

Valerio Magrelli

The Secret Ambition

selected poems translated by
Douglas Reid Skinner & Marco Fazzini



*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.

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selected poems

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been made possible by the generosity of

Mr David Cheyne



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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)*

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)

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.

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

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 ”

— BRUNO ARCURIO

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