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Translator Patrick Creagh and the Sound of Italy

Lucia Re

The translations of three of Leopardi's poems by Patrick Creagh presented in this volume are from an unpublished and unfinished manuscript that was meant to include all of the *Canti* in English.¹ Born John Patrick Brasier-Creagh on October 23, 1930 in London, the award-winning poet and translator Patrick Creagh died on September 19, 2012. Descended from the ancient Irish family of Creagh (of Creagh Castle, Doneraile, County Cork, Ireland), he was educated at Wellington College and, following national service with the RAF, at Brasenose College, Oxford, where he read English. At Oxford he met his first wife, Lola Segre. In the late 1950s, the couple settled in Rome, where Creagh worked as a tutor. Following his wife's sudden death in 1960, Creagh returned to London, but a few years later he went back to Italy with his second wife, Ursula Barr—heir to the literary rights for *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and settled in Tuscany, where the couple acquired an old farmhouse with its own vineyard near a Chianti village. Creagh and Barr separated in the early 1980s, and his partner until his death was Susan Rose, with whom he lived in Panzano.

Unlike so many other expatriates, Creagh immersed himself fully into the life, tastes and sounds of Italy, learning to speak like a native and mingling with his Italian neighbors, making wine for many years and proudly playing trombone with the uniformed brass band of the village even as he maintained cosmopolitan connections. Creagh's contributions to the cultural life of Italy were many. From 1966 to 1969 he was responsible for organizing the Poetry Readings of the Festival of Two Worlds at Spoleto, where he featured and acted as an interpreter for such famous poets as Ezra Pound, Pablo Neruda, Allen Tate, Charles Olson, John Berryman, Octavio Paz, Rafael Alberti, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Yevtushenko, Allen Ginsberg and Ingeborg Bachmann. He was writer in residence at Princeton in 1971-1972, and later lectured on Dante at Columbia University. In Rome, he became friends with the American composer John Eaton (also on-and-off a resident of Italy, and a fellow at the American Academy in Rome), for whom he wrote several opera libretti, while Eaton set some of Creagh's poems and translations to music.

Creagh's first collection of poems, *A Row of Pharaohs*, appeared in 1962, followed by *Dragon Jack-Knifed* (1966), *To Abel and Others* (1970), and *The Lament of the Border Guard* (1980). Creagh translated from various languages, including Irish and French. His *A Picture of Tristan: Imitations of Tristan Corbière*—Creagh's own version of works by the Breton author whose poetry he had previously translated—was widely acclaimed. But it was through his literary renditions of Italian writings that he emerged as one of the great translators of his generation. He made available to Anglophone readers a wide variety of works, ranging from essays, stories and major novels by Italo Calvino, Antonio Tabucchi, Sebastiano Vassalli and Gesualdo Bufalino to children's books by Leo Lionni and Gianni Rodari.² In collaboration with Robert Hollander, he

¹ We would like to thank Patrick Creagh's son, Jason Creagh, for granting permission to publish these poems in *CIS*, and George d'Almeida for calling the existence of these translations to my attention.

² Some of his major translations are: *The Selected Poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti* (1971); Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* (1986) and *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1993); Claudio Magris, *Danube* (1990); Vitaliano Brancati, *Bell'Antonio* (1994); Antonio Tabucchi, *Declares Pereira* (1995); Sebastiano Vassalli, *The Chimera* (1995); Anna Maria Ortese, *Grieving Linnet* (1997); Salvatore Satta, *The Day of Judgement* (1999); Gesualdo Bufalino, *The Keeper of the Ruins* (1995), *Blind Argus or the Fables of Memory* (1993), and *Night's Lies* (2000); and Marcello Fois, *Night*

also translated the first three cantos of Dante's *Inferno* for the *Lectura Dantis Americana* series (1989 and 1993). For his translations from the Italian, Creagh won the 1988 Lewis Galantière Award, and he received the John Florio award three times (in 1972 for his translation of Ungaretti's *Selected Poems*, then twice in 1990 for his translations of Gesualdo Bufalino's novel *Blind Argus* and of *Danube* by Claudio Magris). Creagh's philosophy of translation was simple and realistic. "La traduzione non è cosa impossibile, ma necessaria," he stated. "È paradossale che una cosa non diventi meno necessaria, solo perché è impossibile."³ Keenly aware that the meaning of a literary text—especially a lyric poem—resides in "quelle parole, in quel preciso ordine, con quella loro compattezza, con tutta la loro musica, i loro ritmi, le loro pause, i loro silenzi, fino alla minima virgola,"⁴ Creagh brought to translation the same assiduous attention to every syllable and every sound that he gave to his own poetry. Critics and scholars praised in particular his translations of the poetry and prose work of Giacomo Leopardi, which included the *Canzoni (Ten Odes)*,⁵ admired and cited as exemplary by Stephen Spender;⁶ and the *Operette Morali (The Moral Essays)*.⁷

About the sounds of Leopardi's *Odes*, Creagh wrote the following in his translator's note:

He is austere, patriotic, contemptuous, rebellious, and out of step with everyone else because he hears a different drummer. He is proud of his originality, not only of thought but of poetic technique. He revives odd words, makes conscious and consistent use of archaisms and literary echoes, and often constructs sentences that sound more like Latin than Italian. His word order is a translator's nightmare, but frequently creates unique and beautiful effects.⁸

In "The Calm after the Storm," "To Silvia," and "The Feast-Day Evening," Creagh sought to evoke some of the power of Leopardi's greatest poetry which, as he admirably put it, "is often so simple and transparent as to resemble a window with no view beyond."⁹

of the Abyss (2013). His translations include also the Borgesian manual of imaginary plants *Parallel Botany* by Leo Lionni (1977) and the classic *Design as Art* by Bruno Munari (2009).

³ Patrick Creagh in "Tavola rotonda," chaired by Agostino Lombardo, in Rosario Portale, ed. *La traduzione poetica nel segno di Giacomo Leopardi* (Macerata: Centro Nazionale di studi Leopardiani, Giardini, 1992), 170.

⁴ Patrick Creagh, "Quel maledetto 'vago'!" in Portale, 101-06.

⁵ *PN Review* 29 (1983): 11-21.

⁶ Stephen Spender, "Translating Leopardi and Hölderlin" in Portale, 129.

⁷ Columbia University Press, 1983, with introduction and notes by Patrick Creagh.

⁸ Patrick Creagh, "Translator's Note," *PN Review* 29 (1983): 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*