The Metaphysical Canon in Poetry: on Cristina Campo’s Translation Activity

Abstract
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The article focuses on Cristina Campo’s poetry translations in the context of her literary choices influenced by her predilection to metaphysical literature. The category of metaphysical literature can be understood, first of all, as related to metaphysical English poets like John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan. Metaphysical were also those authors whose writings defied the categories of space and time, and transcended the temporal and geographical limits. One of the greatest Campo’s fascinations from that perspective was the poetry of William Carlos Williams, as well as other authors that entered in her category of imperdonabili. Campo’s translational activity followed a well-delineated path related strictly to her metaphysical inclinations and manifested certain traits of the tendency to establish the personalized canon of real and worthwhile literature that at the same time opposed the mainstream literary choices of that time.

Keywords: metaphysics, translation, canon, Cristina Campo, William Carlos Williams

Cristina Campo is a writer severely neglected in studies on Italian literature. Knowledge of her works is very scarce. The reason for this situation is that her literary activity was located at the margins of the mainstream Italian literary life at the time and, therefore, was neglected by the major Italian 20th century literary critics. The result of this situation is that even now she is scarcely mentioned and dismissed with a short comment in the major Italian literature manuals. Nevertheless, her life and works nowadays receive

1 According to Maria Panarello: “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”. Maria Panarello, “Writing under Cover: Cristina Campo as Translator of John Donne”, Lingue & Rivista di lingue e culture moderne 1 (2009), 35.


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more and more attention from those interested in the 20th-century Italian literature, academics and journalists alike\(^3\). There are, however, still few monographs on Cristina Campo’s work, even in the Italian cultural context. In the international context, one can find some translations of her literary works, for instance in French, in German, in English, and in Portuguese. In the Polish cultural context her work is absent and her figure as a writer and as a translator is barely recognized.

Cristina Campo is a pen name\(^4\) (used constantly from the beginnings of the 1950s) of Vittoria Guerrini, who was born in Bologna in 1923 and died in Rome in 1977. She lived a troubled life, being affected by heart disease since her childhood years. Nevertheless, she managed to dedicate herself to work, sacrificing her life to literature with brilliant effects. She received some help from her parents – with whom she moved first to Florence, then to Rome, as a result of her father’s work requirements – and her life companions, two great intellectualists of that time: Leone Traverso in the early 1950s and then Elémire Zolla who lived with her from the late 1950s to her death. She was a writer, a poet, a literary critic, an editorial consultant and – the activity which is regarded as one of the most important in her life – a translator. Her own artistic production was scarce as far as the number of published works is concerned (but at the same time she used to comment on it in the following way: “She wrote little and she would have preferred to write even less”\(^5\)). Nevertheless the literary activity which was dear to her throughout her life and which brought brilliant effects located on the margins of texts: she commented, explained, introduced, publicized and translated other works\(^6\). The authors she chose to translate became especially dear to her, she used to call them “the lovely kinsmen

\(^3\) Among the evidence of this growing interest one can find the biographical work Belinda e il mostro. Vita segreta di Cristina Campo (Milano: Adelphi, 2002) by Cristina De Stefano (who is also the author of the popular biography of Oriana Fallaci Oriana. Una donna, Rizzoli, Milano 2013, translated into Polish in 2014 by Alina Pawłowska-Zampino as Oriana Fallaci. Portret kobiety) and a well-managed website created by professor Alberto Donati and other scholars interested in Cristina Campo’s work after the conference dedicated to Cristina Campo in 2006 in Palermo. Worth remembering here is also the monograph by Monica Farnetti Cristina Campo (Ferrara: Tufani, 1996) and a biographical essay by Alessandro Spina Conversazione in Piazza Sant’Anselmo. Per un ritratto di Cristina Campo (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1996). The growing interest is strictly connected with the publishing efforts of Adelphi which in the 1980s started to publish different volumes of Campo’s writings, such as Gli imperdonabili (1987), La tigre assenza (1991), Sotto falso nome (1998), Lettere a Mita (1999), Caro Bul. Lettere a Leone Traverso (1953–1967) (2007), Il mio pensiero non vi lascia. Lettere a Gianfranco Draghi e ad altri amici del periodo fiorentino (2011).

\(^4\) Other pen names that she used were: Puccio Quaratesi, Bernardo Trevisano, Benedetto D’Angelo, Giusto Cabianca. Cristina Campo remained however the most important and her favourite one. Her use of various pen names is sometimes interpreted as a gesture of defiance against literary fame, see Monica Farnetti, “Le ricongiunte in Cristina Campo”, in: Cristina Campo, Sotto falso nome, (Milano: Adelphi,1998), 249–250.

\(^5\) “Ha scritto poco, e le piacerebbe aver scritto meno”, as she defined herself in a note printed on the fly-leaf of her Il flauto e il tappeto published by Rusconi in 1971.

\(^6\) Among writers chosen to be translated by Cristina Campo (some of whom were initially translated under her real name, Vittoria Guerrini) were Katherine Mansfield, Friedrich Hölderlin, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Eduard Möricke, Héctor Murenza, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, Djuna Barnes, Cristina Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, William Carlos Williams, Ephrem the Syrian, Peter Lamborn Wilson, Saint John of the Cross, Simone Weil.
on the shelf – the poets and the novelists that one can turn to when the evening comes”\(^7\).

In the conceptual image delineated by Campo, an act of animation of objects takes place: books become living creatures, a kind of extension of the writers who, themselves, become her best friends and companions. As Maria Panarello points out, “translation in this perspective is a sacred gesture of mediation”\(^8\). It was not easy, though, to be an author that Cristina Campo would find worthy of attention. In her translation choices she followed a path strictly connected to her general literary interests in literature which was located in the sphere of originality, mysticism and high aesthetical value.

To describe her literary choices she used the word imperdonabili [unforgivable, unpardonable] which gave the title to her posthumously published collection of essays Gli imperdonabili (Adelphi, Milano 1987). One of the unforgivable features of the writers and poets that were described as imperdonabili was that they were perfect in their craft. Perfection – beauty – is a feature that was considered as inexcusable from the point of view of modern society: to emphasize this Campo cited a fragment of Paterson by William Carlos Williams: “true, they fear / it more than death, beauty is feared / more than death, more than they fear death”\(^9\). Imperdonabili for Campo are, for instance, Marianne Moore, Gottfried Benn, Djuna Barnes, Boris Pasternak and William Carlos Williams. In many ways perfection was united in this perspective with metaphysical qualities that were distinguished by Campo as characteristic of valuable literature. The beauty, the aesthetical value of literature and art (she appreciated also other artists, not just writers and poets, e.g. Pavel Florenskij, Bach and Chopin) was strictly connected, from Campo’s point of view, with the transcendence of physical limits. In the introduction to her volume Il flauto e il tappeto (Rusconi, Milano 1971) she wrote: “(...) it seems to me that the book repeats from the beginning to the end a single discourse. It is or it would like to be from the beginning to the end a small attempt of dissidence from the play of the forces, »the profession of disbelief in the omnipotence of the visible«”\(^10\). Beauty is closely related to mystical values, in Cristina Campo’s point of view.

\(^7\) Cristina Campo [Puccio Quaratesi], “Scrittori on show”, in: Cristina Campo, Sotto falso nome, ed. Monica Farnetti, (Milano: Adelphi, 1998), 98: “The lovely kinsmen on the shelf – i cavallieri invitti dello scaffale, i poeti e i romanziere a cui rivolgersi, calata la sera, certi di quelle isole solitarie, di quelle presenze celate al mondo: paragoni di grazia e forze di rivolta”.

\(^8\) Panarello, “Writing under Cover: Cristina Campo as a Translator of John Donne”, 39.


\(^10\) Cristina Campo, “Il flauto e il tappeto”, in: eadem, Gli imperdonabili, op. cit., 5 [unless otherwise indicated translations into English are mine, M.S.]. It is worth remembering also that Eugenio Montale, whose impact on Campo was great, in one of his letters to his sister (November 8th 1917) defined himself as a friend of the invisible (“io sono un amico dell’invisibile e non faccio conto che di ciò che si fa sentire e non si mostra; e non credo e non posso credere a tutto quello che si tocca e che si vede”), see E. Montale, Quaderno genovese, ed. L. Barile, Milano: Mondadori,1983, 72.
In what way can we understand the metaphysical as a criterion for the organisation of her literary translation canon? First of all, following the classical meaning\textsuperscript{11} of the term, Campo reserved a special place among her literary choices for poets who represented metaphysical English poetry: John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan. She looked in their poetry for the themes that had interested her from the very beginnings of her private literary research, and that later became particularly dear to her after her radical conversion to traditional Catholicism\textsuperscript{12}. She concentrated in her translational activity on the poems related thematically to Christian liturgy and imagery (she chose to translate, for example “On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord” by Richard Crashaw). Of John Donne’s she chose love poems and put a special emphasis on theological poems from the Holy Sonnets, such as ***[“O might those sighs and tears return again”] or ***[“Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse so bright and clear”], as well as the hymns (“A Hymn To Christ, At The Author’s Last Going Into Germany”). The translations of John Donne’s poems constitute an important part of Campo’s works, not so much as the quantity is concerned, as it is for the seriousness with which she treated the task. She began to translate Donne in 1964 but it was not until 1970 when she provided the editor with a final draft of only a few poems because, as she wrote, the others “do not want to, absolutely” be translated, “and I cannot force them”\textsuperscript{13}. The few poems she chose to translate, on their part, wanted to be translated – like an animate being, they demonstrated the will themselves: “They wanted themselves to be translated”\textsuperscript{14}.

As is commonly known, in the 20th century English metaphysical poetry was rediscovered by Thomas Stearns Eliot – an author read with particular attention by Cristina Campo. In the Italy of the 20th century it was Eugenio Montale – in line with Eliot – who proposed the idea of metaphysical poetry which he refers to in the famous interview in 1960: “C’è stata, però, a partire da Baudelaire e da un certo Browning, e talora dalla loro confluenza, una corrente di poesia non realistica, non romantica e nemmeno strettamente decadente, che molto all’ingrosso si può dire metafisica. Io sono nato in quel solco. Tutta l’arte che non rinunzia alla ragione, ma nasce dal cozzo della ragione con qualcosa che non è ragione può anche dirsi metafisica (...)”\textsuperscript{15}. It is worth remembering that Montale, along with Mario Luzi, was the Italian contemporary poet that had the greatest impact on Cristina Campo.

\textsuperscript{11} Following the definition used by Samuel Johnson at the end of the 18th century in his work Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets.

\textsuperscript{12} The conversion followed her father’s death and the Second Vatican Council. Cristina Campo vividly opposed the changes in the Church that were introduced as a result of the Council, above all the elimination of the traditional Order of Mass, which she found particularly beautiful. See DeStefano, Belinda e il mostro, 129 ff.

\textsuperscript{13} Cristina Campo, Letter to Einaudi Publishing House, October 14th, 1968, in: Cristina De Stefano, Belinda e il mostro, 120: “Non vogliono, assolutamente. E io non posso farle. Non ne uscirebbe nulla”.

\textsuperscript{14} Cristina Campo, “Hanno voluto, loro, essere tradotte”.

\textsuperscript{15} Eugenio Montale, Sulla poesia, ed. Giorgio Zampa, (Milano: Mondadori, 1976), 581.
It was through Mario Luzi that Cristina Campo became acquainted with the works of Simone Weil\textsuperscript{16} and she was impressed with Weil’s spiritual thought (“[Campo] recognizes immediately a kindred spirit in the French philosopher”\textsuperscript{17}). It is argued\textsuperscript{18} that one of the key concepts of Simone Weil remained important to Campo throughout her artistic activity, and that is the inclination towards the supernatural – as Weil wrote in her Notebooks, aesthetic contemplation is always sacred, it is “the key to supernatural truths”\textsuperscript{19}.

Following the religious understanding of mysticism, among Campo’s chosen authors one can find also John of the Cross (e.g. fragments of The Dark Night and Ascent of Mount Carmel), who was also one of the authors particularly important to Thomas Stearns Eliot. In the 60s and 70s she collaborated with Elémire Zolla on his project of an anthology of Western mystics. Thus she helped to find, and she also translated, various texts that subsequently appeared in the anthology I mistici dell’Occidente, edited by Zolla\textsuperscript{20}. Following the path of strictly religious translational choices, in 1975 Cristina Campo published (for the publisher Rusconi), with Piero Draghi, Detti e fatti dei padri del deserto, a collection of translations from ancient Christian literature. She commented that “the koan Buddhist technique is not unfamiliar to these terrifying and sweet Christian zen”\textsuperscript{21}, “great crouching lions of the spirit”\textsuperscript{22}.

Also in the poetry of Djuna Barnes, of the most interest to Cristina Campo were the poems with religious references, such as Galérie religieuse. Campo was fascinated with Barnes’ work and she entered a deep spiritual relationship with her\textsuperscript{23} – as she did also in the case of other translated writers. In this case, however, given that Barnes was still alive, she managed to establish contact with her – through Elémire Zolla who tried to invite Barnes to a conference in 1967 and received a kind rejection but at the same time started a correspondence with the American writer that defined herself as the most famous among the unknown writers, and Zolla met her in person during his trip to

\textsuperscript{16} See Davide Vespier, Autoritratto della perfezione. Per una lettura di Cristina Campo, (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2019), 9; Cristina De Stefano, Belinda e il mostro, 51. Besides, it is interesting that Mario Luzi’s works interested Campo as long as he followed the hermetic and metaphysical line in poetry (conf. e.g. Cristina Campo, “Piano per uno studio su “Primizie del deserto” di Luzi”, in: Campo, Lettere a Mita, (Milano: Adelphi, 1999), 381–384), that is, until the publication of the volume Nel magma, in which he abandoned this attitude and focused on reality.

\textsuperscript{17} Cristina De Stefano, Belinda e il mostro, 51. A detailed analysis of the relation between Cristina Campo and Simone Weil can be found in Federica Negri’s monograph La passione della purezza. Simone Weil e Cristina Campo, (Padova: Poligrafo, 2005).


\textsuperscript{20} Davide Vespier, Autoritratto della perfezione, 9.

\textsuperscript{21} Campo, “Introduzione a Detti e fatti dei Padri del deserto”, in: Campo, Gli imperdonabili, 218.

\textsuperscript{22} Campo, “Introduzione a Detti e fatti dei Padri del deserto”, in: Campo, Gli imperdonabili, 219.

\textsuperscript{23} The affinity of literary choices of both writers can be observed even in their similar predilections, as “the historical and literary periods that most interested Barnes were ones in which religion was central to both the mind and the daily experience of the writers she admired. This would include Dante, the metaphysical poets (especially Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan), and T.S. Eliot”. Herring and Osias Stutman, “Introduction”, in: Djuna Barnes, Collected Poems: with Notes toward the Memoirs, ed. Phillip Herring and Osias Stutman, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 14.
the United States in 1969\textsuperscript{24} – and the two writers corresponded with each other (in English) from 1968 until 1972. Campo also managed to get into contact with William Carlos Williams.

William Carlos Williams because – secondly – metaphysical for Campo were not only those writers who concentrated explicitly on religious themes but also all those who generally defied the limits of their time and space. They touched the very core of creation, the very essence of being, and created absolute literature. Obviously, the two categories are intertwined, but it is important to underline this attitude toward literature characteristic of Cristina Campo, who emphasized the need to read with the eyes of one’s soul to understand those writers who transcend the limits of space and time, whose message would remain illegible “for those who read with the eyes of their flesh”\textsuperscript{25}.

In her correspondence with Williams Cristina Campo was able to describe in detail the way in which she had become acquainted with his poetry. In a letter of 10th April 1958, written in Rome, Campo confided (in English) to the American poet: “I met you for the first time in the reading-room of an insane asylum (I wasn’t staying there though) on the hills of Bellosguardo, in Tuscany. I then lost you for about four years. Only last fall, on the lake of Bracciano (in the old Etruria), were your Collected Poems given to me; and I have been reading them ever since”\textsuperscript{26}. It is worth noting that already the first contact with the book of poems is described in a way which activates the metaphysical paradigm, with special attention paid to places, observed in a symbolical and transcendental way: an insane asylum transcends the limits of the mind, the lake of Bracciano is looked at in a perspective that transcends the limits of time and emphasizes its deep historical, archeologic layers (old Etruria).

In 1958 Cristina Campo managed to publish a small book of her translations of Williams’ selected poems. The book is entitled \textit{Il fiore è il nostro segno} and is published by Scheiwiller in the series All’Insegna del Pesce d’Oro (the same series in which in 1956 Campo published her volume of poetry \textit{Passo d’addio}). On the front cover one could find a reproduction of a 16th-century Chinese drawing representing a floral motif. The Chinese graphic appears here not casually as it corresponds to Campo’s introduction to Williams’ poetry where she calls him “a Chinese master of the Classical age”\textsuperscript{27}. Later, in 1961, in a new edition of Williams’ poems prepared with Vittorio Sereni for one of the most important Italian publishers, Einaudi, Campo would explain the meaning of her “Chinese” concept and put it in a wider perspective: “with Chinese it is meant,
as I think, the archetype of the artist which is totally free in his time and in his space, that is from his time and from his space.”

Williams was impressed with Campo’s deep and acute interpretation of his poems. He wrote in one of his letters to her: “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 a wife. And yet it is an intimacy which we continually long for”.

John Donne and William Carlos Williams can be recognized as the two poets of utmost importance in Cristina Campo’s translational activity. To each of them, Campo dedicated a published volume of translations. Each of them – although in different ways – represented the mystical literature preferred by Campo: Donne in the strictest sense, Williams in a more general way. Although they were very distant in time, for Campo they were both very close to each other as creators of deep spiritual literature, rare and truly beautiful. Both became dear to her, remaining for years – in different ways – close companions on her literary path.

The intense contact into which Cristina Campo entered with the authors she translated was undoubtedly one of the most important features of her translation method. The other was the clearly visible will to construct a canon that would follow a clear and well-discernible line. A good example of this tendency to introduce canonical factors into her translation activity is an attempt she undertook in her youth, to compose an anthology of women poets and writers – among which there was a great number of saints and visionaries, following the principle of showing the finest and the purest literature. Some of the authoresses chosen by Campo were: Sapho, Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Angela of Foligno, Saint Catherine of Siena, Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, Jane Austen, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Simone Weil. The anthology was to be entitled Libro delle ottanta poetesse and appeared in the catalog of the Casini publishing house in 1953. But it was never to be published. Nonetheless, the anthology shows how acute and original Cristina Campo was in her literary activity, having thought of such a publication long before similar ideas of focusing on women writers began even to circulate, additionally – in harmony with her own literary predilections – emphasizing in the feminine writing she selected the value of metaphysics.

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Bibliography