improvised from the last remnants of some actual life," and compares the warning sign in the window of his favorite deli, "Absolutely no outside food or drink," to the words on Dante’s Gates of Hell, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." At the end of this poem, he notes that his apartment window—his vantage point from Purgatory—faces the inferno of the city, but that Paradise must somehow be on the opposite side of his apartment, where he has no view. The ironic humor with which Jollimore scores his descriptions of an often hellish, modern cityscape in this poem are but one facet of his take on the spiritual conditions of everyday life. Paradise must exist, but only in speculations; we live in Purgatory with a view onto Hell.

Occasionally Tom Thomson’s progression reaches a kind of neurotic stasis and instead of describing a specific state of mind, time, or place (in bed, in his office, in denial, in transition, in dreamland), Jollimore places him in Limbo. There are four “Limbo” poems in which Thomson seems to be overtaken with pessimism. Instead of moving upwards, he stagnates in an obsessive self-analysis. He seems to realize that he might just be walking in circles. The first and last of these Limbo poems use the image of the ocean to describe Thomson’s loss of control over his being in the world. Thomson feels like his existence, past and present, is being eroded by the ocean’s dynamo. Nevertheless, the “Epilogue” shows him standing his ground against the eroding action of the ocean, still having come to no conclusions, he and the reader are asked to think: “Tom Thomson, undecided, ponder that.”

In Tom Thomson in Purgatory, Troy Jollimore gives his readers a taste of his talent with and love of language. Yet his penchant for comedy never comes at the expense of a sincerity with regard to the relation of language and world. A reader may be convinced, at least, that the poet still “believes” in the words that he uses and composes into poetry. The playfulness of Jollimore’s verses is not that of a postmodern world-spinner, but that of an old-fashioned storyteller who finds joy and possibility in language. He has created a likeable character, if only for the bumbling and innocent nature of his inquiries. Nor are the ethics and naturalism that underlie these poems overly serious or heavy-handed. The ethics naturally follow the poet’s observations and descriptions. Recently Jollimore’s talent and wit were officially recognized on a national level. As I was writing this review, his volume won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. This short volume of poetry is a pleasure to read and offers an original vision of the world we inhabit.

—David Lummus
Here, Magrelli comes closest to merging his vocations as a professor, a public intellectual, and a post-war Italian poet.

In his latest effort—his first in over six years—Magrelli explicitly juxtaposes the public, political voice of the intellectual with the private, meta-linguistic voice of the poet. Disruptions in the Binary System is fittingly divided into two distinct parts, "Nella tribù" ("In the Tribe") and "La volontà buona" ("Good Intentions"), with an appendix dedicated to meditations on Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. The first section, as its title indicates, is political poems that range in tone from bitter to ironic, from playful to elegiac. Here Magrelli sees the world as victim of a self-created illness, which he as poet is charged to heal somehow. As he writes in "La seduta" ("The Sitting"), comparing his vocation to that of an acupuncturist: "... con i miei versi-argi, dovremi fare qualcosa di simile/per praticare una poesia civile" ("... with my needle-verses/I should do something similar/to practice a civil poetry"). Magrelli feels the need to act as doctor for a sick world.

The poems that precede this are observations of contamination of the political and social world (with themes like immigration, Italian politics, even 9/11). The first in the volume is indicative of the contamination of words and their dissolution in the face of political reality. Entitled "Guace" ("Veace"), a contamination of the words "guerra" ("war") and "pace" ("peace"), the poem tracks a shared language, but one that is shared monstrously, not civilly.

Magrelli's politics here do not strictly follow ideological party lines, but rather pursue a civic ethics that determine the poet's line of sight. He must take examples from the political world of human beings living together. The problem of communication intersects with the problem of politics insofar as they are codependents. Magrelli poses the question: how can sharing space in the world not be a contorted, decrepit situation if human beings see everything and describe everything differently?

In the end, he finds hope—accompanied by terror—in the second section of the volume, which is dedicated to extremely personal family experiences. From "Infanzia del lavoro" ("Labor's childhood"), in which he describes a baby girl's innocence and excitement—possibly his daughter—as she is learning to talk, to "Dormo accanto a mio figlio" ("I sleep next to my son"), in which he describes his son's empty use of curses, which serve to help him construct an adult self. These poems explore the hope for language on a familial level.

The principal that the household is at the root of all political life is not a new one, as Ezra Pound loved to point out. Yet Magrelli's exploration does not just juxtapose politics and family; it shows that the impossibility of a shared language (even among family) is thus the debility of a generative political communication. In "Elegia" ("Elegy"), inspired by the last four lines of Philip Larkin's "This Be The Verse," Magrelli describes the terror he feels at the presence of this illness among his children. Here he considers the death that parents confer on their children with their care, using language that harkens back to "Veace."

Magrelli closes by addressing the roots of miscommunication on the political and personal levels through a meditation on Wittgenstein's perception test—the duck-rabbit. In fact, this is the binary system of perception described in the title and explored in ethical terms throughout the two main sections of the book. If all language and communication is an individual interpretation of what is observed, then the possibility of a shared language is null. The ethical consequence is that no true communication can take place at all and no healthy community (not even family) can form that is not ill. The roots of the illness reside at the neurological level of humanity itself.

However, there is a ray of hope throughout the dialogue about the duck-rabbit, which lies in the recognition that the duck-rabbit remains both entities even if it is reported as being one or the other. Its complexity and its dual nature remain despite the violence that occurs in the acts of observation, interpretation, and communication. If, in "The Sitting," Magrelli suggests that there can be no unification of labor because the word "wall" is not the same for all laborers, then the appendix would seem to suggest that the unification of labor could occur if the complexity of the word was recognized and taken into account in communication.

While most of the poems in this volume express a vivid pain and disillusion at the failure of language, beneath them all is the hope that the poet's doctor's diagnosis could be taken into account, and that plurality, complexity, and even contagion, hold possibilities that do not lead to death and division. The disillusionment of language that he expresses in the postscript to the volume, "Addio alla lingua" ("Goodbye to Language"), is belied by the fact that he writes at all. Poetry, for Magrelli, is a continual battle for language against the bifurcated and logo-immune" zombies that populate his nightmares.

-- David Lummus

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