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Writing under cover: Cristina Campo as translator of John Donne

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What happens when an author meets a translator/his translator; or should we rather say when a translator meets an author he/she feels the wish or the need to translate? What triggers the consonance that harmonizes one voice to another? What sort of magic is at work when there is perfect unison? The study of Cristina Campo's translations offers a precious contribution to those attempting to investigate the cultural importance of that unknown area that lies between the original and the translation, a shadowy zone where original and translation, and the voices and subjectivities of author and translator, become indistinguishable. This paper aims to explore the unique relationship Cristina Campo established with John Donne and his poetry, a relationship producing "perfect" translations that reflect a singular solidarity displaying points of affinity between two extremely complex personalities. Cristina Campo meets John Donne at a rather difficult time of her difficult life; lives with the poet for seven long years, during which she wrestles with him and submits painfully to his attraction, and finally decides to break off the relationship writing thus to her editor Einaudi who has been patiently waiting years for the translated poems:

Gentilissimo amico, riceverà tra breve una *quindicina* (o poco più) di poesie di John Donne. Mi sembrano abbastanza belle in italiano, seppure, naturalmente, non bellissime come in inglese. Hanno voluto, *loro*, essere tradotte. Ho fatto il possibile e *l'impossibile* (che quando è spontaneo è facile) per tradurne altre dieci o dodici. Non vogliono, assolutamente. E io non posso forzarle. Non ne uscirebbe nulla. (qtd. in De Stefano 2002: 120; italics in the text)¹

¹ The letter is dated October 14, 1968. Apart from De Stefano's study, other biographies of Campo include: Monica Farnetti, *Cristina Campo* [Ferrara, Tufani, 1996] and the interesting memoir

Cristina's words highlight an attitude of absolute humility towards the original text which she appears to consider almost as a live creature, that 'feels', 'breathes', 'speaks' and, consequently, must be heeded just as one would a live person, in complete conversational responsiveness².

Cristina Campo had begun translating Donne's poems early in 1964, but she did not consign her final draft to her Editor till late in 1970. Thus, it took her just about seven years to come to terms with the English poet; to 'listen' to his voice speaking to her, before she could attempt to offer her own Italian voice in exchange for his English one. Her approach was meticulous and precise: reading and re-reading meant first of all interpreting the text, finding its 'soul', which implied not just affixing to each word an equivalent 'meaning' but deciding what weight the translated word was meant to carry: a long and wearisome search for an equilibrium to which she felt bound, as she firmly believed in Ezra Pound's recommendation that I would like to quote in Cristina's own Italian translation: "Poesia è l'arte di caricare ogni parola del suo massimo significato" (Campo 1991b: 240)³. In one of her rare interviews, Cristina, underlining the difficulty of defining what she called la "giustizia" of a word⁴, declared "La parola è un tremendo pericolo, soprattutto per chi l'adopera, ed è scritto che di ciascuna dovremo rendere conto" (Campo 1998d: 179)⁵. No small wonder that she was to say of herself "Ha scritto poco e le piacerebbe aver scritto meno"⁶.

Who was Cristina Campo, this inconspicuous literary figure? Her real name was Vittoria Guerrini and she was born in Bologna in 1923 into a middle-class family. Her early years were spent in the city of her birth till her father, during her adolescence, was transferred to Florence, a time and a city she would always look back on with nostalgia. In 1955, she again followed her family to Rome, where she lived till her death in 1977 at the age of 54. Throughout her short, and rather tormented life [she was never very healthy

(written by a personal friend of Cristina) Alessandro Spina, *Conversazione in Piazza Sant'Anselmo. Per un ritratto di Cristina Campo* [Milano, Scheiwiller, 1993].

² This attitude is not episodic for Cristina, who described in these terms (in a letter to a friend dated 11.9.1957) her encounter with William Carlos Williams whose poems she was later to translate so successfully: "Se la vedrò le mostrerò un poeta che è stato con me sul lago e in queste notti - ha 72 anni ed è come un cinese antico." (Campo 1999: 62)

³ Under the name "Ars Poetica", which she herself chose for her compendium, Cristina Campo included various fragments from Ezra Pound's *How to Read* and *Letters to Iris Barry* which she had selected, translated and reordered so as to construct an argument of her own.

⁴ "Sentire la giustizia di un testo molto prima di averne compreso il significato, grazie a quel puro timbro che è solo del più nobile stile: il quale a sua volta nasce dalla giustizia." (Campo 1987d: 145).

⁵ Antonio Altomonte's interview with Cristina was originally published by *Il tempo*, in April 1972.

⁶ This well-known description that Cristina made of herself was originally printed on the fly-leaf of her volume *Il flauto e il tappeto*.

and Death sitting on her shoulder was a constant reminder of her fragility 7], she remained a rather solitary and reticent figure in the Italian literary scene of the 20th-century. She lived and died in isolation, and though not completely ignored [she was much appreciated by all those who knew her: Elémire Zolla, who was her companion from the early 1960s till her death, described her style as “perfetto” 8], however she paid the price for being considered aristocratically stand-offish, an exceptional and rather sophisticated creature who had very little in common with the dominating literary circles (she spoke disgustedly of them as the circus) which she did not understand or appreciate; too different to be easily collocated in the Italian tradition as currently accepted in the canon of the 1950s and 60s 9. For many years her reading public was mostly made up of her friends and of the readers of the journals and periodicals for which she wrote, such as *Il Corriere dell'Adda*, *L'approdo letterario* and, later, *Conoscenza religiosa*, edited by Elémire Zolla). In more recent years, however, and since Adelphi published *Gli imperdonabili* 10 in 1987, which was followed, in 1991, by *La tigre assenza* 11 and, in 1998, by *Sotto falso nome* 12, Cristina Campo has found larger numbers of readers, as is also testified by a greater attention on the part of academic critics – though this is unlikely to be something she would have appreciated. Much

⁷ Cristina Campo suffered from a malformation of the heart, which is now routinely treated surgically. In a letter to Djuna Barnes she herself thus comments on the influence that her heart disorder had on her life: “Questi malanni rendono certo la vita un affare davvero delicato, eppure ci preservano anche da molti mali. Mi chiedo cosa sarebbe stata la mia vita senza questo memento sussurrato ...” (qtd in De Stefano 2002: 149).

⁸ John Lindsay Opie, a friend of both, thus recollects: “Ricordo che un giorno, mentre gli raccontavo che avevo letto un testo di Cristina e cercavo la definizione del suo stile, lui si è fermato e ha detto: “La definizione è: perfetto. Cristina è lo stilista più importante di questo mezzo secolo italiano.” (qtd *ibid.*: 99)

⁹ Campo's detachment from the Italian literature of her time was often openly declared as in the following instance of a letter to Mario Bortolotto (dated Pentecost Sunday 1962): “Ho appena l'energia sufficiente a difendermi da ciò che accade in letteratura – a bruciar sandalo e cinnamomo, come Defoe durante la peste, per tener lontano da me tutto ciò che si fa e si dice nelle lettere italiane degli anni '60 ... Pacchi di libri arrivano a E.Z. [Elémire Zolla] – ed è come se arrivassero pacchi di cibi guasti, pezzi di carogna.” (Bortolotto 1998: 246)

¹⁰ This volume collects previously published prose writings edited by Margherita Pieracci Harwell and Guido Ceronetti who writes the preface and the afterword, almost an eulogy, “Cristina Campo o della perfezione”.

¹¹ *La tigre assenza* collects all Cristina's poems, her poetic translations from various European languages and “Ars Poetica”. The volume is edited by Margherita Pieracci Harwell, who is also author of the afterword “Il sapore massimo di ogni parola”.

¹² *Sotto falso nome* is a collection of both previously published and unpublished prose writings of Cristina Campo. It also contains a complete bibliography of Cristina's works compiled by Monica Farnetti and Filippo Secchieri.

of all the renewed attention is due to the untiring effort of her lifelong friend Margherita Pieracci Harwell who has patiently put together, with the help of other devoted friends of Cristina, scattered publications and papers.

Cristina Campo was certainly not a prolific writer; her own rather heterogeneous production is mostly made up of fragments: some poems, critical essays, reviews and articles, and a vast amount of remarkable translations from various European languages (authors she translated from English include T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams and Djuna Barnes). Translation seems to have suited her temperament for reasons it is necessary to explore before concentrating on one of the authors she loved most.

Cristina was a highly inquisitive reader, albeit an intensely selective one. In the afterword to the volume *Sotto falso nome*, Monica Farnetti writes:

È un lettore tutt'altro che "comune", assai diverso da quel *common reader* in cui si riconosceva con trasporto l'amata Virginia Woolf, quello impersonato da Cristina Campo. La cui stravaganza, nonché nelle idee personalissime che collegano e uniformano le sue disparate letture, o nella scelta del tutto particolare di queste, risiede ancor prima nell'idea stessa della lettura che tutte le sottende, e quindi nello speciale tipo di testo [...] che ne deriva e da cui esse vengono in un certo senso documentate. Che cosa legga, e come legga, Cristina Campo non è d'altronde se non l'esatto controcanto di ciò che scrive e del modo in cui alla scrittura s'accosta, nell'appurata, speculare reciprocità fra leggere e scrivere, o fra ascoltare e parlare, che dà della biografia intellettuale l'immagine di un coerente e prolungato episodio di conversazione. (Farnetti 1998: 209)

Margherita Pieracci Harwell has interestingly observed that "Una biografia di Vittoria Guerrini dovrebbe essere prima di tutto una storia delle sue letture: anche il colloquio con i vivi [...] se ne nutre" (Pieracci Harwell 1987: 270). Reading, for Cristina, meant coming into contact with oneself for it implied recognition of the self in the other as in a mirror; a process which she considered sacred and mysterious, but also frightening. Likewise did William Carlos Williams, who so aptly described his relationship with his translator Cristina thus: "You have turned me inside out, stripped me bare and I am not even embarrassed but on the contrary welcome you as a lover and a friend [...] it frightens me – we don't in this world admit such intimacies, we have to hide them from each other but you have found me out, I am frightened by it, it is an intimacy which a man cannot permit in a wife. And yet it is an intimacy which we continually long for ..." (qtd in Pieracci Harwell 1998: 107).

In her biography, Cristina De Stefano underlines the absolute importance of books and reading in Cristina Campo's life offering remarks which, I believe, are relevant to my topic: "La vita di Cristina Campo," she says, "si realizza compiutamente solo attraverso la letteratura. I libri sono stati la sua prima scuola di vita, e hanno finito per diventare, nel corso di un'infanzia so-

litaria, l'unica realtà tangibile della sua vita, l'unica via per accostare gli altri.” (De Stefano 2002: 142)¹³. One further first hand observation from Pietro Citati adds another perspective which helps to understand the particular kind of relationship Cristina established with the authors she read and most loved. The critic refers the episode of having been shown Cristina's room which is “intorno lindura, precisione e ascetismo”; Cristina queries “Non le sembra la camera di Emily?”; Citati comments: “Avrebbe potuto dire: “Non le sembra la camera di Jane?” Visse anche così di perfetta imitazione: che è il modo migliore per essere introdotti nella casa della letteratura.” (Citati 1998: 286).

In an article bearing the title “Scrittori *on show*”, Cristina describes the rift she perceives between the clamour and vulgarity of the official world of letters offering verbal commodities for the general public and the worlds of beauty and peace opened up by her precious silent martyrs on the shelf as she calls her books:

The lovely kinsmen on the shelf – i cavalieri invitti dello scaffale, i poeti e i romanzieri a cui rivolgersi, calata la sera, certi di quelle isole solitarie, di quelle presenze celate al mondo: paragoni di grazia e forze di rivolta. Dietro le nostre spalle, mentre si inorridiva agli *shows* del mondo, c'erano pur sempre loro; e ciò che essi vedevano e giudicavano con noi era in qualche modo già esorcizzato, già vinto. (Campo 1998c: 98)

The feeling of companionship with the authors she loves (Cristina in effect uses the word “amicizia”), as though all together they share a sort of ideal community, renders difference of language a secondary issue in respect to affinity of intent, of vision, of emotion. This dialogic rapport abolishes difference in space and time, as well as difference in language, as author and translator testify the same supreme tension towards beauty, truth and perfection; together they co-operate in building a single literary corpus composed by a plurality of individuals. Translation in this perspective is a sacred gesture of mediation, just as poetry mediates the world around us. Says Cristina,

Poesia è anch'essa attenzione, cioè lettura su molteplici piani della realtà intorno a noi, che è verità in figure. E il poeta, che scioglie e ricompone quelle figure, è anch'egli un mediatore: tra l'uomo e il dio, tra l'uomo e l'altro uomo, tra uomo e le regole segrete della natura. (Campo 1987e: 166)

The poet gives voice to the silent language of the world, the translator gives the poet another voice in a language not his own; thus he lives again in an-

¹³ De Stefano further adds: “Vive costantemente altrove, in compagnia di esseri – autori e personaggi dei libri amati, senza distinzione – che non ha mai incontrato ma con i quali dialoga da sempre [...] E non sono mai dialoghi astratti, ma scambi pieni di passione che investono tutta la sua esistenza.” (De Stefano 2002: 143).

other time and another place: translating is seen as a sort of ritual in which the poet, like a lover, “brucia per riscaldare l’amato e nella parola dare nuova vita” (*ibid.*). Composing and translating are considered fully interchangeable functions; they are intrinsically equivalent.

There is certainly a process of identification at work in which the subjectivity of both author and translator recedes into the background, as though secondary to the poetic word charged “al massimo” with beauty and significance. In this regard, how can one not recall the fact that Cristina Campo is but a pseudonym, one of the many masques with which Vittoria Guerrini veiled her subjectivity¹⁴. However, the complex relationship between poet and translator can be viewed from several other perspectives. We need to look, for example, at Cristina’s idea of perfection, and at her untiring search for the ethically and aesthetically beautiful, the perfectly beautiful. In Cristina’s view, perfection is just another name for beauty, that inevitable starting point and inevitable aim of literary communication: “un giacinto azzurro che attira col suo profumo Persefone nei regni sotterranei della conoscenza e del destino” (Campo 1998d: 179). Beauty is “imperdonabile” in the contemporary world, for accepting beauty is equivalent to accepting death. With the exception of the great poets, “Tutti provano questo terrore [e] preferiscono sparare sulla bellezza o rifugiarsi nell’orrore per dimenticarla” (*ibid.*:180)¹⁵. Perfection, like beauty, is a passion: “... l’ardua e meravigliosa perfezione, questa divina ingiuria da venerare nella natura, da toccare nell’arte, da inventare gloriosamente nel quotidiano contegno” (Campo 1987b: 75); a passion it is not possible to do without. Mario Luzi has pointed out that “Cristina Campo credeva che la perfezione esistesse e, come altri che l’hanno creduto, non sapeva che farsene della perfettibilità. Era là e solo là che bisognava puntare, e non contentarsi di niente di meno” (Luzi 1988). She writes: “È bene avere ideali impossibili” (Campo 1998d: 180).

My argument has everything to gain if we draw on another meaning of the word *perfection*; after all, it does indicate *completeness*, not just *flawlessness*.

¹⁴ I am wary of saying that she would hide; but it is significant to my topic that she wrote under an unbelievable amount of pseudonyms, mostly names of men. It would seem that names (and the identity they carry?) were unimportant to her; or, assuming different names may simply reveal, rather than a wish to masquerade her identity, an independence of judgement and of choice; a need to put the poetic word in the first place; a wish to cover up her tracks. In a letter to Leone Traverso, an old friend, Cristina wrote in 1962: “Ora anche di questo libretto [*Fiaba e Mistero*] mi è venuto un enorme desiderio che *nessuno* si accorga. Una parola è sufficiente per toglierti tutto il piacere di averlo scritto, farti sentire “as public as a frog”, il che equivale a non scriver più” (qtd in De Stefano 2002: 115 – italics in the text).

¹⁵ Relevantly, Cristina Campo quotes her own translation of three lines by William Carlos Williams which describe the same attitude: “Ma è vero, essi la temono / più che la morte, la bellezza è temuta / più di quanto essi temano la morte ...”.

This suggests to us the possibility that Cristina, in silent recognition of her own timid creativity, takes on loan the words of another in order to suggest, and assess, her ideal of perfection; she chooses texts which have already accomplished her idea of “perfect” beauty and writes over them. Writing over, rather than translating or rewriting, seems a more suitable definition of Cristina’s approach. Hers seems to be a form of appropriation of the literary text of another with whom she feels affinity so as to superimpose her own presumably “imperfect” voice on the voice of another. However, in order to write over she must recognize in the other symmetry of style, but above all affinity of vision ¹⁶.

Modest creativity must have been a concern for Cristina who talks about this in regards to Borges whom she quotes as describing his own narrative art thus: “l’irresponsabile giuoco di un timido che non si decide a scrivere racconti e che si distrasse nel falsificare (senza giustificazione estetica, talora) storie altrui”, words that she considers “definizione deliziosamente civile” (Campo 1987c: 90) ¹⁷. The use of pseudonyms also seems significant in this respect, for it implies writing “sotto falso nome”, under cover, just as translating implies writing under disguise. Translation is after all the secluded art. Cristina considered a weakness in herself the wish to have readers. Her ideal was to write for a small number of readers, while communing in spirit with her favourite authors whom she quotes continuously almost unknowingly (Cf. De Stefano 2002: 102). Thus translating, or as I should prefer to say in this instance, writing over suited her aesthetic approach absolutely.

In Donne Cristina Campo found a perfect companion, the kindred spirit, for her re-creative adventure. What she seems to have loved most in the English poet was that he lived his life as an ethically and aesthetically risky process, an attitude that was close to her understanding. She had started translating religious poetry in the early 1960s, especially, but not only, the English ‘metaphysical’ poets Herbert, Crashaw and, finally, John Donne. Donne’s poems are particularly numerous, and the entire collection was published by Einaudi in 1971 under the title *Poesie amorose. Poesie teologiche*.

In her selection of Donne, Cristina includes the translation of 24 poems: 14 of the 55 lyrics in *Songs and Sonnets*; 7 Holy Sonnets; two Hymns, and the Divine Poem “The Crosse”. Her choice seems to derive from her

¹⁶ Consider, for example, what she writes in Spring to a friend, on reading T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, of which she was later to translate some passages: “Ha tutte le caratteristiche del ‘poema perfetto’, ritmo e controritmico, sapore massimo di ogni istante, capovolgarsi continuo di tempo e spazio. Non prova lei, in questi giorni, una sensazione come di bocci che si distaccano con dolore dai rami mentre le foglie cadute vi ritornano in volo?” (qtd in De Stefano 2002: 73).

¹⁷ See also, though in another perspective, Campo 1998b: 58-63.

perception of the English poet which she explains intensely in the two short essays on Donne's poetry that preface the translations. Cristina called her small volume "il mio libro sulla conversione", thus offering us a possible key to her interest in the English poet, as she herself underwent a slow process of conversion. What in fact strikes her most in Donne is the process of change that led Donne to the self-awareness that made possible his subsequent conversion. She is keen to explore this process by following the poet through the various phases of his life that brought him to view the world with different eyes: through his love of Anne More and his love of God, Donne gradually changed, became another. Of the *Songs and Sonnets*, Cristina thus chooses to translate those poems that she finds representing an almost sacred idea of love, for she herself believes the relationship between man and woman to be a mystic union of two beings that are as one. Conjugal love is, however, but one step leading to another phase of the process of conversion. These are Cristina's words from her "Introduction":

Imago mundi si restringe finalmente alle dimensioni di una stanza, un volto, una pupilla in cui, come nei rotondi specchi concavi di van Eyck e di Velázquez, ogni cosa si raccolga senza ferire. E come, di colpo, gli amori non gli appaiono più se non preistoria di un più fine e più compiuto stato, tipi indigeni e risibili dell'autentica storia, la *affectio coniugalis* si fa a sua volta media proporzionale, tipo ancor timido della *delectio Dei*. Venendo meno sulla terra, quel perfetto amore pre-teologico punterà come una freccia nella direzione della teologia. (Campo 1971a: 9 – italics in the text)

To exemplify this, Cristina quotes lines from Donne's Holy Sonnet XVII: "Here the admyring her my mind did whett / to seek thee God; so streames do shew their head ..." ["Ammirarla affilò la mia mente / a cercarti, Signore. Così i torrenti svelano / la loro polla ..."] (Donne 1971: 80-1). Cristina points out that the relationship between man and God revealed by the Holy Sonnets and the Hymns is radical, absolute, exclusive and physical; she adores Donne's faculty of perceiving the presence of God in all things. Here again there are points of contact between Donne's perspective and Cristina's beliefs: for both, their faith was a pervasive and sensuous experience. We may recall how T.S. Eliot, another of Cristina's *kinsmen on the shelf*, described the sensuous quality of Donne's perception in the critical essay that reappraised his poetry; defining the difference between "the intellectual poet and the reflective poet", Eliot speaks about Donne's ability to feel thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility" (Eliot 1961: 287). In one of her own visionary essays, "Sensi soprannaturali", Cristina speaks of the need to experience the intimacy with God with all five senses, almost carnally: "Che l'intimità col divino sia dei

cinque sensi la suprema occasione — *l'occasione della metamorfosi ...*” (Campo 1987f: 231; italics in the text). Once again the affinity between author and translator is impressive.

Symmetry of style and similarity of vision not only encouraged the translating process itself, but made speaking in unison possible, as two lovers who are “mixt equally” (“The Good-morrow”, Donne 1971: 32). Cristina Campo shared Donne’s profound sense of literary communication as a ceremonial event; she writes: “Alta scrittura senza cerimonia non fu possibile mai, fosse pure occultata la cerimonia nella convenzione di un sottovoce” (Campo 1987d: 153). It is likely that both derived this approach from their delight in ritual and in music as Guido Ceronetti so poignantly observes: “L'idoneità di John Donne ai riti e alla musica è perfetta, perché lo è la sua umanità, e l'umanità intrecciata di riti e musica della sua traduttrice mi sembra straordinariamente idonea a fornirne, nel verso e nel commento italiano, un'idea perfetta.” (Ceronetti 1971). The two authors also shared a strong inclination to turn to hyperbole probably for very similar reasons: truth, being a little larger than life, “parla per iperboli esatte” (Campo 1987d: 147).

Cristina’s understanding of Donne’s formal choices also seems exceptional; in her introductory essays she particularly respects the emblematic quality of the imagery, both visual and auditory, which she sees as “un repertorio e un compendio simbolico di tutte le arti umane ed occulte”. She observes:

Nello sfondo, ruderi di cattedrali e monasteri illustri su cui ormai crescono l'edera e l'erba, brandelli di canti liturgici sopravvissuti alle processioni agli antichi santuari [...]. Vi si mischiano doppi di campane e corni da caccia, *flourish and fanfare*, marce funebri e accenti di clavicordo; il gergo del mercato e quello del tribunale, i termini della sala anatomica e il balbettio dell'alcova, il lessico sottile e marmoreo della teologia e il sussurro delle fontane nei parchi inglesi, il grido mitologico della mandragora e il ritornello della litanìa, gli speciosi sofismi del corteggiatore e la tenerezza grave dello sposo. Il tutto aggredito, mischiato col piglio casuale e potente del gran teatro dell'epoca: il sipario della poesia si apre abruptamente su una scena già cominciata, su una storia probabile e pungente di cui nulla è spiegato e che la prima parola rende patente. (Campo 1971a: 11)

Clearly, Cristina, who had a very fine ear¹⁸, could ‘hear’ the multiplicity of voices and sounds breaking through Donne’s verse and right from the start her approach to the translation of Donne was first of all auditory, in a sheer effort of attention to listen to the voice of the poet speaking to her over the centu-

¹⁸ Cristina’s father, Guido Guerrini, was a talented musician; he and his daughter often listened to the English madrigalists, whom he loved particularly (Cf. De Stefano 2002: 106).

ries. This implied reading and re-reading; therefore, concentrating intensely: “poiché la vera attenzione non conduce, come potrebbe sembrare, all’analisi, ma alla sintesi che la risolve, al simbolo e alla figura” (Campo 1987e: 167). This meant constructing phonetic patterns that could echo John Donne’s auditory complexities: his rhythmical splintering and contrasts; his bold, vibrant associations; his phonetic symmetries and asymmetries. It also meant evaluating verbal possibilities with great humility, in order to find equivalent meaningfulness: “come se dovessi spiegare a qualcuno l’esatta posizione e il peso di ogni parola”. She adds: “È il modo più rigorosamente onesto – e dà a volte risultati di una purezza sorprendente”; beauty in composition comes if it will, “per soprammercato” (Letter to Remo Fasani, qtd in De Stefano 2002: 120). In effect, it is great labour; it means wrestling with the poet, as though physically, venturing to re-create, therefore to suppress, as Donne had done before her, all trace of technique, for “nella poesia, come nel rapporto fra le persone, tutto muore non appena affiori la tecnica” (Campo 1987d: 149).

Cristina appears absolutely self-conscious of her own translating process and of the problems she must solve as a translator of Donne’s intricacies; she observes:

In queste composizioni concentriche e decentriche l’idea più astratta riveste immagini di una precisione ottica da tavola di trattato, così che una sfumatura di arbitrio nella traduzione può spostare di novanta gradi la qualità della visione. (Campo 1971a: 13)

Having dived into the depths of the life and works of her *kinsman*, she survives, only just, the tenacious relationship she has established. It has been a symbiotic alliance that has allowed her to offer the Italian reader a perfect representation of Donne’s world, of his rhetorical complexities, of his forcefulness and linguistic vigour; in other words, having understood his world herself, she is able to communicate “soules language / la lingua delle anime” (“The Extasie”, Donne 1971: 36-7). Perhaps Donne’s and Cristina’s own words may serve to represent this relationship:

When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two soules,
That abler soule, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controules.

Così quando l’amore una con l’altra
due anime interanima, quell’unica
anima più compiuta che ne sgorga
vince sulle mancanti solitudini.
(*ibid.*: 38-9)

The resulting “dialogue of one / dialogo a una voce” (*ibid.*: 41) is thus capable of celebrating that ceremonial event which is the art of poetical composition.

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ABSTRACT

The study of Cristina Campo's translations offers a precious contribution to those of us who are attempting to investigate the unknown area that lies in the shadowy zone between the source text and its translation. Vittoria Guerrini, a rather solitary and reticent figure in 20th-century Italian literature, wrote under several pen names, of which her favourite was Cristina Campo, the masque she chose for her beautiful and intense translations of a small but significant collection of poems by John Donne. This paper aims at exploring Cristina Campo's attitude towards translation and the unique relationship she established with the poets she translated. John Donne's translations reflect a singular solidarity displaying points of affinity between two extremely complex personalities. The dialogic rapport abolishes difference in space and time, as well as difference in language, as author and translator testify the same supreme tension towards beauty, truth and perfection. Translation in this perspective is a sacred gesture of mediation.