Valerio Magrelli's *Clecsografie: klecks, image, projection*

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During the erratic and uncertain season that ran from the historic date of 1968 on into the '70s, Italian poetry, particularly in light of the example of the avantgarde group *I Novissimi*, followed a path of linguistic dismantling, fragmentation and dispersal, of distortion and destructuring. These actions, taken in opposition to "given" norms, opened texts to such an extent as to negate any communicative dimension of the work, and to enact an almost complete dispersal and distancing from tradition. While resulting in a transitional period of indecisive movement, this also created a condition as close to *tabula rasa* as is possible in an environment charged with political slogans, advertising jingles etc. This left the field wide open for the successive generation of poets, who, as a result, had acquired new freedoms in their choices for structuring their own precursors.

Contemporary poetry, which here should be taken to mean post-Novissimi, sought the traces of a new communicability. Such is not necessarily to be found in the reconstruction of a linguistic paradigm, but through the renewed availability of forms, including the most basic of forms, words and letters:

Forme che si vanno via via spogliando dagli elementi superflui. Forme che si fanno indicatrici sensibili di un avanzamento nella pratica della ricerca creativa. Forme che offrono grande resistenza alla dispersione della luce. Forme che sembrano lentamente ruotare intorno al proprio asse, di volta in volta mostrando le facce della seduzione, della verità, del mistero, del mito . . . (Ermini 28)

The 1978 anthology *La parola innamorata*, one of the first post-Novissimi collections that sought to bring together new voices in Italian poetry, did so under somewhat loose parameters. As strict adherence to a particular poetics was not the intention behind *La parola*, association with this publication did not pre-program the development of its participants, all of whom subsequently moved in disparate directions. Valerio Magrelli is one of the poets whose poetic research has consistently held its course to produce some of the most original writing in contemporary Italy.

Magrelli's first collection, *Ora serrata retinae*, was published two years after his contribution to the above anthology. The "ora," "rima," and "aequator," originating from the book's title, and from the sections "Rima palpebralis," and "Aequator lentis" respectively, present the reader with a lexicon of images tied to the body's visual apparatus, the eye. The eye, however,

need not only act as a receptor of exterior phenomena; it may, in fact, visualize what the mind / body desires. What, then, is one to make of such images? And what is their nature?

In his introduction to the book, Enzo Siciliano describes Magrelli's work as "a poetry that discovers . . . an unevasive and amorous presence of the body:—he offers it up to the light of those who read with the sentiment to communicate a partial truth, but nevertheless an undeniable truth." Further, Siciliano goes on to observe that Magrelli's poetry "takes place in a Morandian light that results from the capillarly exact use of the dry point, of the silver engraving tool" (10–11). It is important here to reflect upon the source of light. By considering the acts of engraving and writing similar, then the scratching / writing of words on a page is the act that allows part of the "light" of language to escape. It is this light that then stimulates the eye to acknowledge its presence. As a result of the scratching, there is a play between form and light by which the form must give resistance to the dispersion of light in order to maintain itself. If one views the lines etched by an engraving tool close up, the edges of the "presence of the body" are not as well defined and clear as one might expect. At the edge of their lines, engraved images seem to escape their form, to diffuse their presence. The "Morandian light" that surrounds the objects is a result of this diffusion that both defines their form and announces their potential undoing.

It is in this precarious balance of form that Magrelli's poetry situates itself. In fact, while *Ora serrata retinae* begins with an initial expression of clarity and truthfulness achieved through the mechanism of the eye, it tends toward a moment in which its organic interdependency with the rest of the body, in all its physiological and psychological uncertainties, takes reign. Writing, like drawing or etching, can only be an attempt toward definition, the poet's desire to "cut a figure well:"

A poetry that would recompose
the images that precede it
is a figure par excellence.
It is man's behaviour
in front of his fantasy.
To cut a good figure
means to cut
a figure well,
the design that would return
to the object its lines,
to thought its features.

(*Ora* 100)¹

The subjective "I" subsists in a Morandian light of "perpetual crisis . . . that can resolve itself only through writing's limited certainty" (Siciliano 11). This persistent light continues its presence in Magrelli's second publication, *Clecsografie*. The rest of this paper, by exploring Magrelli's communicative

project as expressed through a poetry that investigates the nature of physical forms as perceived and projected manifestations, will concentrate on this brief publication that later infused itself into the 1988 collection *Nature e Venature* just as subdued light might. Further, I hope to be able to show that the less than well-defined forms or stains ("Clecs" being from the German for "stain," *Klecks*), that the light defines, are for Magrelli artisanal constructs whose images communicate the essence of their makers. Both *Ora* and *Clecsografie* return to Plato's 'cave' as an analogical reference: in *Ora*, via physical perception / representation, and in *Clecsografie* through the projection / reception metaphor of the film screening-room.

Since I intend to address the perception and projection of forms, it seems apt to project Magrelli's work on a specific background. The curtain I would like to drop behind our consideration of *Clecsografie* is a patchwork of some of Henri Bergson's propositions on the nature of images. Given Magrelli's conjuring of the film screening-room and the assignment to "cut a figure well," and Gilles Deleuze's recent appropriation of Bergson in his cinematographical discussions, the chosen background seems more apropos. I will limit myself to citing the following: "My body, an object destined to move other objects, is, then, a center of action; it cannot give birth to a representation;" "The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them;" "The recognition of a present object is effected by movements when it proceeds from the object, by representations when it issues from the subject" (Bergson 20, 21, 78). These propositions find fertile ground in the poems we are about to consider. The "movement" of recognition presented in the last proposition gives a primary illusion of shared movement. However, since movement for Bergson is not only indivisible but also discontinuous between bodies, any possible representation of such movement can only be an uncertain representation.

This sense of the world dominates the pages of *Clecsografie* from its first composition. The images of the poems are reminiscent of the stains that reveal themselves as patterns on a tablecloth, or of the clutter of objects on a dinner table:

At times from the floral design
of a table cloth there rises
an animated Europe.
During the meal
among the brimming bottles,
filiform and shadowy rises
slowly the profile of Greece,
the swan.

(*Clecsografie* 5)

While some writers have expressed their view of Magrelli's poetry as a return to the "ancient idea of poetry as a source of knowledge" (Arcurio 114), they could only have done so by overlooking the inherent uncertainty

of poetry. Giulio Di Fonzo, in his "Magrelli e la pagina bianca," describes the condition of the modern writer as "fluctuating between aphasia and anxiety . . . between suicide and apotheosis" (73). Subsequently, however, he too falls into the old trap of regarding poetry as a truthful representation when he states that "Magrelli [achieves a point where] the entire universe is transformed into a hand that writes" (75). Undoubtedly, Magrelli achieves the projection of a universe upon the "white page," but it is a projection of his own hand writing its particular universe. Further, since the hand keeps writing, and does not halt its progress at a "truth," Magrelli writes an active field of images that runs counter to the ideology that regards poetry as a point of confluence for the universe and therefore as a source of knowledge.

The transition from *Ora* to *Clecsografie* is from the house of the body to an external habitation, situated in contemporary technological culture. In the latter, though the dominant theme is one of projection, the house of the body is by no means abandoned. The apparatus of the eye projects the world on the "screen" of the mind, while the technological mechanisms of *Clecsografie* are a further extension of the eye. Technology becomes a phenomenological tool that appears to dissolve the divisions between subject and object, categories that are by their very nature uncertain. A writer cannot possess what s/he writes; it is but a shadow that covers the whiteness of the page. Possession implies the appropriation of the object, not merely of the shadow it casts. This, of course, is an impossibility, since we base our knowledge on the mere shadows of things that remain in themselves unknown. It is even impossible to know and possess one's own thoughts, since they too are a product of that shadow state that is the body.

Images, whether extrapolations of *klecks* or designs, or of cracks or photos, are received stimuli. The table presented in "At times the floral design" subsequently becomes surrounded by a "flying city," which contains the house, the tables, the stains and the ideas that all these elements engender. Presenting the city as:

A flying city, self-propelling,
poised over a forest
of pile work, mobile
in the enchantment of weight,
in the grace of distribution,
tilting,
that consumes it. Along its canals
full with fruit, loaded down with fruit salad,
pass boats with twisted keels
like vertebrae, twisted
by the water, oblique,
barely in balance.

(*Clecsografie* 6)

Magrelli defines it as the place in which humankind, and the world it

creates, exists in fragile equilibrium. In keeping with other imagery from this series of poems, the city formed by these convergences takes on the semblance of a stain that gives up its details only to a careful and persistent eye. Taking on a life of its own, the city becomes the place where all images originate as perception, the center that emits all information as a technological representation. It receives information from outside the body "along its canals," and transports this along all the available senses, loaded as in "boats with twisted keels." The whole system of physiological function, including of course visual perception, is a network created between the world, the body, and the brain. The following poem recalls similar preoccupations in *Ora*:

For each line a number,
as according to logismographic norms.
Thought calculates its appendages
and calls them by name.
I transfer the stone figures
being covered by water
to the distant heights,
so that their submerged lineaments
will not be dispersed.

(93)

While in *Ora* the sources of the stimuli seem to be restricted to the processes and instruments of writing / etching / scratching, in *Clecsografie* they are more varied in provenance. First of all, since the eye is no longer the dominant organ of perception, we find verses such as: "I receive from you this cup / red to drink to my days / one by one" (7) which point to the internalization of elements metonymically tied to the cup. The crack that eventually appears in the cup becomes apparent only after the liquid that hides it has been drunk. The act of drinking recalls the liquid movement of the "canals" of the city, and is further to be regarded as a mode of communication that reveals, or delivers, its message when everything has been unloaded from the "boat." The images presented offer not only byways for the movement of messages, communication, but they in fact are themselves almost iconographic in nature, representing themselves as modes of communication. This also expresses a desire of linkage with the outside world by alluding to the possibility of a flowing together.

Further, the revealed sign, the crack in the cup, offers a new "sonorous" landscape, such as the intertextuality reflected by the Auden epigraph that accompanies the composition: "And the crack in the cup opens / a path to the land of the dead." Again, we are dealing with communication, albeit a silent communication, in which a present but invisible crack not only alters our perception of all cups, but gives infinite resonance to the poetry that mentions it and the poem from which it is quoted. The cup of "I receive from you this cup" is an object that possesses the power of transference. It

is itself transferred from one person to another, and, in its use, it transfers its contents to whoever drinks from it. Almost as if it were a chalice of communion, the events and circumstances surrounding the cup's users, the attributes of one person can be imagined to be transferred to others. This, of course, can only be done by projection in relation to the crack, the epigraph, or the verses. The images of cracks, canals and patterns function as pieces of a puzzle for the (re)construction or acquisition of a life and its experiences, a complex of patterns that appears as nothing more than a stain.

For Magrelli, writing is a process by which the covering up of the page by the writer traces a movement, both present and invisible, whose "partial certainty" is revealed by the act of concealment. In other words, the placement of words on a page represents a wounding of the blank page as well as a concealment of the resulting scar by the presence of the word. What initially presents itself as a stain, as something that is not readily discernible as writing, calls into play all of the reader's interpretative and observational skills; a fine movement on the page, a trace that forms itself after the careful invocation of the writer / reader. These seemingly amorphous marks initiate the process of communication by building up tension fields between the surface of the page and that of the eye that reflects it, as well as the hand and the intellect, which act upon the visualized.

Communicative designs wind their way through the poems of *Clecsografie*; the movement of the Earth in its orbit (9): "In the silence, in the shadows, / I imagine the earth that spins / beneath me patient / producing only / this rustling wind / upon its surface;" the migraine, recalling the sutures of the skull and, by association, the cracks of the cup (10): "The migraine closes in, the drums / roll from below, / from the nocturnal hemisphere;" and "the features of a loved one" (11): "Every day is a fragment of that body / familiar but unknown, / maybe a cheek, maybe / only an eyelash;" thereby giving relevance to the senses and the creativity of intuition. These perceptions of physiological origin are contrasted, in the second part of the book, with stimuli received with the help of technology.

Beginning with "At the movies . . ." (11), the body lets itself be seduced and carried by the reflected light of the silver screen. In fact, the body becomes somewhat passive: "I am the screen of the screen, I surrender / the vast copresence of my body / to a lunar work. Bystander, absent, / I am the patient of my passion" (14). Human thought is characterized by visualization, rather than linguistic signs. The written word is unstable as a visual representation because of its inherent signifier / signified discrepancies. The poem below represents just such instability, as it relates to the written word, to poetry, and finally to the being that has become the expressive medium, whether it be as word or as "screen of the screen:"

At the movies, convalescing, given
to a quiet physiotherapy,

the exposure to a reflected clarity.
 Fervent exchange,
 in search of healing,
 I am the screen of the screen, give up
 the vast copresence of my body
 to a lunar work. Bystander, absent,
 I am the patient of my passion.
 Still in the divided dark
 I observe the lights descend,
 its catabasis.

I stop in a forest,
 watch the film of snow
 fall on the landscape, on the creche
 of this artificial night, curved upon
 the mute hall in the current of the story.
 I stare at that illuminated window
 and catch someone who walking behind
 the window glass makes a sign,
 gesturing to these people,
 invalids, ill, posing
 for a group photo.

(Clecsografie 14–15)

The relationship of the observer to the film screen annuls any possibility of constructing a passive narrative, and further undermines a subject / object relationship by making the observer / observed positions reversible. The “current of the story,” the pure energy it projects, is similar to the energy of the being and the poetry it populates. While projection is also an element found in Magrelli's earlier work, here the identification of the being with the machinery of communication, and their mutual calibration to a zero level by which the security of a linear narrative is lost, sets its roots in the verses below.

Mail, horrendous invention,
 transmute into writing the cough,
 the impatience, a sudden move, spiteful.
 It is strange that technology
 could take us closer to nature,
 to the sighs, to the smiles of the telephone.

(Clecsografie 16)

In this piece, and the one that follows, the zeroing of the being traversed by technology becomes complete; all that remains is communication. The being is codified into the field of technology, becoming but a numeral:

If in order to call you I dial a number
 you become a number,
 carry the features

of the combination to which you answer.
 The repeating three,
 the nine in third place,
 reveal something of your face.
 When I need you
 I have to draw your figure,
 I have to give birth to the seven figures
 analogous with your name
 in order to open the safebox
 of the living voice.

(*Clecsografie* 17)

In technology, only the instruments of communication, in other words, that which expands and extends the message along its wires, rays, and radio waves, are important. A microchip or circuit board communicate only their design and the possibilities of altering the processes of communication; they have nothing to do with the nature of the messages that they receive or emit. The possible interferences that “alter the dialogue, multiply it,” that form a “horrendous trail of words, phrases, / the multicephalous and deformed monster / that calls to me from the depths” (19), are disturbing because they deny the possibility of knowing through direct contact. And, in turn, poetic language produces a sort of static that hovers over the literal, rendering communication less direct. The technology that represents communication without actually being communication confirms the fragile equilibrium in which the being subsists. The artist is faced with two harsh realities: first, s/he is not necessarily able to conform the medium to the intended message, and second, each statement is always a re-statement that contains no possible linearity that would lead it to an original source, since in each re-statement a new (original) dimension is added.

The last verses of *Clecsografie* support this tendency of restatement. It is impossible to distract Magrelli from his poetic path; the “monster” is adopted and demonst(e)rated without fear in a non-narrative series of verses. These, free from the tyranny of the being, are organized in a sort of Duchampian listing that declares both their independence from, and their interconnectedness with, things in the world:

What will be of me?
 To become a traitor
 To become one of the judges
 To become my own master
 Conceive hope
 Be alone
 Road turning upward so
 As to vanish from sight.

(*Clecsografie* 21)

In the process of writing / reading one must indeed be a “traitor, judge, and

master." All of these are traits that prevent dominion, and that contribute to the process of becoming for which poetry stands. The chameleonic writer / reader has to be ready to meet language at every level of its treacherous paths.

Finally, Magrelli's poetry has found singularly favourable some of the parameters set out by the "Innamorati" poets. While *Ora serrata retinae* seems to have limited itself to the relationship between the being and the "enamoured" and "coloured" word, *Clecsografie* comes much closer to a "rapturing" word. While the equation thought / mind = lie / shadow may seem rather pessimistic, Magrelli's work rescues poetry from the "suicide and aphasia" extremes of Di Fonzo's scale. It achieves this through its continual references to shadow areas that are components of artisanal expression: a floral pattern, a cup, an excerpt from a poem, or even a microchip. All of these find referentiality outside the system that holds them; they in fact open a world of new possibilities in their acquisition.

The artisan provides a way of working within the matter of the world. His products, among which we may also include things technological in nature, emerge onto the landscape as conditioned extensions of unconditioned elements of the world. The things we take for granted, the things we no longer see in their presence, are exposed to a new light, are scrutinized from a new angle. In other words, the word / stain gains ground by recalling images and reconstituting fragments of experience. As such, *Clecsografie* summons up the staining power of words to illustrate various artisanal effects (the city, the cup, writing, projection) that take us further toward the *factum* of "language."

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NOTES

- 1 All translations from the Italian are mine.

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