

Trials and Temptations of a Translator

A talk delivered by Tom d'Egidio for the NY Browning Society at Westbeth in New York City, on September 29th 2021, as part of National Translation Month and viewable on YouTube



I'm going to translate Valerio Magrelli, a contemporary Roman poet who has the appropriately Roman name of Valerio which has retained its popularity since ancient times when there were many famous, and indeed valorous Valeriuses, including at least 5 poets. English cognates include both valor and valuable. Quite the opposite is Magrelli which immediately reminds an Italian of *magro* or thin. Magrelli is furthermore a diminutive, suggestive of ancestors who were not only thin but also small. An English cognate is meager. Fortunately for Valerio Magrelli, it's OK for poets to have both strengths and weaknesses.

And now for one of his poems, from his second collection, *Nature e Venature*, of 1987:

I've often imagined that glances
Outlive the act of looking,
As if they were arrows
With measurable trajectories, or lances
Hurled in a battle.

Then I think that in the room I
Just left, lines
Of this kind must remain
For some time suspended,
Crisscrossed, holding
Their positions
As in a game of Pick-Up Sticks.

This very last line in his poem bothered me because Pick-Up-Sticks is an old-fashioned game with which newer generations may not be familiar. But it also intrigued me because the Italian is “Legni dello Shangai” or Shanghai Sticks. I looked up the history of the game and found out that it was first marketed in 19th century Germany, and suddenly everything clicked for me. I knew from the biography of Hermann Hesse that Lutheran missionaries, such as his father and grandfather, had spent time in China, bringing back a knowledge of the I Ching and its method of divination through the tossing of yarrow stalks, so that I was sorely tempted to rewrite the ending to say:

“Like the Augury to be had from the throwing of the Yarrow Stalks”.

That’s somewhat like the liberties Robert Lowell allowed himself in his fascinating if controversial collection of translations called *Imitations*.

But then in my mind’s eye I saw Magrelli’s poem as describing the hallucinatory party scene in Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, and decided to drop the whole thing. Next, I translated a Magrelli poem from the same collection that begins with two quotes some of you may recognise:

“And the crack in the teacup opens
A lane to the land of the dead” W.H. Auden

“...as when a crack appears
the length of a cup” Rilke

I receive from you this red
Cup with which to toast my days
One by one,
A string of pale mornings,
Pearls making a long necklace of thirst.
And should it fall and break,
I full of compassion,
Will see to its repair,
That my kisses may proceed
Uninterrupted.
And every time that the handle
Or rim cracks,
I’ll keep fixing it with glue

Until my love has slowly accomplished
The making of a durable mosaic.
Down along the curve
Of the cup's white interior
The black crack descends
With the zig and zag
Of a lightning bolt:
Sign of a storm
That keeps on thundering
Around in this landscape
Of enamel.

The prominent ending of this poem on the word enamel, *smalto*, reminded me of the unusual use of this word, twice that I know of, by Dante in his *Inferno*. In the 4th *Canto*, he takes his place alongside the ancient poets Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan who are standing on grass that Dante then realizes is in fact a hard surface of green enamel or as Dante says, "*smalto*". Then in the 9th *Canto*, Dante is threatened by the Furies who say they're going to get Medusa to turn him into what most translations give as "stone", but again Dante uses this term "*smalto*", or enamel, perhaps appropriate to hell because it is fused through great heat. And then there's the monster of *Canto 25* which, as it zigs and zags across Dante's path, reminds him of a jagged bolt of lightning.

Auden, Rilke, and maybe Dante are part of this poem. Dante is after all the poet most likely lurking in the background of an Italian poem, as for that matter in the poems of such Americans as Pound and Eliot.

And so maybe the cup is a sort of infernal landscape of damage and danger, perhaps of punishment for kisses like Paolo & Francesca, the satanically red cup a scary stormy terrain, a circular pit through which one travels as along one of the Malibolgie, the perilous pits of Hell.

Poems are often made from other poems. But, a teacup from Hell? I don't know. For good reason the Italians have a saying, *Traduttore, Tradittore*, or Translator, Traitor. How can you make sure that all the cultural information gets into your translation? Like the Tardis in Dr. Who, the inside of the poem is much larger than the outside.

When Magrelli was a mere 22 years old he was included in a big International Poetry Festival held on a beach near Rome in the summer of 1979. I was at that Festival and by big I mean huge, with famous poets from many countries, and an audience, for three days running, of 20,000 each day (& night): the Woodstock of Poetry.

His inclusion in the Festival didn't mean that he was regarded as an important poet. He was one of a number of young Roman poets who got to read something because they were Romans and the Festival was sponsored by the City of Rome. His appearance made no particular impression, and in fact I far better remember eccentric Roman poet

Valentino Zeichen and the other young poets associated with Beat '72, whose director Simone Carella had spearheaded the whole amazing Festival.

Then just a few months later in 1980, Magrelli's first collection appeared, and it was declared the most important first collection since the appearance of Eugenio Montale's *Ossi di Seppia, Cuttlefish Bones*, in 1928.

Who would have believed that a poetry collection with an obscure title, in Latin no less, would attract so much attention. That collection is called *Ora Serrata Retinae*, and the exact meaning was a puzzle to me, even though I studied Latin in school, because it is the scientific term for a bit of tissue connecting the retina with the optic nerve, and literally means "Serrated Edge of the Retina".

High praise for that collection came from such luminaries as Mexico's Octavio Paz, and the exiled Russian Joseph Brodsky. Here's my translation of the first poem of that first landmark collection.

I don't have a glass of water
By my bed;
I have this notebook.
Sometimes I write down words in the dark
And the next day finds them
Stunned by the light, with nothing to say.
They're night things,
Set out to dry,
That curl under the sun's rays
And even explode with a little pop,
Leaving a scattering of fragments,
The broken shards of sleep
That overwhelm the page.
I manage to gather only
A cemetery of thoughts
In my hands.

One more particularly beautiful poem is from Magrelli's 3rd collection called *Esercizi Di Tiptologia* or *Typtological Exercises*, of 1992, by which time he was not quite so intellectual, allowing himself to explore the mysteries of love.

L'Abbraccio/The Embrace

As you sleep next to me I bend my body
And moving close to you draw
Sleep from your face like a wick
Draws flame from another
And the two votive lights are there, the flame
Catching, as sleep flows between us.

But as it catches, the furnace in the cellar
Shudders: Down there the ooze of fossils burns,
Way down there prehistory glows hot, dead
Submerged fermented peats
Surge up into my radiator.
In a dark halo of petroleum
The bedroom is a nest heated
By organic deposits, by compost heaps, swamp gas
And we, two wicks, are the two tongues
Of that single Paleozoic torch.

I should tell you that these translations are unlabored drafts, perhaps even studies for translations. They are quickly improvised attempts to match two languages that are not altogether different versions of one another. English, with its huge vocabulary, and Italian, with its more precise tenses, are sometimes stubbornly at odds in ways that can get even stickier the more one pushes and pulls at the linguistic taffy.

I only hope that I've provided a flavor of this very fine contemporary Roman,
Valerio Magrelli.

About the author



Native Roman poet **Valerio Magrelli** debuted in 1980 at age 23 with the collection *Ora Serrata Retinae*. Since then, his collections have won the Mondello, Viareggio, Montale and other prestigious literary prizes. His newest collection, *Exfanzia*, appeared in 2022. He has been a professor of French literature at the universities of Pisa and Cassino, and is known for his translations into Italian

of the poetry of Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Valéry and others. *Vanishing Points*, a bilingual selection of his poems as translated by Jamie McKendrick, was published by Farrar Straus Giroux in 2010.



About the translator

Tom d'Egidio is a member of the Suppose An Eyes poetry group at the University Of Pennsylvania's Kelly Writers House. He is Director-At-Large on the Board of the NY Browning Society at the National Arts Club. He translates poetry from Italian and from Abruzzese dialect and is currently at work on a novel set in the NY art world c. 1980. His chapbook *The Enigma Of Arrival* is found at UNDERGROUNDBOOKS.org.