldic,  
radiating (if 'radiating' describes the point  
of the heavenly dome from which  
the trajectories, drawn by swarms  
of falling stars, seem to diverge).  
We stopped and talked beside the axial pillar  
of that crypt, the crypto-fulcrum  
of a rotating organ.  
Because this is the city,  
swarming with shooting stars,  
an astronomical beehive.  
"One should always depart from here,"  
he explained.

*Ella sen va notando lenta lenta:  
rota e discende ma non me nàccorgo  
se non che al viso e di sotto mi venta.*

~ DANTE, INFERNO XVII, 115-117

To you, DNA of poetry,  
propeller and elastic  
wound tightly  
into a reluctant braid  
coiled round and round  
rhymes  
of a toy aeroplane  
which, when released,  
whirrs off through the centuries  
towards the future of the mother tongue.





from

**Poesia (1980–1992)  
e altre poesia**

*(Poetry 1980–1992  
and other poems, 1996)*

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# Waves

1

The study of a wave's sign:  
the curvature of its force,  
the flexion of its line.  
Breath or sigh.  
Everything must be calculated.  
The measure.

2

Petal of the impression  
a digital wave:  
a spreading curve,  
the emission of self.  
A force extinguishing itself  
on the shore of nothing:  
spume which contains no sand,  
the remission of self.

## Defamations

*~ to Pier Paolo Pasolini*

It's been said he threatened a petrol-station attendant  
with a pistol loaded  
with a golden bullet.

Cineaste and poet, goldsmith and ogre!

But is there anything that contests this charge,  
the weapon or its bullet?

The Holy Roman Church or the nightingale?

That unfired shot crosses his work  
bending it into a double oxymoron,  
fantastic phantasm of violence  
and compassion, of blood and laurel.

# The driver

1

Don't ask me to tell you stories  
while I'm driving.  
This car is a needle threading  
its own story, which is ours,  
you in the eye, me pulling the point  
with clenched lips, overtaking  
along the broken line of the road's tacking.  
Don't make me lose the thread, don't let  
the stories move instead of you.

2

As I once again set out in my car  
he goes away from me as I go on  
watching him while I reverse.  
We are looking in the same direction,  
he straight in front,  
while I am drawn backwards again.  
But who is moving forward,  
you who move without seeing me, or me  
who moves away with my gaze set on you?  
Oh, undying death, my life  
is a departure, an electrolysis of me.

3

The driver's eye in the mirror  
comes and goes like a bee  
that wants to make honey  
in a beehive of glances.

from

**Didascalie per la lettura  
di un giornale**

*(Directions for reading  
a newspaper, 1999)*

---

## Titles

They are the thorns  
for tearing the wool,  
splinters for pulling off a jersey,  
the pretexts that attract  
the reader's textile  
attention, pitfalls,  
traps, while the eye  
has already fallen  
into the birdlime of the piece.

## The price

Inscribed on the pediment of a temple,  
it unwinds in *lire* and in the wide  
frieze of foreign currencies.  
Print for print, paper money  
is used to buy money-paper  
whose magical value expires in twenty-four hours  
when at midnight the brand new  
carriage of the latest turns back  
into a pumpkin, stale news,  
money out of circulation, waste paper,  
the carcass of the news,  
carrion stripped of its flesh.

## Stock exchange

The thousand pipes (the organ  
of listed securities)  
don't play for us,  
but rather for the faithful  
genuflecting in the Temple:  
the music of the spheres in the City  
—and the breath of death.  
The breath of death and of commodities,  
along the vast mountain range of crap  
Sisyphus is accumulating.



## Photography

It's the release that severs the umbilical cord  
of light. Those scissors sever  
the slow, long filament of  
the glance, intestine  
of nourishment; it separates  
so that the image can  
be born, dividing itself  
from its mother.  
And the shadow-pupa,  
the cocoon, is a basket  
left floating on water  
for the rescuing of form.

## Poetry

Poems should go on being reread;  
read, read again, read, be plugged in;  
each reading recharges them,  
they are devices for loading meaning;  
meanings accumulate there, the buzz  
of waiting particles,  
withheld sighs, ticking sounds,  
inside the Trojan Horse.

## Advertising banner

The phony reference to goods  
serves as a memento mori.  
Live your life anyway,  
but don't forget to remember  
we are in this world to buy, i.e.  
to hang around the money shark,  
that primitive creature which,  
because it has no  
autonomous means of breathing,  
must circle unceasingly  
in order to live,  
a fish-currency-dog.



from

**Il sangue amaro**  
*(The bitter blood, 2014)*

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# Christmas in Strasbourg, the city where Gutenberg was born

~ for Alessandro Zanella

*It prints quickly, the printer.*

~ A JARRY

Welcome to Good Mountain,  
Welcome to Gutenberg,  
the land where the press  
has no olives for pressing  
but has volumes to print.

These swarms of words that alight on pages  
are bees that give honey, worms that give bitterness.

Ink is flowing instead of oil,  
when the art of staining leaves  
impressions on paper  
like the brand on a calf,  
like the wash in a watercolour.

These black tattoos can be poetry  
or the dregs of the dregs, bureaucracy's dregs.

Welcome to Good Mountain,  
Welcome to Gutenberg,  
the city where the millstone  
doesn't have any wheat to grind  
but, rather, writing to be embodied.

## Mimicry

Why is it that voice and colour  
are so bound up in a parrot?  
Were such gaudy pens  
really necessary,  
for mimicking humans?  
Perhaps that rainbow of plumage,  
Stefano, is used to hide  
the blade of a fabulous tongue,  
like the knife in a swordstick,  
if it's true that hiding  
is the primary purpose of language.

## The incessant neuronal buzz

*The awareness of being conscious seems to have arisen through the integration of primary consciousness, symbolic memory and language. In this emergence, the central role might have been played by the mechanism of so-called 'feedback', namely the incessant buzzing in neuronal tissues of the synchronising between different brain maps.*

~ from an article in *Corriere della Sera*

The incessant neuronal buzz, I read,  
and immediately got what it meant.  
It's what I always hear, the chattering  
thalamus-cortex,  
an aviary of twittering,  
and the crying, crying, crying  
of millions of synapses  
waiting for the food that I carry,  
that I have to carry.  
They wait for thoughts, my thoughts,  
and they scuffle around  
when I leave the cage  
in a whirl of electrostatic impulses.



## English suites

*~ for Roland Barthes, master of solfège*

As a student, I went to meet him because of  
a dissertation, and instead all we did  
was chat about the scores I'd brought with me.  
He played Bach on the piano and the current  
of that 'stream' propelled him  
around whirlpools and bends.  
What is playing all about?

Blind obedience,  
a martial art: ascesis,  
and a background of sound that rises evenly,  
Always-evenly,  
in the obstinate hope,  
if not of alleviation,  
then of mild musical compensation.

## *Tombeau de Totò*

Totò's going blind because he's growing old.  
All that floppy fidgeting  
only to end in darkness.  
Moving by groping,  
a zigzagging in darkness.  
But the opposite is also true:  
Totò's growing old because of blindness.

I still remember him, how below my house  
he crossed the road at a funeral,  
between two wings of a madding crowd.  
And he played a game, disjointed, advancing in fits and starts,  
unseeing—and only now do I understand!  
Blind, old and mechanical,  
yet still as loaded as the steel spring of a dialect.

Until, having lost his eyesight, he loses language.  
In his last films, unable to follow the script,  
he was dubbed. This is the legend:  
first he goes blind, now he is mute  
in a film, his voice dubbed over  
by someone else.  
Totophonically blasphemous, on the threshold of shadow.

With his vision gone, his language lost,  
his bagatelle body goes down to the Tomb.

## Invective beneath an Etruscan tomb

*Mortal Latin...*

~ GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

Now everyone will speak the same way,  
the same language, which has replaced our own.  
They chased the alphabet around the fields,  
hunting it like a fugitive, like a thief,  
the alphabet of our fathers.

No one will understand us, and even among ourselves  
the old words won't be used anymore,  
those corroded, crumbling walls of our fortresses.  
All we have left are  
tombs, the ultimate shelter.

So I speak from here,  
a reclusive voice in the shadows  
among coloured shapes, but always as still  
as the last breath  
of our pronunciation.

(from the sequence *The bitter blood*)

Invisible and invincible  
is the mould that I carry inside myself,  
a template of the world moulded for me in the world  
and which makes me a part of the world  
but only in the form of print.

Where is freedom, if melancholy  
keeps gathering its clouds to no end?  
Here I am, enduring a slow passage,  
just waiting  
in the shadow of myself.

## The chemical wedding

These drops that I take  
with such religious compunction  
bear witness to  
my marriage with the world.

Thanks only to them I can tighten  
my bond of love with the world,  
because only with them can I bear the brunt  
of its unlimited hostility.

A magical helmet: my father never had one  
and died before he actually died,  
incredulous, helpless and indignant,  
beneath the blows of the world.

## On the sanguineous circuit

It's like in the circulatory system:  
the blood is always the same,  
but before it goes, it comes.

We call it hatred, but it's only suffering,  
the vein that returns  
the gift of the arteries at the start.

## Bitter Blood

There are those who bake bread.

I make Bitter Blood.

Some construct aluminium shapes.

I make Bitter Blood.

Some draw up plans for developing a business.

I make Bitter Blood.

I make my Blood Bitter.

And it's been a house specialty, ever since 1957.

## Notes on the translators

**Douglas Reid Skinner** was born in South Africa in 1949. In the early 1970s, he moved to London, then to New York and San Francisco, all the while working as a computer consultant. He returned to Cape Town in the mid-1980s, there founding The Carrefour Press, which specialised in publishing the English poetry of the region. He edited the literary journals *Upstream* and *New Contrast*, as well as starting and editing the *South African Literary Review*. He returned to the United Kingdom in the early 1990s, is married with a son and lives on the edge of London. He is co-editor of the poetry journal *Stanzas*.

Poetry:

*Reassembling World* (1981); *The House in Pella District* (1986); *The Unspoken* (1988); *The Middle Years* (1993); *Blue Rivers* (2011) and *Heaven: New & Selected Poems* (2014).

Translation:

*Approximations: Translations from Modern Hebrew Poetry* (1989) with Israel Ben Yosef; *24 Poems*, Marco Fazzini ('Hct! Press, San Francisco, 2014) translated from the Italian.



**Marco Fazzini** was born in Ascoli Piceno, Italy in 1962. He lives in Vicenza and is a lecturer at the University of Ca' Foscari, Venice, as well as a freelance critic and translator, foreign contributions editor for the literary journals *Ali* and *Il Tolomeo*, and a series editor for the publishing house Edizioni del Bradipo.

Poetry:

*Nel vortice* (1999); *XX poesie* (2007); *Driftings and Wrecks* (2010). *24 Poems* (2014) is a selected poems collection translated by Douglas Reid Skinner.

Translation:

*Il sonno dei mie leoni* (1992), poems translated from the work of Douglas Livingstone; *Poeti sudafricani del Novecento* (1994), an anthology of South African English poetry, translated and co-edited with Armando Pajalich; *Fading: poesie scelte 1950-1980* (1994), poems translated from the work of Philip Larkin; *L'equilibrista: poesie scelte 1955-1990* (1995), poems translated from the work of Norman MacCaig; *Per chi non è caduto: poesie scelte 1959-2006*, poems translated from the work of Geoffrey Hill (2008).

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**Valerio Magrelli** lives in Rome. He is Professor of French Literature at the University of Cassino and a regular commentator in a number of journals and Italian daily newspapers. He has published six collections of poems and a number of prose works. His poems have been translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Croatian and English.

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South African writer, editor and poet, **Douglas Reid Skinner** lives near the River Thames and has published six collections of poetry and two of translation. He is a small publisher, as well as co-editor of the South African literary journal, *Stanzas*.

**Marco Fazzini** lives in Vicenza. He is a lecturer at the University of Ca' Foscari, Venice, as well as a freelance critic and translator, and foreign contributions editor for the literary journals *Ali* and *Il Tolomeo*. He has published four collections of poetry and many books of translation.

# Valerio Magrelli

## The Secret Ambition

Selected poems

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Translated from the Italian  
and with a foreword by  
Douglas Reid Skinner  
& Marco Fazzini

A writer of restless enquiry and breadth of learning, Valerio Magrelli bids fair to be the most important poet of his generation in Italy, as witnessed by the critical attention that his work has received and the major prizes it has garnered.

*The Secret Ambition* presents a singular mind exploring the predicaments of being alive in a world mediated by language—by turns inquisitive, contemplative, philosophical, vexed, melancholic and witty. For him, all writing is a kind of translating, and playing with language is a serious occupation, a painstaking process of coming to understand writing through writing itself. These are poems that echo in the reader long after the reading.

*“ Magrelli easily manages...a task... essential for poetry: that of grasping the most hidden folds of the world and revealing them in a simple and heraldic order ”*

— ALESSANDRO FO

*“ His poetry is...a new combination of exactness and sentiment where the syllable measures its own dimension and reality ”*

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