Fragments of an Edifice: Three Books of Italian Poetry in Translation

By Will Schutt

Canti: Poems. By Giacomo Leopardi (trans. Jonathan Galassi). Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 528 pp., $35.
Love Lessons: Selected Poems of Alda Merini. By Alda Merini (trans. Susan Stewart). Princeton University Press, 130 pp., $19.95.
Vanishing Points: Poems. By Valerio Magrelli (trans. Jamie McKendrick). Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 272 pp., $27.

Jonathan Galassi, perhaps the most prolific translator of Italian poetry today and one of Italy's most prominent literary arbiters, has written, "[N]o one not born into a language can truly know how poetry sounds to those for whom it was written." Like many such proclamations, Galassi's is both a curb and a call-to-arms for aspiring translators; if we cannot hear the poem for what it is in its first version, and if sound is the fundament of poetry, how can we relay in another language anything more than the scraps and spoils of the original work? Yet translation, like poetry itself, requires a good ear. It is, in Edith Grossman's words, an "essentially auditory" process, not merely a matter of nosing around in a dictionary. To carry the esthetic experience of a poem across the barriers of another language, translators must *attune* themselves to the original work, so that readers may take for granted their impression that Dante has spun his terza rima in English, that Celan has been recovered in an English incarnation—that both have *spoken* from a foreign tongue. The poets under consideration here are linked by little more than nation. Each has been most prominently influenced by writers from a language other than Italian: Giacomo Leopardi by the Greek and Latin poets of antiquity; Alda Merini by Rilke, among others; Valerio Magrelli by the French symbolists. The poets differ in geographical region (Le Marche, Milan, Rome, respectively), in historical period (the early nineteenth century to the present), and in style and temperament. This review is not meant to be an assessment of Italian poetry of the last two centuries; not enough of it has been translated recently for such a project to be possible. Given the limited number of literary translations to appear in English, a reviewer must work with fragments of the whole—a tile here, a column there.

I

Giacomo Leopardi's style is often characterized as both inimitable *and* unadorned. His sinuous, high-note lyricism coupled with an acute clarity has for nearly two centuries resonated with readers

and exasperated translators, who are generally left to approximate the "poem's literal thrust," as Galassi remarks in his recent edition of Leopardi's *Canti*. Italian critic Attilio Momigliano once referred to the nineteenth-century bard's stylistic restraint as "sublime poverty." Galassi calls it "spare finality." The marriage of such incongruous qualities—economy and splendor—has proven difficult for Leopardi translators, who frequently favor one stylistic direction at the expense of the other.

Here, in its entirety, is Galassi's version of "L'Infinito," Leopardi's most celebrated "idyll":

> This lonely hill was always dear to me,
> and this hedgerow, which cuts off the view
> of so much of the last horizon.
> But sitting here and gazing, I can see
> beyond, in my mind's eye, unending spaces,
> and superhuman silences, and depthless calm,
> till what I feel
> is almost fear. And when I hear
> the wind stir in these branches, I begin
> comparing that endless stillness with this noise:
> and the eternal comes to mind,
> and the dead seasons, and the present
> living one, and how it sounds.
> So my mind sinks in this immensity:
> and foundering is sweet in such a sea.

Galassi's translation favors a bare-bones Leopardi—the spare, no-frills poet of the above lines, who enters the room without fuss and speaks to us intimately, offhandedly. There is no Olympic peak to scale, no involution of language or tortured syntax. One is reminded of Stanley Kunitz's assessment of Robert Hass' early work: reading it is "like stepping into the ocean when the temperature of the water is not that much different from the air. You scarcely know, until you feel the undertow tug at you, that you have entered into another element."

Galassi's version of "L'Infinito" underscores poetry's capacity to mimic an experience inside time; as the speaker sits on his lonely hilltop—now dreamy, now caught in a breeze—so too the reader. The tempo builds as the speaker's thought encompasses (a little giddy at its ability to do so) the superhuman and depthless. The truncated seventh line registers a hiccup of equivocation. Then, as if the speaker were catching his breath, the lines return to a fairly regular rhythm, and the speaker's attention is, for a moment, redirected toward the worldly as he notes the sound of the wind. Until, that is, the speaker's thoughts begin to race again and the poem pitches headlong into the oceanic immensity (of the limits of comprehension, perhaps). The poem, like a last gasp, grows

loud as it expires.

Despite this accomplishment, Galassi's rendering of Leopardi's style can hardly be dubbed inimitable. The diction skirts the pedestrian ("come to mind," "my mind's eye") and the phrasing feels worn-out ("I hear / the wind stir in these branches"). This un-momentous version of what we know to be a monumental—and monumentally celebrated— poem in its original language begs the question: how much poetics can we drain from poetry till we are left in the shallows of everyday speech?

Here is the same poem in the hands of the poet Eamon Grennan:

> I've always loved this lonesome hill
> and this hedge that hides
> the entire horizon, almost, from sight.
> But sitting here in a daydream, I picture
> the boundless spaces away out there, silences
> deeper than human silence, an unfathomable hush
> in which my heart is hardly a beat
> from fear. And hearing the wind
> rush rustling through these bushes,
> I pit its speech against infinite silence—
> and a notion of eternity floats to mind,
> and the dead seasons, and the season
> beating here and now, and the sound of it. So,
> in this immensity my thoughts all drown;
> and it's easeful to be wrecked in seas like these.

Surely Grennan's translation adheres to Auden's definition of poetry as "memorable speech." At every turn, there is great sonic pleasure to lap up: the novel phrasing ("my heart is hardly a beat / from fear"), the mimetic description of wind "rush[ing] rustling through these bushes," the onslaught of echo and near-rhyme (sight/beat, hush/bushes, picture/pit, lonesome/daydream), the "floating" thought in the eleventh line that readies us for the final wreck at sea. Grennan gives us a sense of Leopardi's craft, and more than a hint of the poem's textural felicities.

It is indicative of Grennan's boldness that he translates the title as "Infinitive"—a misstep, arguably—where the more generally accepted translation is "The Infinite" or "Infinity" (as Galassi has it). The poet Giuseppe Ungaretti once remarked that "'L'infinito' is an idyll that is ironic in tone starting with its title. The idyll of infinity will in fact be a representation of the finite." The ironic strain in the *Canti* has often been overshadowed by its extreme pessimism, and much of Leopardi's poetry has been explained away by the physical and social impoverishment of his life: the duress of scoliosis, rickets, asthma, dropsy; the chastisements of his fanatical Catholic mother;

the isolation that results from being an early genius in a provincial city; the lovelessness that results from being a hunchback. The utter despair of the *Canti*, particularly in the occasional poems that open the book, can strike modern readers as overbearing and operatic, as in the following examples from Galassi:

> The children that you'll have will either be
> cowards or unhappy. Let them be unhappy.

(“On the Marriage of his Sister Paolina”)

> Bitter fate, why give us life,
> or else why not an earlier death,
> when you see our country
> enslaved by profane foreigners,
> her virtue cut to ribbons
> by their biting steel?

(“On the Monument to Dante Being Erected in Florence”)

> Ah, Italian song
> begins, is born, in pain.

(“To Angelo Mai, *On His Finding the Manuscript of Cicero's* De re publica”)

So what is it about Leopardi that makes him such an important figure in world poetry? Iris Origo, Leopardi's first biographer, notes that the poet's gifts do not lie in his themes—of despair, transience, solitude—but in his creation of a climate bathed, as it were, by moonlight that “the carter on his way salutes” (“The Setting of the Moon”). The clarity of Leopardi's style reflects his moral and philosophical preoccupation with lifting the veil from artifice. As the poet himself writes in the opening of *The Zibaldone*, his grand poetic and philosophical notebook, “The object of the Fine Arts is not Beauty but Truth, or rather the imitation of Nature” (translation mine).

Irreligious, tragic in vision, a classicist at heart, Leopardi was also a poet of subtlety and rich complication who ultimately acknowledged our desire and intermittent capacity to be happy. He is, after all, capable of writing with compassion, “I consider love as the most beautiful thing on earth, and find nourishment in illusions … I do not think that illusions are merely vain, but rather they are, to a certain degree, substantial, and innate in each of us—and they form the whole of our life.”

In a single poem he can combine a bleak outlook ("I know nature's deaf / and can't share in our pain") with strangely heartbreaking humanity ("yet I feel the familiar / illusions reviving, / my breast is amazed / at all that it feels"). The incongruity that characterizes Leopardi's style can also be found in Leopardi's attitude. As Nicolas Giardini remarks in an endnote here, "…contradiction and self-emendation or even recantation are distinctive features of Leopardi's mind." They are also distinctive features of poetry post-Leopardi.

Despite a lack of vivacity in Galassi's translations, his book provides English-language readers with copious notes and interpretations of the structure of the *Canti* that illuminate the modernity of Leopardi's achievement. He has also given us accurate translations of poems that warrant greater readership, such as "The Dominant Idea," "The Recollections," and the wonderful fragment "Odi, Melisso." Like his *Collected Poems of Eugenio Montale,* Galassi's *Canti* is an indispensable resource—for its intelligence, faithfulness and dedication, if not for its stylistic virtuosity—to better understand why Leopardi is still considered one of the most important Italian poets.

II

The work of Milanese poet Alda Merini is similarly beset—and, perhaps, bolstered—by a biography of legendary proportions. As translator Susan Stewart notes in *Love Lessons: Selected Poems of Alda Merini*, the poet's life was fraught with melancholy, madness and scorned love. Neither Merini's physical appearance nor her poetry offset her reputation as a troubled, mystical poet: disheveled, "dropping cigarette ash everywhere," Merini scribbled her chaotic life-book in lipstick and faint pencil on her apartment walls. It may be hard for American readers to conceive of the cult status acccorded Merini in her country. Upon her death, the President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano said, "[A] limpid and inspired voice has been extinguished." In Assisi Franciscan monks were met in prayer.

Like Leopardi, Merini was a precocious talent. When she was ten, her father published a pamphlet of her poems. At sixteen she began frequenting a literary salon at the house of writer and critic Giacinto Spagnoletti, who included two of her early poems in his anthology of Italian poetry. At twenty-one, her first book of poems, *The Presence of Orpheus*, garnered the adulation of critics. Around the same time, Merini became romantically involved with the critic Giorgio Manganelli, one of several love affairs that would quickly run out of steam yet serve as fuel for her poems:

> I tenderly loved some very sweet lovers
> without them knowing anything about it.
> And I wove spiderwebs from this
> and I always fell prey to my own creation.

("Alda Merini")

If men in Merini's poetry are nothing more than "moments of harvesting the vineyard" ("The

Cry of Death"), in life they provided her with the kind of practical encouragement a young poet often needs. Her early work garnered the attention of such notable male poets as Salvatore Quasimodo, Eugenio Montale and Pier Paolo Pasolini. In an essay on orphic tradition, the latter intuited the powerful effect Merini's psychological troubles would have on her work. Merini suffered from extreme bouts of mental illness—what she called a "shadowy" mind—which drove her in and out of mental institutions throughout her life. She later recounted her institutionalization in several memoirs, including *A Rage of Love*, and in the stark collection of poems *La Terra Santa*, her first book to appear after a twenty year silence from 1955 to 1975, after which she went on to produce a mind-boggling profusion of poetry and prose—roughly a book a year—until her death, at the age of 78, in November 2009.

Perhaps due to her twenty-year remove from the world of letters, Merini's poetry largely ignores the linguistic play and ironic tone that colored much of Italian post-war poetry, particularly that of the Italian neo-avant-garde movement. Merini's poems rather reflect an older belief in the visionary and phenomenological, and are replete with relics of Christian mythology and pagan antiquity—"natural images," notes Stewart, "accompanying a mental world of paradises, saints and angels." Rilke's visions hover over the work, as the poet herself has admitted, as do the figures of Orpheus and Saint Peter, who provide Merini with her enduring subjects: seduction, abandonment and the birth of song. Hers is a hermetic, almost primordial voice, and many of her unapologetically agonized poems seem to have been carted in from the far-off past:

> When the anguish spreads its color
> inside the dark soul
> like revenge's brushstroke,
> I feel the budding shoot of an ancient hunger…
>
> ("When the Anguish")

Merini writes of ardor—and anguish—with a capital A, to both the detriment and profit of her poems. On the one hand, her work has a startling immediacy that avoids the circuitous and descriptive, and achieves a raw, authoritative quality ever at the boiling point of experience.

> As for me, I used to be a bird
> with a gentle white womb,
> someone cut my throat
> just for laughs,
> I don't know.
> As for me, I used to be a great albatross
> and whirled over the seas.
> Someone put an end to my journey,

without any charity in the tone of it.
But even stretched out on the ground
I sing for you now
my songs of love.
("'As for me, I used to be a bird'")

There is something refreshing about a poet who lays bare the tragic spectacle of her heart, poem after poem. This mystic, we're sure, knew hell. Merini's faith in the reality of the world of poetry—and myth—and the lessons that world imparts, strikes us as courageous. Yet the pitfalls of a style such as Merini's will be apparent to most contemporary readers and writers, as they were to Leopardi almost two centuries before. At their worst, the poems succumb to a disproportionate outpouring of feeling that may seem theatrical in our age of moral indecision, understatement, and dispassion. But what is life, Merini might argue, without passion or belief?

Somewhat inexplicably, given Merini's immense popularity in Italy, Stewart's slim but judicious selection is the first effort to introduce a wider range of Merini's work to American readers. The book spans almost fifty years of the poet's career, including poems from *The Presence of Orpheus* (1951) to *Superb is the Night* (2000). Stewart is a particularly faithful translator, retaining the rhythms (Merini often wrote unrhymed hendecasyllabic verse, the closest equivalent of which is regular blank verse in English), uneven punctuation and tortured syntax of the original poems. The line-by-line accuracy of Stewart's translations nearly makes of *Love Lessons* a primer for students of Italian. Stewart is particularly successful in rendering the complex phrases of the longer meditative poems that bookend the collection, where she allows Merini's strange, disquieting logic to unfold, as in the end of *The Presence of Orpheus*:

So, within your shaping arms
I pour myself, small and immense,
serene given, restless given,
unending developing motion.

Occasionally, however, Stewart's faithfulness to the letter saps the spirit of the original poems. Take, for instance, one small example from the end of the short lyric "There are artificial paradises":

…I have seen a crocodile
kissing the frontiers and grazing in the pasture
with a shocked Orpheus between his arms.

The original reads,

Ho visto un coccodrillo
baciare le frontiere e pascolare
con Orfeo sconvolto tra le braccia.

To my ear, Stewart's translation seems unnatural—we don't say that something is held "between" one's arms, and, indeed, "tra le braccia" is the common expression "in one's arms." It is also more verbose—Merini's single verb, "pascolare," is rendered as "grazing in the pasture." "Sconvolto" ("shocked" or "devastated") is the central word of the poem's closing, and as such it sits in the middle of the last line. By placing the modifier before the noun, Stewart has deprived the poem of its final jolting image: it's not Orpheus we're meant to see, but the devastation written on Orpheus' face. A more compelling translation might read:

I saw a crocodile
graze the frontier with a kiss
and Orpheus shocked in his arms.

Similarly, Stewart's translations of Merini's aphorisms sometimes fail to render the fluidity and playfulness of the originals. "Ci sono notti," writes Merini, "che non / accadono mai." In Stewart's version: "There are nights / that never / happen." Flat and unmemorable, this rendition loses the original pun on the verb "accadere" (within which is embedded the verb "cadere" or "fall"). "Some nights / never / fall" might seem sophomoric, but other solutions, such as "Some nights / never / come around," would, I believe, better convey Merini's ludic side.

III

Where Merini opens the floodgates of feeling, Valerio Magrelli zeroes in on the minutiae of the modern world. The body here is a "busted contraption" prone to involuntary movements over which the poet poises his instruments of acuity, and poems are "machines to recharge sense … a buzz of particles that lie in wait." Magrelli's often short, often untitled poems have both a barbed sense of humor and an ethical intelligence. Speculative, insular, methodical, recursive, Magrelli is a master of compression and understatement. Take, for example, the following poem from his 1987 collection *Nature e Venature* (*Nature and Veinings*), as translated by Jamie McKendrick:

On the beach, rotten wood, tires, bottles,
sodden stuff—all things wrecked
and putrified—I love them all:
what's washed up, spewed-out, good-for-nothing,

what no one wants
to have or filch.
In April the air
takes on a hint of warmth.
Glows like a cheek.

("On the beach, rotten wood, tires, bottles")

At first glance the poem, like much of Magrelli's work, appears cast-off, almost slight, like the useless beachside detritus the speaker admires. Read this way, the poem falls into the tradition of poet-as-solitary-beachcomber, praising what the rest of us overlook. Yet on closer examination, we notice a void of both pretense and the trappings of personality—the speaker is almost entirely absent—as well as a lack of argument. The final lines subtly hint at other traditions in which the poem might reside: it may be read as a clever aubade in its movement toward warmth and light; or as an ars poetica, with the speaker's sensibility literally "shedding light" (the expression also exists in Italian); or as a sly refutation of Eliot's "April is the cruelest month" (an Italian might hear the echo – and playful inversion – of Leopardi's "small" lyric about the view he loves).

Yet tradition is only one aspect of what a reader sees, and what a reader sees depends, as Magrelli clearly knows, on the reader. Literary references are never more than a byproduct of Magrelli's medium, and the reader need not be schooled in poetic canons to admire the poet's work. His work has more to do with capturing time and sensation—"even in sounds you find the bone of time," he writes elsewhere—than they do with literary gamesmanship. Magrelli's poems, in his words, "always have to be reread, / read, reread, read again, recharged."

Vanishing Points, the title of Magrelli's selected poems translated by McKendrick, underscores the poet's long-term project to meticulously scrutinize human perception. Project is an apt term because of the clear, cohesive threads that run from the poet's first book, *Ora Serrata Retinae* (1980), to his most recent *Disruptions of a Binary System* (2006). The former title, as we learn in the translator's introduction, is a scientific term meaning "the irregular anterior margin of the *pars optica* of the retina." Magrelli has always been a sensory, as opposed to a sensual, poet, and indeed the characteristically brief untitled poems in this debut collection examine minute elements of seeing in a rhetoric that borders on the technical. Like highly controlled entries in a quizzical notebook, what the poet calls his "shield / a trench, a periscope," the poems quickly spawn their own world, with each white page "like the cornea of an eye" on which the poet "hurriedly embroider[s] / an iris and in the iris etch[es] / the deep gorge of the retina."

For his part, McKendrick mostly succeeds in relaying the poems' subtle currents and Magrelli's flat, mordant register. He does, however, take several liberties, and seems quite willing to play with the form or inject words into the poems. Sometimes his additions succeed in re-energizing the original, as is the case with the first poem quoted above. The last line in Italian reads: "Pare una guancia" ("A cheek appears"). By substituting the verb "appear" with "glows," McKendrick makes

the rather opaque original blush. At other times, McKendrick seems to overcompensate, adding (often bad) puns, or titles that suck the subtlety out of Magrelli's poems, as with the sly anti-love poem to which McKendrick tacks on the goofy title "Stalker." Possibly anticipating such criticism, McKendrick admits in his note on the translation that "With so much at risk of being lost, there has to be the chance of listening out for where a translation might go in the new language, of looking out for what the new language might add." However well-founded this point—one often wishes Stewart would be so daring—the results are mixed.

Instructions for Reading a Newspaper (1999), Magrelli's fourth and most clearly conceptual collection, is a book-length sequence that examines the different sections of a newspaper, including games, horoscopes, and obituaries. Ever scrupulous, Magrelli also sets his sights on the paper's date, price and bar code, calling the latter the "wrist on which to take the pulse of money." Given the number of high-concept poetry collections currently riddling the landscape of American poetry, *Instructions* may at first appear to be another book of gimmicks to toss on the mound. Yet there is something more probing at play here. The anti-poetical pages of a daily newspaper (arbitrarily arranged and almost immediately obsolete) provide him with a sounding board to float larger questions about the more enduring medium of literature. One is reminded of Ezra Pound's famous axiom, "Literature is news that STAYS news!"

Is Magrelli the end-product par excellence of modernist doctrine? In the *ABC of Reading*, Pound lays out a tripartite scheme that distinguishes three kinds of poetry: *melopoeia*, "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property," *phanopoeia*, the "casting of images upon the visual imagination," and *logopoeia*, "the dance of the intellect." The scheme provides a helpful means of approaching the inner workings of Magrelli's poetry. Yet Magrelli, a professor of French Literature at the University of Cassino and the author of critical studies of Baudelaire, Dadaism, and Valéry, has cultivated a style most reminiscent of what the former calls "a pure sound that resounds in the midst of noise … a perfectly executed fragment of an edifice."

For all his erudition, Magrelli is a "pure" poet supremely attuned to his physical surroundings, whose most cursory similes—bus doors that "sigh" or crossed glances that bind a room "like pickup-sticks"—animate the world. For all his linguistic games, Magrelli's lack of guile proves there are high stakes to such serious play. Many of the most moving poems are, at their core, concerned with morality (without swaggering into platitudes). They pursue truth, even if truth is evasive. As Magrelli observes, "The most striking thing in children's drawings is the violence of the lines," where the "mind seems / to have grown crooked, / carried away by the crayon." Children, not surprisingly, are his preferred mouthpiece for modern-day horrors:

> Sunday morning
> I'm woken by the voice

of my daughter, who, shouting,
asks her brother
if it's true the Bomb
when it explodes
leaves the shadow
of man on the wall.
(Not of "a man"
but "of man" she says.) He
agrees that it does.
I turn in my bed.

("The Shadow")

"The Shadow" appears in *Disruptions of the Binary System*, poems from which close the selected translations, and in which Magrelli most pointedly explores the slipperiness of truth. The book's final sequence ruminates on the well known duck-rabbit illusion. A *visual pun* used by American psychologist Joseph Jstrow and later examined in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the picture of the duck-rabbit evokes our imperfect perception of the world; we can never know whether we are seeing both duck and rabbit simultaneously, or why one person sees a duck while another sees a rabbit. Like the picture, the poems in this sequence alternate between italicized and roman print as they shuttle back and forth between the aphoristic and the philosophical:

This is the secret of the duck-hare:
to be guilty as hell while taking care
to preserve one's innocence.

("Innocence")

How come all this time
I've been staring at a picture of the duck
never once seeing hide nor hair
of the hare?
I was trying to unravel the concept of deceit
in moral terms when I was merely
the dupe of a visual pun.
I'd opted for the ethical
when the problem was optical.

("Optical")

The handsome bilingual edition of *Vanishing Points* has the added benefit of having the translations and originals printed *en face*, giving the reader an immediate visual of what Magrelli

takes pains to dissect: the duplicity of nature and the difficult but necessary task of making the two shores—imagination and observation—touch. Turning *Vanishing Points* over, I was surprised to discover a blurb by Henri Cole, who writes with a candor of feeling and sensuality entirely absent in Magrelli. And yet, recalling Cole's predilection for simile, as opposed to the violent displacement of metaphor, one begins to understand what he might admire in the Italian poet. Unlike metaphor, simile allows the poet to ferry back and forth between different elements, without one element destroying the other. Both Cole and Magrelli temper the expansiveness of simile with an astringency that, in Cole's words, has no "compulsion to hide or temper the truth," however manifold truth may be. Translation, too, is involved in such correspondence, in such volleying back and forth. It is an art of indeterminacy, giving the lie to definitiveness, to the concept of definitive poems and their definitive interpretations. It asks, why can't several versions exist? Why not rabbit and duck at once?