
With this publication, Roberta Payne gives us an elegantly written compilation comprising 92 poems by 35 Italian poets, published over the course of approximately 100 years, from the 1880s to 1964. She presents the original and the translation side by side, a format that allows the reader to appreciate fully the author's exquisite command of the English language and her close reading of the originals. The addressees, as she herself states, are scholars familiar with other translations of some of the better-known poems in the volume, the "casual reader of poetry who seeks a window into another world," and "students in an academic setting who are seeing that world for the first time" (xxii). On all these counts, Payne's book is highly successful and eminently readable.

In her Introduction, she explains that the decision to frame this period of the Italian lyric, beginning with the Unification of the country and extending to the time of the *neovanguardia*, is to a large extent arbitrary, as is the selection of representative poems. Modern Italy has its roots in the Risorgimento and in this book, as in many anthologies of twentieth-century Italian poetry (see Edoardo Sanguineti [1969], Elio Pecora [1990], Lawrence Smith and John Picchione [1993] for example), modern Italian poetry is ushered in by some of the canonical writings of Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli, and Gabriele D'Annunzio and, in some senses, culminates in the poetry of another famous triad: Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale and Salvatore Quasimodo. Interspersed among these conspicuous figures are the Crepuscular poets, the Futurists, the Neorealist, and other Hermetics, such as Alfonso Gatto. These authors are well represented, but Payne's book also includes several women poets, namely, Ada Negri, Sibilla Aleramo, Alda Merini, and Margherita Guidacci, who are excluded from some anthologies such as Elio Gioanola's *Poesia italiana del Novecento* (1986), as indeed are many other women poets. The volume concludes with a very useful Biographical Note on each of the poetsanthologized.

Roberta Payne is masterful in rendering the full range of lyrical compositions, from the mournful notes of Giovanni Pascoli to the Orphic verses of Dino Campana. To illustrate, I quote a sample from Pascoli's "Novembre":

Silenzio intorno: solo, alle ventate,  
odi lontano, da giardini ed orti,  
di foglie un cader fragile. È l'estate,  
fredda, dei morti.

Silence, all around: only on the gusts of wind,  
do you hear faraway, from gardens and orchards,  
a fragile falling of leaves. It's summer,  
the cold summer of the dead.
Lines from Campana’s challenging “La Chimera” are rendered with comparable finesse:

Non so se tra roccie il tuo pallido
Viso m’apparve, o sorriso
Di lontananze ignote
Fosti, la china eburnea
Fronte fulgente o giovine
Suora de la Gioconda.”

I do not know if among rocks your pallid
face appeared to me, or if you were
a smile of unknown
distances, your bowed ivory
forehead gleaming O young
sister of the Mona Lisa.

The substitution of the capitalization at the start of each verse is a conscious effort on the part of the author to provide a communicative translation, as opposed to sticking to the “letter” of the original text.

Gabriele D’Annunzio’s exotic verses are also rendered with adroitness and thoughtful consideration of rhythm, tone, and tropes. The haunting effect of the opening lines of “La pioggia nel pineto,” for instance, is captured in its entirety:

Taci. Su le soglie
del bosco non odo
parole che dici
umane; ma odo
parole più nuove
che parlano gocciole e foglie
lontane”

Hush. On the edges
of the woods I can’t
hear words
you say, human words;
but I hear newer words,
that drops of water and leaves speak
far away.

The author is comfortable dealing with Giuseppe Ungaretti’s minimalist “Soldati,” as we can see from the following excerpt:

Si sta come
d’autunno
sugli alberi
le foglie

We are like
in the autumn
on trees
leaves.

And she is equally at ease with the dense allusiveness of Eugenio Montale's poetry, as these few lines from "Vasca" attest:

passò sul tremulo vetro
un riso di belladonna fiorita
di tra le rame urgevano le nuvole,
dal fondo ne riassommava
la vista fioccosa e sbiadita"

over the tremulous glass
a smile of flowering belladonna floated,
the clouds pressed through from among the branches,
the fleecy, washed scene / resurfaced from the bottom.

The Futurist experimentation of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Aldo Palazzeschi, Corrado Govoni and Luciano Folgore, which has been confronted by relatively few translators, is well within the competence of Roberta Payne.

The only quibble one might have with this fine anthology lies in the challenge of providing an adequate number of poems to introduce the essential themes and techniques of each contributor, especially for figures less well known to the non-specialist. Most amply represented are Ungaretti, Quasimodo, and Montale with 8-10 poems each, of varying length. Several other poets have two or three of their works reproduced, while 12 others appear with only one composition. Although there is great range of themes as well as styles, it can be argued that the reader will find it difficult to gain a substantial sense of the individual authors.

This consideration aside, Roberta Payne's book is a welcome addition/edition to the growing number of outstanding English translations of modern Italian poetry, which include the work of such translators as Jonathan Galassi, William Arrowsmith, Allen Mandelbaum, Joseph Cary, Ruth Feldman, and Edith Farnsworth, to name but a few. If her objective was, as she says, to "offer [the poems] not as a definitive but as a pleasant anthology of some of the best that is Italian both in the original and in translation" (xxii), the author has succeeded admirably. Indeed, Payne's translations rival the best that are presently available in the English language.

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