

# A BEEHIVE OF GLANCES: VALERIO MAGRELLI, THE TRANSLATION OF POETRY AND THE POETRY OF TRANSLATION

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## **Sommario**

*Quest'articolo non si propone di valutare la traduzione delle poesie di Valerio Magrelli, che sono invece punto di partenza, insieme all'interesse stesso del poeta nei confronti della traduzione, per una riflessione della traduzione quale modo poetico. È sintomatico il fatto che la più recente traduzione di Magrelli – opera di grande impegno poetico, conversazione lirica, una sorta di ritorno alla poesia – sia apparsa in Sudafrica nel 2015: da un lato testimonia il crescente riconoscimento del poeta a livello internazionale, dall'altro rappresenta un momento importante nell'intersezione culturale Italia-Sudafrica. La focalizzazione su quattro immagini ricorrenti nella produzione magrelliana – le api, il vetro, gli sguardi e la geometria – apre una discussione sulle difficoltà e sulla possibilità del discorso poetico, che nei testi di Magrelli si rivela quale “utterance” nella traduzione.*

**Keywords:** Valerio Magrelli – translation – poetry

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

Magrelli, “The driver” (Skinner & Fazzini, 2015:66)

(L'occhio del guidatore allo specchietto  
Come un'ape va e viene

Che voglia fare il miele  
in un alveare di sguardi.  
“L'autista”)

The highly idiosyncratic South African classicist of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, T.J. Haarhoff, reminds us that Varro called bees “the birds of the muses”. “Pindar tells us that the prophetess of Delphi, who gave oracular responses, was called the Delphic Bee”; and “Cicero says that bees settled on the lips of the infant Plato” (Haarhoff, 1960:155). He also cites Shelley’s translation of Plato, to the effect that “the souls of poets [...] have this peculiar ministration in the world [...] flying like bees from flower to flower and wandering over the gardens [...]” (Haarhoff, 1960:155). Plato’s metaphor, of course, anticipates Horace’s own species of translation in the fourth book of his Odes:

ego apis Matinae  
more modoque  
grata carpentis thyma per laborem  
plurimum circa nemus uvidique  
Tiburis ripas operosa parvus  
carmina fingo (Carm. 4, 2)

(Io, come suole  
Ape matina  
Che i cari timi al bosco ed alle sponde  
Dell’acquidoso Tivoli con molto  
Studio raccoglie, industriosi carmi  
Piccolo ordisco.) (Rapisardi, 1897)

(I who resemble more  
The small laborious bee from Mount Matinus  
Gathering from Tibur’s rivery environs  
The thyme it loves, find it as hard to build up  
Poems as honeycombs.) (Michie, 1964)

The human fascination with bees doesn't end there, in the ancient association of bees with poets (indeed, Haarhoff tacks on to his article on antiquity's interest a characteristically bizarre footnote in which he shows how most of this folklore is recognised by "a Zulu wise man, Laduma Madela", including the notion that the bee "confers wisdom and eloquence" (Haarhoff, 1960:170). Leopardi recurs many times to bees as a concordant or discordant exemplar of social existence, and Virgil, of course, is fond of them in the fourth book of his *Georgics* at least superficially as an agricultural and biological diversion.

But the cumulative effect of all this interest is a kind of buzz itself, a murmur among the poets and philosophers, all trading the metaphor, directly or indirectly, out of the fields they harvest for the honey they bring. That seems the sum of it, and it pulls the epigraph by Valerio Magrelli above into focus. Construing the hum enables us to reason pretty logically that the driver is the poet, the mirror is the project or hope of art (constrained by retrospect and the limited frame of human insight), honey is poetry, humanity is a beehive. And so we construe, more speculatively, that glances are nectar, or pollen, and somehow like language, and language therefore somehow the field, or the flowers of the field. But *glances*? And *language*, not life, the field of poetry, and thus form, not content – or thus form *the* content?

Suddenly things are novel and strange, and we know we are dealing with a poet of novelty and strangeness, scholarly, informed – original and important.

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Because poetry happens on the edge of human experience, which is to say at the limits of language, it is more readily susceptible of admitting the obvious: that language is imperfect and contingent, a ceaseless accretion of approximations.

Language (or the orthographic pretensions of ideology writ in language) likes to dazzle us into a belief that it is true, not only *to* the

world (faithful, accurate), but *of* the world (that words in here in things, things in words) – so true, that is, as to be of the same reality it represents<sup>1</sup>. Poetry is implicated in that dazzling, but is also so contrived or absurd as an utterance that it can never quite shake off its plasticity<sup>2</sup>. Nobody really speaks in such snipped threads. We do not normally trade plain-speaking for beautiful obscurities, as it were bread for the tongue of a lark. It is obsessive-compulsive to want sonic patterns to constrain the simple sense of things. To want to so *sculpt* language – *to make more of a thing of it* – belongs to those who see that it *is* a thing. It belongs to those who see that its philosophical purport is extraordinary: the unauthored artefact.

Poetry is ever an approximation, like all language, but more so. It is language's work in progress. Explicitly (sometimes) or implicitly (always, and to a high degree), language is the first and universal subject of poetry. Magrelli's four lines move within the compass of this insight, or belief. They are very contemporary in doing so, given the "linguistic turn" of the past century, but not altogether. It would be hard to find a significant poet anywhere or at any time who did not look up from the page to the world, and back from the world to the page, with some sense of the same. Leopardi is directly concerned with it: "Words, which in themselves are mere sounds, and entire

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship of language to ideology has a long history of theory; I am (like much of that history) following Althusser here, particularly in the apprehension that ideology obfuscates itself. Nowhere is this plainer (and yet more invisible) than in language, where the seamlessness and transparency of the representational system (language) works to absent language (the engine of the apparent) from the reality that so seems not to appear but to *be* (Althusser, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Confronting the *lapse* of poetry as an agent in language's self-obfuscation entails wondering a bit about why the genre arises, if it so unsettles the foundations of the glass castle that is language's edifice of truth. Conspicuously I am arguing that the impulse to poetry arises in celebrating the humanity of language itself (as opposed to what we tend to see: poetry as the celebratory language of our humanity). But I think it useful also to consider poetry arising at, and being itself, a site of contradiction, fraught (so often) with the unspeakable in our lives and world. Lacan derives for us the notion of the "subject in crisis"; might we not consider poetry as a speech-cousin of that person(hood), the "subject *is* crisis"? (Lacan, 1966).

languages, too, are only signs for ideas to serve and signify them insofar as men mutually agree to apply them to a given idea and to recognize them as signs for it.” (Leopardi, (Z1202) 2013:574) (“Le parole che per se stesse sono meri suoni, e così le lingue intere, in tanto sono segni delle idée, e servono alla loro significazione, in quanto gli uomini convengono scambievolmente di applicarle a tale e tale idea, e riconoscerle per signi di essa” (Leopardi, 1973:809)). What sounds more like the world after Saussure than this?

But Magrelli’s lines only make this sort of sense if we allow glances as a sort of language. To do so is not impossible; indeed, as a mode of what we call “body language” it seems even necessary. But glances carry both the limitation of imprecision and the extreme liberty of an in-finite signification. There is no dictionary of glances. Moreover, and more to the point here, glances exemplify that dialogical nature of language so central to the insights of Bakhtin and Voloshinov – that is, the kind of glances evoked in Magrelli’s image, glances exchanged between people, whether consensually, accidentally, or by modes of plunder or coercion. Glances only signify together, and we (here that co-optive pronoun, by which writer and reader are conjoined, is appropriate because exemplary) – we will come back to that.

Between us, in the glance, lies a fumbling translation out of and into two language mutually private and exclusive. The interlocutors in a glance must exchange not only information they “cannot help”, but also something like their own signature, accent, and metamorphic lexicon. It is all this that make the exchange – the utterance – so bee-like. It’s an exchange like “bumping into” (as bees do), followed by a physical comportment (a dance), a “chemistry” (pheromones), recognitions and reactions, implicit with the paradox and gamble of sweetness and venom.

Translation, like the poet in the rear-view mirror, must catch the eye, not so much of the reader as of the poem. But it must also ensure

that its own eye is caught by the glance of the text. It must catch the glance; it must dance; it must build a hive.

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For some time now, Valerio Magrelli has been established to the English-reading world as “the coming thing” in Italian poetry. Just as Auden, say, once book-ended the anthologies reporting on English poetry before the war, with a voice still announcing itself, but strong enough to push back against Chaucer or Hopkins and contain all the poets in between, so we find Magrelli closing the *Faber Book of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Poems* (2004). This places Magrelli squarely as the inheritor of a vigorous century of Italian poetry, carrying its genes and its burdens, accounted for by it and accountable to it – but it also tips him as the founding father of the Italian 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Now into its second decade, the outset of that 21<sup>st</sup> century continues, in the English ear-out for Italian poetry, to seem Magrelli’s prerogative. The editor of Faber’s Italian retrospective, Jamie McKendrick, has gone on to produce a standard-setting monograph translation in 2010, available on both sides of the Atlantic. *Poetry*, the pre-eminent English-language magazine, has taken Magrelli poems by other translators, and the standard English-language websites for poetry routinely feature the poet and the poetry. Most recently, a highly impressive selection has been translated collaboratively by the South African poet, Douglas Reid Skinner, and the Italian poet and scholar, Marco Fazzini, last year. Published in South Africa, and following so closely upon the heels of McKendrick’s *Vanishing Point*, Skinner and Fazzini’s *Secret Ambition* surely culminates the felt eminence of Magrelli in the English-language reception of contemporary Italian poetry; the southerly provenance of their book, and its proximity to “metropolitan” editions must now exemplify the global reach and temporal urgency accorded to Magrelli, and make

him – or make a case for his being – the successor to Montale in English’s overhearing of Italian poetry.

Magrelli and Montale are very different poets, but it must be said that they share a good deal in common too. Both their poetries are characterised by wry irony (more wry in Magrelli) and a whiff of gnosis. There is in both a dependence upon imagery whose density and detail drag every metaphor to the frontier of the symbol. Indeed, this compression of the image – image into metaphor, metaphor into (almost) symbol – is now habitual across most Italian poetry, at least of the sort received as canonical in the English reception of it. It is the proximate legacy of Leopardi and the remote legacy of Dante, obviously. This lapidary imagism (not quite symbol but becoming so), or this poetry of the numinous sign, makes for difficult reading and treacherous translation. How does one translate a sign whose project is not to signify a thing or action so much as to signify its own signifying, not its significance but the mystery of becoming significant? In other words, how does one translate translation? Would this not be true for all poetry? Does it perhaps make the translation of poetry that much *easier*, by implying that poetry itself is a kind of language prior to Babel, a source always and everywhere still supplying our heteroglot reservoirs?

Read in English (which is also to say in Italian as an English-speaker), the strategy of the “Italian image” in this and the previous century works well to effect a momentary occlusion of reason – like a small, verbal ischemic event – and then a startling spray of cognitive sparks, like a welder’s torch or an exploding fusebox. We read the poem with the cleared head of the first effect, and with the attentive urgency and thrill of the second. Immediately, however, the problem of translation arises. With strategies as hazardous as these, it is difficult for an English translator, translation, or audience, to get much closer than an awe-struck spectator. It’s just as difficult for an English-speaker to raise a critical eyebrow at the presence of cholesterol in the bloodstream of the poem, at brittle vessels, at

perilous electrical wiring. We wonder if the Italian reader also reads the poem through the smoke after the wiring-fire, or whether this once again the signature of alienation in an English (or French, or any) reading. Perhaps it is the gnomic, symbol-hankering image that is our obstacle. Certainly in translation the density of the Italian image, its gravitational force, its clot of intertexts, make for obstacles in the reading. No eel swims but through Montale, no broom grows but on the hillside of Leopardi, no tree stands but is leant on by Ungaretti.

Magrelli succeeds Montale, akin, but his poetry is more austere and direct<sup>3</sup>. There remains that dense compression, but it is not exercised to confusion (in the best sense of the word). The orphic in Magrelli is blent with light – not the spectacular light of the world, but a kind of platonic light, the *lucidis ordo*, that makes him at once accessible and reasonable. He drags poetry out of the province of oracular unreason and into the conducive light of philosophy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find a poetry fascinated by neurology, the science of consciousness, photography, pharmacology, the circulatory system, machines – and engaged with philosophy directly (and with authors across a dozen or more languages). Baroque modernism has yielded to something lucid, lean, wry and detached. Its closest correlative in European poetry would seem to be the work of those Eastern Bloc writers whose historically enforced irony discovered a republic of language and mind. This is exactly the sort that fixates Magrelli, and which he finds in the hive of glances exchanged in the mirror, even as he is driving through the landscape of the “real”.

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<sup>3</sup> Intriguingly, Magrelli seems closest to Montale when one reads Montale in the translations of another South African, the poet Patrick Cullinan, who most reveres the elder Italian when he is plain and direct (Cullinan, 1994). Cullinan’s translations go after that lucidity and offer the bluntest attributes of English (consonant-stopped single-syllable words, for example) to its amplification. In his lifetime, Cullinan was a friend of Skinner’s, and one feels a certain correspondence in *The Secret Ambition*. As another instance of the binocular effect of translation this is valuable. That two such spectacular translations should arise in this kind of concert in one apparently remote southern polity is exceptional enough to warrant scrutiny.

Indeed, there is a kind of “driving” in the experience of reading Magrelli, or a sensation of overflight. It is akin to the slightly dreamy power in experiencing the manipulable geometry of a plan or landscape on a computer screen. To refine that further, there is a mode of *enabled participation* in Magrelli’s poetry, and its correlative feeling tone is that of navigating, by “flying” in fits and starts, with the power of prescience, on Google Earth. The four lines from Magrelli that head this paper recapitulate much of this readerly sensation. They suggest also that it comes close to the modus of the poet himself as a kind of driver. Specifically, they evoke a driver who regards the world at speed, but in the spy’s retrospect of the rear-view mirror, where all is flattened to the planar geometry of a glass visor. There, the world that would be viewed is rendered as through a glass darkly by the entangling glances of passengers making eye-contact through the same planar portal. They (we) communicate primitively, but efficiently, in the proto-language of the glance, whose vocabulary is as mysterious, numerous and rumourous as the parliamentary dance of the beehive.

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We call the person who translates for another verbally and in situ “an interpreter”; their job is to hazard a closely literal, yet idiomatic, transposition of the speech of one person into the language of another, and as fast as possible. I have a friend who interprets and who says that the linguistic facility is natural to most interpreters, who are at least bilingual, and that the defining skill of a simultaneous interpreter is rather the massive effort of self-effacement, a skilled action – an acting – of self-dispossession, of un-becoming, so that you are no more than a disembodied voice. To some who translate, and where “translate” means to transpose the written (rather than the spoken) text from one language into another, the idiomatically literal aspiration of the effaced interpreter is the desired object; clearly, if

you are translating the law of a country or the home-page of a bed-and-breakfast then this makes sense. But poetry has never prospered by such an approach, and those who undertake it in this mode usually signal the limitations of their project by translating into prose, as a “gloss”, reading for the gist of things.

In fact, the translation of poetry has always gone to that other sense of the word “interpretation”, and found there both its difficulty and its enthusiasm. Indeed, among translators of the written text, the translator of the poem is properly its interpreter as well as its transposer. Some of that interpreting has to do with evincing the immediacy of an utterance (poetry) whose oral origin always lies close to the surface of the written. More has to do with the myriad critical and analytic decisions that have to be taken to retain the highly polysemous language of the genre, its nuance and evasions, hints and feints, quite as much as its thumping deliberate ambiguities. Most especially the “interpretation” needs to carry over the musical signature of the original, because poetry is more a kind of music than a gnomic prose. In this regard other poets make the best interpreters, because they are this kind of musician; many an excellent linguist and philologist just has a tin ear. The greatest problem with the musical interpretation – and therefore the greatest problem in the translation of poetry – is that while the sense of the words of one language can always be carried over to a fairly high degree, yet the music often cannot be conveyed at all, or, if it can, loses its consonant or dissonant relation to the words from which is now no longer emanates. The best a translator-poet can do is to fix upon a music in the destination language and bring that out of the words in which they render their translation, *and* to hope to retain a scrap of the original sound of the poem, or to weave that sound into the music of the destination text, as a theme or grace-note.

The problems of the translator of poetry must be most profoundly problems of ear, or they don't properly understand poetry at all. But the fact remains that they work on paper, from paper to paper, and

that the organ of sense by which the process is undertaken is the eye. Textual translation begins as a mode of looking, of which fact, and of which nature, we should *not lose sight*. To someone like Magrelli, fascinated to the point of preoccupation with the one great remaining mystery of consciousness, and the conversion of sensation into increasingly complex renditions of neurochemistry until a kind of culmination in cognition (and then the cognition of cognition, the knowledge of awareness, the ability of deliberate memory, fantasy, *imagination*) – to someone like Magrelli the phenomenon of consciousness is itself a complex, infinite and minute translation. And a poem.

For poetry, too, needs to be reckoned a translation *within* the resources of its own language. “To put it another way”, we say in English, or “in altre parole”, or “vale a dire” in Italian, not only when we want to make ourselves clearer, but also for emphasis, or nuance, or to freight what we say with extra meaning, or – not least – for rhetorical flourish. Poetry is that province of language where things are always being “put another way” in order to find better or newer or more apposite or undiscovered ways of saying what is, or is not, known. We should entertain this too: that as much as poetry might be informed by a correspondence with translation, so should poetry enlighten our understanding of translation.

The point is this. Ordinarily we judge of a translation by its fidelity to the original poem. But the translation of the poem is an act of interpretation, and of critical and analytical interpretation, in which the poem is not looked at but *looked into*. Translation pushes against the poem quite as much as it facilitates its movement, and it brings the poem most conspicuously into the dialogical theatre of the utterance as Bakhtin and Voloshinov construe it<sup>4</sup>. If poetry as our mode of

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<sup>4</sup> It should be said that Bakhtin’s sense of poetry, in particular, was different to that I am espousing in this essay, nor would he have much subscribed to the manner in which I am conscripting his thought to my ends here – but that is the tax upon original theory of genius.

“difficult speech” is held best equipped to speak of life’s difficult things or of the difficulties of knowing, then the appropriate interlocution is translation. This doesn’t mean that poems are best read by foreigners, but that the mode of reading a poem is always, within as much as without a language, a translation, and that we can best learn from translation how we do and how we should read poetry. Similarly, the poet works in the language of the poem with the same problems that confront his or her translator, and the best poet is that one most able to undertake the self-dissolution of the interpreter.

Magrelli supplies us with a perfect key to much of what I have been arguing above. In the epigraph to this essay we encounter just one of Magrelli’s invocations of the glance – or the look. The Italian “sguardo” poses both a difficulty and an opportunity to the translator, operating variously, like the noun “look” in English, to reach back into the sense of the drawn-out look of the gaze and forward into the rapid subliminal look of the glance. Indeed, Magrelli’s “Ho spesso immaginato che gli sguardi” has the “sguardi” translated as “gazes” by Adam Palumbo (*In Translation*, 2012), while Skinner and Fazzini, as well as Dana Gioia in *Poetry* (1989), go with the surely better “glances”. It is the latter, in any case, that more engage Magrelli, because the glance is a mode of looking more often supplied between people, as an exchange in a kind of proto-language, than other kinds of look. The glance also comports with those tics, the “gestures that go astray” (McKendrick, 2004:159), which form part of the “incessant neuronal buzz” (Skinner & Fazzini, 2015:78) that is another of Magrelli’s central preoccupations (his original is directly translated: “l’incessante brusio neuronale”). This is – like the tic – a kind of hapless activity, the vocalisations of a Tourettes subject, *which cannot be helped*. This is all the more interesting because glances both receive and give information, they ask and assert and imply and check

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For a sense of his criticism of poetry as a more rigid discourse or genre, see his “Discourse of the Novel” (Bakhtin, 1981:269-434).

and apprise and doubt and fail and drop and gloat and share and conscript. Some, we say, are “knowing”, but all aim at that. In all of this they are wholly of the province of poetry, because they happen on the frontier, the circumference, of the being circumscribed by ordinary language and they happen there because the occasion disallows ordinary speech, whether for simple reasons of haste or complex reasons of social propriety. In this they are urgent and fugitive. Poetry, too, occupies this liminal or limital circumference, struggling there to speak of what lies beyond, or from there – the vantage of there – of what lies within. Poetry and glances, both, come as tangents to that circumference.

But to become a kind of speech, glances must *tangle*. They don't communicate finitely and by a finite signification. They only work by conscripting the interlocutor – the co-glancer to some part in the work of meaning. Speech involves a speaker's mouth and a listener's ear, there need be no collusion of the same sense organ in each, but glances involve the eyes of both parties, and who is initiating and who is receiving the glance is not always clear. (The equivalent oral correspondence is kissing, whose intimacy and intensity, whose polysemy, and whose character of hazard are instructive.) The entangled glance is like poetry as Magrelli sees it: some part of the poem is solicited by the reader's glancing at it. In that space and moment the poem “looks” different, and changes the landscape through which the author is driving the poem, takes the directive “guiding” (“guidare”) eye off the road, and submits it to the hazards of flirtation, anxiety, or even unintelligibility in the (both compromised and renovated Aristotelian) mirror.

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Magrelli brings these matters to head of sorts in his little poem “Ogni volto fotografato”, where the interaction of two glances is given (in Gioia) as “the burning touch / between two glances” (1989:158) or (in

Skinner & Fazzini) as “the flagrant contact / between two glances” (2015:40). Magrelli’s line runs “nelcontatto flagrante tra due sguardi”, and so the Skinner-Fazzini translation is closer to the Italian, rightly discerning its strategies of deferral and euphemism. It holds with Magrelli’s always thoughtful somatic approaches. Typically, here, the word “flagrant” is deeply freighted, carrying a more arousing implication of conflagration, with that latency and pregnancy so characteristic of the glance. It exchanges its own glance with the word “contact”, which word also takes us to a more linguistic, platonic sort of encounter, less obviously the sensory abuttal of touch. All of this might describe the entanglement of the Italian and the English poems, or of Skinner’s glance with Fazzini’s, or vice versa.

Earlier in the poem Magrelli anticipates this kind of contact in the idea of the tangent: “il punto di tangenza”. Skinner and Fazzini render this as “the tangential point” (2015:40), Gioia as “the point of tangency” (1989:158) – the latter now better, because “tangency” is the unusual word, fumbly, unanticipated, sounding “dance-y” and “tangly”, “plangent” and above all “chancy” and “glancy”, and so it more richly embodies the adjacency of the tangent. By contrast, “tangential”, carries really only the mathematical and established figurative meanings. Moreover, Gioia’s version shifts the image towards the active, with “tangency” figuring as the event of abuttal contact, and away from the adjectival “tangential”, which modifies only the point in space. So Gioia conflates the spatial point (at which the tangent is drawn) to the moment in which the tangent *happens* by the drawing together. In this way it historicises and humanizes that characteristically Magrellian geometry. The difference between the two translations – and this is important – *points up* this shift in the sense, or rather the enacted poeisis, of the phrase, and is in this way makes the translation not a servant of the poem, but a collaborator in an enriched *poeisis*.

Setting the two versions alongside each other establishes the dialectic by which something more than the preferable version might

determined. The dialectal reading – the trans-translation – allows us to see the practice as a cross-reading or cross-translation, and it is probably only in setting both versions before ourselves, to force to the surface the dialogical nature of the utterance, that we are better empowered to see, feel, hear what is – or might be – really going on in the words. Almost certainly this must be true for the poet himself, hypothetically brought to “the point of tangency” with his own words, and having there the privilege of hearing himself as he is heard.

The difference is intriguing also because in another poem we find Skinner and Fazzini differing from McKendrick in almost exactly the same way. This time – in “Qual è la sinistra della parola” (Skinner & Fazzini: “Which is the left side of a word”, but “The Vanishing Point” as McKendrick titles both the poem and, subsequently, his book in England) – we find McKendrick staying with “the vanishing point” (2004:160) for his last line, while Skinner and Fazzini render it as “the point of vanishing” (2015:52). Magrelli’s concluding line in the original reads “al punto che la fugge”. In this instance Skinner and Fazzini now secure that more active sense which Gioia found in “the point of tangency”, as well as the embedded metaphysical ambiguity (in the sense of the *purpose* of vanishing or of tangents happening).

Such ceaseless quibbling, hemming and hawing, over the Solomonic conundrums of the translator – obligations to accuracy versus obligations to opportunity, retrospects and prospects – are always with us in our everyday lives. Magrelli is supremely the poet of this knowledge, but his translators point this up by diverging (as a line does from the circle once the tangency passes) precisely over these points of their respective contact with the poems. Take, for example, the preceding poem once more. In Magrelli’s original the poem is untitled, which is to say that it defaults to its incipit. In the Faber anthology McKendrick chooses instead to offer a title from the last line of the poem, and one which seems to me to deaden the effect of the first line, by implying an answer, the way titles do. Not that “The Vanishing Point” would make a very useful answer in itself,

except perhaps in a lesson on perspective, yet by being a title it works to imply a *closure* in the vanishing where, instead, a kind of widening-out seems entailed. Relatedly, should translation close the gap between languages, or widen it out?

We find the same problem (or possibility) exemplified in the first/title line itself, which Skinner-Fazzini and McKendrick also translate differently:

Which is the left side of a word (Skinner-Fazzini, 2015:52)

Which is the lefthand side of the word (McKendrick, 2004:159).

Each has its merits, and despite the evaluative comments made along the way, this is not an essay in preference for its own sake. The Skinner-Fazzini here works to worry me more, with its greater degree of indeterminacy – there are no hands on the body of the thought, with which to grope for an answer, and the indefinite article likewise offers no purchase. Their version also carries the residual ambiguity in the word “left” – i.e. not the orientation in space, but the residuum, the residual, the remaining, the neglected, the avoided, or the abandoned. But just as this sparse line tends upon a lean translation all through Skinner and Fazzini’s book, so McKendrick’s more fulfilling line, with its slightly more comfy philosophical complacency (you can imagine his version spoken by a professor, whereas the Skinner-Fazzini version belongs to the terrifying questions of children) continues in a translation which, sounding more sure of itself, perhaps allows the poem to speak answers as well as ask questions. But there is also this: Skinner and Fazzini have a version which disembodies the question and disarms the reader. No left hand: nobody. Gone is Magrelli’s own sometimes cosy familiarity with things like quantum theory, with the slightly dippy inflection that the New Scientist puts on these things, and gone is the don (which at Cassino he is). Theirs is a “left” without a hand to remind it, and not necessarily with a right either. It also happens to be that little bit

closer to the literal Italian, and a little further away from the idiom. What does this all add up to? It would seem that it makes us look again for an information which it is the purpose of the poem to confound in a “vanishing”. The less information we have, so the more glancing our look can only be.

Translation, then, is a matter of relation – of relative truths and relative readings in many directions. Texts lie at a tangent to one another and to their moments, and the translation happens in (more than at) the tangent. It takes place (as the spatial phrase renders the temporal even) not in the enclosed circle of the ur-text nor in the line bringing the tangent, but at the event of adjacency. Translation is as when an entity is struck a *glancing* blow. So, in “Una scissura”, Magrelli argues “divide me in due versanti”, it divides me into two sides. Skinner and Fazzini take this third line, work it to the top of the poem, alter the subject, and make it their title: “I am divided into two sides” (Skinner & Fazzini, 2015:48). It’s a good translation, for all its changes, because it amplifies the famous forked nature of human being, our bifurcation, and does so within the compass of the typically Magrellian view, as also a kind of bisection, or something less drastic, a proof of the self that is accomplished by the angle of a line cutting through, or to, or tending upon. This, the translation concludes, describes “the inclination / and slope of the soul” (“dell’inclinazione / e della pendenza dell’anima”). So, too, we find transects and tangents, all manner of ocular forays and raids throughout Magrelli’s vision, in photographs, films, mirrors, rear-view mirrors, and x-rays, and each one enriches also our sense of translation, and of translation’s part in poetry.

Here by way of conclusion is Skinner and Fazzini’s version of lines from “Dieci poesie scritte in un mese” (“Ten poems written in a month” (2015:21)

Writing  
is not a mirror

but rather  
the shagreened glass of showers,  
where the body crumbles  
and only its shadow is visible...  
How important it is, therefore,  
to see behind the watermark  
if I am the forger  
and the only watermark is my work?

(La scrittura  
non è specchio, piuttosto  
il vetro zigrinato delle docce,  
dove il corpo si sgretola  
e solo la sua ombra traspare  
incerta ma reale ...  
Perciò che importa  
Vedere dietro la filigrana,  
se io son oil falsario  
e solo la filigrana è il mio lavoro.)

By any standard, this is superb poetry, in which the poet takes on Aristotle (the mirror), Plato (the shadows on the cave wall) brilliantly conflating them in the contemporary image of the distorting glass of the shower cubicle. It is redolent of horror movies and what the shower-image there portends: anonymity, the disruption of the self as the matter of the self falls (asunder) between the multiple gazes/glances of stalker, camera, audience, and now poet, poem, reader. It's also a superb translation in the hands of Skinner and Fazzini, because a word like "shagreened" operates poetically, rather than merely translationally, encrypting the word "shard" subliminally into a line also containing the inverted implication of showers of glass. In other words, the translators take the ocular "crumble" of the distorted image of the body, and find a way to make more menacing the glass itself. This works profoundly, since the danger is not just to the self, via psycho or psychology, but also to the foundational philosophy itself. The peril of the Aritotelian mirror, the image

(*image*) of art's relation to reality, turns out to be in its own art, its metaphor, which proves brittle as glass, because, needless, *yet necessary*, to say: art is art, a mirror a mirror.

But the true splendour of the poetry lies in its lesson in how to mix a metaphor. Having fashioned an image of the distorted image, the poet has established for himself (and anticipates in us) a kind of licence for onward distortion. What we see, we are told quite truly, is a watermark, the flux of lenses in the drops and trails of water on the glass. But what we are asked to understand of this is the further sense of the pun, by which the watermark is a proof – of provenance, of being (in the sense of the poem's idea), but also literally of paper, the destination and repository of the act of writing, such as might lie in the reader's hands in the very instant. Thus from Plato and Aristotle we are brought via a shower cubicle to the compact between poet, poem, and reader in the instance of a watermark on paper, needing to notice that the image at the heart of it all is, itself, a watermark, a picture of water, made upon the paper we hold. All this, we might otherwise describe as a spectacular chain of translations.

In aggregate, Magrelli's poems read so well in translation because they have this translative sense of their own purpose. The poet is quite candid about it in his "Scrivere come se questo":

To write as if this  
were the work of translation,  
of something already written in another language  
"To write as if this" (Skinner & Fazzini, 2015:35)

(Scrivere come se questo  
fosse opera di traduzione,  
di qualcosa già scritto in altra lingua.  
“Scrivere come se questo”)

In this he enacts exactly that implicit hope of all translation, of being read back into the text, back into its language. It is a greater hope than criticism might own to, because criticism entails the longer, rationating scrutiny of the gaze, and must forego the necessary entanglement of the glance, with its momentary and compromising union, its complicit intimacy of kissing. Italian has also the privilege of being a richly and deeply translated language in itself, because of its being *in itself* more co-extant with Latin than other languages, more the living translation of a “dead” language than wholly another. To argue so may be a semantic slight of pen, but it has some measure of truth. Consider only how it is, to all intents and purposes, the poet Catullus who brings “basiare” into the Romance languages (his noun “basium” replacing “osculum”<sup>5</sup>) (Highet, 1999:17, 31) and so translates that experience in a way that binds poetry into the genes of the act itself.

The same is true of the bees. They swarm through the language and the literature (and now others) in an ongoing hiving and dividing of intertexts. Certainly they are about a process of translation, converting nectar into honey, and by a very social and proto-linguistic process. But they also sponsor what I think is the most remarkable way of conceiving Magrelli’s image of rear-view beehive glances. The ancient ritual of *bugonia* undertook the forcing of new hives by a peculiar process of parthenogenesis, by seeking to culture swarms from the carcasses of animals. It is this mystical and mythical phenomenon which Virgil looks back at from the conclusion of the

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<sup>5</sup> Catullus 5. This is following Highet closely. His own footnote to the claim he makes and which traces the word and its absence (and “low” usage) offers a philology of not an etymology: Highet (1999:252).

fourth book of his *Georgics*, the extraordinary vision of bees pouring like smoke from the deliquescent flesh of a rotting animal to hang themselves in new globular clumps from the bows of trees. It scarcely takes a James Frazer to counterpoint the inertia of dead cattle with the vitality of bees, the silence with the hum, the failure of food with the furious assertion of sweetness to come, and to argue for a resurrection myth such as is intrinsic to fertility cults and rites. But we can argue here that those black bees hanging themselves up in a new form are very much as the letters of a new poem disposed upon a page, that their hum is the murmur of aggregated human speech, that old poems are carcasses out of which new bees swarm. Nor should we forget that Virgil's happenstance *bugonia* arises out of a sacrifice to Orpheus. Now, as then, you will see nothing like this by gazing hard at the world we live in, but it is precisely what gets seen, almost by accident, in the rear-view, in a mirror, on an x-ray, *at a glance*. Such "takes" on events or things or ideas necessarily translate those things out of the language of the rationating gaze. So, too, translations of poems arise from the body of the text they inhabit, not as a map of its bones or a drool of its putrescence, but as something vital, multiple, voluble, and wholly untoward.

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