

MAGRELLI'S WINTER JOURNEY

Valerio Magrelli. *Vanishing Points: Poems*, a bilingual edition, translated from the Italian by Jamie McKendrick. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2010.

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Jamie McKendrick was once asked in the question session after a reading in France, the homeland of *poésie pure*, why, given the impure-diction and narrative style of his poems, he didn't write short stories. Hugo Williams, who was reporting in the *TLS* on this tour of British poets *outré-manche*, did not record McKendrick's reply. The anecdote came back to me when pondering the elective affinity in his deciding to translated this ample selection from Valerio Magrelli's poetry, for the Italian poet, a university professor of French literature, has reported that his early influences included Paul Valéry and John Donne, and Magrelli's early poems, usually very short, are like nothing so much as the rarified metaphorical thought experiments, with highly-refined connections to sense experience of a non-quotidian kind, that appeared to be the default mode of post-Bonnfof francophone minimalism. Yet McKendrick's poetry isn't only made up of extended comic narratives such as "The One Star" about being mistaken for John Ashbery in the hotel lobby at a writers' conference. He can also write a pointedly economical lyric like "Sky Nails":

That first day, to break me in,
my hardened comrades
sent me scampering like a marmoset
from the topmost parapet

to the foreman's hut
for a bag of sky nails.
The foreman wondered which precise
shade of blue I had in mind.

It's still sky nails I need today
with their faint threads
and unbreakable heads

that will nail anything
to nothing
and make it stay.

With deft economy McKendrick transforms his workplace humiliation into a metaphor for the poetic art's capacity to make something that will "stay" (remain *and* sustain) out of an airy nothing. But that up-in-the-air, down-to-earth context with its class and cultural divisions forming the poem's implicit and still needy import has barely any equivalent in Magrelli.

This may be one reason why it's possible to feel that in some of the Italian's early poems, notwithstanding McKendrick's skill with the short-range intensive twist of such lyrics, the author of a collection called *The Marble Fly* (1997) is left lacking enough to work with when rendering untitled poems such as this from Magrelli's second book, *Nature e venature* (1987):

I should like one day
to be turned to marble,
to be stripped of nerves,
glistening tendons, veins.
Just to be airy enamel,
slaked lime, the striped
tunic of a wind
ground to a halt.

This poem, like a number of Magrelli's other short ones, invites the translator to attempt an additive verbal flourish at the close, which appears a tacit confession that the original's ending doesn't quite make a poem in English. Magrelli had written: "Soltanto malta aerea, nubilosa, / calce spenta, la tunica / striata da un vento / che non soffia." Here, I fear, the translator may not have quite caught what his original is picturing. This is perhaps the tunic of a classical sculpture that appears rippled by a wind, because of the shaped marble, which remains like that even when, as usually in museums, there is no wind blowing. The poem's second sentence might be more closely rendered as:

Only cloudy, airy mortar,
slaked lime, the tunic
rippled by a wind
not blowing.

McKendrick seems to have translated "smalto" for "malta", "enamel" instead of "mortar," and made sense of his original by taking "striata" to mean "striped" like a French sailor's jersey, placing it, English-fashion, as an adjective before the noun, and then adapting the grammar by substituting a "di" (of) for a "da" (by). He then poeticizes his close by coming up with the "ground to a halt" image, like a motivation for wanting to be turned into

marble, wanting to come to a stop, to step away from change and become a solid object; but it does add to its original something not there, and more or less fails to catch what its original imagines. Yet it is in the nature of translation, like the performance of scored music, for others to come and offer a different interpretation. What perhaps makes this small instance unfortunate is that McKendrick's aim in translating Magrelli's poetry seems, as here, one of rendering faithfully his originals, even when that commitment to fidelity has compelled him to adapt other means for saying much the same thing. It is also particularly difficult to do this with very short poems, because there are so few syntactic and semantic moves within which to work.

McKendrick finds himself on far more congenial ground when, in Magrelli's third collection *Esercizi di tiptologia* (Mondadori, 1992), the poet branches out into much longer narrative and commentary poems, with a wider reach in their thematic materials, their social and geographical space, and their cultural implications. At the heart of this book, and Magrelli's entire achievement, lies a series of seven poems, given a section of their own called "Viaggio d'inverno", a title with the Schubert *Winterreise* song-cycle behind it. McKendrick translates six of the seven in *Vanishing Points*, and notes that the first poem of Magrelli's he attempted to translate was the last of the group, "The Embrace", which provides the title to the Faber & Faber monolingual edition (awarded two translation prizes in the UK). This is a pity, not least because the one he leaves out is the first. The form of McKendrick's book, a selection from Magrelli's five published volumes to date, does not permit him to preserve the section divisions of these original collections, so the title "Viaggio d'inverno" ("Winter Journey") also disappears. In McKendrick's defense, it might be noted that the extent to which this is a sequence of poems remains ambiguous. I think of it as one not least because when the first five parts appeared in the magazine *Poesia* in 1990, each had a roman numeral followed by a title. So, whether a sequence, or series, or looser grouping, here is the first of them in my translation:

Each in turn carries his birthday,
 the day where his own
 age dies. In January,
 mine, the season's
 gateway, when
 I carry the corpse to the pass,
 to the year's needle-eye,
 noose and strait, angina
 that distances me from my blood
 leaving me ice-box
 in charge of the freeze.

The theme of the series is caught in the double implication of “his own / age dies”, where the “age” may refer both to his number of years on earth and to the period in which he has lived. The poem’s freeze then points to his January birthday through which he passes to warmer parts of the year—and to the end of the Cold War, through which we were passing at the time these poems were composed. Magrelli was in his early thirties at the end of the 1980s, already a distinguished poet with two well-received collections behind him. The book’s *tiptologia* refers to a means of communication by tapping that prisoners use to speak through cell walls and, by metaphoric extension, the typewriting or keyboarding I’m doing now. With this volume Magrelli took leave of his earlier minimalist mode to take on narrative-like poems, prose-poems, poems with interlocutors, ones much more drawn to the interrelations of sound than sight, the principle sense-organ in his earlier volumes—the first of which indicated as much with its Latin title, *Ora serrata retinae* (1980).

The poet’s development was signaled for me, as I say, by the publication of “Viaggio d’inverno” in its five-part magazine form. I liked the way the series develops from the first lyric, not unlike an exercise in the poet’s earlier manner, to the second in the series, “Heligoland,” about the fate of this island in the North Sea that had been a highly fortified German naval base, its defences destroyed after the end of World War Two by bombs from the RAF. Yet Magrelli, writing a tourist-poem, finds that even these efforts were not enough to efface that threatening past, and McKendrick again finesses his version by rendering his original’s sequence of present tense verbs, such as the first “si arresta,” with past-tenses and one more “ground to a halt:”

But the plan ground to a halt, and where explosives failed,
 tourism succeeded. And here they are—the standard string
 of duty-free shops, the island market,
 worm-eaten, sand-blasted and manhandled into
 the shape of a chair that limps, a spent projectile aka
 SHELL CASE,
 a dented disc left to float
 among the thousand medal-souvenirs.

There is more material, history and commentary in these lines than all of his earlier books, and the effect is multiplied in the following poems that take us to Finland in an epigraph from Joseph Brodsky in “They Speak,” then a poem about the Trabant (the eastern bloc people’s car as the Warsaw Pact counties fell to the charms of consumerism), and a wild goose chase of a search for Porta Westfalica, a town in the district of Minden-Lübbecke.

This poem most effectively brings together its end of the Cold War theme with the poet's own existential condition in the closing image of his taxi's meter running:

Nothing. And wandering in the forest, I think
of the driver who waits and frets,
of the driver who waits and frets
and takes this opportunity to clean the car windows
while with a chittering sound
under the dashboard the meter runs on
like a brook, the propeller of money,
dike, conduit, outlet, opened lock, aorta,
hemorrhage of time and mitral valve,
Porta Westfalica of my life.

In "A Note on the Translation", McKendrick tells us "The first poem of Magrelli's that I read, some ten years ago, was 'L'abbraccio' ('The Embrace'). My immediate response was such a turbulent mixture of recognition, awe, and envy that the only way I could still the chaos was to see if I could write it in English. Besides, I was intensely curious to discover whether what I admired so much in it might survive the passage." Poet-translators, the ones most prone to envy-motivation, are equally those most vulnerable to damage-transfer from the self to the translated poem, being at their best when envy of the original's success is transformed into a jealous concern for the fidelity of its appearance in another language. McKendrick's conclusion to this poem, as in "Porta Westfalica," does not feel compelled to invent a concluding flourish, recognizing that the original contains all that is needed in its reflection on the double embrace of the couple in bed with the present winter moment and the primordial past via their apartment's heating system:

Wreathed in a dark halo of oil,
the bedroom is a close nest
heated by organic deposits,
by log pyres, leafmash, seething resins...
And we are the wicks, the two tongues
flickering on that single Paleozoic torch.

Magrelli's early work represents the poetry of a young solitary, a literary person cultivating his sensibility almost in a vacuum, while the poet of "Viaggio d'inverno," his entire middle collection and the two following, is a poet who has sought to place this sensibility within a life lived in relation

to others, just as, at the end of the Cold War, the western European countries had to find, and must continue to find, ways of living with their old supposed enemies, their new neighbours, friends, and allies. The poet's two most recent books, *Didascalie per la lettura di un giornale* (1999) and *Disturbi del sistema binario* (2006), seem like poetry's equivalent of the concept album—and can at moments, not so much despite but because of the poet's metaphor-mongering skills, feel a little willed, as if Magrelli were bending his talent to fit the set task. There are well-turned poems in both books, such as “The Interview,” “To Let: Unfurnished,” “Who Looks the Other Way” and “Goodbye to Language,” ones expressive of the poet's attention to the passing minutiae of his times, as they stimulate both his poetic imagination and cultural critical faculty, for these last two books in particular might be variations on a line of Vittorio Sereni's from “In Sleep:” “I don't like my times, I don't like them.”

Indeed Magrelli's work, like that of many a fine poet, reads as profoundly out of sympathy with the changes he is living through; yet he has steeled himself and his work to keep up with its unpredicted and unpredictable unfolding. McKendrick notes this in his introduction by listing some of his poet's “subjects as various as hijackings, radioactive contamination, dinosaur toys, sheep cloning, recycling, graffiti, skateboarding, and environmental destruction.” Yet his work embodies the paradox of radically modernizing poetry since Baudelaire, namely that it is done best by the poets who are least at home in their moment. McKendrick's contemporary English, which makes a point of catching onto the latest street idiom, goes a good way to imitating this bang-up-to-date aspect of Magrelli's verse, but he is perhaps a little less squeamish about this impure diction than his original, rather less a poet who had gone to school with French philosophical and linguistic refinement.

Yet this is not a fault. When a poet of Magrelli's quality is lucky enough to attract the creative attention of a poet as good as McKendrick there will inevitably be some tension or friction between the original's idiolect and the idiolect of the renderings. That friction too is part of the condition of poetic translation, and *Vanishing Points* is as good a place as any to study and enjoy the meeting within a single volume of two such sensibilities.