



“Knowledge is sacrifice” Two Poems by Antonio Riccardi

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Translated by William Wall
([<williamwall@gmx.com>](mailto:williamwall@gmx.com))

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Antonio Riccardi’s *Il profitto domestico* (1996) tells the story, in numinous fragments, of Riccardi’s family home at Cattabiano near Parma. The present texts are translations of two of the poems from the collection but I have chosen to use the versions that appear in the later collected poems (2022) for reasons that I will make clear.

“Abramo” is dedicated to his namesake Antonio Riccardi, a priest born in 1810, and “Reliquia” (“The Relic”) centres on Dositeo Riccardi, a young epileptic who lived between 1859 and 1878 – a short life and one full of pain, the existence of whom Riccardi became aware of by accident when he stumbled on the official record – epilepsy having been a notifiable disease at the time.

The critic Alberto Casadei described the book’s mechanism very well:

[L]e sezioni della raccolta, le sottosezioni, le poesie – come le stanze, gli anditi, le scale dell’antico podere di Cattabiano, proprietà dei Riccardi da più di cinquecento anni – portano nel segreto di una famiglia, evocato per schegge, frammenti, attraverso le vicende dei suoi componenti, remoti e vicini, che della rappresentazione di quel segreto sono insieme attori e personaggi. Poema familiare che, nel suo dare struttura narrativa a universali tragici quali l’amore, il possesso, la morte – individuati da serie foniche e dunque simboliche come soldi-colpa, casa-corpo, cose-ricordi, rovine-reliquie –, rappresenta un unicum nella poesia e nella lingua italiana del secondo Novecento. (Casadei in Borio 2015)¹

¹ [T]he collection’s sections, subsections, and poems – like the rooms, passages, and stairs of the ancient Cattabiano estate, property of the Riccardi family for more than five hundred years – lead to the secret of a family, evoked in flakes and fragments, through the experiences of its members, both remote and close, who are themselves both actors and characters in the representation of that secret. A domestic poem that, in giving narrative structure to tragic universals such as love, possession, and death – identified by phonic and therefore symbolic series such as money-guilt, house-body,

When I began working on the translations I was dismissive of the differences between the earlier editions and the collected poems but very quickly realised that they were significant. I'm a poet, a novelist and a translator, not a scholar of literature, and these variations intrigued me. Let's look at one simple example.

"The Relic", the sixth part of the sequence contains certain apparently minor variations. For example, both the 1996 and 2015 editions open with a simple declaration "Il giorno va sotto. Sale l'inferno / in questa casa"². The 2022 anthology, on the other hand, begins "Il giorno della sagra³ va sotto / e in casa sale l'inferno". In the earlier edition this is followed by a speculative line about the existence or otherwise of hell – "*se esiste o se è vuoto / non si può dire*"⁴ – but the 2022 edition eliminates this line and moves immediately to the voice of the young person, Dositeo, to whom the poem is dedicated: "*Non accusatemi, non accusate / chi vi è stato devoto...*"⁵. In the earlier versions, Dositeo claims to have been devoted "to this house", in the later it is "you" (plural), probably the family or certain members of it, that he addresses directly. This use of direct speech throughout the collection brings to mind, as Casadei signalled, voices crying from a darkened stage-set, and each of the revisions serves to make the speech more personal, more direct.

But the most striking difference comes in the last two lines of the section. In both the 1996 and 2015 editions, he threatens to kill his father "*e io ucciderò mio papa / come un ladro*"⁶. The 2022 version, however, refers to his father much more formally as "*Signor Padre*" and the lines run thus: "*e io vi ucciderò come un ladro / amatissimo Signor Padre*". Again the "*vi*" here is the second person plural, the formal address of the nineteenth century, already putting some distance between the speaker and his parent, but the phrase "*amatissimo Signor Padre*"⁷ shifts the register very much into the ironic. It is, I suspect, a reference to the letters exchanged between Giacomo Leopardi and his father Count Monaldo Leopardi.

In Riccardi's poem, the young epileptic Dositeo complains that he loved his father and begs for his father's love in return ("*ma guarisco solo se mi amate*"⁸) and in Leopardi's letters we find a similar dynamic at work in which the poet begs for his father's love and respect. The young man in Riccardi's poem is an epileptic whose story has been cancelled by the family; Leopardi was a hunchback whose father never really came to terms with his deformity.

Throughout the collection, the cuts and occasional additions of the later edition point to a process of reduction, a tendency towards a more essential, more suggestive and less concrete form. The effect of the whole is to create a magic lantern show of delicately coloured scenes, moments of luminous intensity and emotion, but with an underlying narrative both epic in

things-memories, ruins-relics – represents a unique example in the poetry and language of the late twentieth century. (Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine).]

² Trans.: The day goes down and hell / rises in this house.

³ Trans.: The day of the festival he goes down / and all hell breaks loose in the house.

Strictly speaking, the word "sagra" has no equivalent in English. A complex word with links to the sacred, it can refer to the sanctification of a place, an object or a religious group, the festival of a patron saint, or the consecration of a church, a commemoration of the dead, or of military heroes; more recently a festival devoted to a locally prized product, a harvest or even a fair – e.g. La Sagra della Focaccia, the Festival of The Focaccia.

⁴ Trans.: *whether it exists or is empty / one cannot say.*

Italics follow the original text where direct speech is always italicised.

⁵ Trans.: *Don't accuse me, do not accuse / him who was devoted to you...*

⁶ Trans.: *and I will kill my father / like a thief.*

⁷ Trans.: *most beloved Signor Father.*

⁸ Trans.: *but I will heal only if you love me.*

scope and private in sensibility that creates couplets – to extend Casadei's insight – of home/work, God/shame, reason/passion/, relics/wealth, faith/profit, pain/silence, property/loss, disease/love, ancestors/futures and many more surprising associations.

Translation can be high fidelity but never perfect and the age-old conflict between the literal and poetic only adds to the problem. The word "sagra" (see footnote 3) is a perfect example, but there are other losses that cut deeper. The absence in English of a formal register for pronouns, for example, makes the archaic form of address in "vi", with its connotations of profound respect and even subservience to the father, impossible to convey – compounded by the fact the "you" in English was originally the formal and is identical in both singular and plural!

However, the dramatic intensity of a desperate young man claiming that his "*faith [...] is a staff with a goat's head doubled*" and that he will slaughter his "*most beloved*" father like a thief, or the voice of the priest struggling with his unconfessable sin and "the word of Christ / in the small hours of the night" speaks to us from the darkness in Riccardi's lyrical voice in a manner that is entirely comprehensible to modern audiences in any language.

These poems come to us from the abyss of history, without context, stripped of all that we associate with identity and personality. They arrive like fragments of paper rescued from a fire. I am reminded of a beautiful and tragic Irish song called "An Mhaighdean Mhara" ("The Sea Maiden") which we know was once much longer but which now survives only in three acutely rendered images with voices. *Il profitto domestico* is just such an arrangement of fragments – haunting, intense, suggestive, unsettling and beautiful.

William Wall

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“Abramo”

Monologo e una coda

Per Antonio Riccardi (1810-1887), sacerdote

Sarei Abramo
ma di una famiglia, di un piccolo
popolo buono in una sola casa
a Cattabiano.

Una colpa però ci trapassa
per sanarci.
So solo che è per sanità
non per denaro e non so altro.
E so poco anche di Dio.

Io sono quello che da solo
lascia una traccia ai miei
che poco sapranno del potere
dei nostri doveri e niente
della pietà avuta in destino.

*

Ognuno è il modo che il mondo
soltanto gli concede e allora
ogni cosa rimane come decisa
e segnata: l'esempio dei Santi
le stagioni della terra con i frutti
i soldi e le parole di Cristo
nell'ora più fonda del giorno
quando i morti volano al buio.

Dio è spirito, l'anima tribolazione.
Ora sto a casa e curo i bachi da seta.

*

Eppure qualcosa ci leverà la terra
e le cose per un castigo
e se avrete il centuplo lo patirete
ogni giorno con una pena nuova.

*

Sono io la colpa di questa rovina.
Non dico per me, che sono perduto
ma per i miei che vengono senza sapere
dico per loro la mia colpa
che disfa in cenere e vergogna.

“Abraham”

Monologue and Coda

For Antonio Riccardi (1810-1887), priest

I would be an Abraham
but just for a family, for a few
decent people, a single homestead
at Cattabiano.

Guilt touches us
to heal us.
I only know it is for our good
not for money or God knows what.
And I know little of God.

I am one of those who alone
bequeaths a mere trace for my people
who will know little of the farm,
of our duties, and nothing
of this piety inherited like fate.

*

We are only the way world
lets us be and so
everything remains as ordained
and foreknown: the example of the Saints,
the seasons of the year and their fruits,
money – and the word of Christ
in the small hours of the night
when the dead fly in the darkness.

God is spirit; soul is suffering.
I am at home now. I'm tending to the silkworms.

*

And yet something will relieve us of this farm
and the stock as a chastisement
and even if you should have it a hundredfold
you would live every day a new torment.

*

I am to blame for this ruin.
I confess not for myself who am lost
but for my heirs who come unknowing,
I declare for them my guilt
rotting in ash and shame.

È stato un buco nelle cose, l'amore
per lei e sono precipitato.
Retribuisce con l'oro matto
il male dei padri nel cuore dei figli.

*

Ho visto tutto: cosa è stato e come sarà.
Il prossimo tempo viene da questa radice
con la giusta miseria per chi resta...

Il giorno che lei è morta io non l'ho salvata
non ho avuto il coraggio di restare
e come un ladro sono scappato.

Sulla sua pietra legge chi passa
NON DIRE AD ALCUNO
PERCHÉ SONO MORTA

*

Un sapere per misura.
La scienza di Dio chiede tempo
osservazioni e prove:
nel pulviscolo più lento
che deposita sui mobili di casa
riconosco la varietà del mondo
non sempre la sua verità.
Questa campagna tiene il fiato
nelle mattine di fine estate
quando passano le cicogne d'argento.

*

Sapere è sacrificio

mangio la storia del primo figlio
e lui scompare
né corpo, né cose, né ricordi
cancello ogni traccia, la memoria
del predestinato
che porta il nostro nome
nato per segno stellare
dopo accadimenti infausti
un giorno segnato col fuoco
nella casa al centro del potere.

*

Love for her was a rift
in the world, and I plunged in.
The evil of the father in the son's heart
repaid in fool's gold.

*

I have seen all: as it was and shall be.
The coming times will grow from this root,
with a just measure of misery for those who
remain...

The day she died I did not save her
I could not find the courage to stay
and like a thief I slunk away.

Let the passerby read on her gravestone
TELL NO ONE
WHY I DIED

*

A thought to provide a scale.
The knowledge of God requires time
observation and proof:
in the slow dusting of the universe
on the furniture of the house
I recognise the complexity, but not always
the truth, of the world.
This land holds its breath
mornings at the end of summer
when the silvered storks pass by.

*

Knowledge is sacrifice

I consume the story of the first born
and he disappears –
nor corpse, nor effects, nor memories –
I erase every trace, the memory
of the predestined
who carries our name
born under an unlucky star
after inauspicious happenings
on a day marked by fire
in the house at the heart of the holding.

*

So che la vita ci trapassa e resta
niente e non si tiene: le cose
in casa, i soldi nella latta dei dolci
e la pena di non dire, di non avere
altre parole per un tempo nuovo.

*

Spianare le cifre e i conti del potere
senza lettere di credito, senza sospesi.
Adempirò anch'io
come i miei prima di me
il merito con la fatica.
Se succede qualcosa restate
e non vendete.

*

[Coda]

Scurano 17 Xbre 1863, sul far del giorno...
don Antonio scrive a suo padre
Pier Giovanni, a Cattabiano

*... non si va in Paradiso
se non per mezzo della morte.*

I know life passes through us and nothing
remains and we cannot stay it. The things
of the house, the coins in the sweet-tin
and the pain of not telling, of not having
other words for a new time.

*

Reconciling the accounts of the holding
without letters of credit, without overdraft.
I too am fulfilled
like my parents before me
by the justification of hard work.
If something happens stay
and do not sell out.

*

[Coda]

Scurano 17 Oct. 1863, in the course of the day
Don Antonio writes to his father
Pier Giovanni, at Cattabiano

*... there is no reaching Paradise
except by the transport of death.*

“La reliqua”

per Dositeo Riccardi (1859-1878), epilettico

La fortuna si misura in soldi
altre volte con le reliquie.
Della rovina dei miei io non ho colpa
ma ne conservo la misura e la scena.

*

In primavera si era visto
un segno stellare sulla casamatta
e poi una nascita sfortunata.
L'anno, il 1859.

“The Relic”

For Dositeo Riccardi (1859-1878), epileptic

Fortunes are measured in silver
otherwise in relics.
In the ruin of mine I bear no guilt,
still I set down the scale and setting.

*

In springtime appeared
in the casement a signifying star,
later an unlucky birth.
The year was 1859.

Il figlio del primo figlio
riceverà il centuplo con la paura
e avrà in premio la veglia interna.

*

Per sette giorni ha tenuto
una chiave d'oro
sotto la lingua per guarigione.

Nessuno ha mai saputo di certo
né la madre s'è mai rassegnata.

*

Nel punto più basso dell'orbita
finalmente il giorno andava sotto
con tutti i suoi presagi.

Avevano sentito entrare qualcuno
dalla parte della loggia, la mattina.

Era coperto d'erba medica e di cardi,
diceva senza poterlo giurare
ma ancora tremando di paura
come chi ha visto qualcosa,
la più giovane di casa.

Segni indecifrabili però
erano comparsi sulle scale
e nelle stanze di mezzo.

*

*Vedrete che Dio vi darà
il mio sangue da bere.
In questa casa cresce ogni cosa
anche il veleno...*

The first born son of the first born
is cursed with fear a hundredfold
and blessed in turn with silent vigilance.

*

For seven days he kept
a golden key
under his tongue for the cure.

no one knows for certain
not even his mother
if he ever surrendered it.

*

At the lowest point of orbit
at last the day went down
with all of its forebodings.

That morning someone was heard
to enter from the loggia.

A figure dressed in herbs and thistles
according to the youngest of the house
who could not swear to it
who spoke still trembling
as if what he saw were real.

Bewildering symbols however
were scattered on the stairs
and in the middle rooms.

*

*Behold God will give you
my blood to drink.
In this house everything grows
even poison...*

Rimarranno tre
 Odet, Sesto, l'Artemisia
 a tenere il segreto dei segni
 sulle scale e nelle stanze di mezzo
 e nessuno saprà mai
 di un altro quarto,
 il primogenito Dositeo.
 Nessuno di noi, mai più.

*

In casa ogni sua cosa
 è andata perduta
 insieme col nome.

*Tengo dell'oro sotto la lingua
 per guarire, come da suo consiglio
 carissimo Signor Padre
 ma guarisco solo se mi amate....*

Abitiamo la stessa casa e niente
 sappiamo del suo piccolo inferno.
 Né corpo, né cose, né ricordi.

*

Il giorno della sagra va sotto
 e in casa sale l'interno.

*Non accusatemi, non accusate
 chi vi è stato devoto...
 ma sappiate che la fede per me
 è un bastone a due teste di capra
 e io vi ucciderà come un ladro,
 amatissimo Signor Padre.*

*

*Di questa misura sarò misurato
 e qui sarò sepolto, in questa casa
 nelle stanze di mezzo
 come dentro una macchina
 con le mie scarpe di ferro.*

There remained but three,
 Odet, Sesto, Artemisia,
 to keep the secret of the signs
 on the stairs and the middle rooms,
 and no one will ever know
 a certain fourth,
 the first born Dositeo.
 None of us, ever again.

*

At home everything
 was lost
 together with his name.

*I keep gold under my tongue
 for the cure, according to your advice
 dearest Signor Father,
 but I heal only if you love me...*

We live in the same house
 knowing nothing of his small hell.
 Nor body, nor effects, nor remembrances.

*

Pattern Day goes down
 and all hell breaks loose in the house.

*Do not accuse me, do not accuse
 him who was devoted to you...
 You should know that faith for me
 is a staff with a goat's head doubled
 and I will slaughter you like a thief,
 most beloved Signor Father.*

*

*By this scale I will be measured
 and here I will be buried, here in this house
 in the middle rooms
 as in the works of a machine,
 with my iron shoes.*

*Conosco il fondo di questa famiglia
vedo le azioni che ognuno vede
e tengo la mia vita in pari al beneficio
come fossi solo al mondo.*

*

Qui tutti hanno sempre abitato
nel regno dei morti, per abitudine
per vocazione...

 e infatti, ancora
nella stanza che forse era sua
sotto la campana di vetro soffiato
un animale in posa araldica
punta alla farfalla di stoffa
come se tutto fosse vivo e vero.

*

È poco un inferno per me

*ma sappiate ch'io ho più dolore
che vita in avanti a voi,
amatissimo Signor Padre...*

*I have sounded the depths of this family
and I see what everyone sees,
I declare my life equal to the benefit
as if I were alone in the world.*

*

Here everyone has lived
in the kingdom of the dead, by habit
by vocation...

 and indeed, even still,
in the room that was most likely his,
under the bell of blown glass
an animal in heraldic pose
points at a knitted butterfly
as if all were alive and actual.

*

Hell means nothing to me

*but know that I have more pain
than you have life in front of you,
most beloved Signor Father...*

