

Translations from the Italian
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In 1987 I left Australia for the first time. I flew to Rome and travelled by train through northern Italy, northern Spain, France and England following a largely Poundian agenda (Florence, Sienna, Rapallo, Mont Segur, Perigeux, Paris and London). Other than English my only language was rusty high-school French. In Rome I picked up the two-volume *Poesia Italiana del Novocento* (ed. Sanguinetti, 1971) setting myself the task of learning enough Italian to translate some of these poems (astonished as I was that the anthology, some 800 pages of it, contained not a single woman poet). I had translated from the Latin of Martial before this but had used a crib (the Loeb Classical Library edition) and consulted a Latinist. With this anthology I decided that I would attempt poems I had not seen in translation before, alongside more familiar pieces like those of Quasimodo. Back in Melbourne I went to the Centre for Italian Studies in Carlton and took a few months of beginners' classes. I started working on some of the poems straight away, going through them word-for-word and then trying to make sense of the results. It seemed easier to work with poems that were vividly descriptive than with some of the more cerebral ones.

In 1990 I published what is possibly my least satisfactory book, *Blue Notes*. It was a rushed job as the publisher (Picador) wanted to follow up my relatively successful long poem *The Ash Range* (1987). *Blue Notes* included several of my Italian pieces but these, like much of the book, had been done in haste—at least they hadn't been around for long enough for their weaknesses to become apparent. They were selected from a much larger body of translations in progress and I filed the rest away. I didn't look at them again for twenty years, nor did I attempt any further translations. Then in 2010 I dug out the file and attempted to salvage some of the work therein. I also went back to two of the poems I had published in *Blue Notes*, Cavacchioli's "Antiromantic Prelude" and Onofri's "Soil Returned to the Cosmos" and reworked them considerably.

One thing I noticed when I made my first attempts at these works was that I tended to compress them, the longer pieces particularly. The poems of Ardengo Soffici (not included here) were for the most part satisfactorily done but in the process I had lost almost a third of several of them. Some lines and phrases were too obscure or impossible to make work in English. As long as the overall sense of the poem was there I dispensed with these. Martin Johnston, a friend and fluent Greek speaker once noted that the southern European modernists had not been through the stringent parings back that the English high modernists

had: there had been no Pound or Eliot to insist on condensation. Instead there was often a sense that if you could say something again and again in different ways then why not do so. These repetitions and embellishments can seem awkward in English so I navigated through them.

What I liked about doing these translations was that sense that there was another intelligence at work, producing a kind of sensibility that wasn't strictly my own (angels, for example, just don't occur in my own work). With the Martial poems the poet gave me license to review the works and mores of my contemporaries. The Italian poems worked differently. They represented instead a series of possibilities, of other selves existing in other time-frames. When I reworked these poems I decided not to consult the originals but to make good my earlier attempts. By doing this I would avoid those problems that occur when you are trying to balance your version with the original where the result is often *translatorese*.

A Fragment (Antonio Porta)

Behind the door nothing, behind the curtain,
a mark imprinted on the wall, below,
the car, the window shuts, the wind still ruffles
the curtain, on the black ceiling
a dim stain, a hand mark without source,
nothing, pressing, a silk handkerchief,
the swinging chandelier, a knot, a light, an ink-stain,
on the floor, above the curtain, the cane chair scrapes,
on the floor drops of sweat from nowhere,
a stain that won't vanish, behind the curtain,
the black silk of the handkerchief, glitters on the ceiling,
a hand rests on it, the fire in the hand,
on the armchair a silk knot, glitters,
a wounded woman, the hour of blood on the wall,
the silk of the handkerchief, a shaking hand.

The moon lounges on a baroque balcony,
Pan grips his golden pipes,
trees incline in the style of the 18th century
and a little owl shouts Viva Romanticism!,
the blue night reversed in his spectacled cry,
its pink stars like phosphorescent ulcers.

Rivers whimper Arcadian songs
in the dribbling tones of my contemporaries;
roses bloom Napoleonicly
in gardens amazed by the song of nightingales;
from mildewed caves nymphs smile.
Moon, you lull me with voyeur's dreams;
the world, a foul convent
yawns through its nightly vigil,

and you, buxom taxi-dancer,
your golden curves arch over a faith
that brands us with dipped crumbs!
You shine in the shadows, reflected from a knife blade;
romantic assassins, bandits, thieves and murderers
take flight in your mysteries,

but when a bell is rung at daybreak,
gongs loosed from its bronze throat,
under the dark quilt of the horizon
you slip, groping another hemisphere;
in a green sky the spectre of my desire
rides like a futurist cowboy into the sun!

Lament for the South (Salvatore Quasimodo)

The red moon, the wind, the colour
of a Northern woman, an expanse of snow . . .
my heart is imprinted with this landscape,
these waters dark with fog.
I have forgotten the sea, the blown
conches of Sicilian shepherds,
the lullaby of carts in the streets
where carobs tremble in smoking stubble.
I have forgotten the northward passage
of herons and cranes to the green uplands,
the soil and rivers of Lombardy.
Nothing will take me South again.

The South is tired of bearing the dead
along banks of malarial marshes,
is tired of solitude, tired of chains,
tired of the blasphemy of those
who dump corpses in its echoing wells,
who drink its arterial blood . . .
Nothing will take me South again.
This evening touched with winter
returns to me as I mourn
what I cannot love.

San Remo, the sea and the poppy fields (Corrado Govoni)

Mad furnaces buried in the grass folds,
diabolical harvest of embers.

Beneath a dream sea, the vast hallucination of fallen stars,
of liquid pearls and washed out pink buds.

On the green surface, a field of poppies
slap and tickle like made-up clowns.

Ocean and poppy field; mother-of-pearl handle
of the sky's blade, red from assaults on the angels.

from Soil returned to the cosmos (Arturo Onofri)

The earth burns quietly
in a glow of furious air,
and every shoot, every flower,
breathes oil into the night.

Stamens exhale aromas
of an old season,
detached, estranged
from their faded pith.

Around them an eddy of wings:
golden angels swarm
balanced in the turbulent air,
ablaze with deathless dreams.

The skylight (Dino Campana)

The smoky evening of summer
sheds light in the shadows under the roof,
imprints on my heart its burning seal,
but who has (on the river terrace a lamp is lit) who has
(to the little Madonna of the Bridge) who has lit the lamp?
In the room there's an odour of putrefaction:
in the room a gaping red wound,
the stars are mother-of-pearl buttons and the evening is dressed in velvet
and the evening trembles, spirited (it is 'spirited' the evening
and it 'trembles') yes, but there is
in the heart of the evening, there is,
always, a gaping red wound.

Works Cited

Duggan, Laurie. *Blue Notes*. Picador, 1990. Print.

Sanguinetti, Edoardo, ed. *Poesia Italiana del Novocento*. 1971