



Sandro Penna, *Within the Sweet Noise of Life*

(Translated by Alexander Booth,
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by Graziano Krätli

There are essentially two ways to review a literary translation. One consists in addressing the *text as translation*, or a dialectic between a source and a target, an approach that tends to privilege the role of the translator over that of the author. The other considers the *translation as text*, of which it understates or ignores altogether its linguistic difference to focus on the achievement of the author instead. Depending on the competence and intellectual agility of the critic, a third way is possible which variously combines the other two. While the second is the standard critical approach for nonfiction works, reviews of more creative forms typically follow one of the other two, although poetry tends to call for the first one. This is, anyway, the one that I will follow with the book under review.

Content-wise, *Within the Sweet Noise of Life* is the latest English-language translation of selected poems by Sandro Penna. As a physical object and commercial product, however, the book represents a crosscultural as well as a transnational initiative. In addition to an Italian poet, we have: an American translator who has lived



in Rome and is currently based in Berlin; an Indian publisher of (mostly) non-Indian authors; the typesetting in Kolkata, West Bengal; the printing and binding in East Peoria, Illinois; while the distribution is handled by the University of Chicago Press in North America and by the London office of Yale University Press in Europe. Given the international character of the book, it is reasonable to think—or to hope—that its critical reception will follow suit, and other reviews will appear in Italian, Indian, British, and American periodicals.

As it happens, this is not the first instance of a selection of Penna's poems to be published in India. In 1988, Hanuman Books, a small press founded two years before by Raymond Foye and Francesco Clemente, brought out *Confused Dream* (1988) under diametrically opposed editorial circumstances. Despite the title, this was not a straightforward translation of *Confuso sogno* (1980), a posthumous collection edited by Elio Pecora, but a selection from this and two other editions of Penna's poems, by the editor and translator George Scrivani. Hanuman Books had its administrative and editorial offices in New York's Chelsea Hotel, while the production was handled by the Kalakshetra Press in Madras (Chennai), from where Scrivani would ship the locally printed and bound books to America.

Confused Dream is one of a kind, both for its format (smaller than a playing card) and the selection (apparently based on three collections, of which only two are clearly identified), but it is one of the first editions of Penna's poetry in English. The first was translated by M.J. Shakley and Ian Young, edited by Young and Anthony Reid, and published in 1975, when the poet was still living. It is not listed in the bibliography appended to the 2017 Meridiani edition of Penna's poetry, prose, and diaries, and it is now untraceable. Next came a selection of over one hundred poems by W.S. Di Piero (1982), a distinguished American poet and translator of, among others, Leopardi and Leonardo Sinigalli. Di Piero started working on Penna a decade before, and his edition (the only with parallel text) remained the most accomplished and authoritative until Alexander Booth's, who follows it often (Di Piero is the only previous translator mentioned in the acknowledgments) and even more often surpasses it. Less remarkable and convincing, although not entirely irrelevant, are the subsequent translations by William Jay Smith (1989), Blake Robinson (1993) and Peter Valente (2014), the latter admittedly consisting of "'free' renditions or variations" forming the translator's "personal portrait of Sandro Penna."

For a translator, referring to his or her predecessors is as inevitable as necessary. In fact, as necessary and inevitable as confronting the original, which in this relationship is mediated—both clarified and obfuscated—by previous versions. The resulting polyphonic conversation, in which the translator listens simultaneously to the authors and his past interpreters (or, more precisely, to the author *through* his past interpreters), may be challenging and frustrating, but has the advantage of supplying models and benchmarks, therefore providing the incentive and the motivation to act critically and selectively—by rejecting, adopting, and adapting what others have done before. Of this process (which occurs *anyway*, whether the translator consults previous versions or not) *Within the Sweet Noise of Life* provides an admirable example, whose success combines



an intimate, nuanced understanding of the Italian text with a genuine and felicitous poetic sensibility.

Like past selections, the book begins with “La vita... è ricordarsi di un risveglio,” the poem that Penna considered his first and wanted to open his poetry collections. Booth renders it by adopting or rejecting previous solutions. ‘Waking sad’ (for “risveglio triste”), ‘broken body’ (for “corpo rotto”), ‘sudden release’ (for “liberazione improvvisa”) and ‘A crisp and colourful sea’ (for “un mare tutto fresco di colore”) all come from Di Piero, while ‘uncertain light’ (for “luce incerta”) is Smith’s choice (Di Piero translated ‘tentative’ and Scrivani ‘dim’). Booth further corrects the verb tenses in the first stanza (‘to remember waking... / having seen... / having felt’), following closely the original from which both Di Piero and Smith, let alone Scrivani, had departed. But instead of repeating ‘outside’ (“fuori”) in the closing couplet, he opts for ‘beyond,’ an interpretive departure that emphasizes the progress of the poet’s eye, from inside the train compartment outwards, as well as ‘beyond’ the figure of the young sailor to the ‘crisp and colourful’ sea outside.

More complicated is the business of “Guardando un ragazzo dormire.” Here (as elsewhere in *Confused Dream*), Scrivani is forced by the miniature size of the page to alter the structure, and therefore the meaning, of the poem, drifting away from the original text and getting bogged down in interpretive maneuvers that culminate in the nonsense of the final couplet. Robinson, whose title is closest to the original, translates “in riva al mare” to ‘oceanside’ (a term more often associated with real estate) and “dormiranno” to ‘will go to sleep’ (literally *andranno a dormire*). Booth lowers the age of the subject, both in the title (“Watching a Young Boy Sleep”) and in the translation of “fanciullo” with ‘little one,’ and does away with full stops (a consistent approach throughout the book, and a curious one for a translator who, in many other respects, follows most closely the Italian text). Even so, his version sounds more like poetry than translation, and (unlike that of his predecessors) doesn’t make the reader wonder about the original.

None of the three, however, seems to realize the fundamental, Empsonian ambiguity of the poem and the consequent possibility of alternative readings. The opening line is consistently understood and translated as if written “Tu morirai, fanciullo, ed io ugualmente”

You’re going to die, kid. / And so am I. (Scrivani)

Lad, you’ll die, and I the same. (Robinson)

You’re going to die, little one, and so will I (Booth)

although the Italian actually says “Tu morirai fanciullo ed io ugualmente” (‘you will die a young boy, and so will I’), which makes for a very different statement. Here “fanciullo” does not indicate the recipient but rather the archetypal Romantic condition—inherent in the poet and the artist in general—of remaining ‘forever young’ (or, in Penna’s version, ‘young and boyish’). An interpretation reinforced by the comparison between the “ragazzo” of the title and the “ragazzi” of the next couplet: “Ma più belli di te ragazzi ancora / Dormiranno nel sole in riva al mare.” Although a metrical



reading suggests that “ancora” refers to “ragazzi” (and as such it has been translated), the possibility of an alternative interpretation, according to which “ancora” refers to “dormiranno,” cannot be discarded a priori. The question, in fact, is not whether one interpretation is more correct and justified than the other, but that both are possible and contribute to the overall meaning of the poem.

This is not the case of “Io vivere vorrei addormentato / entro il dolce rumore della vita,” Penna’s most famous couplet, the most quoted by his readers but also the most hated by its author (Penna 1132). Although its compact eloquence makes it arduous to translate (and for this reason, I suspect, it has been avoided by most English-language translators), it doesn’t have the bombastic momentum of Ungaretti’s “M’illumino d’immenso” or the symbolic thrust of Quasimodo’s “Ed è subito sera.” On the contrary, it is a rather straightforward and candid—even boyish—personal manifesto, or mantra, riding on the perfect interdependence of content and form (the alliterative, soothing movement of the twelve syllables) for its persuasiveness and purpose.

Di Piero’s version (‘I’d like to live falling to sleep / inside all of life’s sweet noise’) is clumsy and uninspiring. He renders “addormentato” (‘asleep’) with ‘falling to sleep,’ adds ‘all’ as a fill-in, and the result, if translated back in Italian, would be slightly awkward: “Io vorrei vivere addormentandomi / entro tutto il dolce rumore della vita.” Booth, on the other hand, avoids the pitfall of a literal interpretation and chooses a more creative approach, although one that relies on an accurate and intimate, indeed affective, understanding of the original text. He rightly sees (and hears) the poem as a lullaby, for which the “dolce rumore della vita” provides the motif and the impulse, while metaphorically evoking the sanctuary of the cradle and the maternal womb. The result (‘Lullabied I’d like to live / Within the sweet noise of life’) is both elegant and convincing, and the reader only needs to repeat it a few times, sottovoce, to understand both its effectiveness as a translation and its eloquence as poetry.

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