



Rose Sneyd translates Giuseppe Ungaretti

On Translating “Ungà”

In translating these Ungaretti poems I was guided by Robert Bly’s translation approach as outlined in his *Eight Stages of Translation*. The first four stages largely focus on the importance of producing a natural English version of a poem, by first translating “literally,” then into written English, and finally into spoken English. I find this successive naturalisation – almost unbending – of the language used in translation very helpful, but especially when translating Ungaretti. Because of his very sparseness, and the shortness of the lines, almost every word is placed in sharp relief. But the translator’s word choices are also made particularly agonising by Ungaretti’s strong and evocative, but generally inconspicuous diction. Two of Bly’s final stages are that of catching the mood of the poem: “the ear turned inward toward the complicated feelings the poem is carrying,” and that of replicating the poem’s sound. For me, the first of these two stages depended principally on my word choices, but was also inextricably linked to capturing the poem’s sound. While you’re (obviously) never going to make English sound like Italian, I decided that one element I did need to try and convey something of was the substantiality of Ungaretti’s short lines. Italian can feel more condensed and weightier than English, with all its unnecessary pronouns and particles, and Ungaretti is a master at the short line. So, I tried to make my English lines as compact as possible, and the syntax as dense as possible, to instill the English verse with a similar substantiality.

Agonia

Morire come le allodole assetate
sul miraggio

O come la quaglia
passato il mare
nei primi cespugli
perchè di volare
non ha più voglia

Ma non vivere di lamento
come un cardellino accecato

Agony

To die like skylarks dying of thirst
beside a mirage



Or like the quail
beneath a bush
having crossed the sea
because its will
to fly has failed

But not to live on wailing
as the blinded goldfinch does

I fiumi

Cotici il 16 agosto 1916

Mi tengo a quest'albero mutilato
abbandonato in questa dolina
che ha il languore
di un circo
prima o dopo lo spettacolo
e guardo
il passaggio quieto
delle nuvole sulla luna

Stamani mi sono disteso
in un'urna d'acqua
e come una reliquia
ho riposato

L'Isonzo scorrendo
mi levigava
come un suo sasso

Ho tirato su
le mie quattr'ossa
e me ne sono andato
come un acrobata
sull'acqua

Mi sono accoccolato
vicino ai miei panni
sudici di guerra
e come un beduino
mi sono chinato a ricevere
il sole



Questo è l'Isonzo
e qui meglio
mi sono riconosciuto
una docile fibra
dell'universo

Il mio supplizio
è quando
non mi credo
in armonia

Ma quelle occulte
mani
che m'intridono
mi regalano
la rara
felicità

Ho ripassato
le epoche
della mia vita

Questi sono
i miei fiumi

Questo è il Serchio
al quale hanno attinto
duemil'anni forse
di gente mia campagnola
e mio padre e mia madre

Questo è il Nilo
che mi ha visto
nascere e crescere
e ardere d'inconsapevolezza
nelle estese pianure

Questa è la Senna
e in quel suo torbido
mi sono rimescolato
e mi sono conosciuto

Questi sono i miei fiumi
contati nell'Isonzo



Questa è la mia nostalgia
che in ognuno
mi traspare
ora ch'è notte
che la mia vita mi pare
una corolla
di tenebre

Rivers

Cotici, 16 August 1916

I cling to this mangled tree
abandoned in this hollow
that has the lassitude
of a circus
before or after the show
and I watch
the peaceful passing
of clouds upon the moon

This morning I reclined
in an urn of water
and like a relic
I rested

The flowing Isonzo
polished me
like one of its pebbles

I lifted up
my arms and legs
and away I went
like an acrobat
on water

I crouched down
beside my clothes
filthy with war
and like a Bedouin
I bowed forward to receive
the sun



This is the Isonzo
and here I better
became aware of myself
a docile fibre
of the universe

My torment
is when
I don't believe
I'm in harmony

But those arcane
hands
that drench me
offer me
that rare
happiness

I retraversed
the epochs
of my life

These are
my rivers

This is the Serchio
where two millennia
of my native people
were drawn including
my father and my mother

This is the Nile
that saw my being
born and raised
my burning with ignorance
on wide-spreading plains

This is the Senna
and in that murkiness
I merged myself
and knew myself

These are all my rivers
told in the Isonzo



This is my longing
revealed to me
in each
now it is night
and my life seems
a crown
of shadows

Dolina notturna

Napoli il 26 dicembre 1916

Il volto
di stanotte
è secco
come una
pergamena

Questo nomade
adunco
morbido di neve
si lascia
come una foglia
accartocciata

L'interminabile
tempo
mi adopera
come un
fruscio

Night Hollow

Naples, 26 December 1916

The face
of tonight
is dry
as a
parchment



NEKE The New Zealand Journal
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This nomad
bowed
damp with snow
lets go
as a leaf
all shrivelled

Interminable
time
uses me
as a
rustle



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