Atti e Convegni
IRISH-ITALIAN STUDIES
New Perspectives on
Cultural Mobility and Permeability

Edited by Chiara Sciarrino
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This volume has a relatively long history behind it. It stems from a personal interest in a topic which is fascinating as well as relatively well-known abroad: as a teacher of Italian and a PhD student in Dublin, years ago, I inevitably felt the need to investigate the ways in which Italians and Italian culture were viewed, used in a way or another, exploited and written about by Irish writers and more generally by Irish people. In my mind a precise idea of what Ireland was met with what I experienced as a “foreigner”. Was the image of Ireland I had before living there faithful to reality or was it beforehand influenced by preconceived, prejudiced ideas about the country and its people? But also, to what extent could the same attitude be applied to the view Irish had and have of Italy? These were and are some of the main questions here addressed with an attempt to provide with accounts of multiple journeys during which Italy and Ireland have been variously represented.

The volume gathers some of the papers given at the Tenth Conference of EFACIS (European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies) on *Beyond Ireland: Boundaries, Passages, Transitions*, which took place at the University of Palermo from 3-6 June 2015. The number of contributions on the links between Ireland and Italy was so high that the publication of a single volume seemed the obvious result. Further contributions were sent in answer to a call for papers to offer more insight into aspects of the topic, which, as most Irish Studies scholars working in Italy know, has been explored before, sometimes offering new perspectives on single authors, sometimes venturing forth in various directions and offering a variety of provocative intersections which range widely in both subject and method.
An overview of such studies will be given by Donatella Abbate Badin in the introduction. The volume opens up several opportunities for reflection on single aspects of what seems to be a mutual and everlasting love relationship between the two countries: as a result of a successful conference, the first on Irish Studies to be organised in Palermo and in Sicily, this gathering of contributions invites for more initiatives of the kind in Italy and among Irish-Italian scholars.
Introduction
DONATELLA ABBATE BADIN

“Irish-Italian Studies. New Perspectives on Cultural Mobility and Permeability”

Although both Italy and Ireland are on the fringes of Europe - or because of that - they have shared many common experiences and ideologies throughout the centuries, and have looked at each other with curiosity, admiration, and at times, with suspicion, interacting with each other, constructing images of each other or exchanging texts and ideas as highlighted by the scholars engaged in the present volume, whose analyses of canonical and non-canonical texts are cracks within a surface through which to explore historical discourses - discourses of power and of identity.

A brief survey of Italian-Irish connections

The distinct nature of the encounter of the two lands (much before one could talk of nations) emerges from a brief survey of the evolution of the connections between Ireland and Italy. Contacts with Italy in the Middle Ages had represented for Ireland the first link of a network of relations extending beyond national boundaries, a presage of the subtle balances in a globalised world. From the representation of Rome and Ireland as the two poles of the known world in Giraldus Cambrensis’ Topographia Hibernica, we can deduce that Medieval Catholic Ireland had indeed a very privileged relationship with an Italy that was made sacred by the Pope’s presence but was
also represented as remote and slightly mysterious being associated to quasi demonic phenomena such as smoking craters, eruptions and sulphurous springs. Many miracles of Irish Saints were connected to Rome and well before the year 1000, Irish monks made Italy their target for holy missions and the foundation of monasteries, St Columban reaching Bobbio, Ursus Aosta, Fulcus Piacenza, Donatus Fiesole, Fridian Lucca, and Cathal Taranto. Attached to the above-mentioned monasteries were hospices for Irish pilgrims e.g. the hospice of St Trinity of the Irish in Rome or St. Peter’s of the Irish in Ravenna.

Later, in the Early Modern age, Italy (as, later, France) played an oblique role of triangulation in the complex interaction with England, the main object against which Ireland had to define itself. After the Reformation, being the geographical space where Rome was located, it became closely associated with Catholicism. In the eyes of the British, Ireland was inevitably connected with Italy since Irishness meant Catholicism. This was exemplified as late as in the nineteenth century by the slogan “Home Rule Means Rome Rule.” The dual nature of Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, impinged on constructions of Italy. While in the eyes of Irish Catholics Italy was the country in which to find comfort and support, in the eyes of Irish Protestants it was the country to fear and execrate. On the one hand, Trinity College in Dublin was founded as a corrective, lest the students by being educated abroad would become “infected with popery and other ill qualities, and so become evil subjects.” The foundation Charter of the College and Queen Elizabeth I’s letter, show that the chief source of infection was indeed Rome and, with it, Italy not only because of religion but because it was seen as a land of political and sexual corruption. Several travelogues document the education young Irish Prot-

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estant aristocrats and intellectuals received through their travels but also feature suspicion and disapproval of Italy. As the Ascendancy ethos prevailed, there seemed to be no major differences between the Anglo-Irish and the English perceptions of Italy as attitudes wavered between italophobia and italophilia.

On the other hand, Italy was where many Catholic students sought higher education being barred from schooling at Trinity and having no opportunity to train at home to become priests. Many of them flocked to Italy during the dark age of Penal Laws and studied in the Irish colleges that sprang up in Rome (alongside those of Salamanca, Leuven, Prague, Paris) making Italy a land where to be instructed and train as a friar or priest at the Franciscan college of St. Isidore’s or the Jesuit Pontifical Irish College, both founded in the 1620s. Italy also became a land of refuge for the defeated Irish aristocracy after the so-called “Flight of the Earls” in 1607 brought a consistent number of Irish-speaking exiles to Rome. Some of these refugees, as Hugh O’Neill, were actually buried in Rome making the city a land of nationalist pilgrimages. Other political exiles who congregated in Italy were the Jacobites, many of them Irish. James Francis Edward Stuart (the would-be James III) settled in Rome in 1719 after his failed attempts to regain the throne of Great Britain and his palace in Rome (Palazzo Muti better known as Palazzo del Re) became a sort of embassy for Irish grand-tourists of the eighteenth century. O’Connell’s death in Genoa in 1847 on his way to the Holy City and his bequeathing his heart to Rome where it is shrined in the church of St. Isidore, added to the politico-religious links between the two countries creating nationalist itineraries in search of the relics of the Liberator. Later, in the nineteenth century, Ireland returned the courtesy and several Italian exiles in the days of the Risorgimento found hospitality in Dublin and elsewhere under the patronage of such Irish personalities as Lady Morgan.  

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From the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, Irish history oscillated between Great Britain and, at the opposite pole, Catholic Rome which eventually came also to play an important role in Irish Nationalism. Indeed, there is some foundation in the advertisement of the 2017 Notre Dame Seminar “Ireland and Italy” held in Rome, that “a great deal of Irish history has taken place in Italy.” Nationalism should, actually, be another link between the two countries both of which in the nineteenth century went through similar struggles for self-determination and the transformation of national identity into political identity. Surprisingly, there was, however, little sympathy between the two movements. On the Italian side support for Ireland would have meant antagonizing Britain, a great helper of the Italian cause; on the Irish side, support for Italy would have gone against the interests of the Pope in his quality of head of the State of the Church. Irish soldiers (the Irish Brigade), actually fought for the Pope against the Italian forces seeking unification. The parallel histories of migration, the flight from the country for economic reasons, as well as the turmoil and crises the two young countries went through after acquiring independence, and their finally coming together in the European Union provide further chapters in a story of connections, similarities and contrasts.

Beside historical links there was also a flow of “mobile individuals who moved between countries and were agents of transnational cultures” as is highlighted in the introduction of Italia Mia, a volume that studies the Irish presence in Italy in the nineteenth century. Whether soldiers, politicians or church people, scholars or journalists, artists, musicians or literary personalities, pilgrims or tourists visiting Italy alone or as part of mass travel, socialites or simply spouses of Italian partners, they made Italy a fertile terrain for cultural interchange and dialogue contributing to the making of “a cosmopolitan Irishness”

7 See Ciaran O’Carroll “The Irish Papal Brigade: Origins, Objectives and Fortunes” and Anne O’Connor “‘Giant and Brutal Islanders’: The Italian Response to the Irish Papal Brigade”, in Nation/Nazione, op. cit., pp.73-95 and 96-109.
caught, as O’Connor proposes, “between home and abroad” (16). This flow still continues today through language students, exchange students and business relations that are knitting Italy and Ireland together as members of a new Europe.

Beside long-time residents, short-term travellers, too, contributed in spreading reciprocal knowledge.

On the Italian side, the eighteenth century writer, Giuseppe Acerbi, with his *Diario del soggiorno in Inghilterra e Irlanda 1796-1801*, marked the beginning of an Italian interest in the Emerald Island although his letters and notes only circulated among friends and relatives. On the other side of Europe, instead, from the eighteenth century onward, Italy was the object of several important travel accounts or guidebooks penned by Irish writers. Three of the most popular and influential guidebooks about Italy at the height of the Grand Tour age were of Irish authorship: Thomas Nugent, John Chetwode Eustace, a Catholic priest residing in Ireland, and Lady Morgan, who in her *Italy* (1821) brought her national identity to bear in the account of a year-long stay and made sure that English-speaking travellers saw Italy through Irish eyes. To these we should add the Dublin-born Anna Murphy Jameson’s *Diary of an Ennuyée* (1827), the highly successful fictionalized version of her Italian trip as a chaperone. Like their English counterparts, eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish travellers reported about Italy with the customary admiration for Italian art and landscapes, and the customary deprecation of Italian character and history. Italian travelogues written by Protestant Irishmen and women in the nineteenth century, as Raphael Ingelbien points


9 Giuseppe Acerbi, *Diario del soggiorno in Inghilterra e Irlanda* (1796-1801) has remained in manuscript form until the recent partial edition by Simona Capellari, Verona: Fiorini, 2013.

10 Thomas Nugent, *Grand Tour* - containing an exact description of most of the cities, towns and remarkable places of Europe” (1749), then updated and retitled in 1756 as *The Grand Tour, or, A Journey through the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and France* was the first detailed guidebook for English and Anglo-Irish gentlemen.

11 John Chetwode Eustace, *A Classical Tour through Italy*, 1802 (1813).

out, often had a more or less virulent anti-Catholic agenda, while in Catholic travel-writing (and reviewing of travel-writing), nationality would be foregrounded alongside religion (132).\(^\text{13}\)

The gaze Anglo-Irish and Irish writers cast on Italy (and vice-versa) and their constructions of Italy in poems, novels, plays and travel writing are often inspired by the politics of place whereby domestic issues and preoccupations are projected outside Ireland by choosing Italian locales or referring to Italian events. The Irish literary discourse concerning Italy took many forms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Poets such as Moore, Mangan, Wilde, Yeats, Heaney, Mahon among others wrote poetry with Italian settings, Italian themes, Italian allusions. Irish fiction found a fruitful terrain in Italy with Edward Maturin’s *Bianca*, a little known love story between an Irishman and an Italian singer set at the times of the Risorgimento and Charles Maturin’s Gothic novel, *The Fatal Revenge or the Family of Montorio*. Le Fanu’s sensational tales “Spalatro: from the notes of Fra Giacomo” (1843) and “Borrhomeo the Astrologer: A Monkish Tale” (1862) are other examples of how Gothic novels written in Ireland with an Italian setting contain the usual proportion of the sublime and of native villains indulging in horrible crimes that characterize representations of Italy at the time. In the twentieth century, with the increased mobility of writers and readers, Italy became, together with Spain, a favoured location for several Irish writers (Bowen, Trevor, Julia O’Faolain, Madden, Hickey just to name a few). The land of passions, Machiavellian politics and revenge, so popular in Gothic literature and Early Modern drama, feature also in Oscar Wilde’s plays, *The Duchess of Padua* and *A Florentine Tragedy* in contrast with the local settings Irish drama favoured.

The greatest contribution to reciprocal knowledge has come, however, from translations that have cross-fertilized the two cultures and are too numerous to be listed. Some, nevertheless, cannot be ignored such as the seminal translation of Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* by Ugo Foscolo (1805). On the Irish side, Heaney’s translations and reworkings of Dante (e.g. in *Station Island*) or Ciaran Carson’s translation of the *Inferno* show the popularity of the Italian poet in Ireland.

As this brief survey of the historical, literary and personal connections between Ireland and Italy has attempted to show, the relations between Ireland and Italy were rich and fertile and although further, more comprehensive investigations are needed to uncover new areas of contact, there are, indeed, sufficient bases to talk of a specific Irish gaze on Italy different from the gaze cast on Italy by other Anglophone cultures.

The Irish gaze

The Irish gaze was often seen as being one and the same as the English gaze, forgetting that while the latter was conditioned by Britain’s position of power, the former came from a country that was, like Italy, considered as subaltern, in need of civilizing and modernizing. The representations of Italy by the British, in fact, notwithstanding the fascination with it, partake of the European practice of casting foreigners (especially from the South or the East) and members of other ethnic groups in an inferior role. The question that arises, then, is what sort of a gaze would the Irish turn on Italy, being themselves cast as second-class citizens. Moreover, could the Irish, that entertained relationships of dependence from Italy for religious reasons, share a British sense of superiority and slight contempt? The way Ireland confronted the alterity of Italy in the interface with reality represented by literature is, in fact, rather ambivalent. On the one hand, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and even the early twentieth century) there was an Anglo-Irish literary discourse filtered through the relationship with England and reflecting the position of power and influence of the Ascendancy, that duplicated the slurs and stereotypes common in the English-speaking world. On the other hand, Catholic Ireland established a special connection with Italy naturalizing the alterity in its own way.

I would like to give the study of these special relationships and attitudes the name of Irish “Italianism,” a term coined in the wake of Edward Said’s seminal text, Orientalism (1978) and of Pfister’s “Meridionism”14 to indicate the study of images of Italy in literature

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and of the way they are influenced by the ideological bias behind them and, more especially, by an idea of cultural hegemony. British, American, French, and German “Italianisms” have been studied extensively, but Irish “Italianism” and, conversely, Italian “Irishism,” are still a field to be ploughed in spite of important recent contributions, chief among them those of the authoritative on-line journal based in Florence and edited by Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies (SIJIS) which since 2011 has been addressing Irish-Italian relationships in its articles and through its monographic special issues. Some universities in Italy and Ireland have or have had centres and institutes of, respectively, Irish or Italian studies focusing also on interrelations between the two cultures (Trinity, UCD, Galway, Cork, Florence, RomaTre, Turin, Trieste, Sassari) and devoting conferences, workshops, seminars and exhibitions to the subject. As for individual studies conducted in Italy and in Ireland in the field of Irish-Italian interrelations, in spite of this being still a budding area of research, they are too numerous to be listed separately. A survey or bibliographical appendix would be necessary to acknowledge the richness and variety of contributions. They have encompassed reciprocal influences and intercultural, political, religious or personal links. These are, at random, but a few of the headings that have been illustrated by Irish and Italian scholars, as well as by a few foreigners,

16 Dedicated workshops at conferences (EFACIS, IASIL, Notre Dame, or simply conferences organized by universities), the presence of many Irish authors at literary festivals and book fairs, Irish book launches, encounters between Italian and Irish Writers, the EFACIS Irish Itinerary that brings Irish artists and authors to Italian Universities, exhibitions such as the 2016-17 one at Biblioteca Nazionale, even an Irish-Italian cultural webzine, Italish, (www.italish.eu) are all signs of the great interest there is in Italy for Irish-Italian relations. Joyce studies in Italy present an entirely different story being extremely well developed through the James Joyce Italian Foundation, its annual conferences in Rome and the journal Joyce Studies in Italy, to which one should add the series of publications ‘Piccola biblioteca joyciana’ directed by Franca Ruggieri.
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and could bear to be revisited and expanded. Ecclesiastical history. Relations (and interferences) of the Vatican in Ireland in the twentieth century. The Risorgimento, Garibaldi or Mazzini in the context of Irish nineteenth century history. The impact of Irish events of the twentieth century on Italian public opinion. Travel of Italians in Ireland and vice-versa. Representations of Ireland in Italian literature and of Italy in Irish literature. The reception of a specific writer or text in the other literature or the role of an individual in spreading awareness of the other culture. Translations and adaptations in print and on stage. The popularity of Irish literature and theatre in Italy in certain periods such as the Fascist era or at the time of the Troubles. The popularity of Italian music in Ireland and of Irish music or folklore in Italy. Fascination with Irish mythology.

The following gathering of essays, partly the fruit of a workshop at the EFACIS10 conference held in Palermo in 2015, attempts to reach some understanding of the relationship of Irish culture with Italy and vice versa by studying the interactions between Italian and Irish texts either through direct or indirect influence or through translation and, in so doing, highlighting the interest for Ireland in Italy and for Italy in Ireland. The volume is oriented in both directions: some articles go north to south, in other words regard the interest of the Irish for Italy, others move in the opposite direction illustrating influences or analysing translations or the reception of Irish texts.

Anne O’Connor’s “The Metastasio Moment: Language, Music and Translation” belongs to the first category, illustrating the popularity of opera and Italian music in Ireland, a popularity that had the side effect of leading to an increase of translations from the Italian. Metastasio, for one, was the most translated of Italian authors in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland and had a leading role in language education as the study of Italian was aimed at understanding.

As Metastasio came to be criticized, his language was deemed “effeminate and unsuitable” and the interest in the study of Italian declined.

The fascination with Ireland that swept Italy in the nineteen-nineties is comparable to that which swept Ireland two centuries earlier and its fulcrum, music, an art so important both in Ireland and Italy, is at the heart of Simona Martini’s analysis, “When Italian Popular Music Sings about Ireland: Homage, Inspiration and Kindred Spirits.” The article addresses the permeability of Italian popular music
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towards various Irish sources, Ireland being an inspiration for several Italian musicians who either used Irish themes or Irish tunes or set their songs in Ireland. The article examines Branduardi’s interpretations of Anglo-Celtic folk and especially his setting to music of ten poems by Yeats, Bubola’s songs such as Il Cielo d’Irlanda and, especially, the Modena City Ramblers (MCR) albums, which are a love song for Ireland starting with a rendition of the traditional Mo Ghile Mear, and continuing with other songs incorporating Irish tunes and legendary subjects. Such groups as Le Orme and Casa del vento are also symptomatic of the lure of Ireland for Italian groups. The two articles on the reciprocal musical influences, albeit of a different kind and of different eras, open up interesting grounds of comparison.

O’Connor’s article also examines the translations of Metastasio by Croker, Waller and Mangan and is the only example in this collection of a study of Irish translations from the Italian while studies of translations of Irish authors into Italian are a well-developed field also, perhaps, because of the importance of translation studies in Italian universities. Monica Randaccio, for one, analyses relationships with Ireland from an Italian point of view, that of drama translation. In her article “Translating for the Stage: The Case of Owen McCafferty’s Quietly” she discusses relevant notions derived from semiotics, as they are displayed in Natalia di Gianmarco’s translation of the play for staging purposes. In the translation/adaptation, communicative situations among characters in the original are reassessed in order to preserve their deictic orientation; the semantic charge and the hermeneutic potential of the original may be adapted in order to reach a new audience through space and time. In addition, para-textual material (such as reviews) completes the transaction between the original and the targeted Italian audience. All of these elements account for the micro- and macro- changes in the Italian version of Quietly, which Randaccio has identified through the analysis of the script and her interviews with the actors-directors of the play when it was staged in Rome. Negotiating between cultures, in the case of Quietly, however, has blurred the boundaries between translation, version and adaptation. The search for a dynamic and creative relationship with audience and location, prevents the public from understanding the Northern Irish situation contemplated in the play and the subversive potential for ‘truth and reconciliation’ implicit in it diluting it into a more domesticated ‘universality of conflict’. 
Debora Biancheri’s “Poetic Rewritings: Issues of Cultural Distance and Examples of Textual Mediation in Seamus Heaney’s Italian Translations” is a discussion about some of the problems Italian translators encounter in general and, especially, regarding Heaney’s poetry. Biancheri points out that most translations of his works are problematic not only because of the different context, so that allusions to historical situations are lost on the reader (as is the case indicated by Randaccio for drama translations) but also because they are marked by different temporal and geographical coordinates to those of the original production. In other words, an Italian reader cannot see Heaney’s poetry “evolving in ‘real time’” because the various collections were published out of sequence in Italy, some of them after Heaney’s death. Paradoxically, however, translation as interpretation is “able to release the suppleness and provisional nature of the signifiers” and thus fits Heaney’s dialectical style, his “two-mindedness” or sense of “in-betweenness.” The comparison between three translators, Sonzogni and Sacerdoti but, chiefly, Erminia Passannanti whose scholarly skills complement her skills as a poet, highlights some of the problems on which the Italian reception of Seamus Heaney hinges owing to the topicality of the poet’s interrogations about his art in times of upheaval and to the semantic ambiguities chosen as a rhetorical device by the poet to evade “direct affiliation.”

The focus is on influence rather than on translation, or translation as interpretation, in Luppi’s and Cotta Ramusino’s essays, both writing about Yeats. “W. B. Yeats and Eugenio Montale: Images in Common, Different Poetics,” by the former of the two scholars, is an interesting critical appraisal of the influence of Yeats on Montale examining the significant re-use of Yeats’s images on the part of the Italian poet who was also a translator of Yeats. Luppi leaves aside the translations to concentrate on the analogies, whether in the early or late poetry, whether lexical or thematic, coincidental or deliberate, dictated by the Zeitgeist or by a more direct and conscious imitation. Montale’s opinion of the Irish poet, as expressed in his prose works, was ambiguous, showing little appreciation for his personality and ideology, while he was clearly impressed on an aesthetic and stylistic level. Montale’s imitations, at times with the intention of marking the distance from the original, reflect, thus, his admiration as well as his disapproval.
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While Luppi concentrates on influences and analogies between the Irish and the Italian poet, Cotta Ramusino in “Yeats’s Other Countries: Italy,” deals with the influence of Italy on the Irish poet in the wake of his reading Castiglione’s *Courtier* and of the first of his many visits, in 1907. The stimuli which came from his ‘encounter’ with the country at that time, especially with the cities of Ferrara and Urbino, led to his idealization of some aspects of Italian culture that exemplified, in his opinion, the way creation and an aristocratic way of life were closely tied in contrast with the sterile and narrow-minded values of the middle-classes in Ireland. Cotta Ramusino traces the passage from the Middle-Ages that initially inspired Yeats in the wake of the Pre-Raphaelites, to the Renaissance, “an age which would increasingly become more relevant in his aesthetics”, and back to the Middle-Ages after the 1925 visit and his idealisation of the mosaics seen in Ravenna, Venice and Palermo. While Yeats’s influence on Montale was equivocal, Italy’s influence on Yeats was central as it came to represent for him a much sought-after unity serving two needs, the national, first, because it provided a political and cultural model and the personal, because it released his creative and poetic powers.

Unlike the other articles of the collection, Elisabetta d’Erme’s “Visions of Sicily and of Ireland in Sacheverell Sitwell’s *Entertainments of the Imagination*” does not deal with relationships between the two countries or the influence of one country over the other but studies the influence of both on a refined British modernist writer. D’Erme’s is a study of analogies in the representations of the two countries, Ireland and Italy or, rather, Sicily, in Sitwell’s “travelogues of the mind” as d’Erme calls his vagaries. The British aristocrat was familiar with both locations for visiting them often and acquiring a love for Italy from his father and for Ireland from his grandmother (who was of Irish descent) and from an Anglo-Irish lover. When one is familiar with several countries, one is tempted to compare them and find similarities rather than look at them as examples of alterity. So does Sitwell who finds both locations marked by charming beauty, “splendours as well as miseries” and intimations of life’s precariousness. In their decay from past grandeur (the era of the Bourbons for Sicily, the age of the big houses for Ireland) they are, indeed, examples of *vanitas vanitatum:* metaphors of ephemerality, reminders of *memento mori.* However, while Ireland lacks artifice, Sicily shines for its baroque, its
façade beauty and theatricality. Although Sitwell never drew these comparisons directly, they can be elicited from his texts offering a new form of comparative criticism.

A valuable addition to the collection is a section (Poetry and Prose) including original work contributed especially for it by Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin who has offered a fragment of some work-in-progress where the Italian church looms in the background of the doings of a group of Irish nuns during WW2 and the unpublished translation by Chiara Sciarrino of Harry Clifton’s *On the Spine of Italy*, an account of life in a mountain community of the Abruzzi.

Indeed, this precious volume ranging from an Irish view of Italy as “the culmination of civilization” to the fascination with Ireland in Italian music and stage, with a solid core of translations, both studied and executed, is a sampler of the many ways in which texts may help in establishing links between countries or demonstrating how fruitful the relation of the two countries has been.
Poetic Rewritings: Issues of Cultural Distance and Examples of Textual Mediation in Seamus Heaney’s Italian Translations
deBOra banCherI

This essay is meant to foster a preliminary discussion about the Italian reception of an Irish poet who had achieved an iconic status even before his relatively recent demise: Seamus Heaney. As it has been reported by his friend Robert McCrumm in an article written on the occasion of his seventieth birthday: “Everyone recognises Heaney’s professorial spectacles and silvery mop”, and not only in his home country but also beyond the national borders, just as literary fame and a clever marketing strategy brought predecessors such as Joyce, Beckett and Yeats to international superstardom. A long time ago, Clive James came up with the epithet “Seamus Famous”, a gag that has been turned into an affectionate way of referring to the poet, especially in the North where he grew up, but one which, significantly, remains totally devoid of the malice that frequently marks Irish people’s attitude to other Irish celebrities who have achieved worldwide success. Perhaps this is because despite the fact that his phenomenal literary accolades culminated in the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, the celebrated poet never forgot to be just Seamus as well, and it is unanimously attested that the humbleness of his character never changed.

This premise is mentioned not only as a brief homage to the man and the poet, but it effectively alerts to the notion of “two-mindedness” that so often underlies his work, as noted by a number of critical commentators (amongst others Parker 1993, Hart 1993, Hall and Crowder 2007). The allegory of a double mind is closely related to the poet’s sense of “in-betweenness”, which Heaney himself has voiced in a number of interviews (Cole 1997, Randall 2011) including the famous long series of conversations with Dennis O’Driscoll, Stepping Stones. His predilection for dialectics, which has gained significant
visibility amongst critical narratives within and about Northern Ireland, found expression in many of his essays. In *The Place of Writing*, for instance, Heaney posits a two-way dependence between the canonical text and its translated version, which constitutes itself as an inscription and an erasure at the same time (55-6). This dual sense of emulation and competition is not only implemented in Heaney’s own translations from some of his literary masters from the past or well-esteemed contemporaries, but it underpins most of his original poetic work as well.

His first poem, “Digging”, constitutes a perfect manifesto of a poetics keen on opening spaces of reconciliation between stability and transformation, celebrating and destabilising continuity at the same time, by representing the relationship with his biological father as a balance between tribute and confrontation. The mixed feelings of comfort and unease associated with his father, and his heritage in general, run throughout Heaney’s poetic compositions, confirming his “interest in construing the moment of writing as a manifestation of otherness in the self” (Homen 2009, 39).

A poetics of ambiguity was initially openly declared by Heaney through his choice of pseudonym, *Incertus*, used to sign his early poems. Although acquiring more subtle forms, this refusal to claim the unquestionable validity of one truth over another continued to mark Heaney’s career long after the pseudonym had been dismissed, as he confessed to O’Driscoll in the exhaustive interview series collected in *Stepping Stones*: “There is a residual *Incertus* at work in every poem I write” (98). Nonetheless, Heaney’s personal uncertainty frequently takes the form of what appears to be a wilful ambiguity. One short illustration that captures Heaney’s skilful reticence is the title chosen for his translation of the Early Medieval tale *Buile Suibhne*, rendered by its most canonical English translations as *The Frenzy* or *The Madness of Sweeney*. Yet Heaney, truthful to his interpretation of the story as a tale of dispossession, cleverly retains a semantic vagueness by calling his translation *Sweeney Astray*, thus substituting an indubitable reference to a mental derailment with a possible territorial drifting.

This ability to keep alternative hermeneutic possibilities open has often erected Heaney’s words as heralds of resistance against the clash of two opposing truths. As shown by his work and biography, Heaney’s pull has always been towards a resolution of tensions and his poetry, accordingly,
is intended to be received as an “assuaging” act; a verb, to assuage, for which the poet has declared a certain fondness in a number of interviews. His voice, hanging “between hope and history”, as one of his most famous quotes puts it, has striven to be a harbinger of communion even in most divisive times. Thanks to his well-defended uncertainty, Heaney has focused on asking questions, much more than providing answers.

Amongst his favourite interrogations are the relationships between the Self, his own place, his literary heritage and his own poetic voice. As a consequence, despite being broadly concerned with his experience as a human being, Heaney’s poetry is strongly rooted within a particular geographical and cultural background, which gives his voice a distinctive diction and perspective. Those considerations are important for a discussion of themes which have been widely explored by Heaney, as well as Heaney’s critics, especially when attempting to broaden the investigation into what happens to his poetry’s balancing acts when they are further complicated by the process of translation. The focus of this essay is precisely on the shifts caused by the recreation of the texts, not only in an alternative linguistic form but in another context as well: one marked by different temporal and geographical coordinates to those of the original production.

*Death of a Naturalist* (1966), Heaney’s first volume, provides a clear illustration of the enormous gap that can occur between the publication of the source texts and their translations. Although poems from the collection had been previously published in Italian anthologies, Mondadori’s 2014 edition was the first release of the entire volume, which also kept a literal translation of its title: *Morte di un Naturalista*. From the point of view of reception, it is quite striking that the Italian collection appeared so shortly after Heaney’s sudden demise in August 2013. Such temporal collocation creates *per se* a significant difference for the target readers, many of whom might have heard this specific title shortly after having apprehended the author’s death. Although upon closer inspection the translator Marco Sonzogni reconstructs a clear and very exhaustive genealogy of Heaney’s work, adding details about the actual time individual poems were written and highlighting subtle correspondences between them, this information has to be sought in a brief translator’s note at the end of the volume. Even so, little can be done to counteract a “first impression” necessarily different from the one generated by *Death of a Naturalist* when it first appeared back in the Sixties as the debut col-
lection of a young, still unknown poet from county Derry. Morte di un Naturalista instead, by being released at the very end of such an honoured career, seems to assume the new-found significance of a epitaph, especially in Italy, where Heaney has mainly been hailed as a “telluric poet”, concerned with the elemental aspects of nature.

Indeed Heaney himself has defined creativity as something that springs from “thingyness” or “memoryness”, which, in Death of a Naturalist in particular, finds its expression in the physical and organic materiality attached to the poet’s acts of recollection. Yet the naturalist child of this collection is metaphorically dead by the end of it, when “adult dignity” crawls into the last poem, “Personal Helicon”:

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity...

Here, the poet acknowledges that his childish curiosity for roots, slime and wells as material entities is a thing of the past. The fascination for seeing his reflection and setting the darkness echoing remains, but this is achieved by rhyming, “now”. But when exactly is this “now” located? Does the fact that the Italian adesso is consigned to the readership at such a different point in time to that when it was poetically uttered have an impact upon them?

As acknowledged by the translator in his note, Heaney’s poems have also always been carefully framed from a chronological perspective and it is significant that “Personal Helicon’s” final verse, “to set the darkness echoing”, is ideally followed by the first poem in the 1969 collection Door into the Dark: “Night-Piece”. This thematic continuity would have been quite manifest to somebody who had the privilege of witnessing Heaney’s poetics evolving in “real time.” Such correspondences are harder for Italian readers to grasp, though, as they have been exposed to Heaney’s collections according to an order dictated by the publishers’ will rather than the poet’s, so that thematic affinities have to be explained, as translators often dutifully do. The appreciation, therefore, becomes intellectual rather than emotional, although the latter should allegedly be the chord that poetry is mostly striving to strike. Nonetheless Heaney, himself a keen reader of poetry, seemed to be quite aware of the transient nature of temporal deixis, and he often sets the specific time frame of his childhood
memories against the backdrop of myth, thus structuring his poetry according to more enduring coordinates. The very title “Personal Helicon”, for instance, recalls a Greek mountain that was believed to be home to the Muses, and Greek mythology is also evoked through the figure of young Heaney as a “big-eyed Narcissus”.

The title “Personal Helicon” also provides an opportunity to illustrate how much of a major challenge poetic ambiguity can prove to translate. Whereas in other forms of discourse contextual clues are often vital in establishing the prevalence of one meaning over another in case of synonymy, semantic ambiguity is often deliberately sought within the genre of poetry, especially by a poet who has come to master it as a rhetoric device to evade direct affiliation. “Personal Helicon” is in theory one of the earliest attempts at this art, but it is so accomplished that its final words would not be unfit as the corona of Heaney’s career, as this poem is indeed presented to the Italian public. The problem being that such ambiguity has to somehow be resolved in the target text.

While the “Helicon” in Heaney’s poem may refer simultaneously to the mountain in its mythological acception of creative inspiration and to the musical instrument that goes by the same name, the translator is faced with having to choose between two final vowels that would mark either one or the other semantic solution as prevalent. He opts for “Elicona Personale,” thus referencing the mountain and hooking up to the mythological dimension more directly. This is after all background knowledge allegedly more readily available to target readers, as elicona is fairly unknown in the Italian context, where such instruments as the “horn” or “trombone” are more established as musical elements of marching bands. And the very idea of the marching band has very different connotations within the two contexts, anyway. Although the release of Death of a Naturalist predates the most heated phase of the Troubles by a few years, marching bands have long been the symbols of ideological affiliations at the heart of the divide in the population of Northern Ireland. That was possibly another reason Heaney chose this particular imagery. Starting this collection with the widely celebrated “Digging” analogy between the gun and the pen, symbol of his poetic vocation, Heaney comes full circle by restating his choice to explore his identity as an Irishman living in the North in more subtle ways than asserting it through the loud and peremptory sound of the helicon.
Yet the power of his statement lies precisely in creating a direct juxtaposition between Heaney’s rhyming and the bass tuba, by resorting to an extended metaphor that attributes the same physical properties of the instrument to his art: “to set the darkness echoing”, thus also recuperating the materiality of the darkness in its physical form of a well. Obviously, for an Italian reader, would be hard to read Sonzogni’s final lines Rimo,/per potermi vedere, per rendere il buio eccheggiante from this perspective, as the reference to the helicon as an instrument remains concealed by the Italian title “Elica Persona”. Nevertheless, the notion of translation as tentatively embraced by this essay has to be conceived as a process that transcends the reality of a single target text. Heaney, in Italian, thus becomes the sum of texts and information available to target language readers within the receiving context.

With this in mind, it is worth recalling that an Italian version of “Personal Helicon” had previously appeared in the anthology Poesie Scelte by Roberto Sanesi. On this occasion the translator was Gilberto Sacerdoti, who, shortly afterwards, translated the collection Seeing Things for Italian mainstream publisher Mondadori (Vedere Cose, 1997). Sacerdoti cultivates a highly personal approach to poetry translation, which appears even more striking, by contrast, when examined against the more conventional endeavours of his colleagues. Arguably the most outstanding quality of his translations is the “vertical” stylistic re-elaboration of his lines, which disrupts the formal arrangement of the source texts by re-arranging the pentameters in regular hendecasyllables, a technique that helps to create assonances in the Italian versions of the poems but which effectively suppresses the distribution of verse paragraphs characterising Heaney’s original. The last line of “Personal Helicon” can be used as epitomic illustration not only of Sacerdoti’s modalities of re-elaboration, but also of the theoretical aporia of translation as a dimension where difference and sameness have to coexist. “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” becomes in this instance: Per vedere me stesso, perchè il buio riecheggi, faccio versi.

While from a semantic point of view the only manifest explicitation occurs with the choice of the complex verb fare versi instead of its superordinate “to rhyme”, which restricts or rather specifies Heaney’s activity as composing poetry, the real shift lies in the position of the verb in the Italian text, as this is now at the very end of the poem. Sacerdoti’s intention is somewhat clarified in contrast with what Sonzogni did a few
years later, which was to show that it is possible to achieve an acceptable Italian text even by following Heaney’s text *ad litteram*, including its syntactical structure. Yet the solution chosen by Sonzogni would have prevented Sacerdoti from achieving other goals, such as the formation of hendecasyllables and assonances. Nevertheless, whatever differences there may be between Sacerdoti and Sonzogni’s texts, it is perhaps more interesting to focus on the idea that there are differences at all.

Within the English language canon and literary heritage, the immutability of this verse is an inherent aspect of its poetic power and emotional grip, as implicitly acknowledged by the literary imperative of textual stability followed by the author. The revelatory nature of poetic language, according to this poem in particular, lies in the permanence achieved by “echoing” the same sounds over and over. It is what Calvino called an icastic form, able to “crystallise into a well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form” the ephemeral and chaotic qualities of the poet’s inner visions and imagination (Calvino 1988, 82). Translation denies the poem the capacity to reverberate infinitely and unchanged at different times conflating into temporal sameness.

In *Poesie Scelte*, the concluding lines of “Personal Helicon” are also used as a conclusion to Sanesi’s introduction, thus re-asserting the centrality of the concept it expresses; yet the quote used by Sanesi is from Sacerdoti’s translation, which obviously attains consistency within the Italian volume as a self-contained enterprise, but a discrepancy is re-affirmed between this earlier iconicity of the lines and Sonzogni’s more recent version. The simple need to mention different authorial interventions in relation to a line that, in its English formulation, is incontrovertibly Heaney’s, proves the point that literature in translation has to be understood according to completely different schema. The act of selection itself precludes the same reverberations of meaning that Heaney intertwines within the poetic texture of his work.

Years later, the verb “to rhyme” will be used in what are perhaps the most quoted lines by Heaney, from the chorus of *The Cure at Troy* (1991):

> History says, *Don’t hope*
> *On this side of the grave.*
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.
The succinct power of this last statement lies precisely in the more complex notion of “rhyming” that Heaney developed throughout the years, that spurred many public figures to use the condensed power of these words, such as the ones by Gerry Adams for the title of his book *Hope and History* (2003). These gave iconic status to this line, which was more recently used by *The Irish Times* to capture the aftermath of the same-sex marriage vote: “A Day when Hope and History Rhyme” (24 May 2015).

The ability to achieve this level of iconicity within the Italian environment is undermined from the start by the fact that *The Cure at Troy* was never translated. And if Heaney’s words have ever reached the general public, they are more likely to have been attributed directly to Bill Clinton, who once used them in a public speech during a visit to Derry, or even to U2 frontman Bono’s lyrics for his song “Peace on Earth” (*All that you can’t Leave Behind*, 2000), which in a pessimist take on Heaney’s statement declares that “hope and history won’t rhyme”.

In all this, though, it could be useful to return to Calvino and note that his notion of linguistic immobility relates exclusively to form and is not matched by fixity of meaning, which instead has to remain “alive as an organism” (69-70). This apparent paradox of the openness of linguistic crystallisation can be used as a fundamental pillar for the understanding of translation as interpretation, able to release the suppleness and provisional nature of the signifiers. Thus, it becomes apparent that, contrary to the source text, which achieved authority precisely by virtue of repetition, it is transformation that keeps translation alive, even when this transformation equals the silence of non-translation, as in the case of *The Cure at Troy*.

Moreover, while it is true that Sonzogni’s translation of *Death of a Naturalist* was meant to fill a gap in the Italian market, it would have been almost inconceivable for him to use previous translations when available. He acknowledged consulting them, but even if he had independently duplicated a pre-existing translation of such an iconic line, he would arguably have felt compelled to change it. The problem lies in an inherent tension between the representation of poetry metaphorically given by the line “I rhyme... to set the darkness echoing” and the practice of translation. If, on the one hand, Heaney is giving an account of poetic charge in the musically inspired figurative terms of patterns and resonances, the publishing world relies
on the implied rule that each translator of the same text is expected not only to produce an autonomous version, but one which virtually substitutes previous versions as well.

In order to fully appreciate the consequences of assessing translation as refraction of meanings, a further translation of “Personal Helicon” will be examined. This is contained in an anthology titled Terra di Palude, published in 2009 and later reprinted after Heaney’s death in 2013, featuring Erminia Passannanti’s translations of a selection of the “Bog Poems” plus a couple of other poems. First of all, it is worth noting that in this occasion the Italian title of the poem is “Elicone privato”. The image chosen by Passannanti, therefore, is more clearly that of a musical instrument, and the adjective chosen as an attribute suggests that it is not for public display, thus in contrast with the helicons triumphantly played and displayed by marching bands. Passannanti is also providing a more literal semantic and syntactical reproduction of the poem, whereas Sonzogni and Sacerdoti are mostly striving to convey the poetic qualities of the text, rearranging it in order to create rhymes and quasi-rhymes in the fashion of Heaney’s source text. The expansion of meaning occurs not only through the use of alternative linguistic renditions that respectively stress different nuances embedded within the source text, but also by way of contextualisation, of rather re-contextualisation of the poem. This can equally concur in creating alternative refractions of meaning, which, from a theoretical perspective, might be understood as complementary.

In Terra di Palude, for instance, “Personal Helicon” is moved within the context of the “Bog Poems”, originally belonging to a short anthology that was to be re-published as part of the famous collection North (1979), with which Death of A Naturalist would not be immediately associated. The same collection also includes the poem “Digging”, placed between the translations of “Punishment” and “The Grubhalle Man”. Being Heaney’s first poem and most frequently anthologised, the focus will now shift onto “Digging”, in order to investigate more closely how translation operates a re-contextualisation of the source text in relation to other existing texts and discourses, as well as to the novel context of reception. The idea is to further dispute the notion of translation as “reproduction”, so as to account for translation choices that effectively re-invent not only the text, but also its specific situation within the opus of the author. This poses an active challenge to textuality as something that develops linearly over time, following a specific chronology.
In this light, “Digging’s” significance is not erased by having been moved to join the Bog Poems, but refracted to acquire new meaning. The bog may lose its symbolic value as the starting point of a poetic journey, but becomes a climactic celebration of a mythical structure that Heaney has firmly rooted deep within the exceptional qualities of this special soil. In *Terra di Palude*, Passannanti’s goal is to frame Heaney as a telluric poet, a representation that has been particularly felicitous amongst the Italian public and critics, who have consistently emphasised the elemental over the specific aspects of Heaney’s poetry. This allows a more direct relationship between Heaney’s work and readers who might have never seen the bog in their life.

Passannanti’s volume, from its very title, reveals an inspiration towards a more universal landscape. “Bogland” is not translated with the more specific term *torbiera*, but with the superordinate term *palude*, a swampland, thus losing its specific Irish or at least Nordic connotation, and alluding to any place presenting an unbalanced presence of water within its soil, including areas of Italy, which would be easily referred to as *terreni paludosi*, but not really as *torbiera*. This attempt to foster better identification on the Italian reader’s part is reinforced by the inclusion of the picture of a farmer *intento a scavare zolle di terra*, as the caption reads. While the farmer is identified as Irish, the black and white landscape and the activity described, “digging tufts”, could easily apply to rural farming activity in Italy. One of the essays included, moreover, highlights the presence of the soil as a symbol of the landscape as *un altrove*, literally “one elsewhere”, *luogo della memoria e del futuro, dove l’identità personale e collettiva riposa*, “a place of memory and future, where personal and collective identity rests”.

Evidently, Passannanti, while acknowledging the importance of Heaney’s cultural roots, is keen to elevate the significance of his poetry above the geographical boundaries of the Irish isle. Besides, reflections on language as the medium of poetry, as well as the expressions of idiosyncrasies within the language of the opposing factions in Ulster, the translator focuses on themes central to Heaney’s work, such as the role of memory that, yet again, is linked not only to Heaney’s biographical contingencies but to the collective as well, in both na-

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tional and mythical terms. This angle is also emphasised by the inclusion of pictures taken from P. V. Glob’s book, often associated more directly to the collection _North_ as their declared source of inspiration. However, the Italian collection only incarnates a widespread tendency of reading the corpus of Heaney’s poetry as a whole, and therefore applying hindsight to their critical appraisal. The emphasis on the theme of the archaeological dig as a search for personal as well as communal identity, however, is largely justified as a similar excavation is not limited to a specific phase of Heaney’s poetry; quite the reverse, this metaphor is at the core of some of the defining strategies of Heaney’s writing throughout his career. In this sense, the explicit mythologisation of history operated in this collection is only the climax of the metaphorical relationship between the human self and the ground that underpins Heaney’s opus as a whole.

The act of criticism inherent to the process of selection and presentation of Heaney’s work to a foreign audience causes the dislocation in space and time to escape the corpus of texts and enter the reality of translation. This is because, although rooted within the historical and social actuality of the context of reception, the translator – just like a critic, as Passannanti in fact is – is also looking at the texts from “outside”, located in a temporal dimension that embraces Heaney’s opus in its entirety and thus effectively dissolves the concept of linearity. This consideration may very well apply to other anthologies edited by Passannanti that also contain “Digging”. The insertion of the poem in the section “North” of a volume titled _Poesie Scelte_ (2007) is perhaps the more glaring manipulation of Heaney’s original structuring, as it might give a deceiving impression of the poem belonging to that particular collection. Nonetheless, the goal of this “selected poems” is clearly not to give a balanced and accurate representation of Heaney’s original collections, but rather, to create an Italian anthology filtered through the translator’s appreciation and critical assessment of Heaney’s work.

Relocating “Digging” is therefore almost a minor adjustment in the context of a much larger process that already entails a total overhaul of the chronology of Heaney’s works by the Italian publishing industry. Making _Death Of a Naturalist_ available for the first time in 2014, for instance, is _per se_ not much less surreal than placing “Digging” within a new context constructed by fostering an origi-
nal critical perspective of the poet’s work. *Poesie Scelte*, for instance, makes manifest in both its content and structure that it is somehow intended as a personal homage to the poet from his Italian translator. The summary, which already openly displays Passannanti’s imprint in its prominence of translated poems from *The Spirit Level*, the only collection published separately by the translator (2007), is followed by an epitaph of sorts, in which Heaney’s picture is accompanied by his title as Nobel Laureate, his birth and death dates, and a couple of quotes from his critical work defining the role of the artist. The crucial importance of the translator’s mediating activity is sanctioned by the inclusion, at the end of the volume, of pictures of Heaney’s handwritten correspondence with Passannanti and a substantial biography of the translator, which highlights her achievements both as a poet and a scholar. The inclusion of the same essays that are present in *Terra di Palude*, and indeed all of the other anthologies published by Passannanti, further confirms that her role as a scholar has largely complemented her skills as a poet. As for the other essays included, they not only supply necessary background information about Heaney’s life and career, but also constitute an in-depth critical and indeed emotional journey through Heaney’s poetics, which indicates the perspective from which the poetry that follows has to be read.

Overall, it is made manifest that the volume is *about* Heaney, more than *by* Heaney. Although his name appears in bold capital letters on the book’s front cover, it is one of the few instances where the translator’s name appears almost as prominently in the front cover, instead of being relegated to minuscule prints on the page containing copyright and other technical details about the book. The reader should therefore become aware that they will not be hearing Heaney’s voice directly: Passannanti’s poems have replaced, rather than reproduced, Heaney’s poems, and in this specific anthology the source texts are not included alongside their translations. The translator’s interpretative act has effectively eclipsed Heaney’s words.

With her versions of the poems, Passannanti is acting as a mediator who is attempting to recontextualise the material, not only by making its linguistic actualisation intelligible to Italian readers, but also by creating literary and cultural connections potentially closer to them. Part of this process consists in redefining the textual relations of the source text to fit the new cultural environment in which
it will be received. Throughout the essays, numerous attempts may be found to drive Heaney’s poetry to overflow the boundaries of the source culture and bring it closer to the target reader. For instance, while discussing the function of myth in Heaney’s poetry, the translator resorts to Mircea Eliade’s philosophical insights on the matter, which are also quoted by Heaney in a number of his critical essays; yet, she also alludes to the Italian philosopher Vico’s circular vision of history. While this overall critical perspective is shared by all of Passannanti’s volumes, each one of them is framed in a slightly different manner, so as to fit the actual poems included in the selection. In both La Livella a Bolla d’Aria—her translation of The Spirit Level—and Poesie Scelte, a quote by Alberto Moravia is inserted at the beginning of the volume. This reinforces the idea that Passannanti is claiming co-authorship with Heaney. In the case of Poesie Scelte, in particular, the translator seems willing to stress that this is her volume of Heaney’s poetry. In the long excerpt from “Il comunismo al potere e i problemi dell’arte”, Moravia discusses the role of the poet in moments of struggle. As a post-second-world-war article, the Italian author was obviously more concerned with the Italian resistance to the recent Nazi occupation than with issues relating to Northern Ireland, yet the translator, by suggesting this link through the words of an intellectual figure widely known in Italy, is able to address one of the crucial themes in Heaney’s poetry by stimulating the reader’s interest and appealing to something arguably familiar to them.

The framing of Le Frontiere della Scrittura, another volume released by Passannanti in 2013, is slightly different. By including only one new translation, “The Frontiers of Writing”, once again, in a large selection from The Spirit Level, and using it as the title of the collection, the translator is creating an anthology that is more directly addressing the issue of the Troubles, thus employing the same material to target a somewhat different audience. This is highlighted by the inclusion, within the same essays, of snapshots of riots, helmeted policemen, British flags and marching crowds. Passannanti’s correspondence with Heaney is also substituted by photographs of manuscripts from The Haw Lantern, to which the poem “The Frontier of Writing” orig-

inally belonged. In one printed edition of this collection, “Digging” features as an afterthought, or rather as a forethought, as it is the first poem to appear before a limited selection, but it is not even included in the summary.³ Le Frontiere della Scrittura is quite clearly constructed envisaging a different set of expectations on the readers’ part, and it is therefore framing Heaney’s poetry according to different parameters.

This closer analysis of Passannanti’s recent engagement with Heaney’s work, and “Digging” in particular, has shown that the contextualisation of the same source text may vary even when translated by the same translator at roughly the same time, and reception is meant to vary accordingly. In this sense each Italian publication of Heaney’s work, or perhaps on Heaney’s work, supplies Italian readers with a different outlook on the poet which is certainly partial and perhaps at times even misleading, but which nonetheless provides insights into his poetry which would not have otherwise reached and therefore enriched some of their readership. The main challenge for the translation of much of Heaney’s production lies in capturing the full depth of meaning of the complex combinations of signifying elements rooted in precise historical, geographical and personal circumstances.

The collection North is perhaps the one in which the existing organic relation between materiality, representations and memory is more closely scrutinised. Here, the Italian translations’ greatest infractions seem to happen in relation to Heaney’s occupation as a poet and the definition of his place as Northern Ireland, as well as on the strict interrelation between these aspects that lies at the very foundation of North. This often impacts on what is perhaps the core theme of the collection: the interrogation of the reliability and effectiveness of Heaney’s own poetic statements. The final poem, “Exposure”, provides a clear illustration of the poet questioning his self-worth:

...Instead I walk through damp leaves,
Husks, the spentflukes of autumn,
Imagining a hero
On some muddy compound,

³ It should be pointed out that minor variation may exist between different versions of the same anthology, especially between those made available as e-books and printed versions.
... As I sit weighing and weighing
My responsible tristia.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs? (134)

Here the creeping doubts that characterise this whole collection become frantic and more direct. The mythical structure of North is also desecrated in these lines. “Muddy compound” may refer to the leaves and spent fluke the poet is threading on, but it might refer to the composition of the bog as well, divested of its symbolic aura and revealed in a more quotidian and unassuming light. The hero is only in his head: his weapon is just as imaginary as he is.

“Exposure” is the end of the poet’s mythopoetic journey; the final milestone illuminated by the poems that came before, and at the same time investing everything that preceded it of new, dimmer and yet more profound light. It is Heaney’s closing attempt to surpass a bi-dimensional rendition of reality, the final push for tri-dimensional writing, capable of giving voice to one viewpoint without occluding the saying of the rest. He is asserting and at the same time surpassing the admission that “for all this art and sedentary trade I am incapable”, made in the preceding poem, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing”. In “Exposure” the absence of firmly stated convictions becomes the poet’s stronger statement, yet this poem is far from self-contained. It draws its significance not only from previous poems within and without this collection, but also from an understanding of the unsaid that can only be achieved with a close acquaintance with the historical and cultural circumstances in which the poem is rooted.

These are perhaps the reasons the Italian translator opted for escape in a realm that transcends contingency, thus partly obfuscating the poem’s nature as the poet’s personal interrogation about his art in times of upheaval and consigning it to a more abstract, metaphysical dimension. This occurs in two ways: the semantic level and the use of syntax, in particular the omission of pronouns.

As far as the use of terminology is concerned, the main tendency is to substitute a specific word with its superordinate or with a word of equivalent function within the context of reception. In “Exposure” the more subtly loaded terms in the source text are “internee”, “in-
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former” and “wood-kerne”. The first two have specific referents within the political situation in Northern Ireland, so that a neat dichotomy comes to life between two different ways of being pro-active: informing the British of Republican activities, or taking part in them, thus facing the consequence of political imprisonment. The words used for the translation of this crucial line, where Heaney is questioning both the “inaction” inherent to writing poetry and the failure to take side even in this circumstance, lack the same oppositional quality of the source text, as they are largely de-contextualised:

Come sono finito così?
Spesso penso ai bei consigli prismatici degli amici,
e al cervello a incudine di chi mi odia
mentre siedo pensando e soppensado i miei responsabili tristia.

Non sono né una spia né un internato,
sono un emigré interno, diventato capellone e pensoso, uno sbandato
sfuggito al massacro, ... (135)

Both spia and internato show a degree of domestication, as they fail to create a straightforward association with the situation in Northern Ireland. The former is a general term very commonly used in Italy in relation to the CIA or James Bond movies, thus highly mediated by its use in the media to refer to distant, stereotyped contexts. The use of internato, on the other hand, is less common and not immediately associated with political prisoners; in the Italian context, it would be more readily associated with patients of psychiatric hospitals, or students working and residing within a college or school. The final term deprived of its historical connection with the Irish context is “wood-kerne”, a term normally used to describe those old rebels who took to the woods to prepare their resistance. The Italian sbandato, in contrast, is a generally pejorative term for someone who has gone astray, usually a lowlife. Moreover, it loses semantic cohesiveness with the forthcoming metaphor assimilating the poet to “bole and bark”, which also functioned as a final re-statement of
Heaney’s main concern underlying this collection: the repeated oblique interrogation of the utility of a poetic engagement that, “by taking protective colouring”, refuses to stand out and take sides.

As the overall use of Italian terminology is rather informal and fairly vague, it gives a remarkably different impression of the poet’s bitter portrait. Some traits are almost cartoonish at times, as the obsolete term capellone for ‘grown long-haired’, for instance, which also strikes a pejorative note by expressing connotations sometimes attached to the English “longhair”. Pensoso instead captures the more “ruminative” mood of thought, concealing the possibility of intellectual re-elaboration and emotive concern left open by the source text’s “thoughtful”. The changes are minor and yet more neutral translation choices, such as dai capelli lunghi e pieno di pensieri, for instance, would have made it possible to carry the resigned solemnity of Heaney’s voice.

After all, the poetic persona uttering his predicament is also partly concealed. The second level of intervention is in the use, or rather omission, of personal pronouns, as in the translation of “How did I end up like this?”, “I often think of my friends”, “As I sit weighing and weighing”, “I am neither internee nor informer”. Although the verb conjugation implies first person speech, none of these pronouns is made visible in the Italian version. Moreover the effect of this strategy seems to go beyond a matter of emphasis; in the last three stanzas, Heaney’s syntactical structure is turned into a stream of consciousness of sorts, which makes the undisputed assignation of subjects really challenging:

Non sono né una spia né un internato,
sono un emigré interno, diventato
capellone e pensoso, uno sbandato

sfuggito al massacro, uno che si mimetizza
col tronco e la corteccia, e sente il soffio di ogni vento,

che mentre soffia su queste scintille
per il loro povero calore, ha perduto
il portento di una volta nella vita,
la rosa pulsante della cometa. (135)

In English the initial clause “I am” is clearly supporting all the attributes following the two semicolons, making it indubitable that the “who” introducing the final coordinate sentence equally depends on the I, because the English “who” incontrovertibly refers to a person.
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The Italian relative pronoun *che*, meanwhile, can apply to both a person and an object and normally immediately follows the item to which it refers. In Mussapi’s poem, therefore, it would seem obvious that *che mentre soffia* refers to the “wind” immediately preceding it. This would displace the focus of the final lines from the narrating Self, already blurred out by the absence of pronoun and the elusive syntactical structure, to the wind. In its Italian guise, then, “Exposure” struggles to fill the role of unifying manifesto of the collection, since the image of the poet doubting the validity of his efforts, indeed his priorities in life, does not outstandingly dominate the conclusion of the poem.

This final example confirms that in Italian translation the combinations of tropes of territory and self, and the poet’s doubts about the purpose of writing, are often performed differently in translation. Yet, target texts may be “partial”, as Tymozcko has noted in relation to the process of translation in general, but still “loyal”, to use a term, suggested by Franco Buffoni as an alternative to the conventional “faithful”, which allows the idea to be challenged that the only form of faithfulness is formal equivalence. By presupposing that the source texts will be changed, the idea of “loyalty” overcomes the stalemate of seeking a chimerical overlap between form and meaning. Translation can be carried out only by performing “betrayals” that serve a good end, since the translator is working with the source text and target reader in mind, striving to achieve what they deem to be the best possible result.

At the core of the act of translation, there is a certain distance, to evoke an insightful statement of Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra:

> I am utterly sure that I read a different Seamus Heaney than you. And I loved him, for sure, I felt close to him, but I know that closeness involves a deep distance, and maybe part of what I loved was that illusion of closeness. (Maleney 2015)

This gap is necessary in order to ignite a spark of love for the text in new readers distinguished by different values, knowledge and interests. In this regard, the underlying purpose of translation becomes that of facilitating the international reception of poems that are often deeply rooted in the reality of Northern Ireland, as well as constructing a perception of Heaney’s work that is primarily intelligible, but ultimately respectful of the poet’s posture within the canon of contemporary world poetry.
Works Cited


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Further Readings


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When Italian Popular Music Sings about Ireland: Homage, Inspiration and Kindred Spirits

Simona Martini

The present essay aims to offer some representative examples of the interactions between Italian popular music and songwriting and Irish references, thus showing that a study of popular music represents a strategic way to observe the cultural interconnectedness of Irish culture and traditions and Italian musical output. The purpose of this noncomprehensive article is to introduce Ireland as a source of inspiration for Italian musicians of different genres and styles who either have used Irish themes or Irish tunes or set their songs in Ireland – all with Italian lyrics, thus reaching a wider national audience. To this aim, an illustrative selection of songs will be analysed with translations and discussion of lyrics and musical styles, along with interviews and statements by the songwriters. The Italian musicians presented in this study were chosen because they are well-known performers and songwriters who share a sense of belonging to Irish culture, literature and landscape that is expressed in their notes and lyrics.¹

As this article will highlight, the fascination with Ireland felt by several Italian musicians originated from their journeys to Ireland and the consequent experience of its nature, wild settings, local people and customs. Ireland is perceived as a place where merry, genuine relationships and human values are fostered; furthermore, some features of Irish rural life are seen as close to those of some Italian countryside regions.

Additionally, Italian folk music is characterised by a diversity of styles that also stems from Italy’s fragmented history of several dominations

¹ There are also Italian critically acclaimed musicians specialized in traditional Irish music who deserve proper discussion: to name but a few bands, Whisky Trail, who recorded their first album in 1975, and Birkin Tree. Both bands have been playing for decades in Italy and abroad.
occurred over centuries. Among them, Celtic substrata in folk music are especially found in Northern Italian regions, where the musicians introduced here come from. In this essay, they will be presented according to thematic criteria, starting from Massimo Bubola’s intense cultural interest in Ireland, followed by Le Orme’s song dedicated to Dublin and the work of bands Modena City Ramblers and Casa del vento, both closely related to Irish folk. The essay concludes presenting Angelo Branduardi’s acclaimed endeavour to set to music some Italian renderings of W.B. Yeats’s poems.

Massimo Bubola

The most well-known Italian song dealing with Ireland is ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda’ (‘The sky of Ireland’, 1992), written by rock singer-songwriter Massimo Bubola for the popular singer Fiorella Mannoia. The song had great success and has also become part of Bubola’s repertoire.

Born in the province of Verona, Bubola is a master in Italian electro-acoustic folk-rock and his music is a distinctive mix of folk, rock and balladry. He has published more than twenty albums and has written songs for several Italian musicians and singer-songwriters, such as Fabrizio De André, Milva and The Gang.

I wrote this song after several travels to Ireland. It was the summer of 1984, on a ferry from Galway to the Aran Islands. I had already repeatedly spent some time staring at the Irish sky, trying to grab its mood and secrets. But that day, I felt I had really discovered it – it revealed itself to me. In a few hours, we had experienced summer, then winter, then summer again. It reminded me of the Dolomiti sky I used to watch in my youth – it moved so fast, with iridescent light and shadows. The sky over Ireland brought sudden, violent rain when it was dark and thundering, then sudden bursts of sunlight would bring unexpected peace.

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2 Among the first studies on the geographic distinctions in Italian folk music, see Lomax, Alan. 1956. ‘Folk Song Style: Notes on a Systematic Approach to the Study of Folk Song’, in *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, VIII, pp. 48-50. For a thorough study of Italian folk music, see Ferrari, Luca. 2003. *Folk geneticamente modificato. Musiche e musicisti della moderna tradizione nell’Italia dei McDonald’s*, Viterbo: Stampa alternativa. Ferrari explains that folk music from the western regions of Northern Italy adopted forms and expressive modules from Occitan and Celtic traditions (p. 31).

3 Massimo Bubola’s statements in this essay were originally given in a private e-mail correspondence we had in March 2016.
The changing weather Bubola had experienced in Ireland is rendered in the line ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda è una donna che cambia spesso d’umore’, ‘The sky of Ireland is a woman with frequent mood swings’, that confers a feminine nature on the sky by comparing its rapid changes to mood swings. However, these changes are of a charming kind, as Bubola himself clarifies: ‘The Irish sky would transform the landscape – that recalled the black and white postcards of the 1950s – into three-dimensional sights with vivid, almost surreal colours’. This explanation leads to the lines: ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda a volte fa il mondo in bianco e nero/ma dopo un momento i colori li fa brillare più del vero’.4

The song also features instruments characterising Irish as well as Italian traditional songs, such as accordion, violin, mandolin and recorder. Bubola explains: ‘The music came together with lyrics, as usual. It is a summa of the folk music I had listened to in Ireland and the several popular songs from Veneto that had been sung and played in my family since I was a child’.5

Italian musicians’ fascination with Ireland has often stemmed from travel experiences they had there. Travel plays a peculiar role in the life of performers. In fact, not only do they travel when they are on tour – with the consequent opportunity to live some aspects of the relation with those places’ otherness that can be developed into songs –

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4 ‘Sometimes the sky of Ireland makes the world in black and white/but after a while it makes colours shine more than the real thing’. All English translations of the Italian lyrics in this paper (both in body text and footnotes) are mine.

5 Other Italian folk musicians share Bubola’s view. For instance, when recalling his first encounter with the production of Breton and Celtic musician and singer Alan Stivell, multi-instrumentalist Enzo Vacca, from Piedmont says: ‘Quella musica mi rituffava nella mia infanzia, vedevo la mia gente cantare, ballare, far festa’ (‘That music brought me back to my childhood, I could see my people sing, dance and have fun’), in Esposito, Salvatore. 2012. ‘Enzo Vacca: l’arpa celtica e la tradizione musicale del Piemonte’, Blogfoolk (http://www.blogfoolk.com/2012/05/enzo-vacca-larpa-celtica-e-la.html, last visited 27/6/2016, translation mine). Similarly, in an interview with S. Esposito Bubola recalls his journeys to Ireland in the Seventies, when he listened to young people singing and playing songs from the Irish folk repertoire about ‘their history, their war for independence’. On those occasions, Bubola used to sing Italian traditional songs about the Great War so that he could ‘feel on the same wavelength’ as his Irish companions, who were eventually so charmed that they asked him to translate the lyrics and explain the stories behind them (http://www.blogfoolk.com/2014/06/massimo-bubola-il-testamento-del.html, last visited 28/6/2016).
but they also travel when they are ‘simple’ tourists. As this essay will show hereafter, when the traveller is a musician his gaze on a country becomes a deeper and more multifaceted, fascinating cultural filter.

When asked to explain the lines in the chorus, ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda si muove con te/Il cielo d’Irlanda è dentro di te’ – ‘The sky of Ireland moves along with you/The sky of Ireland is inside of you’ – Bubola says: ‘The sky of Ireland, that is indeed the country’s visible soul and ID, is eternally moving, like a pendulum. It carries with itself the colour of the Atlantic Ocean and fills its eyes with the emerald green of meadows, and the blue of its quiet lakes and large rivers’. This explanation is referred to the lines ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda […]/ti annega di verde e ti copre di blu’ (‘The sky of Ireland […]/ drowns you in green and covers you with blue’). With reference to the line ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda […] si ubriaca di stelle di notte e il mattino è leggero’ (‘The sky of Ireland […]/ gets high on stars at night and in the morning it is light’), Bubola continues: ‘The sky, which is personified in the song, is a good drinker – like almost all Irish – but it drinks stars, and you feel it is following you, whether you are walking or driving fast in a car. You can feel that the sky enters your soul somehow, with its perseverance and majestic stride’.

As for the lines ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda è Dio che suona la fisarmonica/ Si apre e si chiude al ritmo della musica’, encompassing in a couplet the distinctively Irish elements of weather, God and music, Bubola clarifies: ‘The image of God as a music player opening and closing his accordion is a metaphor dealing with the vigorous Irish religiousness. It stands for the image of God who “plays” everyone of us as if

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7 ‘The sky of Ireland is God playing the accordion/ It opens and closes to the rhythm of music’.
we were little accordions, thus choosing the intensity, the rhythm and the end of our own music in the natural time of our life, i.e. the music of his score’. Such a fascinating view highlights the poetic achievement of Bubola’s songwriting, and showcases how Ireland has been a peculiar source of inspiration to him.

Bubola further explains his relationship with ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda’ with stimulating observations:

I wrote this song as an anthem, as a celebration of the great beauty and spirit of Ireland, that I first encountered when it was still a poor country, nearly unknown – not only in Italy. In the early 1990s when ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda’ was released, Irish distinctive culture (as well as its well-known dark beer) had not expanded in Italy yet. The song has had great success and I believe it contributed to the dissemination of Irish images and culture. I think it also paved the way for discovering the Irish model of development mainly based on its identity and culture – music, literature, great prose and splendid poetry, cinema and a lifestyle that stemmed from poverty, struggles and a deep bond with roots. This model is one of a kind in the world, and has been exported worldwide with great influence in the last thirty years. I am very happy I did my part – even though minimally – as a poet and musician, because I really feel I have an Irish soul, too.

In Bubola’s view and writing, therefore, Ireland is both a real, physical place and a place of the soul whose genius loci the songwriter has experienced and rendered into his lyrics. Bubola’s undertaking, involving a precursory addressing of Ireland for the Italian music audience of that time, recalls what Glenn Hooper noted on ‘a reorientation on the notions of centre and periphery, as parts of [...] Ireland were transformed from inaccessible [...] regions [...] to rediscovered venues of primitive delight’.

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8 Hooper (cit.), p. XVIII. Hooper refers to 18th-century travel accounts on Ireland. As for more recent times, Ireland’s popularity has gradually grown among Italian audiences since the Nineties, also fostered by the Celtic Tiger and the boost given by the recent knowledge of typical Irish features – i.e. landscape and cultural heritage, Dublin city’s vibrant atmosphere, Saint Patrick’s Day hype, music, beer. On Ireland’s strong reputation among Italians, see also Tourism Ireland - Italian strategies for growth 2013-2015, https://www.tourismireland.com/TourismIreland/media/Tourism-Ireland/Initial%20Setup/368-Growth-Strategy-Italy-2013-17_Pf17_1.pdf?ext=.pdf, last visited 4/7/2016.
Furthermore, ‘musical “texts” [...] are clearly implicated, aesthetically as well as thematically, in the continued influence literature experts in the drafting of shared memories that make sense of a particular past or shared character’.\(^9\) Here the character – with its recent past that was not well-known in Italy back then – is Ireland, as collected, recollected and memorized in Bubola’s lyrics.

In 2005, Bubola released Quel lungo treno (‘That long train’), a concept album about World War I. Along with ballads, rock songs and country renditions of traditional songs that pay homage to the folk roots of Bubola’s region (i.e. Veneto), the album also features the song ‘Jack O’Leary’. Instruments such as tin whistle and violin evoke the Irish origin of the eponymous protagonist of the song: ‘Son Jack O’Leary di anni ventitré/figlio dimenticato/nato a Belfast nei quartieri est/al fronte richiamato.//Nei fusilieri d’Irlanda per il re,/il re dell’Inghilterra/scaraventato nelle trincee ad Ypres/ in Belgio a far la guerra’.\(^10\)

It is noteworthy that Bubola’s lyrics express the Irish point of view with a powerful pattern where the words for ‘Britain’ and ‘war’ rhyme: ‘Inghilterra/guerra’. The array of countries mentioned in few lines suggests the extraneousness and the sense of unrelatedness felt by soldiers who fight wars they did not wage – and for countries that are not always their own.\(^11\)


\(^10\) ‘I’m Jack O’Leary I’m twenty-three/a forgotten son/born in East Belfast/called to the front.//To the Irish fusiliers for the King/the King of England/thrown into the trenches at Ypres/in Belgium to fight the war’. This English version of the lyrics is by Tim Parks, whose translation is featured in the album booklet. For East Belfast’s contribution to WWI, see the ongoing project ‘East Belfast and the Great War’ (http://www.eastbelfastww1.com/, last visited 24/3/2016, with online database fully searchable from July 2016). As regards West Belfast, see Grayson, Richard S. 2009. *Belfast Boys: How Unionists and Nationalists Fought and Died Together in the First World War*, London: Bloomsbury.

\(^11\) Bubola also wrote other ballads set in Ireland – for instance, ‘L’alba che verrà’ (‘The dawn that will come’, 2014), about an Irish soldier who grows up in the Great War trenches, and ‘Roger McClure’ (2004), about the story of a street child arrested and lynched in Dublin between the wars. In the latter case, the songwriter chose a past Irish setting to address the ongoing issue of *meninos de rua* in Brazil – see Susanna, Giancarlo. 2004. ‘Bubola: tutto il mio mondo in un disco’. (http://www.ilportoritrovato.net/html/bubola.html, last visited 28/6/2016).
Le Orme

Irish themes and settings in Italian music are not exclusively found in genres related to Irish roots and folk. An example of such diverse approaches is the song ‘Dublino addio’ (‘Farewell Dublin’) by Le Orme (‘The Footprints’, from Venice), one of the main Italian progressive rock bands. In 1990 they released *Orme*, an album that steered from prog to a more electropop-oriented sound. *Orme* features the song ‘Dublino addio’, a homage to the fascinating Emerald Isle whose lyrics were written by Cheope – nom de plume of the Grammy-awarded songwriter Alfredo Rapetti Mogol. While introducing the song in live performances, Le Orme’s former singer Aldo Tagliapietra would peculiarly say: ‘This is a song about a very faraway country – Ireland’, thus referring to Ireland as an alterity – at least spatial – that left a lasting impression on the songwriter’s mind and memory.

The refined tune is set on a constant bassline permeating the atmosphere together with keyboards. This song represents an interesting example of cultural intermingling, since its Irish topic is conveyed through Italian language and a musical style of primarily British derivation.

As an introductory theme, landscape elements are featured in the first verse – namely, green meadows, ocean waves and blue sky. The second verse introduces the human presence: ‘E negli occhi quella libertà/che ancor oggi è a metà/Orfana, non si è tolta il velo’. The stance becomes political, with a reference to the split island that was still causing losses, since the Troubles – the Northern Ireland conflict – were still tearing the land apart at the time this song was written.

In a conversation we had in July 2016, Cheope said that the inspiration for the lyrics came from his direct experience of Ireland, as he has always had a deep love for the country – which he visits frequently: ‘I felt love at first sight for both Irish land and people. To me, Ireland always means emotions and feelings. Le Orme had written the music, and the atmosphere of that tune brought me back to Ireland. Hence, lyrics came easily’.

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12 ‘In the eyes, freedom/still split in half/Orphaned, it didn’t remove its veil’.
The lyrical I is therefore that of a foreign traveller who is about to leave Dublin city. Following Cheope’s statement, as for travellers departure is a separation of an individual from a context that defines him – while the arrival represents the beginning of a process of identification with it\textsuperscript{13} – the same can be observed about the protagonist of the song.

After referring to the landscape and the grief for Irish ‘halved’ freedom, with the following lines addressing Dublin city ‘Anch’io ho imparato ad amarti lo sai/cosi come si ama qualcuno di noi’,\textsuperscript{14} the lyrical I acknowledges he has experienced a kind of otherness that he feels very close to his own self: ‘Anch’io figlio tuo oramai’ (‘By now I too am a son of yours’). He is going through a painful goodbye because he feels he has become a son of the city, by now.\textsuperscript{15} Accordingly, Le Orme’s song gives voice to the nostalgic love for Dublin city expressed from a non-local standpoint. As stated by Ulf Hannerz, ‘cities have a major part in ordering transnational connections, and must therefore be major observation posts for a study of that “culture of all humanity”, and of how it comes together’.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, ‘Dublino addio’ shows how Ireland’s capital city itself has a cultural role in the ‘combination of local and long-distance processes’ that take place in the mind of those who relate with, and experience, the city.

In the refrain, the parting wishes to Dublin from the first-person subject of the song are a sort of blessing: ‘che Dio si ricordi di te’ (‘may God remember you’). Even though the songwriter did not have such a reference in mind, this parting line interestingly recalls an excerpt from the Church Father Cyprianus Carthaginiensis’ \textit{De dominica oratione}.\textsuperscript{17} In

\textsuperscript{14} ‘I too have learned to love you, you know /just as everyone loves a kindred one’. Cheope clarifies these lines stating that when one’s love for a land is so strong, it can be compared to the feeling for a beloved person.
\textsuperscript{15} Hooper (cit.): ‘To visit other countries, to become, if only partially and provisionally, of another culture’; ‘if travel allows for anything it allows for the possible reinvention of the self’ (p. XIII).
\textsuperscript{17} ‘E vuoi tu che Dio si ricordi di te, quando tu di te stesso non ti ricordi?’ (italics mine). \textit{De dominica oratione} is an explanation of Pater Noster (Lord’s Prayer) written in 251-252 A. D. See Martini, Monsignor Antonio. 1835. Istruzioni dommatiche e morali sopra l’orazione domenicale. Venezia: Giuseppe Antonelli, p. 3.
the last refrain, the blessing is for both the city and the subject: ‘Che Dio si ricordi di noi’ (‘may God remember us’). When explaining these lines, Cheope states that in his view love always has a spiritual element and, in the case of Ireland, spirituality is also frequently present in culture and society – more so at the time the song was written. Hence, his choice to include a form of blessing in his lyrics.

The lyrical subject still feels the wind of the city (‘Addio alle strade battute dal vento/ancora lo sento dentro di me’18), even when it is not blowing anymore. He feels like an adopted child of Ireland and, borrowing Lawrence Grossberg’s words, he ‘finds that the strange is [...] already familiar’.19 He sees himself mirrored in the landscape, rooting his (perceived) identity in a newly-gained way of belonging that informs the songwriting.

Through this process of identification with the land, Cheope’s lyrics present Dublin – and, metonymically, the whole Ireland – as a sort of locus (amoenus) of the heart, an anthropological place where physical and mental space are linked by some kind of ‘inextricable continuity’ (Bonadei 2003, 23).

Modena City Ramblers

Modena City Ramblers were born in 1991 as an Irish folk buskers ensemble who played in local pubs, streets or for their friends. Their name establishes a link with the tradition of Irish street performers and is a homage to the folk band Dublin City Ramblers, with a focus on their own origins from Modena, in the Italian region of Emilia Romagna.

The relationship between Modena City Ramblers – also abbreviated as MCR – and Irish culture spans across their career; accordingly, this essay will only present some of the main features of the group’s work. The band’s former singer Cisco has frequently stated that a journey to Ireland left a deep mark on him, and had a deep influence on his attitude to life and music. The band has also travelled

18 ‘Farewell to the roads beaten by the wind/I can still feel it inside of me’.
across Ireland, to get in touch with Irish music and musicians – some of which also contributed to MCR’s 1999 album *Fuori campo*, singing and playing traditional Irish instruments. 

The band’s 1993 first demo tape contains a declaration of intent in its very title, *Combat folk*. It summons the roots that stand at the core of MCR’s music, since it also includes – along with original songs written by the group – their cover versions of traditional Italian songs like ‘Bella ciao’ and traditional Irish ones, such as ‘Farewell to Erin’ and ‘The Pipe on the Hob’. Ramblers’ discography expresses the band’s cultural syncretism that includes a wide range of themes about Italian history and society together with Irish subjects, that have been progressively intermingled with Latin American topics. In the band’s view, all these geographical and cultural areas share common traits in their tradition of stories about life, freedom, (in)justice, hopes and expectations. MCR’s music and songwriting deal with activism as well as more intimate atmospheres and festive moods.

‘Combat folk’ has later become the name of a whole genre, whose main Italian representatives Modena City Ramblers have inspired other groups, including Casa del vento – that will also be addressed in this paper. Combat folk music expresses the sense of belonging to a mixed tradition, reflected in a mixed identity – also resulting in such lyrical themes as travel, social-political struggle, and the standpoints of outsiders and underprivileged, e.g. proletarians, foreigners and the poor.

In the case of Modena City Ramblers, their ‘hybrid identity’ encompasses the Irish and Emilian ones, and is also highlighted by the lyrical mix of Modenese dialect and Italian language – that in some cases is also enriched by quotations of lines in Irish. It’s the genius loci, the spirit of the place, that MCR try to repossess and express in their output: a place perceived with its intrinsic, distinctive features.

The musical style developed by Modena City Ramblers started from Irish jigs, combat rock and ballads sung in dialect with typical

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20 Modena City Ramblers’ peculiar approach to Italian themes conveyed through Irish tunes is epitomized by their 1994 version of the traditional Partisan song ‘Bella ciao’, whose instrumental intro consists in their own rendition of Dublin folk musician Finbar Furey’s ‘The Lonesome Boatman’.

21 See Luca Ferrari’s cited study of Italian folk music, *Folk geneticamente modificato. Musiche e musicisti della moderna tradizione nell’Italia dei McDonald’s*. 
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Irish instruments such as tin whistle, bodhrán, bouzouki, uilleann pipes. Then they gradually reached a hybrid genre that they defined ‘Celtica Patchanka’ (after the title of a 1999 song of theirs), always keeping constant references and homage to songs by Anglo-Irish Celtic punk band The Pogues and several Irish traditional tunes.

The use of instruments typical of Irish folk tradition immediately offers the setting for the style, genre and atmosphere, together with the mood evoked. For instance, MCR’s Irish folk balladry prepares the listener for such themes as melancholy and nostalgia for a past whose promises were not fulfilled by the future, as well as stories about life, friendship, travels. An example of such approach is the bands’ love song to Ireland, ‘In un giorno di pioggia’ (‘On a rainy day’, 1994). It is a ballad with typical Irish instruments like tin whistle, bodhrán (the Irish frame drum) and bouzouki, and represents a homage to MCR’s passion for The Pogues.

The opening verse is taken from ‘Mo Ghile Mear’, a traditional Irish song written in the XVIII century. After that, the first line is: ‘Addio, addio e un bicchiere levato al cielo d’Irlanda e alle nuvole gonfie’ (‘Goodbye, goodbye and let’s raise a glass to the sky of Ireland and its puffy clouds’). Once again, the nostalgia felt at the moment of departure from Ireland proves a common feature Italian musicians could not help singing about.

The farewell goes on with a toast to Ireland ‘con un nodo alla gola’ (‘with a lump in the throat’), then recalling the Liffey, the docklands and moorlands, leprechauns and fairies. The last verse addresses the Irish diaspora: ‘I tuoi esuli parlano lingue straniere, si addormentano soli sognando i tuoi cieli, /si ritrovano persi in paesi lontani a can-

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22 The original ‘Patchanka’ combines musical traditions and genres like punk, ska, reggae, rap and Latin American traditional sounds – in different languages. The term was coined by French group Mano Negra, who started mixing a number of styles in their first album, entitled Patchanka (1988). MCR’s Celtic version of Patchanka includes ethnic, rock, punk and folk influences from Irish and Latin American traditions.

tare una terra di profughi e santi’.  

The declaration of love to Ireland in the chorus: ‘in un giorno di pioggia ho imparato ad amarti’ (‘on a rainy day I learned to love you’) strikingly recalls Le Orme’s line ‘Anch’io ho imparato ad amarti’ in ‘Dublino addio’.

In an interview with Giovanni Vescovi in 2009, MCR’s former singer Cisco (Stefano Bellotti) confirmed that travel experiences have always been at the core of MCR’s music and, even after leaving the band, he maintained: ‘I keep on travelling. One can always write a song without staying in Africa for a month – or anywhere else, but I’m not like that’.  

The experiences of the Italian musicians addressed in this study prove that they don’t feel Ireland’s ‘otherness’ – primarily represented in their lyrics by the focus on its distinctive geographical aspects, even more frequently than its social life features – as alien to themselves. This may explain the feeling of Ireland as ‘a second homeland’ and the choice to refer to it as a place able to convey feelings related to personal memories along with a sort of ‘nostalgia of origins’ – that human condition associated with youth, innocence, hope, that has no nationality other than Humankind. Hence, Ireland as a ‘way’ to recall and re-memorize one’s own past, life and experiences is, for Italian musicians, a way to establish a close contact between kindred spirits, i.e. the Italian and Irish ones.

The ironic folk ballad ‘Great Song of Indifference’ (1990) by Irish singer-songwriter Bob Geldof proved perfect for a cover version by MCR, who kept the English title, but loosely translated the lyrics in Modenese dialect as ‘A m’inceva un caz’ (‘I don’t give a ****’, 1994). The song presents stimulating features of translation and coverization of a song. It is an adaptation that positions the social criticism of one’s own country through an apparently – and ironically – nihilistic approach. As Dai Griffiths noted, ‘cov-

24 ‘Your exiles speak foreign languages, they fall asleep alone dreaming of your skies,/ they find themselves lost in faraway countries singing about a land of refugees and saints’.


26 Geldof also collaborated with Modena City Ramblers singing in their song ‘Il bicchier dell’addio’ (‘The parting glass’, 1994), characterised by a merry, revelling atmosphere. ‘The Parting Glass’ is also the title of an old traditional Irish song.
ers illustrate identity in motion\textsuperscript{27} – in this case, the rendering of Geldof’s song involves crossings and movements across places and languages. What Griffiths calls the ‘transformative intention or effect’ (p. 60) of a cover is given by the shift to Modenese dialect and Italian social-political local context, that allows Ramblers to make space for an entertaining, funny, ironic presentation of influential personalities like the Pope, or local food like ‘un panein, [...] un bicer ed vein’ (‘a sandwich, [...] a glass of wine’), none of which was addressed in Geldof’s lyrics.

MCR’s main interests and themes are also featured in their album \textit{Fuori campo} (‘Out of the picture’, 1999), highlighting the band’s will to reaffirm their own musical and cultural identity between Celtic references and the band’s Emilian, rural roots, together with the push for commitment and social struggle. Along with references to Brendan Behan in ‘Morte di un poeta’ (‘Death of a poet’, 1994), and Bobby Sands in ‘Grande famiglia’ (‘Big family’, 1996), another example of MCR’s musical and cultural syncretism is in their song ‘I funerali di Berlinguer’ (‘Berlinguer’s funeral’, 1994). Here, incorporated into the Irish wake musical pattern is the mix of Italian and Modenese dialect in lyrics that address a crucial political event for Italian society in the early Eighties.

‘Canzone dalla fine del mondo’ (‘Song from the end of the world’, 1996) is another ballad following Irish folk style. Starting with the line: ‘Ho sognato che il vento dell’ovest mi prendeva leggero per mano’ (‘I dreamed that the west wind took me gently by the hand’), the lyrical dreams of a faraway country, so far that it could be at the end of the world – a perception that can be fostered by the overhanging cliffs in the West that seem to mark the very end of the world. This place is the West of Ireland, that is mentioned with its wind, ocean and isles – presented in the second line ‘mi posava alla fine del mondo tra isole e terre lontane’ (‘It placed me at the end of the world, among faraway isles and lands’). The Irish setting considered as a physically distant place is an imagery also seen in Le Orme’s ‘DUBLino addio’; the Irish sky already sung by Massimo Bubola is also mentioned here in MCR’s last verse: ‘Ma il vento dell’ovest chiamava ed il cielo d’Irlanda svaniva, /mi svegli-

This couplet is an effective example suggesting that such elements as the Irish sky, the wind and a dreamy condition of the lyrical I – as well as drunkenness, be it literal or metaphorical – prove to be recurring themes in several Italian songs dealing with Ireland, and that the Emerald Isle itself is often regarded as a desired place to be, longed for with melancholy.

The non-Irish lyrical I in MCR’s song holds a reflexive standpoint, and sees himself “as homo figurans [...] becoming a spectator of the world who has various relations with the space – with emotional, imaginary, symbolical, utopian implications” – an attitude similar to that maintained in ‘In un giorno di pioggia’.

Drago Momcilovic’s observations are relevant to the discourse on Irish-Italian connections in music: ‘[a]s “raw materials” of cultural memory, such popularized forms of music become appropriate and compelling sites where memories are disseminated, narrativized, and shared’. Therefore, Andy Bennett’s words can be borrowed about music as a medium and a way to establish a bond for diasporic, displaced peoples. In the case of Ireland and Italy, the bond of music can effectively bridge ‘the geographic distance between [people from different countries] and provid[e] a shared sense of collective identity articulated in a symbolic sense of community’.

Modena City Ramblers’ Celtica Patchanka style also implied their need to develop further variety in their sound. Giovanni Rubbiani (MCR’s guitarist and among the band’s main songwriters until 2000) stated that the band would also need to steer from the Irish references in order not to repeat the previous sound patterns, thus ‘respecting [the band’s] roots [in Irish folk] and working on them with a fresh touch’.

28 ‘But the west wind was calling and the sky of Ireland disappeared, / I awoke in a desert room, drunk as the dream ended’. As reported by Carlo Susara (cit., 2012), there are no references here to P. B. Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’: this song is indeed inspired by ‘Song From the End of the World’, by Scottish band Waterboys.


30 Momcilovic (cit.), pp. 3-4.


32 Ferrari, P. and Verri (cit.), p. 118.
Ultimately, the constant presence of elements that connect MCR’s music with Ireland as an extension of their Emilian roots seems to be identifiable in what Amin Maalouf calls ‘a new concept of identity’, suggesting the need for our contemporaries to be ‘encouraged to accept their multiple affiliations and allegiances’. Also Salman Rushdie’s observations seem to fit Ramblers’ relationship with Ireland, since their Irish-related songs in their essence contribute to celebrate ‘hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure’. To quote Rushdie again, Modena City Ramblers’ Celtica Patchanka can be considered ‘a love-song to our mongrel selves’.

Casa del vento

Originally from the province of Arezzo, Tuscany, the band Casa del vento started playing Irish folk music when their name was Teach na Gaoithe, that is the Irish for ‘House of the wind’ – in Italian, Casa del vento.

The band’s music genre is ascribed to combat folk. The group shares Modena City Ramblers’ inclination towards Irish traditional folk music, together with social struggle-oriented lyrics and contaminations from different influences. Together with former MCR’s singer Cisco – who has also performed live ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda’ together with Massimo Bubola – the Tuscan band has written and released their second album, ‘900 – Novecento (2001), that features the ballad ‘Inishmore’. Its geographical setting is Irish, the music follows the traditional Irish style with uilleann pipes and low whistle, and the subject encompasses

35 Casa del vento draws musical contaminations from Irish ballads as well as Latin American and Middle Eastern sounds. They have also played as guest musicians on Patti Smith’s album Banga (2012).
Inishmore winds, pints, people, roads, walls, old people telling stories and children running. The lyrics also work on a universal level as they deal with the human experiences of lost love, nostalgia and regret.

The first lines of the song ‘Nei sentieri di Inishmore/ho perduto il mio amore/è volato per caso/oltre quelle scogliere’ seem to reflect W. B. Yeats’s ‘When You Are Old’ verses: ‘Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled/And paced upon the mountains overhead’.

The lines ‘Nelle pinte di Inishmore/ho affogato il ricordo/Certe notti in un viaggio/tutto quello che ho perso’ display the elements of drinking, memories and all that has been lost in a lifetime, thus establishing the core matter of the ballad, that parallels the refrain: ‘Sulla strada di Inishmore/c’era un signore/che mi disse di correre/e di cercare/che la notte per lui/stava per arrivare/e che qualche rimpianto/lo faceva soffrire’.

The same folk instruments as those in ‘Inishmore’ are played in the ballad ‘Il treno per Galway’ (‘The train to Galway’, 2002, from the album Pane e rose – ‘Bread and roses’). Its lyrics array a sort of buskers’ recollection of travelling memories: Ireland’s West Coast as a site of identification for the lyrical I is a recurrent theme in songs related to the country. The Galway train stands as a metaphor for life’s occasions: it is the train of life, love, opportunities, and symbolizes the disillusioned expectations – identifiable with those of the working-class youth – of a better future.

Al tempo del treno per Galway
con le tasche vuote
riempite soltanto dai sogni
[...] E il treno sbuffava sui sogni
e sulle passioni
Scoprivo la terra, le idee
e le rivoluzioni.
[...] Dentro i pub di Galway

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36 ‘On the paths of Inishmore/I lost my love/It flew by chance/over those cliffs’.
37 This and all the next quotations from Yeats’s poems are from 1967. The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats. London-Melbourne-Toronto: Macmillan.
38 ‘In Inishmore pints/I drowned my memories/Some nights during a journey,/all that I’ve lost’.
39 ‘On the road of Inishmore/there was a man/who told me to run/and to go searching/’cos the night for him/ was coming/and a few regrets/were hurting him’.
When Italian Popular Music Sings about Ireland

Leggevo le storie di Doyle
di Yeats e di Joyce.
Ma quando un mattino d’inverno
mi sono specchiato
ho visto dieci anni passare
e un sogno sparito.

[...] Dormivo tra il cielo di mille stazioni
di un tempo che non tornerà.\(^{40}\)

The city of Galway, as a utopian destination and an ideal place to see dreams and revolutions come true, represents anyone’s aspirations for the future. Perceiving Ireland as a kindred land, such lyrics – as well as MCR’s ‘In un giorno di pioggia’ and ‘Canzone alla fine del mondo’ – also express the non-Irish protagonist’s desire to know and comprehend Ireland, its customs and manners as well as its history, literature and social features, as a means to better know himself, too. Then, the initial enchantment and the dreamy mood of hope, aspirations and utopia eventually give way to the final disillusion taking place ten years later\(^{41}\) – with the melancholy and nostalgia for a past that did not stick to its promises, since youth and the lightheartedness it carries are gone, after facing life’s disappointments.

Nonetheless, to put it in Glenn Hooper’s words, what emerges in these songs is that “[t]he sense of possibility, the opportunity to reinvent, or to simply imagine oneself as an amalgam of shifting identities, exists in many cases” (Hooper, p. XIV). This seems to be the case of Modena City Ramblers and Casa del vento, who feel themselves, as folk tradition musicians, as amalgams of shifting musical and cultural identities – namely, Italian and Irish.

\(^{40}\) ‘At the time of the train to Galway/ with empty pockets/ only filled with dreams/ [...] And the train puffed on dreams/ and passions./ I discovered the land, ideas/ and revolutions./ [...] In Galway pubs/ I used to read stories by Doyle,/ Yeats and Joyce./ But on a winter morning/ I looked at myself in the mirror/ I saw ten years had passed/ and a dream disappeared./ I used to sleep under the sky of a thousand stations/ of a time that won’t come back’.

\(^{41}\) The theme of passing time as a symbol of lost opportunities, remorse and regret is frequently expressed in music by decades. Besides the example of Joy Division’s song ‘Decades’ (1980), a striking resonance here is with Pink Floyd’s lines in song ‘Time’: ‘And then one day you find ten years have got behind you/ No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun’ (Pink Floyd. 1973. ‘Time’, in Dark Side of the Moon. Harvest Records).
Massimo Bubola’s rendering of his relation with Ireland in ‘Il cielo d’Irlanda’ displays an impressionistic sensitiveness with limpid, poetic brushstrokes in each stanza or couplet, that could also be read in a different order or extrapolated. On the other hand, Le Orme, Modena City Ramblers and Casa del Vento present personal stories experienced by characters – either real or fictitious – with events in chronological order.

These bands’ songs depict first-person experiences, sometimes clearly expressing the point of view of a foreigner, other times representing ambiguity – the lyrical I may also be that of a local, thus presenting an interesting overlapping/assimilation of the Irish and Italian identities: given the universal nature of some situations addressed, there are certain experiences of the Irish land that can be similarly made by both peoples, generating analogous reactions.

Angelo Branduardi

The connections between Italian music and Irish culture are distinctly represented in the work made by the so-called ‘Italian minstrel’ Angelo Branduardi, who released a whole, critically acclaimed album of poems by W. B. Yeats translated into Italian and set to music, Branduardi canta Yeats. Dieci ballate su liriche di William Butler Yeats (‘Branduardi sings Yeats. Ten ballads on lyrics by W. B. Yeats’, 1986).

It features a selection of ten of Yeats’s poems, translated and adapted by Branduardi’s wife and main collaborator, Luisa Zappa.

As noted by Mario Bonanno, Branduardi renders the polychrome universe of the Irish poet in ten evocative tracks. Indeed, Yeats’s poetic microcosm is extraordinarily consistent with Branduardi’s, given their similar folklore/fairy-tale settings with such symbology as that of ‘swans, woods, poets, berries, boats, moths’.

By a curious coincidence, four years later Branduardi played violin in a song on Le Orme’s album that features ‘Dublino addio’. Also, Casa del vento’s album Pane e rose has the same title as the album that Branduardi released in 1988. Furthermore, in 1996 Modena City Ramblers published a cover of Francesco Guccini’s ‘La locomotiva’ together with The Gang, a combat-folk band who collaborated with Massimo Bubola. These musicians seem to create a pattern, a ‘figure in the carpet’, that is even more articulate than the ‘simple’ fil rouge of their Irish relatedness.

Bonanno, Mario. 2014. È sempre musica. Una guida alle canzoni di Angelo Branduardi. Piombino: Edizioni Il Foglio, p. 46. All translations from Italian are mine.
Branduardi’s career started in the early Seventies; since then, he has been influenced by Renaissance and early Baroque music as well as Anglo-Celtic folk, with characteristic subjects from legendary archetypes, Northern fables, Medieval ballads. The Italian minstrel sings about kings, knights, jesters, poets, anthropomorphic animals and elements of nature with such instruments as violin, harp, bouzouki, Pan flute, zither, lute, sitar. His uniqueness in popular music has made him much-loved and successful also in countries like France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Born near Milan and raised in Genoa, ‘the post-modern minstrel who substituted the Irish mist with that of Po Valley’ (Bonanno 2014, p. 9) has a longtime interest in Yeats that dates back to his adolescence, as he explains in the email interview we had in March 2016. He adds that the basic role of the violin – his most beloved instrument – in Irish traditional music influenced his decision to work on Irish poetry. He specifies: ‘Irish music, together with other kinds of traditional music, has always been a source of inspiration for me’. The musician also clarifies that he chose the ten poems for his album because he particularly loved them. To actually release the record, Branduardi received the permission of the poet’s children Ann and Michael, who listened to it and were satisfied because they felt the spirit of the poems had remained intact.

The lyricism of the original verses through Luisa Zappa’s rendition and Branduardi’s delicate singing naturally fits into the essential,

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44 In Il rovo e la rosa (The brier and the rose, 2013), Branduardi sang in Gaelic his own version of the traditional Irish folk song originated in the 17th century, ‘Báidín Fheilimí’.


46 In 1985 Northern Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison did not have the same fortune with Yeats’s heirs when he wanted to release his version of poem ‘Crazy Jane on God’. In fact, they maintained that Yeats’s verses should be set to more ‘classical’ music, and not to rock. He could only publish an alternative version of his song in 2008.
refined, touching atmospheres composed by the musician. He maintains: ‘To me, as a musician the most fascinating elements in Yeats are the value and musicality of words. His lyrics are new, original harmonies dominated by precise rhythms. [...] Mine] was a long work where I preferred to polish my notes rather than change the meaning and rhythm of the original’.\footnote{In the Italian rendering the lyrics’ meter cannot always correspond to melodic accents. Branduardi is well aware of such complexity, as he wrote in the album inside cover, stating that the musicality of the original poems is unattainable. Nevertheless, Branduardi and Zappa’s work is a praiseworthy homage to Yeats and poetry. A sort of declaration of intent can be in fact seen in his statement: ‘I ultimately regard myself as a musician – but a musician open to poetry’ (Bonanno 2014, cit., p. 14). When asked about his relationship with poetry, Angelo Branduardi says: ‘I took others’ lyrics because I wanted to be them, because their diction in those poems meant the whole world I had inside and could not express. A poem is a musical form itself [...] I’ve been Yeats, Dante, St. Francis and all the ones I’ve wanted to embody’ (Ibid.). Indeed, the Italian minstrel said he considers his Yeatsean album ‘a gift I made primarily to myself’ (p. 45). In his preface to Saverio Simonelli’s book La musica è altrove. Cielo e terra nelle canzoni di Angelo Branduardi (2012. Milano: Ancora Editrice), the musician says that this is the album that better represents himself, and reaffirms that he really wanted to be the characters, landscapes and objects present in those songs.}  


Zappa’s translations stick to the meaning of the originals and rarely present rhymes – some of which are found when verbs are put at the end of lines, as in the first stanza of ‘La canzone di Aengus il vagabondo’.\footnote{‘Fu così che al bosco andai, ché un fuoco in capo mi sentivo, un ramo di nocciolo io tagliai, ed una bacca appesi al filo. Bianche falene vennero volando, e poi le stelle luccicando, la bacca nella corrente lanciato e pescai una piccola trota d’argento’. My italics highlight rhymes with past and gerund tenses (the corresponding verbs in Yeats’s poem are, respectively: went out; cut and peeled; were on the wing; were flickering out; dropped). Lines 2 and 4 present the assonance ‘sentivo/filo’. In the other stanzas, as well as in the other Yeatsean lyrics translated, Zappa gives her renderings}
The ten ballads of Branduardi canta Yeats are played with an essential set of acoustic instruments: violin, baritone violin, recorder, two guitars and percussions – a ‘proto-unplugged’ before the term unplugged was widespread in popular music, as Branduardi himself noted. An evocatory, reflective mood is kept constant throughout the album, with the only exception of ‘Il violinista di Dooney’, that stands out in the middle of the tracklist as a merry uptempo whose dance-related theme inserts itself into the Branduardian ‘leit motiv [...] of dance as a means for liberation and openness’, typical of such songs of his as ‘Cogli la prima mela’ (‘Pick the first apple’), ‘La danza’ (‘The dance’), ‘Girotondo’ (‘Ring a Ring-o’Roses’), ‘Ballo in fa diesis minore’ (‘Dance in F-sharp minor’).

The Italian minstrel maintains that he identifies himself with the protagonist of ‘The Fiddler of Dooney’. He also said that this was the first Yeatsean poem he tried to set to music: ‘I thought it was perfect: Yeats’s world was akin to mine. [...] William Butler Yeats against the background noise in circulation’ (Bonanno 2014, p. 45).

The melody and rhythm both echo those of Irish folk music and the positive mood evoked by Yeats’s verses themselves. ‘Balla la gente quando suono il mio violino’ (‘When I play on my fiddle in Dooney, Folk dance’): this verse is the main line that seems to indicate the path for the musical setting of the poem. The world of jesters, minstrels and court poets is that of Branduardi, who knows how to make folk dance as he plays his violin. In fact, Branduardi shares the sort of syllogism expressed in Yeats’s verses: the good and the merry love the violin and music, so eternal glory be to musicians, along with the priority at Heaven’s gates. It would be therefore suitable to quote Ezra Pound, to express Branduardi’s interconnectedness with Yeats’s lyrics: ‘Music rots when it gets too far from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music’.

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51 In Yeats’s poem, the fiddler states that St. Peter will ‘call me first through the gate;/ For the good are always the merry’. The fiddler makes people dance merrily, so he is good; hence, he will be the first to go through that gate.

Branduardi and Zappa’s approach to Yeats’s poems consists of an almost stripped-down musical setting where ‘less is more’, as Branduardi explained; this allows the lyrics to stand out in a proper accompaniment.

In ‘Il mantello, la barca e le scarpe’ a stylistic feature that proved fitting for Zappa’s translations is a pattern of repetitions in some lines: the verse ‘What do you make so fair and bright?’ is rendered as ‘Cosa stai facendo di così bello? / Cosa stai facendo così lucente?’; ‘O lovely to see in all men’s sight’ as ‘bello a vedersi io lo farò / agli occhi di chi lo guarderà’.

The poem ‘When You Are Old’ is always literally translated in Italian as ‘Quando sarai vecchia’, while Luisa Zappa opted for a slight, meaningful change: ‘Quando tu sarai…’, leaving out the adjective for ‘old’, thus both making the title more discrete and polite for the addressee, and also opening an array of possibilities represented by the dots. Zappa renders the poet’s exhortations with the description of a scene in the future, as exemplified in the original sentence ‘take down this book’ that becomes ‘prenderai questo libro’ (literally, ‘you will take this book’). This poem presents some themes also recurring in Italian songs previously analysed: i.e. lost love, as in Casa del vento’s ‘Inishmore’, and missed opportunities of the past, as already seen in some of MCR and Casa del vento’s songs. Regret for the past is expressed in more elegiac tones by Branduardi’s version of ‘Down by the Salley Gardens’. Here, a delicate, minimalist arpeggio accompanies Zappa’s translation, effectively set again with the repetition-doubling pattern. ‘But I, being young and foolish, / With her would not agree’ becomes ‘Così giovane ero, io non le diedi ascolto / Così sciocco ero, io non le diedi ascolto’.

Branduardi’s album closes with ‘Innisfree, l’isola sul lago’, where strings accompany his singing in a delicate elegy of suggestive, yet concrete lyrics.

53 In an interview with Max Giuliani, Branduardi refers to his acoustic quartet in the live performances of this album as ‘a bare but effective theatre dimension, where the less there is, the more there is’. Giuliani, Massimo. 1986. ‘In giro per l’Europa con W. B. Yeats: intervista radiofonica del 1986 ad Angelo’, in www.branduardi.info/piazza/amarcord/max.htm (last visited 10/3/2016, translation mine).

54 On the other hand, Zappa sums up the Yeatsean four opening verses: ‘Down by the salley gardens / My love and I did meet; / She passed the salley gardens / With little snow-white feet’ into two lines: ‘Nel giardino dei salici ho incontrato il mio amore; / là lei camminava con piccoli piedi bianchi di neve’.
Branduardi effectively renders Yeats’s sort of idyll expressing ‘the idea of Ireland as a pastoral retreat’.\textsuperscript{55} To Yeats – and to the Italian minstrel as well – Innisfree is ‘a vision of an “elsewhere” of rural, isolated, reflective peace – an idealized Irish pastoral setting’, even though ‘none of its details is true to a nature landscape’.\textsuperscript{56}

The album’s conclusion with an idyllic, almost utopian island is particularly meaningful, both as a homage to the whole island of Ireland, and also because islands have usually represented a sort of ‘mirage, utopian microcosm, and geographical place of possibilities’ (Bonanno 2002, p. 72) throughout Branduardi’s output. The ideal Innisfree coincides with the ontological essentiality that is a \textit{fil rouge} in his thematic repertoire.

In 2011 Branduardi released the album \textit{Così è se mi pare} (‘It is so, if I think so’), that includes an Italian rendition of Irish traditional ballad ‘She Moved Through the Fair’, arranged by the musician in the song entitled ‘Una vigile stella’\textsuperscript{57}, and a cover of The Pogues’ Irish folk Christmas song ‘Fairytale of New York’ that became ‘Favola di Natale a New York’. In both cases, Zappa’s translations prove well suited for the Italian rendering of the songs, and Branduardi’s arrangements (where strings, percussions and piano characterize the minstrel’s versions) pay homage to Irish tradition as a whole – a consistent presence in his music.

Conclusions

Among the Italian musicians here presented, for those who started as Irish folk bands, the Irish derivation of their output was or-
ganic and thematic. Inspiration drawn from journeys to and through Ireland is a common trait, while other features are more frequently present in some musicians than in others. In fact, if Bubola’s outcomes also carry a consistent cultural-historical significance across his production, the song ‘Dublino addio’ represents a single Irish-related experience in Le Orme’s output. The close relation of Modena City Ramblers and Casa del vento with Irish music and settings is a trademark of their career. Branduardi’s interest with folk instruments and themes is a distinctive mark of his musical output too, that was peculiarly enriched by his work on Yeats’s poems.

The examples provided demonstrate how some Italian musicians showcase a stimulating pattern of cultural permeability to Irish sources. Likewise, the critical and audience acclaim their work has received confirms the fertility of such contamination. As W. H. Auden wrote in his poem ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’ – ‘Now he is scattered among a hundred cities’, also the presence of Irish themes and culture is interestingly disseminated across cities and countries thanks to the notes and words of Italian musicians, too.

Works cited


Bibliography


The Metastasio Moment: Language, Music and Translation

Anne O’Connor

The production, circulation and reception of translations are deeply embedded in the historical circumstances of the society that chooses to translate such texts. According to Lawrence Venuti, changing interpretations of foreign cultures lead to changes in the selection of foreign texts for translation (Venuti 2005). Two languages and cultures are brought into contact through translation and this relationship can evolve and diverge due to varying historical and cultural circumstances. This chapter studies the convergences and divergences in the relationship between Ireland and Italy from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century as seen through the prism of translations of the works of the Italian librettist Metastasio. The ‘Metastasio Moment’ in Ireland is charted in order to understand how Italian culture was variously embraced or rejected, as evidenced in the translation, circulation and reception of the Italian’s works. In these discussions, the strong associations and links between Italian language, culture and music emerge as crucial mediating factors in the Irish-Italian interchange. As a central figure in the multilingual and intercultural world of music, Metastasio is an important case study to understand the interaction of music, language and translation and the cross-fertilisation of cultural contacts in Europe. The popularity and eventual rejection of Metastasio and the Italianate fashion demonstrate the ebbs and flows of translation choices and the historical variations in cultural interactions.

The Metastasio Vogue

Pietro Antonio Domenico Trapassi (1698 –1782), better known by his pseudonym of Metastasio, is possibly one of the most famous au-
Anne O’Connor

thors of libretti of all time. The Italian poet gained immense fame and popularity throughout his lifetime aided, no doubt, by his influential position as the resident librettist for the Emperor of Austria. His impressive output was translated into French, English, German and Spanish, amongst other languages, and was set to music across Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Performances of Metastasio’s works were regular occurrences in all of the major operatic centres and his canzonette and ariette were also popular for local and drawing room performances.¹ His work was a fusion of literature and music with the lyrical language of the Italian prized by his contemporaries. Metastasio’s melodramas were regularly translated during an extraordinary vogue for the Italian’s work and his Canzonetta Nice: Grazie agli’inganni tuo was, in the words of Fucilla, ‘the song-hit’ of the day (Fucilla 1952, 13). As one commentator has observed, his English and French contemporaries were full of interest and enthusiasm for the Italian and ‘it is no exaggeration to say that all Europe was at his feet’ (Bates 2005, 402). His fame spread east to Poland and Russia (Welsh 1964) but it also travelled west as far as Ireland in this European trend of Italian musical and cultural influence.

Metastasio’s fame in Ireland peaked in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and was closely connected to his musical reputation. The interest in the Italian coincided with the upsurge of popularity in Italian opera in this period: there were some short Italian operas (burlette/intermezzi) staged in Dublin in the eighteenth century and as the nineteenth century progressed, many great Italian musical artists came to Ireland to perform (Allen 1998; Walsh 1993, 1973).² The Crow Street Theatre in Dublin put on Italian opera in the early nineteenth century and the popularity of Rossini, Bellini, Verdi and Donizetti led to a sustained presence and extended seasons of Italian opera in Dublin from the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Angelica Catalani took part in Metastasio’s Il Didone in Dublin in 1808 and she regularly returned to Ireland to perform in Italian

¹ Fucilla says that Metastasio’s minor works were, between 1750 and 1825, the ‘most profusely imitated and translated lyrics of the times, equalled only by versions from Anacreon.’ (Fucilla 1952, 13)
² The sopranos Angelica Catalani, Giulia Grisi and Giuditta Pasta, and the legendary Italian violinist, Niccolò Paganini for example all came to Ireland.
works. Operatic troupes and musicians frequently travelled to Cork, Limerick and Belfast, while aspiring Irish musicians and performers such as Catherine Hayes and Michael Balfe travelled in the opposite direction to Italy for training and opportunities (Walsh 2000; Walsh 2008). In the early nineteenth century, Italian was adopted throughout Europe as the main operatic language and, with the travels of Italian musicians, singers, composers and librettists, this association became even more engrained (Mateo 2014, 329).

In this wave of enthusiasm for Italian music and performance, Metastasio’s fame was raised in the Irish consciousness and the Italian librettist became a popular figure for performances and for translations. He was not the only Italian librettist to enjoy such fame in Ireland: others such as Giovanni Battista Casti (1724-1803) and Carlo Innocenzo Frugoni (1692-1768) also featured in Irish translations and publications. It is interesting that figures such as Metastasio, Casti and Frugoni, who were closely linked with music, gained widespread popularity in Ireland, rather than the more canonical figures such as Leopardi, Foscolo and Manzoni. In the Irish newspaper, the Nation, the birth of Frugoni and Metastasio at the end of the seventeenth century was heralded as the arrival of two men who would revive the declining fame of Italian literature in the succeeding age (7 February 1845). In another article, Casti is acclaimed as the most celebrated Italian poet of the eighteenth century next to Metastasio (19 September 1845). Although this opinion might not coincide with the canonical account of Italian literature, Metastasio and the other librettists were singled out for special attention because of their musical connections. It is therefore impossible to separate Metastasio and publications of his work from the music culture which surrounded it. As C.P. Brand has observed,

The cult of Italian opera, sung in Italian, naturally encouraged the study of the Italian language, and particularly of the compositions of Metastasio who wrote libretti which have been set to music more than a thousand times, and whose name and works were widely known throughout Europe. By the end of the [eighteenth] century he was probably the favourite Italian poet in England, his works appearing constantly in Italian and in English translation. (Brand 1957, 175)

Metastasio was translated by William Wordsworth and Felicia Hemans as his fame grew in the Anglophone worlds. His librettos were influential in developing trends in theatre and musical drama. Along
with Petrarch, he was the most popular Italian lyric poet of this period and translations of his lyrics appeared in the press, in periodicals and in collections of translations. In advertisements for new music in Ireland for example, Metastasio’s works were promoted including his ‘Vuoi ch’io lasci o mio tesoro’ with the words by Metastasio adapted to the air ‘Cherry ripe’ (Freemans Journal, 5 June 1825). Metastasio’s work existed in a multilingual world of song and word where languages and music overlapped and cross-fertilised. The Irish public, for example, could purchase in 1842 Metastasio’s Pellegrini al San Sepolcro (The Pilgrims of the Holy Sepulchre) a religious Cantata for five solos and chorus, with accompaniment for the harp or pianoforte, composed by Nauman and adapted to Italian, English and French words, which was for sale in Irish booksellers (Cork Examiner, 6 September 1842). Booksellers regularly advertised original works by Metastasio for sale in Ireland, and in auctions of book collections, the Italian author was a staple.

Given the regular performance of Metastasio’s melodramas in Italian, Metastasio became linked in the public mind with the Italian language and consequently he became central to how people learned Italian and interacted with the language. Irish pupils had a variety of opportunities to study Italian and to come into contact with Metastasio. Italian was taught at schools, universities and private academies and, in all of these educational settings, Metastasio was a strong influence and one of the first Italian authors which Irish students of Italian encountered. Italian books which were used to teach Italian in Irish schools included Ariosto, Alfieri and Metastasio (Freemans Journal, 19 March 1816; 13 January 1818; 21 June 1820) and the Opere dell’Abate Metastasio scelte da Leonardo Nardini, ad uso degli studiosi della lingua italiana [Works by Metastasio chosen by Leonardo Nardini for the use of students of the Italian language] was for sale in Dublin and

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3 The links between multilingualism, opera and translation are discussed in Mateo (2014). She notes that ‘Bilingual opera performances seem to have been particularly common in 18th-century Britain, where a large number of operas were staged with the Italian aria-English recitative formula. Many composers and librettists were commissioned to adapt Italian operas to this pattern and most of the pieces were extremely popular, as can be inferred from the number of monolingual and bilingual versions, frequently adapted from the same libretto, Metastasio’s.’ (337)
advertised in the local press. As Brand has noted of the English context, for many years Metastasio was the first poet read by students of Italian; as late as 1824 Macaulay complained that they read little else.\footnote{Quoted in Brand, 175. Thomas Jefferson practised Italian by copying poems by Metastasio in his notebooks. See Fucilla (1952, 14).}

Public recitations of Italian works by students and teachers during end of year performances and exhibitions almost invariably featured Metastasio (e.g. \textit{Belfast Newsletter}, 25 December 1820; \textit{Freemans Journal}, 25 July 1854; 28 July 1858; 30 June 1870). In Clongowes Wood College for example in 1856, during the Italian dialogue section of the end of year exhibition, ‘a scene from Metastasio’s “Death of Abel” was rendered very nicely by Mr. M. O’Shaughnessy and Mr. R. Mc Donnell’ (\textit{Freemans Journal}, 29 July 1856). A few years previously, ‘the Italian dialogue by Masters Whitty, Carton, Shearman and Ring, from the \textit{Artaserse} of Metastasio, was also admirably given; both were greeted by the auditory with delighted plaudits’ (\textit{Freemans Journal}, July 29 1851). At Mount St. Joseph in Clondakin, the efforts of the students in French, Italian and German were calculated to show how efficiently the tutors discharged their important duties. Along with Molière, the students performed a piece from Rossini which was ‘heard with much pleasure’ and ‘the most attractive of the performances was a scene from Metastasio’s \textit{Giuseppe Riconosciuto}, ably translated and as ably set to music by Mr Johnson. The young gentlemen who sang in the several parts did well and their acting possessed considerable merit, and we believe that the composer is entitled to high praise for the manner in which he acquitted himself.’ \textit{Freemans Journal}, 30 June 1870. When the Intermediate Education Examination was introduced in Ireland in 1878, one of the recommended texts for Italian (along with Tasso’s \textit{Gerusalemme Liberata}) was Metastasio’s \textit{Giuseppe Riconosciuto}. It is therefore not surprising that when many of these students came to publish translations and enter the world of letters, they turned to an Italian author who had been part of their education in that language and who was very much part of the cultural milieu of the era.

\section*{Translating Metastasio}

Translations of Metastasio regularly appeared in periodicals and collected works during the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Ire-
land. They were often isolated islands of Italianess in the midst of very domestic offerings. For example, the *Magazine of Ireland (Bolsters Quarterly Magazine)* volume IV, published in November 1826, contained three translations from Metastasio which are interspersed amongst county histories, Irish tales, sketches of excursions, and a legend of the South of Ireland by Croften Croker. One of the translations, ‘from Metastasio’ is short and simple:

Enough of grief by fate’s decree,
This weary soul is doom’d to share,
But to be scorn’d, accused by thee,
Oh that, it cannot, cannot bear,
If rebel to my plighted love
One thought within my bosom dwell,
Yon sun—the righteous powers above,
This breaking heart—thy heart—can tell.

No translator is given, no original title is given and the Metastasio presence is unadorned by any annotations or explanations. The anonymity of the translator was quite common in the nineteenth century and translations in periodicals generally contained no paratextual details. The works are termed as being ‘from Metastasio’ but that lack of an original text means that the translation could be a close and faithful transfer from Italian into English but it could also be a liberal reworking or the original. Translations from Metastasio also featured in the *Dublin University Magazine* in the 1830s which were similarly minimalist in their presentation and their supply of information. In July 1833 a poem entitled ‘The Voice of Nature’ which was ‘from Metastasio’ was published. The translation was by John Francis Waller but the publication supplies no information on the original source. The poem itself contains many of the tropes which were familiar to Irish fans of Metastasio and which were central to the diffusion of his fame as a lyrical and romantic poet.

When modest Eve, retiring mildly, yields to night her power,
And every sound is hushed around, and closed, is every flower;
My Julia! Wilt thou leave thy cot, and come and rove with me,
And drink the freshening twilight breeze by yonder flowing sea?
‘Tis not alone in smiling mead that joy and beauty dwell,
Or waving wood, majestic hill, or in the sunlit dell.
For now the softest zephyr cools the scarcely ruffled tide,
And gently o’er the sloping sands the rippling waters glide;
The wide—wide heavens, that lately glow’d with gold and crimson light,
Are now all darkly shadowed by the purple veil of night;
The evening star comes sweetly forth, the pensive mind to cheer,
The lady moon from clouded throne looks down serenely clear;
These are sweet lessons in the book which God to us has given,
And these are thoughts that lead the heart to soar from earth to heaven!

This translation demonstrates some of the salient features of Irish translations of Metastasio in this period. Firstly, the simplicity and clarity of the language are striking and the lexical range and syntactical constructions are basic. Metastasio’s poetry was easily understood and therefore was deemed capable of an uncomplicated transfer into English and could appeal to those who were just dipping their toes in Italian literature. His words and verbal constructions were considered very accessible and therefore very suitable for translation. In an advertisement for Metastasio: Giuseppe Riconosciuto with Biographical Notice (Dublin: Gill and Son) it was stated that the simple text was ‘very acceptable as a specimen of Italian, at once easy to translate and attractive by its flowing melodious style’ (Cork Examiner, 17 October 1881). The second element to be highlighted is precisely the ‘flowing melodious style’ which can be seen in the above example in the metre and rhyming scheme. Due to the poet’s musical links, the reception and translation of Metastasio was closely connected to the sound of the language and this was a large element of his appeal in this period. In the above translation, the translator has produced rhyming couplets throughout in this lyrical rendering of the Italian. Rhyme also facilitated memorisation which was very important for the performative aspect of Metastasio’s works. The metre of the translation also adds to the musicality of the piece. In 1845, The Nation newspaper commented on ‘the grace and facility of Metastasio’ (19 September 1845) and this appears to have been a major factor in the popularity of his work and in his presence as a translated poet in this period.

There were many possibilities and options when translating musical works: original words could be translated for song or for poetry; there could be dual language versions of libretti; some translations might preserve the rhythmic sense of the original, others might prefer the sense to be the guiding feature (Gallo 2006). Metastasio’s vast
output offered a myriad of possibilities for translators who adapted the Italian and domesticated him for local needs. A previously noted, the Italian language had become associated with musicality, and this musicality was a guiding feature and an important influence for translator. In the Irish translations of Metastasio, we can observe an interest in harmony and rhythm and an attraction to the poet in musical terms which transcended religious or political divides. By analysing the textual form of Metastasio’s work in translation, we are of course missing out on the multidimensional nature of these pieces and cannot discuss the melody, pitch, rhythm, tempo, harmony, articulation of these works in music (Susam-Saraeva 2008, 190). The published translations nonetheless bear the trace of their musical originals and influences, and the links were very clear in the public mind – the Freeman’s Journal said of the Italian, ‘Metastasio was so sensible of the delicacy and nicety requisite in adapting poetry to music, that he spent his whole life perfecting himself in the knowledge of them’ (25 December 1828). The Irish translations of Metastasio bear the hallmarks of these close musical connections.

The sound of the language was therefore central to Metastasio’s fame and fortune in Ireland and was closely linked to general perceptions of the Italian language. During a lecture in Dublin on the Italian language in 1819 by a certain Sig. Agnelli, the lecturer discussed Metastasio and recited from the Italian author. A journalist in the audience agreed with Agnelli’s proclamations on the harmonies of the Italian language, and commented that ‘Any one at all conversant with the beautiful and flowing language of Italy, will readily allow that it is not to be at all compared with the Gaelic nasal twang or the sibilating and guttural harshness of the mingled English’ (Freemans Journal, 15 April 1819). The Italian language was thus perceived as harmonious and melodious and translators tried to transport these features into their works, particularly when they were translating a poet so renowned for his lyricism as Metastasio. In introducing his translation of Metastasio’s ‘Hymn to Venus’ in 1836, the Irish translator John Francis Waller said that

5 Metastasio, like Petrarch, was praised in the Anglophone world primarily for his qualities of technique – his ‘exquisite taste’ and ‘the harmony and rhythm of his numbers’ as well as for the ‘pure flow of strict morality everywhere observable throughout his poetry.’ (Brand 1957, 102)
Metastasio’s beautifully graceful ‘Hymn to Venus’ must be so familiar to every Italian scholar, that it is unnecessary here to present it to the reader. A translation, closely following the original, both in expression and metre would be the most obvious as well as the most easy, but such as one would certainly be but little in accordance with the genius of our own poetry, and quite inadequate to preserve the simple and graceful dignity of the Italian composition. I have for these reasons, deviated, in some degree, from the strict manner of rendering the originals, to which I have in these articles, herefore confined myself. The following translation, though somewhat paraphrastic, will not, I trust, be found altogether untrue to its prototype, either in sentiment or execution. (Dublin University Magazine, Feb 1836, 142)

Waller was willing to deviate from the original and ignore contemporay notions of the importance of faithfulness in order to better render Metastasio into English, while still maintaining the sentiment and ‘execution’ of the Italian’s work. For the Irish translators of the Italian, the flow of the lyrics and the musical elements of the verse were important components which they attempted to preserve in their translations.

John Francis Waller who published under the pseudonyms ‘Jonathan Freke Slingsby’ and ‘Iota’ was one of the most prolific translators from Italian in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century and one of a wide variety of Irish people who translated Metastasio. Translations of famous Italian lyric poems became a mark of refinement in the nineteenth century (Pite 2006), a trait that can be seen in the engagement of the upper echelons of Irish society with Italian literature. For example Lord Charlemont wrote a History of Italian Poetry from Dante to Metastasio (sections of which were posthumously published in 1822) which contained a wide-ranging introduction to Italian poetry and translations from all eras up to the eighteenth century (Charlemont and Talbot 2000). Charlemont was a pioneer in terms of introducing a survey of Italian literature to the Anglophone public (Talbot 1999) and it is interesting that Metastasio was the final poet in his collection. Almost a contemporary of Charlemont, he was among the figures singled out for inclusion in the Italian canon and worthy

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6 There were of course widespread debates in Europe on approaches to translation in this period and the relative merits of faithfulness in translation practices. For these debates in an Irish context, see Cronin (1996).
of transfer into English. Members of the Anglo-Irish Protestant élite who translated Italian literature showed themselves to be very much in harmony with prevailing trends in Britain where Italy featured largely in the romantic imagination (Brand 1957; O’Connor 1998). However, translations from Metastasio were not confined to the Anglo-Irish élite as can be seen in the engagement of writers such as James Clarence Mangan with the Italian.

Mangan, who was to become one of the greatest poetic voices and translators of nineteenth-century Ireland, translated Metastasio as part of his entrance onto the literary scene. In one of his earliest publications in 1832, he published a fragment of a translation of Metastasio’s Amor Timido (Timid Love) in the Dublin Penny Journal:

*Amor Timido*

Placido zeffiretto,
Se trovi il caro oggetto,
Digli che sei sospiro,
Ma non gli dir di chi.
Limpido ruscelletto,
Se mai t’ incontri in lei,
Dille che pianto sei,
Ma non le dir qual ciglio
Crescer ti fe’ così.

*Timid Love*

Ah! gentle zephyr, ah! if e’er
Thou find the mistress of my heart,
Tell her thou art a sigh sincere,
But never say whose sigh thou art!
Ah! limped rivulet, if e’er
Thy murmuring waters near her glide,
Say thou art swell’d by many a tear,
But not whose eyes those tears supplied.

Once again, this translation demonstrates the relative simplicity of the original and its English version, both of which are very accessible texts. Mangan expands slightly on the Italian text but attempts to maintain a rhyming scheme and the lexical proximity. He adds exclamations ‘ah!’ to the translation which are not present in the original, presumably for greater emotional effect. The ‘dear object’
of the author’s affections in the original becomes ‘the mistress of my heart’ in the translation, possibly to enable a rhyme with ‘whose sigh thou art’. To facilitate the rhyme in English, Mangan adjusts his language to create a lyrically expressive translation which evokes the melody of the original. Mangan translated only a few works from Metastasio, and like his translations from Petrarch, he briefly engages with the author and the language, and then moves on to other literatures and time periods.

For Mangan, his translations of Metastasio would appear to be an exercise in literary practice, possibly he was introduced to the Italian by his language tutor, a Fr. Graham who had studied in Salamanca and Palermo, and he might have translated Metastasio’s lines as a first foray into Italian literature. In the latter stages of his literary career Mangan expanded the horizons of translations in Ireland by translating from Oriental languages, by publishing pseudotranslations, and by using original works as suggestive starting points for his creative impulses rather than faithfully rendering texts into English. In his earlier translations, however, he was quite traditional in his choice of text and in his faithfulness to the text. This can be seen in his translations from Petrarch which seem to have been a necessary form of literary apprenticeship for him. Mangan also translated from other Italian poets but they were all very much of a traditional nature and none fits this bill more so than Metastasio. Translation of the Italian writer could even be deemed a necessary rite of passage for any aspiring young translator and Mangan’s translation must be situated in this context of an early flirtation with a popular European vogue which he subsequently abandoned in favour of more fanciful and less traditional experiments in translation. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Italian poet appealed to Mangan and in later years, when Mangan published a supposed translation from the Arabic of ‘Baba Khodjee’ in 1840 (Mangan most likely invented the author as the original was never found), he added a note to say that Khodjee’s ‘simple, truthful, yet not unpoetical philosophy’ recalled to him ‘that of our early favorite Metastasio’ (Dublin University Magazine, April 1840). Mangan’s poetical and lyrical rendering of the verse of Metastasio, even in this short piece, demonstrates the poet’s popularity for translators who wished to grapple with Italian literature and also the artistic possibilities that the Italian poet offered.
Mangan’s short translation from Metastasio provoked a rather extreme reaction which illustrates a turn against Italian poetry and a reassessment of Metastasio and the Arcadian tradition. In a swiping attack on Mangan’s translation of Metastasio’s poetry a writer in the Dublin Penny Journal said:

Such a concetto may suit the air of the Borromean isles - it may be the language of affectation, simpering its syllables in languid accents, and reposing on a couch of roses, but it cannot be the language of manly love. [...] Pretty, no doubt it is; but we doubt much if it is not more the language of refined and courtly affectation, than that of nature-more adapted to the artificial atmosphere of the opera house, than to the simplicity of the common feelings of humanity-and like its glittering music, as compared with our own unrivalled melodies, infinitely inferior in the expression of natural passion and sentiment. (Dublin Penny Journal, 15 September 1832)

In the criticism, Metastasio’s language is presented as limpid and effeminate, the language of refined and courtly affectation, an inferior artificial language when compared to the natural passion and sentiments of the local melodies. Mangan’s translation of Metastasio was termed as ‘pretty’ and suited to the artificial atmosphere of the opera house rather than the ‘real world’ alluded to by the author. The Italian’s work was of course couched in the language of the opera house as it was written for performance in the eighteenth century. However, rather than rhapsodising about the musicality of the Italian’s work and the beauty of the words, in the criticism, the poetry is described as simpering syllables and languid accents. Although anonymous, the attack on Metastasio was most probably written by the Irish antiquarian John O’Donovan who was deeply involved in the translation of Irish Gaelic texts into English and in valorising the Irish tradition.  

O’Donovan’s criticisms were very much in harmony with other British rejections of Metastasio which began to emerge in this period and which also featured in Ireland – the Dublin University Magazine for example referred in 1839 to the ‘turgid declamations of Metastasio’ (Jan-

7 See Chuto (1976)
The Metastasio Moment: Language, Music and Translation

January 1839). Due to his centrality to the Italian canon, Metastasio came to be perceived as emblematic of all the limitations of Italian literature at this time. Bulwer Lytton condemned Metastasio as part of ‘a feeble and ephemeral school of the Italians’ and the Italian poet was also denounced by G.H. Lewes and John Ruskin (Pite 2006). In 1837 Landor commented that ‘The Abbé Metastasio ... has but little flame and fire in him, and ... has buckets and rain-water enough to extinguish ten times the quantity.’ Another reviewer wrote that ‘the exquisite purity of his language, the occasional felicity of his plots, the elegant faultlessness of his manner and the music of his verse, were rapidly confirming the prejudice that effeminacy was the distinguishing character of Italian literature.’ The decline in the popularity of Metastasio arose from a certain fatigue with his style and overexposure to his work. The Italian language and Metastasio’s poetry were furthermore deemed to be effeminate and not strong or manly enough for the real local passions.

In harmony with these general trends, O’Donovan denounced Metastasio as unsuitable and expressed a preference for local and more ‘natural’ compositions and translations. Therefore, in reaction to the Metastasio translation, he instead proposed a translation of a poem composed in the Irish language by Alfred, King of the Northumbrian Saxons, during his exile in Ireland around the year A.D. 685. In introducing the translation of this work, the writer said of Mangan:

> Our friend’s challenge will have this effect: instead of setting us a hunting after prettily turned conceits, expressed in mellifluous syllabics, it will only stimulate our previously-formed intention of entering the MINE of ancient Irish literature, and bring out from the obscurity of oblivion those treasures of intellect and genius and antiquarian curiosity which are there to be found. ([Dublin Penny Journal](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3656582), 15 September 1832)

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8 Quoted in Brand (1957, 102)
9 Quoted in Brand (1957, 102). The review was published anonymously in the Quarterly Review. In 1819, during a discussion in an Irish newspaper of the Italian language, it had already been observed that ‘where strength is required and bold sentiments are to be clothed in appropriate language, we think the Italian will be found far behind its illustrious parent.’ ([Freemans Journal](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4360649), 15 April 1819)
10 Thomas Babington Macaulay for example said of the Italian language that ‘It is a general opinion, among those who know little or nothing of the subject, that this admirable language is adapted only to the effeminate cant of sonneteers, musicians and connoisseurs’ Quoted in Brand, 43.
Anne O'Connor

A translation from the Irish language was thus put forward as an alternative to Metastasio and the literary tradition that he represented. Mangan was not too impressed by this alternative and wrote back questioning if the editor really thought that the alternative proposed was superior to the work by Metastasio. He then included some more lines from Metastasio and said that ‘the following Arias are from that great dramatist, whose language you say is that ‘of affectation’ and ‘more adapted to the opera house’ than to what? ‘the simplicity of the common feelings of humanity’!! Mangan included in this rebuttal a translation of the aria XXIX ‘Se a ciascun l’interno affanno/ Si leggesse in fronte scritto’, a translation which, as Francesca Romana Paci has pointed out, was not in fact by Mangan himself but rather by the Irish poet Charlotte Nooth. She had originally published this translation of Metastasio in her collection entitled Original Poems in London in 1815 (Paci 2014, 194). Mangan’s second offering on Metastasio was derivative and symptomatic of the perceived limitations of the Italian writer. Although some Irish translators continued to translate works by Metastasio well into the nineteenth century, the discussion on the pages of the Dublin Penny Journal in 1832 can be considered a moment of divergence when, instead of embracing the Italianate fashion, Irish translators turned their gaze elsewhere for inspiration and cultural transfer.

Venuti has shown that a translation reveals historical continuities and divergences between the two languages and cultures it brings into contact, and that moreover, not only is every stage in the production of a translation profoundly marked by its historical moment, but its circulation and reception inevitably trace a history that is distinct from the destiny of the foreign text (Venuti 2005, 801). The historical moment in Ireland in 1832 showed a rejection of Metastasio and the tradition that he represented. Despite his previous popularity both in music and translation, by the mid-nineteenth century in some quar-

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11 It is unclear whether Mangan was attempting to pass this translation off as his own work as the contribution is not signed and the translation is used to support an argument rather than as a work in itself. Given the extent of translations from Metastasio into English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were many ‘verbal borrowings’ and some outright plagiarisms. See for example Fucilla (1952, 33) where he illustrates a ‘flagrant case of plagiarism’ in Metastasio translations.
ters, he was no longer deemed relevant to the Irish context. As can be seen in translations of his works, the Italian’s moment of great popularity was most certainly the eighteenth and early nineteenth century; by 1882, *The Nation* could refer to the ‘well-nigh forgotten Italian dramatist Metastasio’ (1 September 1882).

**Conclusion**

Metastasio was not a controversial figure in terms of religion, politics and morals, and so he appealed to translators from a variety of backgrounds and religious persuasions. The Italian librettist’s flexible attraction meant that a wide cross-section of Irish people was able to access and to translate his works. Some Italian authors, such as Bocaccio, fell foul of moral codes of the nineteenth century (Armstrong 2013), others were deemed linguistically challenging, while others again were seen to identify too closely with the values of the Italian Risorgimento which was unpopular in Catholic Ireland due to the threat it posed to the Papal States. Italian translations from Metastasio on the other hand were considered in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to be acceptable and culturally appropriate for Ireland. Spurred on by the multilingual world of opera and music, Metastasio was a very popular and translated writer in Ireland in this period and his language, music and the translations of his work contributed greatly to an Italianate fashion. The Italian became engrained in the Irish education system and he was for Irish translators the ultimate poet of music and performance. However, this non-threatening nature ultimately led to a decline in interest in Metastasio as he was considered by some to be less ‘real’ and his sentiments less relevant to life in Ireland. Having experienced Arcadian literature and the Italian lyrical world, in the mid-nineteenth century, Irish authors and translators turned their attention elsewhere; the Metastasio moment was over.
Works Cited


Visions of Sicily and of Ireland in Sacheverell Sitwell’s ‘Entertainments of the Imagination’

ELISABETTA D’ERME

‘Sachie’, the Hundred-and-First Harlequin

Why Sacheverell Sitwell? He was the scion of a British aristocratic family, which provided him with means to be independent, and he offered an unusual view on Sicily and Ireland. Living and writing in the first half of the 20th century, his works represent the essentially personal and aesthetic vision of an Englishman of his time – and place in society. Reading his books can be richly rewarding, even if they defy any classification: being neither conventional travelogues nor guidebooks, nor scholarly essays on art, music or architecture. His prose shares with Edith Sitwell’s poetry a darting fragmentary and surreal character, but his style seems also inspired by Symbolist writers, especially Jules Laforgue. The best one can say is that his digressive mode belongs to a long lasting British tradition of “free association”, going back to Laurence Sterne, via Walter Pater and John Ruskin. His biographer Sarah Bradford, makes the following comment on his style:

He had found a new prose form using dislocation of time and the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated images in the surrealist manner. He deployed words for their sounds or to convey sensation rather than sense. It was a form which suited him; he was incapable of rational or sustained argument, ill equipped for realism. He belonged to the world of unicorns and harlequins and far-flung fantasies, baroque and rococo in its flights of fancy, “gothick” in its fascination with horror, the grotesque and the bizarre. (Bradford, 1994, 205)

Sacheverell Sitwell was the third son of baronet Sir George Sitwell and of Lady Ida Denison, daughter of the Earl of Londesbor-
ough. He lived a very long life. Born in Scarborough in 1897, he died in Towcester in 1988. Having abandoned his studies at Oxford, he decided to dedicate himself to art, poetry and writing, thereby competing with his better known siblings Edith (1887-1964) and Osbert (1892-1969) for the reading public’s attention. Following his marriage, he began to distance himself from their succès de scandale, alternating a life of seclusion and work at Weston Hall with furious bouts of travel around the world; in this way, he managed to outnumber the already prolific Sitwellian production, by writing around 135 books, though never achieving long lasting fame. His output had a small but steady readership and his more reliable works saw sequential editions till the 1970s.

Among his major works there is 1933’s poetry collection Canons of Great Art, seven ‘Entertainments of the Imagination’ written between 1926 and 1973, collaborations with musical composers, such as the 1926 script for Diaghilev’s ballet company The Triumph of Neptune with music by Lord Berners and his collaboration with Constant Lambert, who set his poem ‘Rio Grande’ into music in 1928. He wrote various ‘studies’ on Gothic and Baroque art, on Medieval life and monasteries, on British architecture and English domestic portraits, as well as books on gardens and flowers. An accomplished biographer of Liszt, he also wrote monographs on Mozart, Hoffmann and Tchaikovsky. Between 1938 and 1963 he wrote twelve travelogues, with destinations spanning from Romania to Portugal and from Peru to Nepal.

The Sitwell family owned several residences: the ancestral ghost-sporting home Renishaw Hall (Derbyshire), Wood End at Scarborough (North Yorkshire) and Weston Hall (Northamptonshire), which was to be Sacheverell’s home from 1925 onwards. In addition to this, Sacheverell’s father had acquired in 1909 an important residential property, the Tuscan Castello of Montegufoni, not far from Florence, where in 1921 the futurist Gino Severini was commissioned to paint the entire walls of a large room with frescoes of figures from the Commedia dell’Arte. In these, the twenty-three-year-old Sacheverell is portrayed as a blond, curly, harlequin, with his long, slim legs encased in diamond patterned tights. He identified himself with this character and its ‘elusive figure darting in and out of the scene, light, witty, fantastic, apart from the crowd and yet at times of it.’ (Bradford, 1994, p. 88).
Sir George Sitwell inspired in his children a great love for Italy and especially the South, where they travelled extensively from 1909 on. As a result Sacheverell was able to publish in 1924 his ground-breaking work *The Southern Baroque Art*. As he wrote later:

> when I found towns like Noto and Ragusa in Sicily, I felt like a composer who has suddenly discovered a whole world of new folk-tunes. I could not help writing something round them, and giving them a big symphonic treatment. [...] They were my own discovery. (Sitwell, 1950, 111).

While Sacheverell first visited Sicily as a young man of 23, his encounters with Ireland occurred later, when his relationship with Lady Bridget Parsons (owner of the Birr Castel, Co. Offaly) brought him to visit the Emerald Isle several times between 1933 and 1950. Actually, he also had an Irish link in the family history through his paternal grandmother, a descendant from the Earls of Donoughmore.

Sachie, as he was familiarly called, was to dedicate many pages to Ireland, especially in his ‘Entertainments of the Imagination’, a peculiar genre that would become his own inimitable trademark mode of expression. In this essay, I will focus on a selection of Sacheverell Sitwell’s writings, in order to analyse his vision of the islands of Sicily and of Ireland, as depicted in his eclectic prose. Thus, I hope to offer an opportunity to rediscover his work and look at those shores with new eyes.¹

Three Eccentric Characters

Sacheverell and his siblings, Edith and Osbert, were, a ‘delightful but deleterious trio’, as they were early characterized by Edmund Gosse in 1916 (Greene 2011, 124). They wrote poetry, novels, essays, travelogues and autobiographies, and rivalled the ‘Bloomsbury Group’ as self-styled artistic leaders in the 1920s/30s. This was

¹ Although Sacheverell can be better defined a “connoisseur” rather than an art historian, in her book *Sacheverell Sitwell e la città barocca del Novecento. Impressioni di un viaggiatore inglese in Sud Italia e Sicilia* (2014 Catania: Agorà), Rosangela Antonella Spina has focused on his description of architectonic baroque artifacts in Sicily. This is not the main aim of my article, which will concentrate more on Sacheverell Sitwell’s cultural and anthropological approach to the two islands, thus privileging experiences that have impregnated his fantasy.
marked by some well-publicised events, notably the launch of the poetry review “Wheels” (1916-1921) and the performance at the Aeolian Theatre, London, in 1923 of Edith’s poems Façade, where her texts were spoken into a Sengerphone (a megaphone-like device) thrust through a painted curtain. The syncopated reading was accompanied by the heavily jazz-influenced music composed by William Walton. The Sitwells have ever since been associated with Façade, which soon became a modernist classic. The title was suggested by Sacheverell, taking it “from a patronising comment someone had made about Edith: ‘clever, but only a façade’”. (Bradford 1994, 112)

All three Sitwells had enormous literary ambition, but were hindered by their own complacency and snobbish dilettantism. Certainly they were aesthetes who glorified baroque art, the Commedia dell’Arte and the Ballets Russes. Sarah Bradford, reports that, in 1923, Arnold Bennett thought of the trio that

Osbert was the impresario ‘presenting’ the family; Edith the chief gladiator; Sachie the interpreter of the harlequin beauty of the Sitwell world, ‘extraordinarily, insultingly different from anybody else’s.’ (Bradford 1994, 121)

During the 1930s those among the British literary circles called by Edith the ‘pipsqueakers’ revolted against the presumptuous and prickly Sitwells, who counted Noel Coward, Wyndham Lewis and D.H. Lawrence among their main ‘enemies’. But they were rehabilitated after World War II, when Edith was rediscovered as the author of English Eccentrics and poems as striking as Still Falls the Rain, (which inspired Benjamin Britten’s ‘Canticle III’ in 1954). As an old lady, she had the disquieting looks of a sibyl, as such, in the 1950s together with Osbert, she won the USA over with a number of successful reading tours. Sacheverell, the least successful of the trio, was left behind, already estranged from his siblings since his marriage in 1925 with Georgia Doble, who was part of the Bright Young Things set.

Due to their style and personality, today the Sitwells are best remembered as the cultural icons of their time immortalised in Cecil Beaton’s cycle of glamorous portraits. Unfortunately, the deadly stamp of amateurishness and dilettantism that is associated with ‘Sitwellism’ also applies to Sachie’s works, which suffered from his lack of discipline and self-indulgence, as well as the presumption fostered by his brother and sister of being a genius.
Furthermore, their literary production is branded with what I would define as an internecine mirror plagiarism, explicable by what their first biographer called ‘the communal use which the Sitwells make of their common memories’ (Megroz 1927, 65). French tapestries, fountains, hunters, Pierrots, Harlequins, Clowns, places such as Renishaw Park, Scarborough, Naples and King Bomba, Venice, Sicily, Spain, bizarre characters from their shared childhood, or figures like Gabriele D’Annunzio, Marinetti or Diaghilev, could all be stored as Sitwellian ‘stage-property’.

Therefore, many of their works show an embarrassing obsession with the same recurring topics. On the other hand, in spite of their claim to modernity and their command of aggressive advertising techniques, they were quite prudish, reticent and censorious about their private lives. No wonder that the litigious trio turned out to be plagued by envy and paranoia.

Southern Miseries and Splendours

Even though Sacheverell Sitwell is usually associated with baroque art, one of the main interests of his life was the enclosed world of monks and monasteries. In a book such as *The Gothick North: A Study of Medieval Life, Art and Thought* (which was popular among the Oxbridge aesthetes in the early 1930s) he was to point at a connection between the Gothic and a more luminous southern culture, by referring to the immense repertory from the Carolingian Cycle and Paladins’ deeds, performed in puppet shows such as the Opera dei Pupi Siciliani. Sachie writes that ‘the names of Odoardo, Boiardo and Ruggiero, are ranted out ominously, while armoured puppets fight the Saracen knights and rescue their ladies from pagan castles’. Stressing that they have become part of the Sicilian ‘street mind’ (Sitwell 1950, 90).

In the last part of the book, references to Catania and other Sicilian cities set off a long study on monasteries around the world, a topic that he was to develop in other books, especially in *Monks, Nuns and Monasteries* (1965) where he would also discuss in a panoramic sweep Noto, Acireale, Messina, Catania, Palermo, Monreale, Alcamo, Vittoria and the Cattedrale of Cefalù. Curiously enough, he writes that the main inspiration for *The Gothick North* had been:
a mendicant friar, dwarfish, red-bearded, and hunchbacked, whom I saw creeping in and out of the lava built slums of Catania. I expect he was selling amulets. He was the most primitive human “throwback” that I have yet come across, while I must admit that his presence in Sicily was not to be wondered at, for this island, of all Western European lands, possesses the most tattered and aboriginal of monks. (Sitwell 1950, 205)

Not divorced from the prejudices of his class, upbringing and formation, in Sicily Sacheverell was fascinated by the great contrast between the richness of its architecture and the archaic aspects of its society, an island where miseries and splendours lived together, a combination that was to become one of his major fields of research. Thinking back on his relationship with Sicily, in 1952 Sachie was to write

It was 1920 or 1921 before I went to Naples and Sicily, and it was an inspiration, a transmission almost, one could say, a transfusion of poetical germs and ideas that no one of my temperament is ever likely to forget. (Sitwell 1952, 43)

He was to return in the Autumn/Winter of 1922/3, together with Osbert and Walton, again in January 1926, newly wed with Georgia, accompanied by his father (the siblings called him Ginger), the butler Henry Moat and his brother. These travels had for Sachie an epiphanic quality. He was to treasure the images gathered during those journeys for all his life.

If we want to see Sachie’s works as travelogues, then they are travelogues of the mind, where encounters, memories and visions of rare works of art act as triggers for his fervid imagination. The best example of his prose style is the work with which he is usually identified: *Southern Baroque Art. A Study of Painting, Architecture and Music in Italy and Spain of the 17th & 18th Centuries*, first published by Grant Richards in February 1924, when he was 23 years of age.

The first part of *Southern Baroque Art*, entitled “The Serenade at Caserta” opens on a hot summer morning at Naples, with a view of the Church of San Domenico’s spire, which sprang forth like ‘a foaming, bubbling geyser, blowing out its lava-like fine glass.’ (Sitwell 1951, 13 and following) Sachie’s visual time machine is now at work: when the narrator leaves his hotel window and enters the Church of Gesù Nuovo we are also there, up on the scaffoldings, near Soli-
mena who is working on his fresco of the “Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple”. Suddenly, everything comes alive, the clouds, the gods, the horses, the cascade-like steep steps of the great staircase. To our bigger surprise, we are at the same time in Venice, among rainbow bridges and balconies that look like ‘small anchored clouds’. All this does not last long, because we are urged to move to the road that leads Palermo to Soluntum in order to climb again a ‘disproportionate staircase’, this time of an unspecified villa on the outskirts of Bagheria. The following passage can be read as a tiny compendium of Sacheverell Sitwell’s poetic:

> Next come two villages, Ficarazzelli and Ficarazzi, of unending squalor bordering each side of the straight road. They might be villages in Central Africa. After two dreary miles of this (...) comes the town of Bagheria. Here everywhere out of the low white houses rise arches and triumphant pavilions. Only last night the town must have been decorated for a festivity. There should be loud bands and flower-bombs, detonating as they touch the aim. Hundreds of lights glow in the air and from the roofs [...] But towards morning, as all the candles are guttering down in the lanterns, a damp breath of rain comes, and very soon last night’s ornaments are spoilt. The hot midday sun then bakes them, half-dilapidated as they are, giving them permanence. This is the impression Bagheria gives you. (Sitwell 1951, 20)

Here the narrator uses first a traditional mode for describing the route, then he lets his imagination flow, suggesting (in a conditional verbal mode) the possibility of a festa paesana having taken place in the city the night previous to his arrival. He goes on depicting many details, until a dreary realism brings him back to his present time, to the transience of it all.

Once the narrator has arrived at the Certosa of Bagheria and at the Prince of Palagonia’s Villa, his phantasies are overwhelmed by the crazy wizardry of those places and he can only stop to describe them. His ramblings bring him then to Venice, Naples, Monte Cassino, Padula and back to Sicily looking for anything stagy or strange at Messina and Catania, where he is fascinated by the Benedictine monastery. Then he jumps again to Naples and Hungary to land, via Venice, at the Royal Palace of Caserta.

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2 Francesco Solimena (1657-1747), prolific Neapolitan baroque painter.
Elisabetta d’Erme

After such a tour de force, the reader is eventually rewarded with pages of considerable beauty, comparable to a unique, almost lysergic, cultural trip. Through his peculiar use of a historical present verbal mode, Sacheverell Sitwell enables us to experience the past in a surprising way. Now we are there too, to marvel at the ‘Serenade at Caserta’, the imposing, theatrical staircase, the immense park, the water, the cascade. We are present at the arrival of Ferdinand I, King Bomba, and the place is completely alive with music, light and surprise. Giandomenico Tiepolo’s Punchinello is also there, ‘arrived by water’ directly from his frescos once at Zianigo.3 ‘These bird-men’, we are told, swing themselves from the branches of the trees in the park at Caserta, while Don Giovanni and Count d’Almaviva, with Leporello’s and Figaro’s complicity, are going to sing their serenade to an open window. Then, at the crack of dawn, it’s all over: the last musicians ‘who had climbed into trees and slept there’, slip off their masks and are ready to leave.

The ensuing two chapters, ‘Les Indes Galantes’ and ‘The King and the Nightingale’, are centred on Baccus invading India, El Greco’s painting “St Maurice and the Soldiers of the Theban Legion” and the castrato Farinelli’s singing of the same four songs every night to the King of Spain to cure him of his madness.

In Southern Baroque Art, Sachie’s first prose work, there is an urgency, a poetical inspiration, a fresh, fervid creativity that it is not to be found in his following works, too often marred by repetitiveness. This is particularly true for Southern Baroque Revisited, published in 1967, a tame compilation of places, works of art and themes already explored elsewhere, all served as a sort of coffee-table book.

Years later, Sachie stressed that he wrote Southern Baroque Art ‘in a sort of poetical delirium’, adding with his usual Sitwellian self-flattery, that ‘opening it again, after the passage of so many years, I find many of the descriptions to be more beautiful than the works of art themselves.’ (Sitwell 1952, 37) For once in his life, though, he might have been right, because - accordingly to the Cuban writer Savero Sarduy’s definition of Baroque - Southern Baroque Art can be seen as a work of ‘mental jewellery’ (Sarduy 1974, 15).

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3 Sascheverell Sitwell refers here to the Pulcinella’s frescoes cicle that Giandomenico Tiepolo painted between 1791 and 1797 for his villa in Zianigo, now at the Museo del Settecento Veneziano di Cà Rezzonico.
By identifying the means with the end and - in order to write his *Study of Painting, Architecture and Music in Italy and Spain of the 17th & 18th Centuries* - Sachie had deliberately chosen a language mirroring that extravagant, eccentric style. As R. L. Mégroz stressed in his sharp critique of Sachie’s early writings,

In reading *Southern Baroque Art* we have been excited, we have been irritated, we have been treated to a feast of reason and a flow of soul, and we have been exhausted. But above all, we have been enthralled. No work of creative interpretation (I hesitate to call it criticism) written in English since Walter Pater’s *Renaissance* is more clearly marked with the stamp of original power and vital permanence. (Megroz 1927, 287-8)

Sacheverell Sitwell’s pioneering interest in Baroque lies not only in its appeal as an original and unusual topic for his times, but must of all in its theatrical grandeur, adventurous experiments in novel effects and continuous surprise. Having written for the stage and having been an assiduous theatre, ballet and opera goer, Sachie was intrigued by the world of the theatre to such an extent that two of his lovers were ballerinas. A lifelong intoxication, that started in his early days while watching a company of Pierrots on the strand of Scarborough and that had left fruitful traces in his poems *The Hundred and One Harlequins*, in the Punchiniellos of *Southern Baroque Art*, in the Commedia dell’Arte-inspired script for *The Triumph of Neptune*, or in the reiterated evocations of Watteau’s “Le Grand Gilles”. Like other modernist artists, he fantasized on the lives of saltimbanques, gypsies and strolling players, clowns and freaks.

Describing in *Cupid and the Jacaranda* Watteau’s rendering of the Commedia’s character Mezzetin in “L’embarquement pour Cythère”, Sachie says that the poetry we find in that painting derives from the shock of meeting actors outside the theatre, out in nature: ‘comedians out of the theatre, lying on the shores of the lake, or in wild, overgrown corners of the garden. It is the overlapping of one life into the other that makes the fascination’. In that same book (his most confessional ‘Entertainment of the Imagination’) he makes a revealing wish: ‘I would like to have it said of me that “among much else, besides, he wrote of scenes and subjects taken from the theatre”’. (Sitwell 1952, 28 and 26)

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4 In the inter-war years, also British painters as Augustus John, Walter Sickert and Laura Knight, were often taking tinkers, gypsies and circuses as their subjects.
An example of Sachie’s curiosity for the seedy show-world of itinerant performers is to be found in the opening chapters of *Sacred and Profane Love*, published by Faber & Faber in 1940:

This is written in the dark days, when there is evil in the air. No one knows which way to turn, or what to work for. […] The storm is coming. Already, the first drops from the thundercloud have fallen. The canvas walls are sopping wet. The painted scenery is running with its colours. The audience is hurrying home. It is for this dwindling public that we mount our plays. For, at this moment, the only dry shelter is upon these boards. Now, when everything is threatened and in danger, we must walk with rags and bones. (Sitwell 1940, 3-4)

While the war rages around him, Sachie seeks shelter in the safety of his memories and, in the following “Preludio”, brings us back to Sicily. We are now in Catania, where we ‘can hear the noises of a fair […] The steam organs play a dozen tunes all at the same time […] This is a fair, and also the purlieus of some shrine of pilgrimage.’ Among the crowd, the bear-leaders and the beggars, there are

Two men: one playing a trumpet, the other carrying a hooded black box upon a stick. They are itinerant fortune tellers, first heard and then seen in Sicily, twenty years ago, near the theatre of the marionettes […] Knights in armour, Saracens and Paladins. (Sitwell 1952, 5 and 8)

The sound of their fanfara is still to be heard and, as he wonders about the Sicilian fortune tellers’ whereabouts, Sachie goes on a long digression about gypsies tribes, that will eventually introduce us to “Little Benvenuto”. The scene is set on a Piazza of Syracuse where Sachie had witnessed a sickly child scampered all day around the city in an open carrozza by his alleged parents.

This was little Benvenuto, the child prodigy, the musical genius who was advertised upon every hoarding of the town. He was in Syracuse for this day only. It was billed as ‘unica rappresentazione’. Twice, today, it was a Sunday, he was to perform in the theatre of the town […] The horrifying feature of this apparition was the appalling pallor of the child’s face […] The wretched child bowed to left and to right, although there was no question of applause, and hardly of recognition […] Occasionally, just now and again, his father – if it were his father – spoke or whispered to him. Urging more bows, more effort to attract the audience. (Sitwell 1952, 42)
From the crowded café tables in the chief square of Syracuse at midday, everybody is looking at “Little Benvenuto”, the young pianist presented on the little carriage like a freak-show. The posters announcing the program of his recital, comprising pages from Beethoven and Chopin, inform that at stated intervals, he would improvise upon any theme suggested by members of the public. Next day he is due to Catania, where ‘the audience might be more musical than in Syracuse’.

Speculating about the musicians’ whereabouts and the possible fate of the boy, Sachie is compelled to think of other itinerant performers, like a small company of shabby comedians once met in the Tuscan countryside, touring through provincial towns, ‘wearing their dresses and their make-up, to advertise the play.’ (Sitwell 1952, 45) or, more shockingly, the sight of a circus company, harlequins stranded at Marseille, shortly after the Great War, hopelessly seeking passage abroad. Sachie did not go to see the boy’s performance, nonetheless he worries about the fate of the child prodigy (the possibilities of his being exploited by the two adults, his uncomfortable itinerant life, the cheap hotels, the third class train carriages), and in his thoughts little Benvenuto becomes a symbol, a warning ‘to look closely’.

Sicily can be seen as a stage setting that Sachie shared with the other Sitwells. It was the place he had discovered with his his brother, who also wrote extensively about it in his own travelogues and autobiography. This influenced his view of the island and informed his writing and memory.

Irish Phantasmagorias

Ireland had never been visited by Sachie’s siblings and it never appears in their writing, and belongs only to Sachie’s most personal and intimate memories. In 1930 he met the beautiful blonde Anglo-Irish aristocrat Lady Bridget Parsons (1907/1972), daughter of the 5th Earl of Rosse and of the Viscountess de Vesci of Abbey Leix. She was interested in art and literature and was on friendly terms with many young writers and artists of the time. They began an affair that lasted many years.

In Ireland, Lady Bridget lived at Birr in County Offaly in an imposing gothic family castle, property of her brother Michael Rosse. Sachie was to be guest at Birr Castle first in April 1933, then in 1934,
1938 and 1947. Birr Castle is still famed for the beauty of its gardens, landscaped in the 18th century, he was fascinated by its magnolia trees, the rivers and especially in a rarity of the demesne: the world’s tallest box hedges, some of which were over 300 years old.

In May 1934, with his socialite wife Georgia, Sachie was guest of Lord Charles Cavendish, younger son of the 9th Duke of Devonshire, at Lismore Castle, Co. Waterford. Built in 1150 as Lismore Abbey along the Blackwater river, Lismore Castle was re-built by the Cavendish family in Gothic style during the 19th Century.

As such it appears as a vision in *The Dance of the Quick and the Dead*, a long meditation on ephemerality published in 1936, introduced by the image of a ‘gallery of yews’ impenetrable to light: ‘grown long ago for the meditations of the monks, when the castle was an abbey. It is their phantoms whom legend places for the shadows of the tree stems.’ (Sitwell 1936, 96 and following) In the book, images of Birr’s ancient box edges and magnolias mingle with those at Lismore.

In *The Dance of the Quick and the Dead*, Sachie never mentions Ireland by name, referring instead to ‘the land of castles’. It is also, by extension, a land of ghosts, coming from a troubled past and troubled recent years. His next vision is of a ruined castle, to be seen against the Slieve Bloom Mountains, not far from Birr: ‘The forecourt to the castle is the very piazza of ghostly condumonion, their Escu- rial and parliament’. This is the threshold of the Leap Castle, said to be among the most haunted places in Ireland. It was burnt down in 1922 and when Sachie visited it with Bridget in April 1934 it was still abandoned. Like in W.B.Yeats’ haunted Big House in *Purgatorio*, the castle ‘stands in the moonlight with lights at its windows and the sound of life within’ (Sitwell 1936, 99), but it soon becomes clear that it has turned into a ‘dormitory’ of jackdaws, that have littered the floor with reeds, rushes and speckled eggs. In moonlit nights

the speckled eggshell would gleam like a polished stone, like a stone from a river bed, rounded by the waters. It would shine, and grow dim, and find the next embrasure, through branches of the rookery, high up in the windless elms; while below, the whole of the ruins were reverberant and crawled with shadows. (Sitwell 1936, 99)

In Sachie’s phantasies, the ‘land of castles’ is a mysterious place inhabited by spirits. Ghosts of those who have left it, forgotten exiles like the monks of St Finan on the Great Skellig, the Culdees monks
Visions of Sicily and of Ireland

from Clonmacnoise, or Irish musicians like John Field, composer of the Nocturnes (before Chopin), whose ‘romantic youth blessed with poetry and cursed with consumption, becomes a figure of Byronic or Faustian import.’ (Sitwell 1936, 82) All of them stand high in Sachie’s personal Olympus near Watteau’s “Le Grand Gilles”, the clown Debureau and Hieronymus Bosch’s monsters.

The Dance of the Quick and the Dead is a phantasmagoria peopled by a chain of marginal characters, at whom – as in the case of Little Benvenuto - Sacheverell Sitwell looks with morbid empathy. Like all the ensuing ‘Entertainments of the Imagination’, this book is a seemingly random assemblage of meditations on finitude, a topic that looms in Splendours and Miseries. A bibliographic highlight, lavishly published by Faber & Faber in 1943, in the middle of World War II. Here Sachie gathers together images of terrible beauty, depicting a world on the verge of self destruction. Here the shores of ‘neutral’ Ireland allow him a vantage point from which to describe the sense of peril of those times and to focus, once more, on the theme of exile. Therefore he choses the metaphor of the ‘Storm at Sea’. The scene he now represents opens on the Cliffs of Slieve League, on the North West coast in Donegal. They rise two thousand feet sheer out of the Atlantic Ocean and are dreadful and tremendous in a storm. This sublime landscape appears to be suddenly teeming with sea serpents and seagulls.

What sort of a land can this be? It is no more than the weeded stepping stone at a ford across the stream? Does it lead on to other lands? Or is it the beginning and the end? Where the heart must be buried? But it is, in fact, a land of exile. Its sons, that is to say, are driven from it. A land of sad memories, of which the crying of the million seabirds under this cliff is harbinger. (Sitwell 1943, 19)

Sachie then associates the stormy sea and the cliffs with the wreck of the Spanish Armada in 1588, when hundreds of galleons crashed on Donegal Bay, Fair Isle and the Giants Causeway, leaving twelve hundred bodies on those shores. Only few seamen and soldiers survived. Sachie imagines them brought to the castle or stronghold of a chief.

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5 John Field (1782/1837) Irish composer and pianist - Jean-Antoine Watteau’s “Pierrot ou ‘Gilles’” was painted 1718-1719 (Louvre) - Jean-Gaspard Debureau or Debureau (born Jan Kašpar Dvořák 1796/1846) Bohemian-French mime who invented the character of Pierrot.
Elisabetta d’Erme

The Irish nobles, the chieftains of the septs, dwelt in a feudal poverty but little mitigated by their long descent and by the multitude of their ragged retainers. [...] Many had been educated in England [...]. some had travelled to Italy or France [...] not all could speak their native Erse. Yet there could be no mistaking them for Tudor Englishmen. They were different in accent, in appearance and character, and in their mode of life. In their improvidence and frugality, being as quick to ruin themselves as to pick quarrels over nothing. (Sitwell 1936, 22)

Maybe those Irish nobles were of the same tribe that, a few decades later, was to abandon the island for ever. We see now a boat ready for the flight of Irish Earls: it is the year 1607, the Earl of Tyrone and the Earl of Tyrconnel are setting sail from Rathmullen, accompanied by ninety nine chieftains of the Gaelic north. After a fearful voyage of three weeks they land at the mouth of the Seine. The rest of their lives will be spent in exile. Sachie tells us that ‘Their huge estates were confiscated in the Plantation of Ulster under James I, and the two Earls died in Rome.’ But for him the Spanish castaways and the Irish noble are only a symbol of a wider, universal condition:

It is enough that, at some time a ship set sail with persons on board who were escaping. That they had to round these capes and headlands and, only in theory, passed by Slieve League, or by the black Cliffs of Moher. And the allegory will begin to grow. (Sitwell 1936, 22)

Over the years, Sachie’s bonds with his siblings had badly weakened also because of financial difficulties that had plagued them throughout their lives. In 1943 Osbert inherited the title and the properties and Sachie felt sidelined and ill treated. In a way – like the Irish Earls - he too was an exile from his ancestral home at Renishaw. To such an extent that his 1973 book For want of the Golden City can be read as the bitter cry of one dispossessed.

Sachie was to go back to Ireland in August 1947, with Georgia and his second son Francis, for a Grand Tour of Southern Ireland that was made more pleasant by being guests of affluent friends. The first stage was Lismore in Co. Waterford, where their extremely wealthy friend Hugh Grosvenor, 2nd Duke of Westminster, called Bendor, had recently acquired a 1830s house in Tudor style called Fort William, located near the Blackwater river.
In 1947 they also were at Birr Castle with the Rosses, Bridget and the set designer Oliver Messel; and with the Aly Khans and Lady Clementine Beit at Russborough, a magnificent 17th-century Palladian stately house in Co. Kildare. Sachie, who had just written British Architects & Craftsmen, loved the house with the fine flight of steps on its front façade, the heraldic lions, the sweep of curved colonnades and the stucco ceilings by the Lafranchini brothers. Later, he was able to add references to Russborough House in the 1960 revisited edition.

The Southern Ireland Grand Tour was for Sachie not only a great source of architectural information, but it also provided him, after so many years, with the inspiration to write poetry. The result was two disquieting poems: ‘Outside Dunsandle’ and ‘The Sick Man’, where he describes, with unusual concision and simplicity, the harsh conditions of the Irish in the Gaeltacht. They were to be published in 1948 and close his Selected Poems.

Published in June 1945, British Architects and Craftsmen: A Survey of Taste, Design and Style during Three Centuries 1600 to 1830 established Sacheverell Sitwell as a connoisseur of art. As had been the case with Southern Baroque Art, British Architects and Craftsmen was to be a groundbreaking work. It went through many editions, each one containing scholarly corrections and revisions, with the result that it’s among Sachie’s most reliable essay.

The book had been inspired to him by a sense of latent danger: ‘The War was very much a living reality when these pages were written and all the buildings concerned were in peril of destruction.’ (Sitwell 1960, 13) Sachie had been an early admirer of D’Annunzio and of Mosley, but, as WW II began, he distanced himself from any form of Fascism. Nonetheless, beyond his habitual nostalgia and sense of lost worlds, he seems to have been in a rather generalised way aware of and responsive to the politics and conflicts of his day.

Many pages of British Architects and Craftsmen are dedicated to Ireland, Irish architects and to the Swiss Italian stucco makers from the Canton Ticino, such as the Lafranchini or the Carbonetti, who were to decorate many Dublin houses and Irish country manors. Among references to the Kilmainham Hospital, the Rotunda, the Casino at Marino (Clontarf) in Dublin, Castelcoole in Co. Fermanagh and Rockingham in Co. Roscommon, there is also an entry on Russborough, ‘the finest of all Irish houses.’ (Sitwell 1960, 206)
Sachie’s visionary gifts are at work again when he embarks on a tour of Dublin and its buildings inspired by James Malton’s *A picturesque and descriptive view of the city of Dublin* (1794). After having browsed through the book, illustrated with beautiful aquatints, he sadly lands back to reality:

A precise moment, on a particular morning in 1791, when eighteenth century elegance has reached to its climax. And in a week, a month, a year, will go from the world for ever [...] We may look on it through darkened glasses. We may take down Maxwell’s Irish Rebellion of 1798 from the bookshelf, with its wonderful but fearful Cruikshanks [...] In this mood we would walk along the banks of Liffey, and look for old houses in the decaying slums [...] I saw it on the day of Munich, in the false sunset a year before the storm. Another world was dawning, but the fearful winds are not dying yet [...] Perhaps the old buildings were never so beautiful as on that livid evening. (Sitwell 1960, 201-11)

In dark days, the arts can provide much needed consolation, but while music, books and paintings can be to some extent saved, architectonic heritage remains the most endangered, not only by the destructions of the wars, but also by demolitions. With *British Architects* Sachie was soliciting in his fellow citizens pride and self confidence, by offering his readers proof of the existence of an national genius, not only in the fields of theatre and literature, but also in architecture. To describe the qualities of British architecture, he describes it in relation with Sicilian baroque:

Our national temperament could not be more aptly illustrated than by comparison with the little Rococo town of Noto, in Sicily, in its way among the minor wonders of the world, where the beauty of the architecture consists in the façades and in the balconies, these latter upheld by figures of turbaned Moors, Chinamen, Pierrots or drolls of Comedy, and winged Pegasus, carved in the local golden stone, but the palaces have nothing whatever of interest inside them, and the whole energy and fortune have gone upon the outward show. Compare this with the exterior of Syon, or of No 44 Berkeley Square, and you will understand the difference, in aesthetics, between the Anglo-Saxons and the Latin. (Sitwell 1960, 27)

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6 Between 1940-46 the Castello of Montegufoni was secretly used by the Italian Government as a deposit for ca. 300 masterpieces from the Uffizi, Gallerie Pitti and various churches.

7 This being a recurring topic in *The Dance of the Quick and the Dead* (1936) and in *Splendours and Miseries* (1943).
Apart from *British Architects and Craftsmen* Sachie’s descriptions of Ireland centre usually on its wild nature, the imposing cliffs, ‘waters as blue as gentians’ in Galway, ancient trees, ruins of haunted castles and so on, all of which offer him sublime sceneries teeming with phantoms. Like Sicily, also Ireland offers metaphors of ephemerality, ‘splendours as well as miseries to recommend it’ (Sitwell 1952, 23). But this is the only possible analogy between the two islands. Since, for all its charming beauty, Ireland lacks artifice and above all the Sicilian theatricality, a distinctiveness that - to Sachie’s eyes – represents the greater appeal.

Sachie’s most revealing work, *Cupid and the Jacaranda*, published in 1952, can be defined an autobiography of the imagination. It was his 43rd book, he was 55, had two World War behind him and it was time to draw a balance of his life. For Sachie’s standards it is a very readable book, that sheds light on his poetic and compositional process. Going through his life, he reconstructs his journeys and literary achievements. Most of its pages are dedicated to Italy and to Venice, a place he loved dearly, even if he now harbours political resentments towards the ‘Bel Paese’. He writes that:

> it is difficult for an Englishman to forgive the Italians or forget what they have done [...] No one could wish to go to Italy where there had been fighting from end to end of the peninsula, up and down the land, owing to the treachery of the Italians (Sitwell 1952, 64 and 83)

Nonetheless he can not stop himself visiting and quoting it, having been ever since his childhood a lover of Italian scenic architecture.

The Art of Façade: conclusions

Sacheverell Sitwell’s visions of Sicily and of Ireland reflect his thoughts on life’s precariousness and on beauty’s ephemeral quality. In this, his approach is truly baroque, with a profusion of *memento mori*, like his returning interest on the Cappuccini’s Catacombs at Santa Maria della Pace in Palermo, or in restless spirits of Irish exiles. But more than anything else it’s the *vanitas vanitatvm*, the theatricality of the baroque that had always excited his imagination. The façades of the streets of Noto, the churches of Ragusa or Vittoria, the monas-
teries of Catania or Palermo are, to his eyes, “entire theatrical compositions, permanent ‘built scenes’. “ (Sitwell 1952, 71) For him, theatre is an absolute necessity, because: ‘it takes the place of what is missing from life.’ (Sitwell 1952, 31) For this reason Sicily represents for him the highest expression of artifice, as ‘theatrically, there is nothing behind it. It is all façade.’ or, with more emphasis: ‘There is nothing behind the architecture: and there does not pretend to be. It is all for effect.’ (Sitwell 1952, 46-7)

After the 1950s Sacheverell Sitwell was headed to more exotic destinations in Asia, Africa or Latin America, leaving Sicily and Ireland behind. His sister Edith (by that time an alcoholic) died in 1964. Osbert died after a long illness with Parkinson’s in 1969, leaving Sacheverell only his title, having bequeathed the properties to his two nephews, Reresby and Francis. Sacheverell would outlive his brother other 20 years, dying on the 1st of October 1988, at 91 years of age. His last two ‘Entertainments of the Imagination’: Journey to Ends of Time and For Want of the Golden City, essentially revisit his previous writings.

In spite of his remoteness and carelessness on scholarly details Sacheverell Sitwell was a great weaver of images and symbols. Today, reading his books can be an exciting and gratifying experience, especially since internet resources make his dense and rare iconographic references now easily traceable. He sought to achieve a poetry acrobatically composed of fragments of reveries. Like Laforgue’s Pierrot Fumiste, he offers a journey through time and space: ‘- Cochers! Tous à Cythère! Au pays de Watteau!’ (Laforgue 1882, 267). Sicily and Ireland were his Cythère.
Works cited


Bibliography


The relationship between W.B. Yeats and Eugenio Montale has been explored in different studies: Musatti (1980), Ó Ceallach´in (1995) and Esposito (2011) deal with Montale’s translations of Yeats’s poems into Italian, while Fantaccini (2009) explores the reception of Yeats’s works in Italy, devoting a chapter to Montale. Orlando (1998) finds several correspondences in Montale’s late poems with images used by predecessors that he admired-Yeats among them. Orlando argues that these images have been re-elaborated and reutilized in different contexts as intertextual references, the original meanings shifting in the ‘target texts’. I deliberately use the expression ‘target text’ (borrowed from translation studies) even if I am not referring here to a translation as such. In the case of Montale the influence of a precise source is often so evident that it can be claimed that the borrowing itself is deliberate.

After a brief introductory description of similarities and possibly conscious cross references between the two poets, I will argue that even in Montale’s first and most celebrated poems-and not just the late works as Orlando (1998) has evidenced—there is an interesting, significant and probably deliberate reutilization of Yeats’s images.

One preliminary assumption is necessary. It is possible to find several evident coincidences in the images used by the two poets, some of which cannot really be seen as direct influences, as the dates of composition of the poems prove. The fact is that many of these analogies serve only to show how Montale’s early poems and Yeats’s last collections share a common sensibility that was, in fact, also seen in several other artists in the interwar years. For example, the title of Montale’s collection, Ossi di seppia - ‘Cuttlefish Bones’- (1925) was originally sup-
posed to be ‘Rottami’ (pieces of junk) - which calls to mind not only Eliot’s “heap of broken images”\(^1\), but also earlier Italian poets such as Camillo Sbarbaro’s “Trucioli” (1920),\(^2\) as well as one of Montale’s most famous images, that of the “cacci aguzzi di bottiglia”-“broken bottle shards”. Only much later did Yeats write ‘The Circus Animals’ Deser-
tion’ (1939) in which he mentions as a source of inspiration for his po-
etry “a mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street/old bottles and a
broken can/old iron, old bones, old rags”. This was probably inspired
in turn by Eliot’s “stony rubbish” and the aforementioned “heap of
broken images”. Incidentally - as will be shown later - this is a rare case
in which Yeats’s sensibility works in favour of a ‘lowering of the tone’
rather than raising it, to reveal a more intimate and private poet much
closer to Montale’s poetic sensibility.

There are, however, many other echoes that are deceptive and that
cannot be ascribed to poetic legacy. As usual, both poets invent their
own personal mythological settings-Yeats’s tower might only vague-
ly recall Montale’s shorewatchers’ house (‘La Casa dei doganieri’).\(^3\)
Montale, like many modernist writers, creates his own mythological
world with its sacred places, its deities and its temples, here identi-
fied as the sea and the coastal landscapes (including the abyss). From
this perspective, the sea, and the coastline in particular, assume the
form of a human construction, almost resembling a temple. We find
such images in two different poems from ‘Mediterraneo’:

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\(^1\) A further accidental, or voluntary, intertextual reference to Eliot might regard the
well-known passage of *The Waste Land* (1922), “a heap of broken images where the
sun beats”, which is echoed in “Meriggiaie pallido e assunto” (1926), where the view
of the sunbeams (“E andando nel sole che abbaglia” – “and walking in the dazzling
sun”) reflecting on broken glass (“broken bottle shards”) reminds us of the English
poem. Cambon (1982, 7) stresses the importance of images of a world of stone con-
sumed by sun and wind in *Ossi di seppia*, quoting “no water and only rock”, “crollo
di pietrame” (cave-in of rocks), “impiesato soffrire senza nome” (“stonebound suf-
ferring without a name”) and other similar images. This might be compared to Eliot’s
recurrent use of stony images: “stony rubbish”, “the dry stone [making] no sound of
water”, “under this red rock”. Again, for Eliot “the cricket [gives] no relief”, while
Montale describes the “debole sistro… d’una persa cicada” (“faint sistrum… of a lost
cicada”). For Montale “The wastelandish aspects counterpoint the regenerative ones,
which they almost overwhelm, but not quite” (Cambon 1982, 4).

\(^2\) The Italian word ‘trucioli’ means ‘wood shavings’.

\(^3\) All quotations from Montale’s poems are from Montale (2004); the respective trans-
lations are by Jonathan Galassi in Montale (2012) unless otherwise specified.
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Là fuoriesce il Tritone   There the Tritone empties
Dai flutti che lambiscono  Into the breakers lapping
Le soglie d’un cristiano  A Christian temple’s floor,
Tempio, ed ogni ora prossima  And every coming hour
È antica. Ogni dubiezza  Is ancient. Every doubt
Si conduce per mano  Is taken by the hand
Come una fanciulletta amica.  Like a little friend.

Guardati dal fondo gli sbocchi  Seen from within, their [the caves’]
delle grotte  mouths
Segnavano architetture  Sketched mighty architecture
Possenti campite di cielo.  On the sky’s backdrop,
Sorgevano dal tuo petto  Thundering airy temples
Rombante aerei templi,  Rose from your breast,
guglie scoccanti luci:  Spires shooting lights:
una città di vetro l’azzurro netto  A city of glass inside the pure azure
via via si discopriva da ogni ca-
duco velo  Slowly shrugged off each ephem-
eral veil
e il suo rombo non era che un  And its roar was no more than a
sussurro.  whisper.
Nasceva dal fiotto la patria so-
gnata.  The dreamed-of homeland rose
(from ‘Mediterraneo’).  from the flood.  

These images represent the Ligurian landscape so dear to the poet. In the first case we also have a specific geographical reference, Tritone being a stream near Portovenere. The waves creating a temple and the coastline which looks like a city made of glass might well remind us of the mythical description of Byzantium in Yeats’s poem:

Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

In this case, however, the analogy is casual, since Montale’s ‘Mediterraneo’ was written almost ten years before Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’.
If we turn to more specific and significant examples, we first need to explore briefly the relationship between the two poets, focusing on their first encounter and the impression Yeats made on Montale. The two men met in Rapallo in the late Twenties when Montale went to visit Ezra Pound. Foster (2003: 379) explains how “Montale came to Rapallo to see Pound and was intrigued by the legendary Irish poet, but found the language barrier impassable”. Montale himself wrote, “in those years another great poet came to Rapallo, the Irish W.B. Yeats, one of the few modern poets Pound really admired. He could not speak one single word of Italian.” (“in quegli anni veniva a Rapallo un altro grande poeta, l’irlandese W.B. Yeats, uno dei pochi poeti moderni che Ezra ammirasse senza riserve. Yeats non spiccicava una parola d’italiano.” Montale 1996, 2996).

Montale never wrote extensively on Yeats; his ambiguous attitude towards the Irish poet can be found through a close reading of the few passages of his diaries in which he expresses the impressions he received from - and the consequent ideas he had of - Yeats. From these passages Montale’s opinion of the older poet and his works clearly emerges and it is evident why he borrowed images and lexical items from Yeats’s work. Certainly the Italian poet also found something rather disturbing in Yeats’s ideas (as perhaps many do when approaching Yeats’s system for the first time), but at the same time he admired his style.

Montale seems to suggest the need to distinguish three different levels of judgment when dealing with Yeats: a personal one (Yeats the man), an ideological one (Yeats the thinker) and an aesthetic one (Yeats the poet). Yeats the thinker is defined by Montale as “quasi pazzesco” (1996, p. 2695) (“almost crazy-like” - from an ideological point of view) an expression that suggests he sees some kind of poetic madness in Yeats.

Montale (1996: 2926) mentions Yeats alongside Cavafy as one of those poets who, through his work, tried “nostalgically to resurrect a past that is impossible to recover”. Almost foreshadowing Kiberd

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4 The complete quotation from Montale’s diaries is: “If we intend by civilized poetry, that poetry which celebrates the epiphany and the highest peak of a civilization or of a race, I am inclined to say that such a poetry is dead. Naturally I am referring to the great poets, excluding those who tried nostalgically to resurrect a past that is impos-
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(1995), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and post-colonial theorists, Montale depicts Yeats as a man who tried to reinvent a lost tradition. In contrast, Montale did not particularly revere Yeats the man; first, because the Irish poet could not speak Italian, and secondly due to his rather puffed-up attitude, very different from the anti-poet stance adopted by the Italian writer. Montale criticized what he saw as this vain and narcissistic manner, saying that Yeats “could not completely dismiss the clothes of the great bard”\(^5\) (Montale 1995: 666). Reading ‘I limoni’, one of the first poems in Montale’s first collection, it is clear from the start that the author totally refuses any pompous self-importance, and distances himself from “I poeti laureati [che] si muovono soltanto tra le piante dai nomi poco usati” (“the laureate poets walking only among plants with rare names”). He proposes a completely different model, cherishing a rather “antigrandiose focus, a clear inheritance from the so-called Crepuscular poets who ever since the start of the new century had waged a quiet battle against highfalutin vatic style in verse” (Cambon 1982: 8).

The idea that a distinction should be made between the man and the poet is confirmed by Montale himself (1996, 1414): “one could admire Yeats (as one could […] admire D’Annunzio) without believing anything he told us”.\(^6\) In a way this was also the lesson proposed in the Seventies by another Italian writer, Giorgio Manganelli\(^7\) (2002, 31), who, referring to Yeats, wrote;

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5 “Incapace di ‘spogliarsi’ completamente ‘degli abiti regali e curiali del vate.’”
6 The complete quotation from the diaries is: “In William Butler Yeats the whole neo-Gaelic arsenal and the frailty of thought of an armchair spiritualist were overwhelmed by his melodic gift. Yeats’s Byzantium exists like Hölderlin’s Rhineland exists. One could admire Yeats (as one might, partly, admire D’Annunzio) without believing anything he told us”. (“In William Butler Yeats l’armamentario neo-gaelico e tutte le debolezze di un pensiero da spiritualista da salotto erano sopraffatti e travolti dall’onda melodica. Esiste una Bisanzio di Yeats come esiste una Renania di Hölderlin. Si poteva ammirare Yeats (come si potè, in parte, ammirare D’Annunzio) senza credere nulla di quanto egli ci raccontava.”) (SMP, 1415).
7 Cfr. Luppi 2012.
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Our thoughts turn to Dante, whose poetry presupposes a theology, the organizations of a fictitious world of figures. It is designed to introduce a regular feature, a sort of geometric definition, a logic insistence. […] In Dante, as in Yeats, theology exists because it is an organization of figures.\footnote{“Il pensiero va a Dante, la cui poesia presuppone una teologia, l’organizzazione fittizia di un mondo di figure, ha la funzione di introdurre un elemento costante, una sorta di definizione geometrica, una insistenza logica […]”. “In Dante, come in Yeats, la teologia agisce perché è una organizzazione di figure.” Translation mine.}

Thus it is not important what Yeats wrote but how he wrote it: and from a stylistic point of view Yeats (as a poet) was for Montale an outstanding model. This is why many literary critics when comparing the two poets focus on the fascination with Yeats’s musicality, his prosody and rhythm, his ability to distil complex meanings and striking images in very few lines, and his craftsmanship in the use of alliteration and repetition. These technical aspects make any attempt to translate Yeats’s poems into Italian enormously difficult, since Italian words tend to be multisyllabic and generally much longer than their English equivalent. This aspect is extremely significant when we consider Montale as a translator of Yeats. However, if we consider Montale as a poet, the argument is rather different.

Shifting our attention from purely stylistic matters to semantic and lexical issues we recognize common themes in various poems by the two authors. Fantaccini (2009, 120) starts his analysis with Montale’s translations of Yeats’s poems and mentions a similarity in lexical occurrences (“tessuto lessicale”) with reference to several works. I would add that it is worth investigating this aspect in relation to some of Yeats’s poems that Montale did not translate. It is not difficult to find similar images used by both poets but which take their poetry in opposing, or at least different, directions. From such analysis it appears clear that not only was Yeats admired for his musicality and technical skills, but he also represented a reference point for how images could be used as analytic tools in order to investigate reality. It is possible to recognize influences and cultural transfers, a shared sensibility, or rather, similar perceptions of reality in the two writers. Indeed, it might appear surprising that such similar (even shared) images were particularly appropriate both for the moral and prophetic tones of the old Irish poet and for the intimate and existential approach of the younger Italian artist.
Glauco Cambon (1983) finds several lexical and thematic analogies between Yeats and Montale. One initial, interesting correspondence is to be found in the titles of two poems: ‘Among School Children’ (1928) and ‘Un mese fra i bambini’ (1971). However, Cambon (1983: 336) suggests that here Montale might be quoting from Yeats in order to create a certain distance from him as the two poems cannot be more different. It is “as if Montale, writing ‘Un mese fra i bambini’ wanted to separate his own writing from any possible alignment with Yeats’s, and also from any possible echo of the Irish bard’s ancient mastery”.

In a line from ‘La mia musa’ (1971) Cambon (1983, 337) also identifies a borrowing from Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ (1928): the image of “the tattered coat upon a stick” seems to have suggested the line in which Montale describes the muse “wearing the clothes of a scarecrow” (“indossa i panni dello spaventapasseri”). These two examples indicate that the use of similar images functions to keep a distance from the meaning conveyed in the ‘source’ text. Cambon concludes that while Yeats tends to “raise the tone”, Montale wants to “lower it”. I am not convinced that the examples given necessarily imply a correspondence between the poems Cambon cites, yet, these possible readings at least lead us to a convincing general conclusion: the two authors often use similar images but with divergent poetical purposes.

I would add that there are further similarities between two other poems. Fantaccini (2009, 120) mentions the “persistent occurrences of the theme of old age, which is present in three out of four poems translated by Montale” 10, but it is also possible to quote from a fifth famous poem by Yeats. Montale never translated it, but it influenced the first period of his poetical production (showing that it was not only Montale’s later work that would find stimulus in earlier modernist poetry, as Orlando - 1998 - implies).

The poem that illustrates this is ‘La casa dei doganieri’ (1932) - ‘The House of the Customs Men’ or, as translated in Cambon (1982), ‘The Shorewatchers’s House’ - the image of which seems to recall Yeats’s

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9 “Quasi che scrivendo ‘Un mese tra i bambini’ Eugenio Montale volesse sviare la sua scrittura non solo da ogni convergenza con quella yeatsiana ma anche da ogni eco del proprio antico magistero.”

10 “Insistita ricorrenza del motivo della vecchiaia che compare in tre delle quattro poesie tradotte.”
‘When You Are Old’ (1893). As Esposito (2011, 48) notes, in ‘When You Are Old’ Montale could not fail to perceive and then to reproduce a motif he had already expressed in his own poems. Esposito investigates Montale’s translation into Italian of ‘When You Are Old’, comparing the two versions (Yeats’s and Montale’s) with the Ronsard sonnet ‘Quad vous serez bien vieille’, which was probably the original source of inspiration for the Irish poet. Indeed, I am also convinced that ‘La casa dei doganieri’ is one of the poems where it is possible to find Yeatsian echoes.

In both ‘When You Are Old’ and ‘La casa dei doganieri’ the authors speak in the first person addressing a woman and asking her to remember their past. The two women are similar, but while Yeats’s poem is melancholic, albeit in part reassuring, Montale’s does not provide any conclusion to his existential quandary. Yeats asks the woman (Maud Gonne presumably) to remember her past beauty; though he does not use the verb “to remember”-preferring the more evocative “to dream”-he is evidently urging her to recollect the past through the reading of the poem itself. Montale repeats three times-in the first, second and last stanzas—that his interlocutor, apparently a young girl who used to holiday with her family in Liguria, cannot remember the house of the customs men, where they supposedly once met, and where he now stands alone. In both poems a recollection is invoked, but while Yeats assumes that the reader will follow his advice, Montale knows that his request will be frustrated and that the only recollection possible is that of the poet himself. In another famous poem—‘Cigola la carrucola nel pozzo’—Montale will show how a defective memory frustrates his poetic quest for answers, while for Yeats it is a positive spur (cfr. ‘He Remembers Forgotten Beauty’ and ‘Old Memory’ written for Olivia Shakespear and Maud Gonne respectively).

Yeats’s most powerful image, which certainly influenced Montale, is the spiral (or gyre); in Montale’s poetry the multi-layered complicated esoteric meanings that this image has for Yeats give way to a simpler function, representing time and the changing and periodical return of the seasons. However simple this image may be, it conveys a sense of ineluctability: the inevitable cyclic return often frustrating the poet who is trapped into an apparently senseless reality. Montale made ample use of circular images in his poems. In Ossi di seppia there are at least three instances of such occurrences:
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non buttiamo già in un gorgo senza fondo
le nostre vite randage
(from ‘Non rifugiarti nell’ombra’, p. 31);

mia vita [...] nel tuo giro inquieto
(from ‘Mia vita, a te non chiedo lineamenti’, p. 33);

un martin pescatore volteggia su una reliquia di vita
(from ‘Gloria del disteso mezzogIOR-no’, p. 39)

Let’s not toss our vagrant lives
Into a bottomless abyss
(from ‘Don’t escape into the shade’, 43)

My life [...] in your restless circling
(from ‘My life, I ask of you no stable’, 45)

[...] a kingfisher hovers over something life has left
(from ‘Glory of expansive noon’, 60)

Many similar occurrences are also seen in his early collections:

A vortice s’abbatte
sul mio capo reclinato
un suono d’agri lazzi
(from ‘Mediterraneo’, p. 52);

La dura materia sentiva
il prossimo gorgo, e pulsava
(from ‘Mediterraneo’, p. 55);

 [...] e in cima al tetto la banderuola
affumicata gira senza pietà
(from ‘La casa dei doganieri’, p. 167).

Racketing catcalls spiral down
On my bent head
(from ‘Mediterranean’, 67)

The hard matter sensed
The eddy there, and throbbled
(from ‘Mediterranean’, 69)

and the smoke-stained weathervane
Spins pitiless up on the roof.
(from ‘The House of the Customs Men’, 223)

In ‘Cigola la carrucola del pozzo’ (‘The well’s pulley creaks’) the whole concept behind the impossibility of perceiving reality - and in this specific case the impossibility of coming to terms with the past in relation to the present - revolves around spiral images: “la carrucola”, “il puro cerchio” and “la ruota” (“the pulley”, “the perfect circle” and “the wheel”) all evoke a blurred perception of the past which turns in on itself in an infinite and ineffectual struggle to overcome an existential impasse.

Cigola la carrucola del pozzo
l’acqua sale alla luce e vi si fonde.
Trema un ricordo nel ricolmo secchio,
nel puro cerchio un’immagine ride.
Accosto il volto a evanescenti labbri: si deforma il passato, si fa vecchio, appartiene ad un altro...
Ah che già stride
la ruota, ti ridona all’atro fondo,
visione, una distanza ci divide.

The well’s pulley creaks,
the water rises to the light, dissolving.
A memory trembles in the brimming pail,
An image smiles inside the perfect circle.
I bring my face to evanescent lips:
The past disintegrates, turns old, belongs to someone else...
Ah, and already
the wheel shrieks, gives you back to the black depths.
vision, a distance separates us. (61)
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There are various instances of such images in later poems too. As Cambon (1982, 37) remarks:

[In ‘Eastbourne’ Montale will say “Evil wins… the wheel does not stop”, taking this sudden emblematic cue from a revolving hotel door that has caught the persona’s eye. […] In ‘Palio’ the spinning top, the emblem that opens and concludes the poem in addition to alluding to the “race that slows down / its coils”, a negative interpretation, verging on political allegory, of the traditional Siena horse race; finally, in the third part of ‘Notizie dall’Amiata’ we have the “mill wheel” that along with the “old log”, sets “ultimate boundaries to the world”.

Cambon concludes (ibid.) that an “overtone of Karma fatality hovers around the wheel archetype in this poetry”, similar, but not identical to, Yeats’s gyres. Not identical because, as Galassi (2012, 511) explains:

[The geometrical image of the circle - whether as spinning compass, turning wheel [cf. the pump in ‘Casa sul mare’], whirling weather-vane, revolving doors, mill wheels, whirlpool - […] present in Montale’s poetry from the very beginning […] - here [in ‘La casa dei doganieri’] takes on mostly negative aspects: meaningless repetitions, recurrent despair and noia, an almost Nietzschean sense of nausée, all linked to life grimly perceived as out of control, a fatalistic mechanism, a web or trap from which one cannot break.

Yeats’s gyres represent a philosophical system which includes the recurring cycles of history, the different kinds of human personalities, the cycle of birth, growth and death. This latter meaning is present in Montale’s poetry too. The poet addresses the sea as a divinity and says he is “waiting to return inside your circle” (“m’attendo di tornare nel tuo circolo”, from ‘Mediterraneo’), with the telling use of the word ‘circolo’ to indicate his returning to nature after the normal cycle of life.

In conclusion one main distinction must be made—the images used by the two poets are similar but not identical as regards their respective meanings and forms. While Yeats’s gyres represent progress and stand for a systematic order of reality—as illustrated in A Vision—the circular images in Montale’s poems do not provide any key for reading our world. The gyre is a spiral, not just a circle. The Yeatsian gyre system—though extremely elaborate and complex—can
be understood, while the Montalian circle only stands for a return to the starting point of our metaphysical or philosophical quest, and alludes to our deceitful expectations. This does not mean that Yeats’s reality is reassuring and peaceful while Montale’s is all gloom and desperation. Suffice it to mention the terrible vision foreshadowed in ‘The Second Coming’ where the recurrent cycles of history lead to catastrophic and violent events, or the peaceful and sunny images in ‘I limoni’, where frustration is balanced by the beautiful atmosphere produced by the marvellous landscape of the Ligurian coast where the lemon trees grow.

It is ‘The Second Coming’ (1921), however, that deserves closer analysis. The first three lines of this poem provide four different images that are used extensively by Montale. Here the Montalian appropriation of Yeats’s words creates new meanings in their different contexts. The first line - “Turning and turning in the widening gyre” - represents one of the sources of the many examples of the aforementioned spiral images. Continuing, the image in the second line - “The falcon cannot hear the falconer;” - is echoed in “un martin pescatore volteggia su una reliquia di vita” (from ‘Gloria del disteso mezzogiorno’, p. 39) quoted earlier. Here the falcon is replaced by a less noble bird, the kingfisher (martin pescatore) - a further example of how Montale tends to reuse images of other poets by tempering the tone - while the birds hovering in the sky recall the wheel image. In the line ‘Non rifugiarti nell’ombra’ (also quoted above), the falcon is again a potent symbol:

Non rifugiarti nell’ombra Don’t escape into the shade
di quel folto di verzura Of that green thicket
come il falchetto che strapiomba The way the kestrel sinks like lead.
fulmineo nella caldura. Lightning in the summer heat (43)

Here the listener is invited not to hide in the shade, like the falcon that launches itself into the heat of the summer, but to go out and face life and its mysteries. And again, Montale readjusts the lexis mentioning not an actual falcon but a small one, a “falchetto”. The image of the falcon also assumes a negative connotation in another famous poem. In ‘Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato’ the existential ennui, or spleen of the first line (which is not as emphatic in the English translation referred to here, “Often I have met what’s wrong in life”); a better translation would be “Often I have met the
pain of living” provided in Cambon 1982) is compared at the end of the poem to the falcon: “il falco alto levato” (“the hawk that soars”). Although in this case we have an actual falcon and not a ‘falchetto’ or a ‘martin pescatore’, the image is transposed into a familiar-albeit existential - context, and does not present an apocalyptic view of history. This factor may be elucidated if we reflect upon the historical periods in which the two poets lived. Yeats made ample use of direct references to historical and political events, describing the Easter Rising, and mentioning the First World War as well as the Irish civil war, occasionally almost “showing off” his involvement in events. Montale’s first poems could not be as direct as Yeats’s due to the censorship of the Fascist regime, and the impossibility of expressing forthright opposition without being reported to the authorities and imprisoned.

The third line of ‘The Second Coming’ (and it is useful to remember that the poem was first published in 1920) is “[…] the centre cannot hold”. This is the most significant image for the present analysis. I believe that Montale rewrote (almost translating) this image in one of his major poems, ‘I limoni’ (composed shortly after the publication of Yeats’s poem, that is, between 1921 and 1922). Here Montale merges two images, substituting the word “centre” with the word “anello”, “the link”, that is, being “the ring [in the chain of being] that does not hold”. In so doing he introduces the image of an object the shape of which is similar to the circular gyres so dear to Yeats. Montale thus creates an even more powerful image: “The centre cannot hold” becomes “l’anello che non tiene”. Even the rhythm of the original—which is the most difficult aspect to transpose into another language in a few short words—is maintained in the Italian. The liquid “l” sound in the verb “hoLd” is retained in the Italian noun “aneLLo”. Indeed, the English and Italian lines are almost identical in meaning: both poets reflect upon reality and share a sense of forthcoming catastrophic events.

This means that for both poets the world is out of joint: for Yeats “things fall apart”, while Montale states that “our world/barely holds up” (“il nostro mondo si regge appena” from ‘Debole sistro al vento’). Montale sees “all the doings/of the minute as ready to crumble” (“gli eventi del minuto/come pronti a disgiungersi in un crollo” from ‘Mediterraneo’). The huge difference between the two analyses
resides in the explanations provided for this phenomenon. Again, Yeats refers to historical contingencies, while Montale positions any analysis on more theoretical and existentialist lines.

Both poets realize that there must be something metaphysical hiding behind the mysteries of the world, and in particular behind these confusing images, the meaning of which escapes them. Yeats, “Surely some revelation is at hand;/Surely the Second Coming is at hand”, while Montale argues that “it’s in these silences you see/in every fleeting human/shadow some disturbed Divinity” (“Sono i silenzi in cui si vede/in ogni ombra umana che si allontana/qualche disturbata Divinità” from ‘I limoni’, p.12). Apparently, they both seek a sort of epiphany linked to the appearance of a supernatural entity which can provide answers and help decode reality.

This can be seen as a final concordance between the images used by the two poets: the vision of this divine entity, hidden behind the mysteries of reality, can be represented in Montale’s poetry by the simple light of day (‘Non rifugiarti nell’ombra’), or described as an unidentified divinity (“the divine indifference” - “la divina indifferenza”, from ‘Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato’ and “some disturbed divinity” - “qualche disturbata divinità” from ‘I limoni’). Or it could be the Mediterranean Sea of Liguria. In ‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte’ - ‘I’ve paused sometimes in the caves’ - Montale directly addresses the sea as the deity he longs for in many other poems.

The sea and coastline do not simply represent familiar places, but the poet’s own origins and identity. In ‘Ho sostato talvolta nelle grotte’ it is defined as a “homeland” (“patria”). This attachment to the land, a sense of geographical identity, is characteristic of both poets: it is often possible to identify a precise setting for Yeats’s works - Dublin, Coole Park, Sligo and many other familiar places - while Montale is much vaguer, the Mediterranean Sea generally standing for unidentified places along the Ligurian coast, though he sometimes does mention specific geographical locations as with the reference to the river Tritone.

Weak vague analogies - such as the latter quoted above - or stronger intentional or even unconscious and accidental coincidences found in many of Yeats’s and Montale’s poems tell us how both artists, from a similar analysis of reality - that is, from the difficulty of grasping the meaning of things - exploited similar images, but arrived at different conclusions. While Yeats creates his own vision to find a fi-
nal meaning and an order to things, Montale’s search is in vain. For Montale things have their “final secret”, (“ultimo segreto”) but it is always out of reach: the answer is never given. Some days ago I came across a YouTube interview with the director Terry Gilliam in which he took Steven Spielberg’s films to task, saying that instead of posing questions, Spielberg’s films tend to provide answers. In a way this is the same objection Montale might have made to Yeats. The questions Yeats raises in his poems are correct, but the answers are rarely acceptable. Yeats builds up a whole ‘philosophical’ system, while Montale does not provide any reassuring conclusions.11 As Orlando (1998, p. 96) says with reference to Montale’s later poetical works, he uses explicit or implicit quotations from other poems in order to refute the situation described in the original - Orlando calls this “riuso montaliano” (Montalian re-use), and “citazione distintiva” (distinctive quotation), that is to say, words and images that quote previous works with the intention of marking a distance from them. As I have attempted to demonstrate here, this technique (at times conscious, at times unconscious) was used by Montale throughout his writing career, even in his early poems, and Yeats was a constant reference point. The similar and the different functions attributed to these shared images are also a key for understanding why Montale did not write much about Yeats, or at least not as much as he did about Eliot and Pound: Yeats must have been a controversial source of inspiration, providing an excellent analysis of reality in a superb poetical form, but with the worst possible answers.

11 Not that Yeats’s conclusion is reassuring.
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Bibliography


Yeats’s Other Countries: Italy
ELENA COTTA RAMUSINO

From the very beginning and throughout his career, William Butler Yeats drew upon other countries, other places, other civilizations – either real or imaginary – to serve his cultural politics, which, perpetually evolving, made him imaginatively and creatively travel beyond the boundaries of Ireland, in search of models or alternatives. India, the mythical lands of Gaelic legends, Greece, Italy, Sweden, all nourished the poet’s imagination.

Yeats’s relationship with Italy and Italian culture has been extensively studied, but this essay intends to investigate the ways in which and the reasons why the poet used the stimuli which came from his ‘encounter’ with Italy to serve two needs, national and personal: political and cultural on the one hand and creative and poetic on the other. Yeats evolved throughout his poetic life, but he never abandoned his search for unity. Influenced by Pre-Raphaelitism, he first saw this unity embodied in the Middle Ages, but later on, for reasons related both to his readings and his life, he identified unity with the Italian Renaissance. This essay will analyse the role played by Italy in this evolution.

Yeats’s relationship with Italy can broadly be divided into two categories, direct on the one hand, mainly his visits to Italy, and indirect, namely: readings, literary, cultural and visual influences on the other. However, it should be borne in mind that Yeats’s relationship with Italian culture was always mediated “through the poor mechanism of translation” (Yeats 1999, 76) in which his wife George, “a good linguist” (Foster 2003, 378), often helped him, as she did in many other areas.

It is worth resuming, though briefly, the poet’s visits to Italy in order to investigate their bearing on Yeats’s aesthetics.
Yeats first visited Italy in 1907. He left London on 10 April to reach Lady Gregory and her son Robert in Florence and came back earlier than planned, on 22 May, owing to problems related to “licensing The Playboy for performance in England” (Foster 1998, 368). According to Foster, though, the poet did not regret his early return.

While in Italy he visited Florence, Urbino, Ravenna, Ferrara, Venice, Milan.

He came back to Italy on a second visit with his wife in early January 1925. The most recent biographies (Foster’s of Yeats and Saddlemeyer’s of George) correct the date of their departure, while previous biographies set it in the Autumn of 1924, thus making the holiday much longer. The poet and his wife were back by the end of February. They visited Sicily (Siracusa, Palermo, Monreale, Cefalù), where he was impressed by the mosaics which would play a remarkable role in his work, with Ezra Pound and his wife Dorothy, “who had decided to move permanently to Rapallo” (Saddlemeyer 2002, 340). Then they went on to Naples, Capri and Rome, where they saw the magnificent mosaics of Santa Prassede. Yeats and George came back to Italy in the Summer from Switzerland, where the poet “gave a lucrative lecture for the Lunn travel company” (Foster 2003, 303), and went to Milan, a city that the poet did not appreciate, to visit a friend “who was struck by WBY’s attachment to the country; he talked of the permanent effect his 1907 visit had left, and the beauty of the mosaics in Sicily and Ravenna” (Foster 2003, 303, emphasis added). I will return to the mosaics later.

Yeats’s later visits to Italy were mainly Autumns and Winters spent at Rapallo on and off from mid-February 1928 to 1934. The Pounds had settled there and the Yeatses leased a flat to enable the poet to enjoy a favourable milder climate.

Yeats came back to Italy in the Autumn of 1934 to attend “the fourth Congress of the Alessandro Volta Foundation in Rome”. He

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1 As Foster claims, “Gogarty later remarked that seeing Italy with her must have been like seeing it from inside a Black Maria; a certain constraint may explain the lack of evidence about the expedition itself, or about WBY’s immediate reactions” (Foster 1998, 367).
2 “On 5 January he and George left for southern Italy, planning to stay away for six weeks” (Foster 2003, 279).
3 As Foster records, “Milan offered less; he dismissed the cathedral as ‘Nottingham lace architecture’” (Foster 2003, 303).
Yeat’s Other Countries: Italy

chose to speak on the ‘Dramatic Theatre’ – “the rise and achievement of ‘a small, dingy and impecunious theatre in Dublin’” (Hone 1943, 439). Among the audience of his talk there were “many distinguished playwrights and men of the theatre from all parts of Europe. Maeterlink […], Gordon Craig, Pirandello and Marinetti were among those in the front row” (Hone 1943, 439).

I would like to concentrate on Yeats’s first visit to Italy and on his 1925 holiday and the echoes they produced in the poet.

The journey to Italy in 1907 would turn out to be crucial in Yeats’s intellectual development, it would provide him with abundant imaginative material, even if it took place in a difficult moment for the poet, and its practical organization did not totally suit his needs. The mosaics in Ravenna, like those he would see almost two decades later in Sicily and Rome would impress themselves on his mind and would then return in masterpieces like “Sailing to Byzantium” (1926) and “Byzantium” (1930).

In order to understand the impact of this journey, it is important to mention some of Yeats’s readings in the previous years which influenced the way the poet experienced his first Italian visit. A few years earlier, in the Summer of 1903, Yeats had begun to read Baldassar Castiglione’s The Courtier (1528) at Coole, a most appropriate context for such a reading. Yeats had used Sir Thomas Hoby’s 1561 translation, introduced by Sir Walter Raleigh, re-printed by Nutt in 1900. This volume is present in Yeats’s library, while the 1902 translation edited by Opdycke is not. In W.B.Yeats e la cultura italiana, Fiorenzo Fantacci- ni argues that the poet must also have read the latter, mainly for two reasons: because Opdycke translates “sprezzatura” with “nonchalance”, a word which sometimes Yeats uses instead of “recklessness”, which can be found in Hoby (Fantacci 2009, 36), and because Duke Ercole of Este, whom Yeats quotes in “To a Wealthy Man…”, is never mentioned in The Courtier, while Opdycke’s edition does.

Ercole d’Este was the duke of Ferrara and made it a model of the Renaissance ideal city thanks to an ambitious urban planning. The Este court had made Ferrara one of the most important centres in Renaissance Italy, attracting painters, architects, musicians and poets like Matteo Maria Boiardo and Ludovico Ariosto who wrote his Orlando Furioso there a decade after Ercole’s death, and later on Torquato Tasso. Interestingly, Lady Gregory recorded in Seventy Years that
Yeats, “that student of Castiglione’s *Courtier*, […] had also set his heart on visiting Ferrara” (Gregory 1976, 201). Foster suggests this was also related to a book which had been recommended by Grierson: “WBY told his Scots friend, Grierson, that it was the latter’s recommendation to read Edmund Gardner’s work on Ferrara that sent him to Italy” (Foster 1998, 367). The book was Edmund Garratt Gardner’s *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara* (1904), but, as Foster claims, “WBY may also have been influenced by his study of Ariosto, *The King of Court Poets* (1906)” (Foster 1998, 598-99, 44).

Urbino, on the other hand, in particular the court of duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, represented the model of *The Courtier*, a text which would accompany William Butler Yeats throughout his life and which became a milestone in his relationship with and vision of Italy. After his first trip to Italy, Urbino comes to represent the place that embodies the renaissance ideal of courtesy, the place where patronage supported and nourished culture, a model Yeats puts forward in the poem “To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures”, written in November 1912 and published in *Responsibilities*.

“*To a Wealthy Man…*” is the first of a sequence of five poems – the other four being “September 1913”, “To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing”, “Paudéen”, “To a Shade”4 – written between December 1912 and September 1913, in which the poet juxtaposes lofty ideals and characters and the ignorant middle class only interested in heaping money. These poems give voice to the poet’s reaction to the bitter controversy over the Hugh Lane pictures, but also, remembering possible native models of behaviour and self-sacrifice, to the shameful attacks on Parnell.

“*To a Wealthy Man…*” is written in tetrameters rhyming abab and is divided into two stanzas of different length: 28 and 8 lines, respectively. The poet infuses his polemic force into enjambed quatrains that are not separated by white spaces. Yeats exploits the quickness created by the enjambement that overflows the rhyme words as well as the hypotactic syntax, to quickly list “commendable aesthetic production over time” (Vendler 2007, 214), from ancient Greece to the humanistic resumption of ancient culture. This stanza shows “Yeats’s

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4 See A. L. Johnson 2005, 1124.
tendency to make sense-units ‘grow’ as the poem grows: here the five lines concerning Duke Ercole are followed by the six lines describing Guidobaldo, themselves exceeded by the nine lines devoted to Cosimo” (Vendler 2007, 215-216). These three “self-contained, and syntactically complex hypotactic sentence[s] […] are therefore to be viewed as offering parallel exempla” (Vendler 2007, 216) of what brought Italy to the splendour of the Renaissance: “Whence turbulent Italy should draw Delight in Art whose end is peace,/ […] By sucking at the dugs of Greece.” (Yeats 1989b, 209, ll.25-28).

As Helen Vendler observes, one single long stanza contains the addressee and three remarkable examples from the Italian Renaissance, their closeness emphasising a negative parallel: while the latter are praiseworthy and still remembered today for their generous contribution to culture, the Irish addressee is revealed, conversely, as the negative part of the comparison – mean, and of limited views.

Ercole’s court saw the first staging of a classical drama in translation, Plautus’s Menaechmi5. To support his claim that Yeats must have also read Opdycke’s edition of The Courtier, Fantaccini remarks that this quotes, in a note, the fact that in 1502 Duke Ercole of Este had five comedies by Plautus staged for his son’s wedding (Fantaccini 2009, 102, 154): “What cared Duke Ercole, that bid/His mummers to the market-place,/What th’ onion-sellers thought or did/So that his Plautus set the pace/For the Italian comedies?” (Yeats 1989b, 209, ll. 9-13).

Quoting Henn, Johnson draws a parallel between Cosimo, Michelozzo and “the San Marco Library” (Yeats 1989b, 209), l. 24, on the one hand, and Hugh Lane, Lutyens and the art gallery he planned on the Liffey on the other.6

Ercole d’Este, Guidobaldo di Montefeltro, duke of Urbino, and Cosimo de’ Medici, all serve as models in this poem because they are the opposite of the poem’s addressee, who refuses to donate and demands a ‘proof’ that the people really want pictures.

These learned men, lovers and patrons of the arts, represented just the opposite of what Yeats, exasperated by the riots against Synge’s Playboy of the Western World, had left at home. While the Renaissance patrons freely pursued their ideal of education and art, Yeats, the Ab-

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bey and his friends – Hugh Lane in this case – had to continually negotiate with the ignorance and contentiousness of petty people. The riots against *The Playboy*, the controversies related to the Hugh Lane’s pictures and, before that, the bitterness and ingratitude against Parnell had all contributed to build up the increasingly harsh juxtaposition in Irish society to win the right to speak in the name of the nation.

Urbino occurs twice in Yeats’s poetic macrotext: it is also quoted in “The People”, written in January 1915 and collected in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, which is also the only poem where Ferrara is mentioned in his poetic ouvre. In both poems, Urbino is an object of desire – “how great the longing has been” (Yeats 1989b, 254, l.7) – juxtaposed to the grim reality of Dublin, where the ‘I’ suffers “The daily spite of this unmannerly town” (Yeats 1989b, 254, l.3). In “To a Wealthy Man…” Dublin had been defined as “the blind and ignorant town” (Yeats 1989b, 208, l.7), where, as Johnson has subtly noted, five out of the six letters of Dublin are to be found in the adjective “blind”7. In “The People” these two towns and what they stand for, the courtly patronage which fosters both creation, aristocratic manners and way of life, are the positive alternative the poetic voice sets for himself: “I might have lived/ […]/In the green shadow of Ferrara wall” (Yeats 1989b, 254, ll.6-9), where the last line evokes Ariosto’s secluded garden. As another alternative, the ‘I’ claims that he might have “climbed among the images of the past –/The unperturbed and courtly images – “(Yeats 1989b, 254, ll.10-11). In the following lines, the poet evokes the evening conversations “where the Duchess and her people talked” (Yeats 1989b, 254, l.13), which were the fictitious setting for *The Courtier*’s dialogues. Urbino is evoked here through its “steep street” (Yeats 1989b, 254, l.12), and in the other poem with these words: “Upon Urbino’s windy hill” (Yeats 1989b, 209, l.17).

Like “To a Wealthy Man …”, “The People” is divided into two stanzas of different length, the first one longer (28 lines in the former and 29 in the latter) and the second one of 8 lines in both poems.

These years were very intense: they were years in which nationalist drives and ideals crossed and hybridized the literary activity of young William Butler Yeats and his discovery of the ‘matter of Ire-

7 See A. L. Johnson, 2005, 1126.
land’. They were also difficult years, marked by unceasing conflicts over dominance in the cultural and literary Ireland that was being created. When the poet set out on his first Italian journey, he had just gone through *The Playboy* riots.

In this context, the three Italian patrons of the arts – a comparison was even suggested between Hugh Lane and Cosimo, both rejected by their people8 – offered the poet an alternative model from which to take inspiration. In addition to this, his friendship with Lady Gregory increasingly accustomed Yeats to an ‘aristocratic’ way of life (Fantacccini 2009, 34); the moment was favourable for the ‘introduction’, so to speak, of the Renaissance in his life: “above all, his Italian journey conferred the inspirational notion of a great culture which had been sustained with patronage – an ideal of Renaissance courts, where the life of the mind was cultivated in miniature city-states on windy hills” (Foster 1998, 368-369). This visit brought him to reconsider the Renaissance, as J. Hone writes, “which hitherto he had distrusted as the period when unity gave way to multiplication” (Hone 219). Indeed, “[t]he tour helped to give a further aristocratic turn to Yeats’s mind” (Hone 219) and to increase, had it been necessary, his loathing of the Irish middle-class.

Until then he had been imbued with the Middle Ages, because the young Yeats had been strongly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite movement: “I was in all things Pre-Raphaelite. When I was fifteen or sixteen my father had told me about Rossetti and Blake and given me their poetry to read; and once at Liverpool on my way to Sligo I had seen Dante’s Dream in the gallery there, a picture painted when Rossetti had lost his dramatic power and to-day not very pleasing to me, and its colour, its people, its romantic architecture had blotted all other pictures away.” (Yeats 1999, 114).

The Pre-Raphaelites and Dante Gabriel Rossetti had influenced Yeats when he attended art school (1884-86), even if their style was not appreciated by his teachers: “When alone and uninfluenced, I longed for pattern, for Pre-Raphaelitism, for an art allied to poetry” (Yeats 1999, 91); the importance this movement attached not only to painting, but also to literature was seminal for Yeats: Pre-Raphaelit-

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ism – Rossetti had translated Dante’s *Vita Nova* in 1851 – was one of the ways through which Dante came to Yeats, the other being Blake’s illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*. As he recognised later, “Rossetti was a subconscious influence, and perhaps the most powerful of all” (Yeats 1999, 235). Furthermore, William Morris, whom Yeats met in 1885, represented a long lasting influence on his aesthetic conceptions, with his ideal of a “socially integrated, impersonal art” (McAlindon 1967, 308), an art which was popular and preceded the fragmentation brought about by the Renaissance. It is then not surprising that the Middle Ages were a favoured historical period for him.

In these controversial years his loathing of the middle-class brought him to conceive a direct connection between artists and aristocracy: in an entry of his *Journal* dated between the end of January and the beginning of February 1909, Yeats establishes an immediate relationship between aristocracy, well represented by Lady Gregory, and artists and courtly life in Renaissance Italy. “Lady Gregory is planting trees; for a year they have taken up much of her time. Her grandson will be fifty years old before they can be cut. We artists, do not we also plant trees and it is only after some fifty years that we are of much value? Every day I notice some new analogy between [the] long-established life of the well-born and the artist’s life. […] instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our head that form of society which aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles. We too despise the mob and suffer at its hands” (Yeats 1988, 155-56).

Steeped in the Pre-Raphaelite Middle Ages, but having started to appreciate Renaissance Italy, and having found in it examples that answered his present needs, his 1907 visit to Urbino and Ferrara crystallized what had been taking shape in his mind. Moreover, as Helen Vendler argues, as an Irish nationalist, he could not choose Renaissance England as a model.

Yeats describes his arrival at Urbino walking through the hills in a passage from *Discoveries* titled “A Tower on the Apennines”: “I was amid a visionary, fantastic, impossible scenery” (Yeats 1989a, 291); he recalls having been struck by the view of a tower against a stormy

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sky, tower he immediately imagines inhabited by an old wise poet – “I saw suddenly in the mind’s eye an old man, erect and a little gaunt, standing in the door of the tower” (Yeats 1989a, 291). The tower is still “a medieval tower” (Yeats 1989a, 291). I would suggest reading this excerpt as the moment of passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance; Yeats’s arrival at Urbino marking symbolically his crossing the threshold of the Renaissance, an age which would increasingly become more relevant in his aesthetics, to the point that he would later consider it as one of the periods in which Unity of Culture, the culmination of civilization, had been reached.

Yeats set Unity of Culture in Phase 15 of _A Vision_, with Greek civilization, Byzantium in the VI century and the Italian Renaissance as the three periods in which Unity of Culture (and Complete Beauty) had been achieved. Unity or wholeness was a goal he constantly strove for, obsessed as he was – like many contemporaries – by the fragmentation of the modern world: “A conviction that the world was now but a bundle of fragments possessed me without ceasing” (Yeats 1999, 163).

If his first visit to Italy introduced him in person to the Italian Renaissance whose patrons he used as models of resistance against middle-class pettiness to serve his nationalist cultural politics, in Ravenna and then in Venice he saw the Byzantine mosaics, instances of which he would also see almost twenty years later in Sicily and in Rome. The sight of these mosaics, which he already knew from books, proved seminal for his poetic development and for his ‘System’, a part of which he finished at Syracuse. Professor Melchiori, highlighting Yeats’s characteristic blending of new stimuli and previous knowledge, claims that it was his visit to Stockholm – “when he was in a peculiarly receptive state of mind” (Melchiori 1960, 214) – which, activating images and notions that he already possessed, metaphorically sent him to Byzantium – a city he never visited – and made it such a powerful emblem in his aesthetics. In “The Bounty of Sweden” Yeats recalls the newly built Stockholm Town Hall and praises its beautiful mosaics, claiming that everything there “carries

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10 “The Great Wheel and from Death to Birth” finished at Syracuse, January 1925.
the mind backward to Byzantium” (Yeats 1999, 406), although, as Professor Melchiori argues, its style was closer to the art nouveau than to the Byzantine, “which is probably what attracted Yeats in the first place” (Melchiori 1960, 216).

Byzantium thus reconnected Yeats to the Pre-Raphaelites: Byzantine art had been rediscovered in the 1890s, and many of Yeats’s acquaintances who were related to the Pre-Raphaelite movement had showed interest in it, although the decadents saw “Byzantium as a magnificently sick city combining extremes of sensuality and asceticism” (McAlindon 1967, 307). Bergmann Loizeaux lists the major influences as reported by Gordon and Fletcher: “Arthur Symons’s descriptions of Ravenna in Cities of Italy (1907) and of Constantinople in Cities (1903), which Yeats’s library contains […]; the similarity between Oscar Wilde’s concept of Byzantine art in The Decay of Lying […] and Yeats’s own; and the specific interest Burne-Jones took in the ‘heavenly churches’ of Ravenna […] Ruskin’s description of the Byzantine St. Mark’s in The Stones of Venice which Yeats owned” (Bergmann Loizeaux 1986, 133). Even more important was Morris’s view that Pre-Raphaelitism was “a resurrection of the Byzantine spirit” (McAlindon 1967, 312).

Typically, Yeats digested and transformed over the years his previous link to the Pre-Raphaelite Middle Ages through the workings of his mind.

Yeats’s idea of Byzantium in the age of Justinian as famously expressed in A Vision, “embraced the features of Pre-Raphaelite art that Yeats had especially admired in his youth. There, according to Yeats, the integration of art and society that underlies a ‘more profound Pre-Raphaelitism’ flourished […] Where the Arts and Crafts Movement failed, Byzantium succeeded in uniting art to the daily life of the people because the community, so important to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, included not only artists and their few admirers, but society at large” (Bergmann Loizeaux 134, emphasis added). As Yeats wrote in “Dove or Swan”, showing the closeness of his ideas to Morris’s conception, “architect and artificers – though not, it may be, poets […] – spoke to the multitude and the few alike” (Yeats 1990, 267).

Byzantium could thus be related to Pre-Raphaelitism, because in Yeats’s view both the latter and the former strove towards unity. What’s more, “the visionary qualities of Byzantine art” for Yeats were
strictly connected to “the typical art of vision [of] which Pre-Raphaelite art and his own poetry were later manifestations” (Bergmann Loizeaux 1986, 134).

Moreover, as Roy Foster argues, “WBY’s vision of Byzantium remained a gleaming personal emblem […] A formalist aesthetic, the blend of the antique and the early Christian, the irre capturable exoticism of it all, conferred ‘a supernatural splendour’ - expressed to WBY’s eyes by the mosaics he had just seen in Sicily” (Foster 2003, 288).

In Autumn 1926, a year after his visit to Sicily and Rome, he wrote “Sailing to Byzantium”, the poem in which he inaugurated a new verse form, the ottava rima, “an Italian stanza, first brought into English by Edward Fairfax’s translation of Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata (1600), (Vendler 2007, 262). This form, “given its origins, was adopted by Yeats as a shortcut to mean, ideologically speaking, ‘courtliness’, ‘statelyness’, aristocratic personhood’, ‘a patronage culture’, and ‘the Renaissance’” (Vendler 2007, 263). The poem, which he chose as the opening of The Tower, therefore definitely confirms the connection in his aesthetics between Italian Renaissance and Byzantium.

This essay has retraced the ways in which W. B. Yeats’s two visits to Italy, in 1907 and 1925, and his relation to the country represented important steps in the development of his aesthetic vision and answered personal and national issues deeply felt by the poet. His mind inexhaustibly wove connections between external stimuli and poetic or aesthetic workings and fed on them. Yeats was most able to take and use elements from very different sources which entered the creative process not necessarily immediately – at times they would ‘lie dormant’ for years – and which, thanks to his “audacious gift for allusive compression” (Foster 2003, 328) as well as his idiosyncratic appropriative power, worked as catalysts that enabled him to progress on the road he had chosen, the road to unity.
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Works by Yeats


Other Works


Translating for the stage: the case of Owen McCafferty’s Quietly

MONICA RANDACCIO

Theoretically speaking, the specificity of drama translation has always troubled its theoreticians and practitioners alike. The semiotic approach that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s had the merit of providing a sound theoretical basis for the exploration of the relationship between the dramatic text and its performance. Thus, the innovative studies conducted in those years by Ubersfeld ([1978] 1999, 158-188), who considered the written text as ‘troué’, incomplete, or those by Ruffini (1978, 83-85), Serpieri (1978, 11-54) and Elam (1980, 32-184), highlighted the dual nature of drama and its typical imbalance, as the written text and the performance text belonged to different semiotic systems. In the move from page to stage, the translator was seen as “operating within to different semiotic systems (textual and audio-visual) and consequently addressing two types of audience (readers and spectators) which seldom overlap” (Soncini 2007, 272). Hence, the almost proverbial ‘paradox of the translator’, according to which the translator was asked an impossible task, i.e., “to treat a written text that is part of a larger complex of sign systems, involving paralinguistic and kinesic features, as if it were a literary text created solely for the page, to be read off that page” (Bassnett McGuire 1985, 87).

Although the idea of the drama translator as “master of two servants” (Soncini 2007) remained central, in the 1990s interculturalism and the so-called ‘cultural turn’ in Translation Studies opened up new horizons in drama translation. The emphasis was on translation as intercultural transfer and the original play text became a product for the target culture and audience. Pavis, in fact, defined drama translation as a “hermeneutic act” (Pavis 1989, 26): in order to understand what the source texts mean, questions must be asked from the target’s language.
Monica Randaccio

viewpoint. Similarly, Aaltonen described the relationship between the source text and its translation with an apt metaphor which hints at the relevance of the spatial-temporal coordinates in this type of translation. She sees the choices made by the drama translator as always tied up to “the time and place of the occupancy” (Altonen 2000, 29).

More recently, the study of drama translation has moved from the ‘cultural turn’ to the ‘performative turn’. Drawing on Schechner’s work, the notion of performativity allows interpretation of the world we live in, drama, and by extension, drama translation, as performance, privileging “the performative over the representational” (Marinetti 2013, 309). Thus, “translation as performance implies a dynamic process of (re)signification integrated with the overall event in its various phases of production” (Bigliazzi et al. 2013, 1). This process brings to the fore issues such as the playfulness of performance and the consequent creative and translation options; and the blurring of the boundaries between translation, version and adaptation; the importance of audience-targeted relocation practices.

As this brief introduction indicates, drama translation as a field of investigation is characterised by fragmentariness and conflicting strategies. For this reason, my analysis of Owen McCafferty’s translation into Italian and its staging, without privileging one of the above-mentioned approaches, readapts three relevant notions derived from semiotics, from the ‘cultural turn’ and from the ‘performative turn’ in drama translation. These notions, which work as guidelines to cast light on the translation process and account for micro- and macro-changes in the Italian version, will be considered sequentially for clarity of exposition. They are: first, the deictic orientation of the communicative situation among characters in the original and in the translation/adaptation. Second, the possible capacity of the translation to “write forward” (Johnston 2013, 375), according to which the semantic charge and the hermeneutic potential of the original is reactivated for a new audience through space and time. Third, the analysis of the paratextual elements, i.e., the Italian reviews of the play as a zone of transaction between the original, the translation/adaptation in Italian and the new audience. According to Genette, among the characteristics of the paratext there are the functions of communicating “pure information”, “impertinent intention or interpretation” (Genette 1997, 268). In other words, many paratextual elements have a performative function, the “power
to accomplish what they describe” (Genette and Maclean 1991, 264) and, therefore, to start a process of re-signification of the play, which is an integral part of the translation process.

My analysis was made possible thanks to the generosity of the translator, Natalia di Gianmarco, who sent me the unpublished script of the play and of the two directors, Paolo Mazzarelli e Marco Foschi, who also featured in the roles of Jimmy and Ian respectively and who made available the dramaturgical changes and cuts they made to the script. Moreover, a filmed version of the Italian play is available online. Unfortunately, The Abbey Theatre denied any access to the filmed version of the original play and this was partly detrimental to deeper insights.

McCafferty’s *Quietly* premiered at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 2012. The following year the Abbey Production of *Quietly* played at the Traverse Theatre during the Edinburgh Festival, winning a Writers’ Guild Award for Best Play, an Edinburgh Fringe First Award and The Stage Awards for Best Actor for Patrick O’Kane as Jimmy.

*Quietly* opens in a pub in Belfast, reminiscent of a Northern Irish version of Murphy’s *Conversations on a Homecoming* or McPherson’s *The Weir*, where a Polish barman, Robert, while watching Poland playing against Northern Ireland in a World Cup qualifier, is joined by the Catholic Jimmy and the Protestant Ian, both in their fifties, who have arranged to meet after sixteen years. In a rising atmosphere of tension and violence, broken only by the exchanges between Jimmy and Robert in the role of the observer, the story of the protagonists unfolds. At the time of another match, Northern Ireland – Poland in 1974, Ian, as a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, threw a bomb into a pub where six people watching the match were killed, including Jimmy’s father. This bombing proves devastating to both protagonists’ lives. After the loss of his father, Jimmy abandoned his studies and joined the IRA, but was incapable of offering solace to his mother in her grief. On the other hand, Ian who had a clumsy sexual encounter with a girl given to him as a reward to celebrate the successful attack, years later came to know that she had become pregnant and had an abortion. When the two men leave in what seems an apparent reconciliation, the play ends with another outburst of violence. From outside the pub, Northern Ireland fans start to throw stones and shout ‘Polish bastard’ echoing Jimmy and Ian’s speaking of ‘orange’ and ‘fenian’ bastards throughout the play.
The translation by di Gianmarco is a literal one and provided the basis for verbal and non-verbal changes in performance made by the directors, who were also the actors playing Jimmy and Ian. These changes testify to a different deictic orientation of the source text as compared to the target text.

As noted in the late 1970s, “in the theatre... meaning is entrusted in primis to deixis” (Elam 1980, 140), which can be defined as the verbal indices which actualise the dramatic world, the “here and now” of the performance. Moreover, deixis subsumes and activates other channels of communication, and accounts for the visual, kinesic and proxemic relations of the characters on stage. Consequently, in drama translation the recreation of a text through its verbal and non-verbal counterparts for new audiences, involves a new communicative situation, which changes the dialectical interplay for the new dramatic here-and-now of the translated text. However, it must be noted that there are discordant views on how deixis is used in drama translation. An almost canonical example is given by Bassnett-McGuire’s and Pavis’s position on the use of the deictic system. As Katerina Nicolarea reminds us, Bassnett-McGuire, revising her initial position held in the 1970s, suggests that the best method for comparing the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) is to analyse the deictic units and their functions in both the source text (SL) and the target text (TT). Bassnett-McGuire, however, sees these deictic units more as linguistic structures than a gestural patterning. On the contrary, Pavis considers the entire deictic system as an encoded gestural patterning in the written text (Katerina Nicolarea 2002). The analysis of deixis has engaged linguists, translation scholars and literary critics since then.1

I would argue that changes in deixis re-orient the Italian translation/adaptation of Quietly from the offset and this, in turn, will have consequences for the receiving Italian audience. In particular, I will compare two passages from the original play and its translation/adaptation which best exemplify how deixis references are responsible for triggering a different interpretation of the play in Italian. These passages are the initial scene and the height of Jimmy’s and Ian’s confrontation (McCafferty 2012, 11, 23; McCafferty 2014a):

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1 To mention only a few: Rosa Lorés Sanz (1990), Peter Van Stapele (1990), Vimala Herman (1995) and David Horton (1999).
The stage is in darkness. Lights up.

A bar in Belfast, 2009. Northern Ireland are playing Poland in a World Cup qualifier on a big screen TV.

Robert is playing the poker machine. He receives a text message.

I can't live like that.
I'm not happy either
Do u luv me
Of course I do
Then what
I don't know
I'm feel alone – what am I doing here- I want to get back to Poland
Can't talk now the place is starting to fill up
I need u
Talk later

Robert: fuckin torture – she wanted to be here – begged me – I didn’t force her – fuckin made it happen that’s what I did – and what – this shit

He moves behind the bar and watches the match.
Jimmy enters.
Ian: my name is Ian...
Jimmy head-butts Ian. He holds Robert in place with his stare.
(To Robert.) it’s fine- ya understand it’s fine
(To Jimmy.) – that it – that the only reason you agreed to see me.
Jimmy: yes
Ian: I think you want more than that
Jimmy: right – I need you to understand something – the head-butt was just an indication ya understand- it’s not out a character either – I’ll kick you all over the fucking street – the only thing stopping me doing that – at the moment – is the fact that a wouldn’t stop until ya had no fucking head left
Ian: (to Robert) two pints of harp please
Robert: you all drink harp – harp is dog piss – should drink good polish beer
Ian: I’m not askin you to drink a
Robert: ok – two pints
Jimmy: you expecting someone else
Ian: no
Jimmy: ask me do I want a pint a harp
Ian: do you want a pint of harp
Jimmy: I want fuck all from you
Robert: just the one then
Ian: I ordered two – just set them on the counter
Robert: you watch the football
Ian: Robert not really
Robert: nobody watch the football – nobody support their country
Ian: who is playin
Robert: northern Ireland and Poland – not very good
Ian: you polish
Robert: yes polish

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Ian: Mi chiamo Ian...
Jimmy dà una testata a Ian. Con uno sguardo immobilizza Robert.
(a Robert) Va tutto bene – davvero – va tutto bene.
(a Jimmy) – ecco qui – questa è l’unica ragione per cui hai accettato di vedermi.
Jimmy: Sì.
Ian: credo che tu voglia più di questo.
Jimmy: Credo che tu voglia più di questo – ti prenderei a calci lungo tutta la strada – l’unica cosa che mi impedisce di farlo – al momento – è il fatto che non mi fermeresti se non ti staccassi la testa prima.
Ian: (a Robert) Due pinte di Harp, per favore.
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Jimmy: Stai aspettando qualcun altro?
Ian: No.
Jimmy: Chiedimi se voglio una pinta di Harp.
Ian: Vuoi una pinta di Harp?
Jimmy: Da te non voglio un cazzo
Ian: Ne ho ordinate due – (A Robert, dietro la tenda)
Mettile sul bancone.
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The analysis of some deictic markers – especially those words referring to time and place and to the encoding of the participant relations – in these two passages will help to show concretely how the dramatic world of translation/adaptation differs from the original.

In the first passage, the original play shows Robert who is receiving and sending text messages in the opening scene. The spatial and time deictic markers – ‘a bar in Belfast, 2009’ – define the framework of the dramatic situation on stage. However, in the exchange of text messages there are other examples of spatial and social deixis (‘Poland’; ‘I can’t live like that/I’m not happy either/Do u luv me/Of course I do’), which are anaphoric references to Robert’s dramatic world outside the stage. In this case, “deixis has the potentiality of putting entities into the dramatic world and keep them alive, entities which are only perceptible through the discourse [and]… may exist in another space and possible in another time than the time and space on stage” (Van Stapele 1990, 336).

These deictic markers, therefore, help to create Robert’s background – the reader/audience will later discover that he has a wife and a girlfriend – and establish his character as the impartial observer from ‘Poland’ between the two antagonists. Although some critics have seen him as a ‘handy device’ that lacks any depth, his presence is nonetheless relevant for the communicative situation as he represents another participant in the original dramatic discourse, a visual presence entering in proxemic relation with Jimmy and Ian on stage. In the Italian translation/adaptation, spatial and time deictic markers become more vague – the action takes place in the back of a pub (‘retro di un pub’) – and spatial and social deixis as anaphoric references to Robert’s background disappear. Although the spatial and time deictic markers of the original – ‘a bar in Belfast, 2009’ - are aurally and iconically shown on the Italian stage as the Irish national anthem is heard and an Irish flag is seen, nonetheless the sense of vagueness

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2 I will refer to this as ‘social deixis’ in its widest possible meaning, according to Horton’s definition. For him, participants relations “can be read off from the text in a large number of markers which serve to encode, more or less directly, relative status, group membership, the type of transactions being conducted, the mutual degrees of formality and intimacy and general attitudes obtaining between interlocutors” (Horton 1999).
of the location remains because the Italian audience may not be familiar with these non-verbal signs. In fact, Snell-Hornby reminds us that the impact of non-verbal signs in drama translation is strongly dependent on the spectator’s familiarity with the culture in question. According to her, the system of signs belonging to the world of theatre is always a mixture of three types of signs, the iconic sign, which “can be taken as it stands and it is fully interpretable as long as the spectator can situate it in context” (Snell Hornby 2007, 108); the indexical sign, which “is interpretable as long as the spectator can understand the point of connection” (Snell Hornby 2007, 108); and the symbolic sign, “which is only understandable if the spectator is familiar with its meaning in the culture concerned” (Snell Hornby 2007, 108). The vagueness of reference to a specific setting is also reinforced by the radio commentary of Northern Ireland Poland in Arabic, as the stage directions show (*la telecronaca – in arabo – di una partita di calcio che scopriremo essere Irlanda del Nord- Polonia*).

Most importantly, in the Italian translation/adaptation the dramaturgical choice of the two directors/actors was to reduce Robert’s character to an off-stage presence. This choice, especially visible in the encoding of the three characters’ interaction, strongly changes the directness of discourse in the play and results in new dynamics of the dramatic action, as shown in the second passage. In the original play, the verbal exchange follows two lines of communication. The main exchange is that between Ian and Jimmy, and the secondary exchange is that between Ian and Robert, who comments on the football match and serves pints of beer to the others. Ian’s and Robert’s exchange has the function to downplay the rising violence of Ian’s and Jimmy’s exchange about what happened that day which changed their lives. The main and the secondary exchange also create two temporal levels: Ian and Jimmy are mainly focusing on past events, whereas Ian and Robert bring the conversation back to the present. Throughout the play, Robert thus has the double role of someone who is extraneous both to the wider historical context of the Troubles and to Jimmy and Ian’s personal story. Therefore, the secondary exchange between Robert and Ian serves as an indication to recall Robert’s situation as a foreigner in a foreign country and indirectly anticipates the final act of violence perpetrated by the Northern Ireland fans against Robert. In the Italian translation/adaptation, Robert’s off-stage presence results in the elicitation of the secondary line of communication – there
are no references to the football match and most of Robert’s lines referring to his own situation have been cut – with the result that Jimmy and Ian’s exchanges acquire a symbolic value.

The symbolic value of Jimmy and Ian’s confrontation is in line with the two directors/actors’ declaration of intent, as they state in their preface to the play (Owen McCafferty 2014b):

Se è vero che la questione irlandese è non solo presente ma centrale in tutta la vicenda, è vero anche che in QUIETLY quelli che si incontrano in quel pub sono - in fondo - solo due uomini, due uomini che come tanti altri sono stati messi dalla storia e dal destino sulle opposte baricate di un conflitto…
Ma la storia, sia quella generale che quella privata, è irripetibile e allo stesso modo inevitabile: ogni generazione ricomincia da capo di nuovo l’esperienza del conflitto, del trauma, dell’elaborazione, come se ciò non fosse mai avvenuto prima. Condizione e destino dell’esistenza umana. Ecco perché, nelle semplici scelte di interpretazione e di messa in scena, abbiamo cercato di dare spazio al carattere “assoluto” dell’incontro fra i due…che, pur parlando del conflitto irlandese e delle sue specifiche questioni, possano rimandare a ogni altro conflitto che affligge e divide gli uomini e le donne del nostro dannato presente.3

The universalistic approach deriving from the joint effort of the translator and the directors/actors invites reflection on what the specific strategies adopted in drama translation are. In the case of Quietly, these strategies try to make literal translation acquire a more stimulating and thought-provoking impact on the target language and culture in the attempt to restore the signifying process of the original work through performance. Quietly, as an act of translation, becomes a fully understandable praxis only when referred to its framework of reception (Cronin 2003, 42-76), “an act of locating and crossing, simultaneously finding a place for communication, and opening up and moving across

3 Although the Troubles remain central, the two men featuring in Quietly are only men whom history and fate put on the opposite side of the fence….For them, history is both private and collective, it is unique and at the same time ineluctable: each generation must face afresh the conflict, the trauma and its personal re-elaboration, and this concerns the human condition and fate. This is the reason why in our interpretation and staging, we have decided to give a universal value to the two men’s encounter which, through the Irish conflict, would reflect any other conflict tormenting and dividing many men and women of this damn present (translation mine).
new space” (Johnston 2013, 367). For Johnston, the greatest achievement of a drama translator is to “write forward”, protecting the context of the original and, at the same time, projecting that context into the emotional landscape of the new audience, a sort of middle ground between “core experiences lost” (Johnston 2013, 371), and those newly recreated.

However, the ‘core experiences’ which get inevitably lost in the re-creative process at work in *Quietly* on the Italian stage are the dense web of intertextual connections the play establishes with the Northern Irish dramatic tradition of the ‘Troubles’. Since the late 1960s, the relationship between theatre and the Northern Ireland conflict had to deal with a “complex series of expectations, sensitivities, entrenchments, imperatives and responses, questioning the very essence of both writing and performance” (Jordan 2010, 111). The connection between politics and drama has a long tradition in Ireland, dating back to the early productions of the Abbey theatre, when the stage became implicitly and explicitly the arena where the soul of the nation would find its communal expression. Similarly, the ‘Troubles’ and its many violent manifestations, expressing competing nationalisms and conflicting identities, exploited the public nature of drama to address issues of civic strife. In a sort of mutual mirroring, the politics of the Northern conflict often borrowed a vocabulary of performance and spectacle, whereas playwrights were exploring the performative possibilities of the conflict (McDonald 2001, 232-233). As many commentators have outlined, these possibilities resulted in a variety of different dramatic modes. According to Murray’s tripartite template, the plays’ structures ranged from the ‘O’Casey model’, ‘to the ‘Romeo and Juliet typos’ to ‘the Theatre of Hope’ (Murray 1997, 188-199). Thus, the sectarian difference hiding class struggle, the tension arising from a love affair between a Catholic and a Protestant and humor as essential to the dramatisation of violence were all topics which gave rise to a prolific production of Northern Irish plays in the 1980s and the 1990s (Murray 1997). These include conventional domestic dramas such as Christina Reid’s *Joyriders* (1986) and Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* (1985); history plays as Friel’s *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1988), Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and Gary Mitchell’s *Tearing the Loom* (1997); and the more experimental dramas such as Mary Jones’s *A Night in November* (1995) and Owen McCafferty’s *Mojo Mickybo* (1997).

Far from being exhaustive, this list of plays not only testifies to the huge variety of Northern Irish drama, but also to the collective tropes and dramatic devices which Northern playwrights have at their disposal. In
the case of Quietly, the sporting metaphor, which has often been employed to assert national identity, is a powerful one and strongly recalls its use in Mary Jones’s A Night in November. In both plays, in fact, a football match represents the device which allows the characters’ personal stories to be inscribed on the wider backdrop of Northern Irish history.

The profound implications that the football match has in the original play is what gets lost in Italian and further confirms the tendency towards a universalistic approach of the translation/adaptation, partly ‘sanitised’ of specific Irish contextual factors. This change in the spatio-temporal dimension of the play, the new ‘time and place of the occupancy’, the creative translation options and, most of all, the importance of target-audience relocation practices is especially clear in the paratextual elements surrounding the translation/adaptation.

A preliminary observation is that Quietly was first staged in Italy, at the Teatro Belli in Rome late in 2014 in a production for a theatre festival called “Trend” dedicated to the new British dramaturgy. In my opinion, ‘British dramaturgy’ may be a misleading label for an Italian general audience, who could fail to recognise the importance of Owen McCafferty as a Northern Irish playwright. Quietly was performed along with other plays by Duncan McMillan (Lungs), Penelope Skinner (Eigengrau), Vicky Jones (The One), Charlotte Josephine (Bitch Boxer), Philip Ridley (Dark Vanilla Jungle and his four monologues, It, Wound, Killer, Now). In turn, this ‘new dramaturgical context’ has consequences for its reception, as shown in some reviews that appeared in Italian newspapers and on-line magazines. Although references to the Troubles are made, the critics’ prevailing focus was on the universal dimension of Jimmy’s and Ian’s painful confrontation.

Leaving aside the ludicrous distinction between the ‘Christian Jimmy’ and the ‘Protestant Ian’ featured in one of the on-line reviews, this is an example taken from La Repubblica, one of Italy’s leading Italian newspapers (De Simone 2014):

Un match di corpi contundenti, di rancori affilati dall’attesa, di memoria scomode da sottosuolo, Quietly è uno strappo inatteso alla banalità del vivere, alla quotidianità anonima di due esistenze segnate da un dolore... E si avverte un sentimento della sconfitta perenne, come se dai conflitti non si potesse mai prescindere, quali fossero un’epidemia congenita all’uomo.⁴

⁴ Quietly is a clash of blunt objects, hard feelings sharpened by waiting and uncomfortable memories from the underground, it is an encounter of two sorrowful men who
Although an acclaimed and successful performance, the emphasis on the ‘universal dimension’ of McCafferty’s play on the Italian stage hides nonetheless a danger, which, surprisingly enough, concerns both the presentation of the Troubles abroad and drama translation at the time of globalisation. Bauman reminds us that in a globalised world, localised existences are a sign of social deprivation and that localities are losing their meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity (Bauman 1998, 3). Discussing contemporary Irish drama and globalisation, Lonergan tries to come to terms with this dispersal of meaning and notes that “the conflict of identities must now tackle (or exploit) the commodification and essentialization of identity within global society” (Lonergan 2010, 27). With particular reference to the Troubles, he sees that there is “a tendency to reject, ignore or transcend the postcolonial paradigm… and to present the Troubles within an historical context only” (Lonergan 2010, 27), because as other countries are becoming more like Ireland, Ireland is becoming more like other countries. Although I agree that this is what is actually happening, not only in Ireland, I have the impression that sometimes this straightforward one-to-one identity obfuscates difference, as partly happens in Quietly. This concealment is also lamented by those who sometimes see translating for the stage as a missed opportunity to create ‘itineraries of encounters’, the opening up of a dynamic space between the translation and the spectators, a space increasingly sacrificed on the altars of marketability (Espasa 2000, 49-62) and performativity. In Johnston’s opinion, “good plays have the potential to suspend their spectators between two differentiated worlds, so that liminality is a constant promise in theatre performance. Translated plays additionally generate spaces-between, confluence of cultural stream and thoughts, confluence in which other time and place become real and visible again for the audience” (Johnston 2013, 377). He is, however, adamant that these itineraries of encounters rely on commonality more than universality, because universality makes us lose sight of the bilateral negotiations of cultures. Thus, in Owen McCafferty’s Quietly the translation/adaption process, which might unexpectedly break away from the banality and ordinariness of life... There is a feeling of ongoing defeat, which forever recalls the presence of conflicts, as if they were an inbred human plague (translation mine).
Translating for the Stage: the Case of Women McCafferty’s Quietly

have brought more effectively on the Italian stage the subversive potential for ‘truth and reconciliation’ (Gardner 2013) or, as some would have it, for ‘truth and recrimination’ (Hennessy 2014) is diluted into a more domesticated ‘universality of conflict’. A conflict too dangerously similar to any other conflict around the world.
Works cited


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Poetry and Prose
To The Mother House
Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin

(From a work in progress)

TO THE MOTHER HOUSE

The tender heaved on its way across,
the liner floated grand in the harbour, and the girls
afraid of looking back, picked out a porthole
and stared and waited for this parting to be over.

There was a war coming, there was work. The young ones
would never see a soldier, only smile
at meagre faces in the alpine sanatorium.
They nursed the miners hammered in the pit,
learning their obstinate love, meeting the mistress
who came afterwards with a cushion
to go in the coffin, embroidered with Bébé.
The older nun survived Belsen, sent there
After hiding a crashed airman in the laundry.

Sister Clara, Sister Antony, meeting a niece
in the quiet convent garden in Desvres,
are overheard reminiscing, always in French,
about their first convent on the hill in Cork
and its precious holdings, the Penal Chalice,
the letters from an Italian priest
soon to be beatified, the foundress’s diaries,

and all that was sent back: wine and brandy,
lace, the little medals blessed and certified
in Rome, in the Holy Year. A relic of the True Cross
in its gold box, a fine linen alb embroidered
in Portugal by a novice. Marble for the shrine.

The marble is there still, under the altar.
The mule-driver’s curses, the rattling ass and cart
leave no sign on the stone; it sucks in meaning.

Marble is perfect, how it shows the bones
inside the skin, the folds in the light shroud,
The trailing strands of hair.
In piena estate, mia moglie ed io ci trasferimmo inosservati in un paese delle montagne abruzzesi e cominciammo a vivere lì. Inosservati, perché, sebbene il paese avesse circa novanta abitanti, il ritorno di emigranti dall’America aveva fatto aumentare il numero a trecento durante quella stagione. Per tutto il mese di luglio e di agosto, ci perdemmo nel flusso di arrivi e partenze, temporanei come il resto. L’unica stranezza negli occhi del paese era che parlavamo poco italiano e nessun dialetto di montagna. Eravamo i primi stranieri a stare lì.

Tutto ciò poco importava a quel tempo. Era anche una questione di rapporti sociali – i rapporti sociali tra gli abitanti del paese ed i loro parenti rientrati per l’estate venivano condotti come delle pubbliche sfuriate, sino alle ore piccole. Perché preoccuparsi di stranieri se avevano da urlarsi gli uni contro gli altri? Per di più, i rapporti sociali poco contavano per noi. Eravamo arrivati sin lassù per essere soli e scrivere. Anche se non lo avessimo voluto, il caldo di piena estate, fatta eccezione delle prime ore mattutine e di quelle serali, ci avrebbe trattenuto in casa. Ciò che importava di più era la casa. Qui, eravamo entrati a far parte di una strana e meravigliosa eredità.

Il paese era costruito attorno ad una piazza. Al centro della piazza un pino era stato piantato in quella che una volta era la fontana centrale da cui si poteva prendere l’acqua. All’ombra del pino sedevano le anziane signore, vestite di nero. La chiesa parrocchiale dava su questa piccola piazza. Sul retro, attraverso la sagrestia, una porta conduceva ad una casa abbandonata, un tempo la casa del parroco, quando tenere un prete in un paese così piccolo, alto e distante valeva ancora la pena per la diocesi.

Questa era la casa dove abitavamo.
Non che vi eravamo entrati e avevamo deciso di trasferirci. Un prete che lavorava a Teramo, il capoluogo della regione, e che veniva una volta la settimana per dire la messa, ci aveva permesso di stare lì. Potevamo stare lì, senza sostenere spese, diceva, se fossimo riusciti a sopportare la frugalità e pagarcì da mangiare. Eravamo nel mese di luglio e la temperatura nelle montagne sarebbe rimasta calda sino a settembre. Sebbene, né lui né noi ancora lo sapessimo, quella sarebbe stata la nostra casa per un anno intero.

La si vedeva da lontano, una casa di arenaria rossa attaccata al retro della chiesa, mentre ci inerpicavamo su per i tornanti fra le montagne. Si ergeva davanti a noi, definita nella luce della sera, ma separata da una gola di mille piedi attorno a cui dovevamo guidare per altri quindici minuti. Dietro di essa ed il paesino in cui era situata, c’erano i passi del Gran Sasso, la vetta più alta degli Appennini.


Dentro, tuttavia, tutto era buio e freddo. Le finestre era piccole, le mura di pietra spesse due piedi. Il pavimento, dove non c’era la nuda pietra, era un mosaico alla veneziana. Il mosaico era in ciò che una volta passava per un parlatorio, una stanza piena di mobili privi di gusto e ninnoli religiosi. Una stufa a cherosene stava ritta su quattro piedi storti contro un muro, e spingeva il suo tubo storto attraverso una fessura nel soffitto. Era difficile immaginare che qualcuno si fosse mai rilassato in una stanza così fredda come questa, un tentativo di gentilezza, disperatamente fuori luogo.

L’ultimo parroco era un uomo di nome Padre Simone. Aveva lasciato alcuni anni prima. Lavorava dall’altra parte delle montagne, non lontano da qui. Aveva lavorato la maggior parte della sua vita nei Tropici. Qui, disse il nostro prete, era dove il vecchio clero veniva mandato durante gli ultimi anni di vita. Solo lui veniva per dire la Messa le domeniche e limitava la sua presenza in paese al minimo. Per il modo in cui si riferiva all’argomento, en passant, si poteva dire che aveva tacite riserve al riguardo.
“Se avete difficoltà, di qualsiasi genere”, disse all’improvviso, “chiamatemi a Teramo. Vi porterò le provviste la domenica.”

In cucina, grandi ganci pendevano dal soffitto. C’erano ancora corde di verdure essiccate che pendevano dal tempo in cui Padre Simone viveva qui. Viveva come un orso in una grotta, raccontava il prete. Le donne del villaggio erano solite andare e pulire la casa per lui. Sul muro, sopra un tavolo di legno coperto di cerata, pendeva un punteruolo da ghiaccio. Un rametto di erbe vecchie dava alla stanza un’aria secca, pepata, vissuta. Nel focolare annerito, una pentola di ferro penzolava. Lì, Padre Simone vi cucinava la carne. A differenza del parlatario, qui, si poteva immaginare come il tempo fosse passato per lui, misero e felice, da solo con le ceneri dei suoi fuochi.

Queste e un bagno piccolissimo erano le uniche stanze del piano di sotto. Sotto la rampa di scale c’era un ammasso di oggetti religiosi - statue dorate della Madonna e vari santi, casule impolverate sospese da ganci con le stesse catene. Ci eravamo sistemati nella stanza spaziosa a ritmo di una liturgia moribonda.

Sopra, c’erano tre stanze. Due erano inutilizzate, con pile di vecchi materassi per i gruppi che bivaccavano qui durante gite in montagna. La terza, imbiancata e resa abitabile dal nostro prete di Teramo, era la nostra camera da letto. Le finestre davano sulla strada e su ciò che una volta era stata una scuola. Adesso, i bambini venivano condotti in autobus ad un villaggio vicino e la scuola era divenuta un bar. Dietro il bar, quanto più a nord si potesse vedere, le cime marroni degli Appennini, la colonna vertebrale dell’Italia, torturati da terremoti e frane. La nostra casa, quando si guardava fuori, dal piano superiore, sembrava scivolare dritta in burroni forestali, in spazi a nord ed est, il cui punto centrale era l’alta, piatta corona del Monte Gorzano.

“Dal Monte Gorzano”, disse il nostro prete, “si riesce ad indovinare che tempo farà”.

Era una casa abbandonata quella in cui ci trasferimmo, trasportata da leggere pagliuzze e granelli di polvere estiva, e relitti galleggianti di una religione in bassa marea. Ma c’era luce e silenzio, spazio per fare respirare lo spirito. I fantasmi erano benigni.

Sentimmo un rumore alla porta. Era Gegeto, il tuttofare del paese e sagrestano ufficioso. Viveva nella casa sopra la nostra; il fico del suo giardino gettava verdi ombre frondose sul muro della nostra cucina. Era vedovo, suo figlio era il sindaco di Poggio, un paese a circa due mi-
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glia dal nostro e centro amministrativo del distretto. Il sindaco veniva nel nostro paese una volta a settimana con la sua grande macchina per fare visita al padre, beveva al bar e dava un’occhiata agli affari locali.

Gegeto viveva da solo, provvedeva lui a lavare i vestiti, a tagliare la legna e a coltivare verdure nel proprio giardino, così come a far andare avanti tante cose in paese. Che noi piacessimo a lui sin dall’inizio era un fattore importante per la nostra sopravvivenza durante quell’anno.

“Si aspetta che sarete silenziosi”, il prete sorrise, “Altri che sono stati in questa casa mettevano musica ad alto volume in continuazione. Lui non lo sopporta – non è vero Gegeto?”

Qualcun altro bussò ed entrò con discrezione: Stefania, la sagrestana ufficiale, responsabile delle candele e dei fiori, degli abiti e della biancheria della chiesa. Entrambi avevano diritto di passare per entrare in sagrestia, così il prete ci tenne a spiegare la situazione sia a loro che a noi. Gegeto si spostò al bar e con Stefania attraversammo la piazza che stava nel frattempo diventando buia e riempendosi delle urla dei teenager che giocavano e amoreggiavano in quella calda serata. Alcuni salutarono il prete seccamente, altri lo ignorarono deliberatamente.

“La situazione nel villaggio è complicata,” disse. “Un giorno ve la spiegherò.”

Stefania viveva con il marito in una casa di due stanze, in piazza. D’estate era un forno, ma le case, nella loro compattezza, erano progettate per trattenere il caldo durante l’inverno piuttosto che il freddo nelle brevi e torride estati. Ci sedemmo nella stanza del piano terra e bevemmo il caffè servito su un vassoio intarsiato. Lo schermo dell’enorme televisione che dominava la stanza – aveva un filtro ultravioletto – lampeggiava di fronte a noi e uccideva qualsiasi tipo di conversazione. Nella stanza sopra di noi, il marito di Stefania, a letto, guardava un’altra televisione. Preti arrivavano e se ne andavano, salutati con il rituale del caffè. Per la monotonia della vita di un paese, tuttavia, non c’era antidoto migliore se non il mondo fantastico della televisione italiana.

“Una donna interessante”, disse il prese, mentre attraversavamo la strada. “La conoscerebbe meglio col tempo.”

L’ora della cena era terminata. Macchine, alcune delle quali eleganti, altre farcite di sporcizia, erano parchegiate fuori dal bar. Fuo-
ri, di fronte, gruppi di uomini giocavano a carte ed urlavano numeri mentre sbattevano le carte sui tavoli. Bambini correvano urlando a squarciagola dinanzi a sguardi accondiscendenti dei loro genitori. Dietro al bar, una donna con un grembiule salutò il prete con moderata gentilezza. Serviva coni gelato che tutti, dai bevitori più accaniti ai bimbi più piccoli, mangiavano con uguale entusiasmo. Gelato, saluti, il suono delle voci di bambini – fossimo rimasti per una settimana, le nostre impressioni del paese si sarebbero limitate a non più di tanto.

Il prete salutò e tornò a Teramo. La Domenica successiva sarebbe ritornato con le provviste. Era martedì, e noi avevamo viaggiato dalla domenica precedente – da Roma, le montagne attorno Ancona, la costa adriatica sino Giulianova e all’interno, nel caldo sfavillante di Teramo, dove il prete ci aveva conosciuto. Rimanemmo svegli a letto, ascoltando un crescendo di discussioni e risa in strada, che morivano in isolate urla nelle ore piccole, ed, infine, nel silenzio profondo delle montagne.

II


Alle sei del mattino, il bar di fronte la strada veniva aperto. La giovane donna che aveva il turno mattutino ripuliva il locale dopo la notte precedente e preparava l’amaro caffè nero che gli impiegati bevevano in piedi prima di andare a Teramo in auto per una giornata da scribacchini. Anche qui, dove gli uomini erano o disoccupati o svolgevano lavori stagionali per la costruzione del tunnel nelle montagne, pochi avevano impieghi statali. Questi costituivano poco più di una forma di social welfare, simbolo strascicante di carte su scrivanie sino alle tre, poi un ritorno alle montagne per mangiare e cominciare la vera giornata. Una volta andati, c’era di nuovo silenzio, rotto dal suono di una giovane donna che spazzava nella veranda di fronte al bar, mentre la luce tra le montagne gradualmente aumentava.
Sul soffitto della nostra camera da letto si rifletteva una striscia di luce molto forte attraverso un’apertura delle persiane. Agivano come gli otturatori di una macchina fotografica. Sul soffitto, allungate, sottosopra, riuscivamo a vedere le immagini in movimento dei paesani che passavano di fronte alla casa, sino a quando l’effetto fotografico veniva interrotto da uno di loro con un colpo alla nostra porta, per una lettera o una cassetta di verdure fresche. La vera giornata, la nostra giornata cominciava in quell momento.

Qualcuno rubava acqua dalla casa parrocchiale. Mentre giacevamo lì, sentimmo l’acqua precipitarsi attraverso la conduttura dalla cisterna sino all’attico sopra di noi. Era rimasta accesa per giorni e notti di fila, ma sempre staccata quando il prete arrivava la domenica. Rintracciamo la canna dell’acqua sotto la strada, in un orto e pascolo per cavalli in uno spiazzo sotto al villaggio. Lì, traboccava in un barile arrugginito e s’infiltrava nel terreno. Con il rumore del bar da un lato ed il rumore dell’acqua dall’altro, durante i mesi estivi la nostra candela bruciava da entrambi i lati. Ma l’acqua era un argomento così vecchio e complicato, ancor di più per noi intrusi, per sollevarne una questione.

Non c’era negozio nel villaggio, a quel tempo. Due volte la settimana, alle undici del mattino, arrivava una drogheria itinerante condotta da un uomo di nome Mario. Per giungere al nostro paese da quello vicino, doveva percorrere un profondo anello su per la vallata attorno al burrone. C’erano voluti sedici anni di lavoro, scioperi e di politica per completare i quindici chilometri di tortuose curve del tragitto, saldato e rattoppato da tremori terrestri e da intemperie invernali. Era l’unico modo per arrivare al paese, poiché il collegamento dall’altra parte della montagna per Poggio si interrompeva ad un ponte crollato. Mario lo ricordava alle donne del paese mentre queste si lamentavano dei suoi prezzi oltraggiosi.

Alto, calvo e muscoloso, con i suoi pantaloncini hawaiani, sembrava Benito Mussolini. Sua moglie, simile ad un leviere, logorata dal lavoro e dalla gravidanza, sottili capelli sporchi, era l’altra faccia della gioia, la vitalità. A quarantacinque anni aspettava il settimo figlio. Gli altri sei erano a Teramo, mentre padre e madre lavoravano nei paesini tutta l’estate, con il loro tintinnante tema musicale che li preannunciava da lontano. Il loro ingresso in paese in calde mattine blu quando eravamo su a lavorare era rega-
le, assordante ed allegro, interrompeva tutto. Se eravamo lenti a scendere per comprare, una delle anziane donne veniva mandata a bussare alla nostra porta per ricordarcene.

Non che ci mancasse il cibo. Spesso una scatola di erbe, patate o carote veniva lasciata fuori la porta, o un cestino di fragole selvatiche sul davanzale. Era estate, la stagione dell’abbondanza nelle montagne, and l’eccesso ci veniva incontro. Durante l’inverno, in tempi più magri, sarebbe stata tutta un’altra storia.

Mi trasferii nell’ultima stanza, odorava di pietre e di polvere proveniente dai materassi ammassati e dalle spalliere del letto. Collocai un tavolo accanto alla finestra che dava sul burrone, e mi lascia trasportare dai suoni e dagli odori, le essenze tangibili del paese. In quella stanza del piano superiore di una casa abbandonata, attraverso le lunghe e calde pause di caldo mattutino e pomeridiano, lavorai con le imposte chiuse ed il sole che batteva fuori, durante le accaccanti settimane di luglio ed agosto. Al posto di una sorta di estraniamento, sentivo, sotto quello strano tetto, soltanto una sensazione di ritorno, ritorno al mondo fisico:

Bianche mura, verdi imposte,
Croste di pane che profuma di lievito
dalle cucine itineranti;
prugne gialle, buccia di pesche
al tatto, campane ambivalenti
ai funerali e alle feste –
tutto ciò era tangibile, assaporato, sentito,
ci restituiva ai nostri sensi
come la gelida acqua montana
dei rubinetti, o il dialetto
spogliato della sua astrazione, risponde
sotto la lingua, confuso
e gutturale connettendo
le cose con la loro giusta parola.

Fuori, lontano a nord, si ergeva il Monte Gorzano. Un bel po’ dopo che le nostre montagne venivano adombrate, un’esplosione di sole a ponente ingiallivà i suoi più alti pendii. Eravamo in una vallata chiusa. Via via che si faceva sempre più sera, era come stare nella pancia di un telescopio interstellare. Si poteva guardare solo da una parte – verso l’alto, nel blu dello spazio cosmico. Il Grande
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Carro tracciava il suo percorso attorno ai picchi, in un gigante cerchio annuale. Nella tarda estate le meteore gareggiavano lungo la stratosfera e si spregnevano.

Durante quelle belle serate estive, passeggiamo con Stefania, lungo uno di quelle strade boschive che si interrompeva lì dove il ponte era crollato. Un torrente scrosciava sui pilastri del vecchio ponte e sulla struttura, per metà completa, di quello nuovo che lo avrebbe sostituito. Per poche, brevi settimane, persino in così alta montagna, il tempo era abbastanza caldo per le lucciole. Attraverso i boschi, riuscivamo a vedere le loro luci che si dilatavano e si restringevano. Più in alto, le luci di Poggio si distinguevano nell’oscurità delle vette. La vera storia, disse Stefania, era a Poggio. Il nostro paese ne era solo un povero parente. “Sono nata a Poggio”, aggiunse, all’improvviso con virulenza “Ma mi sono sposata in questo posto”.

Una settimana dopo, visitammo Poggio. Padre Giuseppe, un prete in pensione che viveva lì, aveva concordato di dire la messa nel nostro paese quella domenica, nell’assenza del prete abituale. A stento ricordava le parole, tanto era vecchio, ma non potemmo fare a meno di notare come la gente del luogo lo trattasse come fosse uno di loro. Dopo, ci condusse, con incauta velocità, con la sua vecchia e malconcia macchina, sino alla serie di tornanti che conducono a Poggio.

“Io sono originario di Poggio,” disse, con un accento apertamente americano, “ma ho lavorato come prete in una parrocchia di New York per quarant’anni. Durante la guerra gli americani volevano internarmi come straniero nemico. Ritorno sempre lì una volta l’anno per raccogliere soldi per la chiesa di Poggio. I miei vecchi parrocchiani mi danno migliaia di dollari ogni anno.”

Il paesaggio a nord ed ad occidente si aprì dinanzi a noi attraverso le montagne. Dietro Poggio, un’alta vallata, chiusa, fatta eccezione dell’estate, conduceva ad un passaggio attraverso gli Appennini sino a L’Aquila, il capoluogo dell’Abruzzo. Mussolini era stato imprigionato lì, a Campo Imperatore, dopo il colpo di Stato di Badoglio del 1943 e prima di essere liberato dalle truppe di Otto Skorzeny e condotto a nord per essere il leader fantoccio del regime Salò negli ultimi anni della Seconda Guerra Mondiale. Mussolini stesso si era costruito un posto di vedetta sopra Poggio. Era ancora lì, una magra rovina su un ponte sopra di noi, usato adesso dai gruppi di alpinisti per bivaccare prima di raggiungere il Gran Sasso.
Fuori dalla chiesa di Poggio, una piccola congregazione aspettava Giuseppe. Mentre diceva la Messa, facemmo un giro su per la collina, nel centro città. C’era un ufficio dell’amministrazione locale, una farmacia ricoperta di avvertimenti sulla dipendenza delle droghe. I negozi erano pieni di prosciutti appesi. Merce vecchia marciva sugli scaffali. Poggio era alla fine della strada. Oltre, alcuni contorti chilometri più su, c’era una stazione sciistica aperta soltanto durante la stagione invernale. Nonostante gli enormi spazi montuosi su cui dava, il paese era noto per la chiusa taciturnità dei suoi residenti. Si odiavano anche, si diceva, ma si sposavano solo tra di loro. Si erano rifiutati di fare registrare per i posteri il loro dialetto, retaggio di varie occupazioni nei secoli, da una commissione folcloristica locale.

Ci arrampicammo su per i contorti vicoli di ciò che oggi è quasi una città fantasma. Case signorili, con architravi che risalgono al Medioevo, erano cadute in rovina. Dall’inizio del secolo, il posto era stato abbandonato a causa di onde migratorie. Corvi e piccioni stavano appollaiati sui buchi anneriti che una volta erano state finestre. Tavole erano inchiodate alle porte delle case i cui proprietari non sarebbero più tornati. I gatti sembravano i padroni del luogo, erano dovunque. Ce ne dovevano essere dozzine attorno alla torre dove Padre Giuseppe, l’anziano prete, viveva. Lasciava cibo lì fuori, per loro.

Osservammo mentre una donna in un vicolo macellava un galletto iridescente. C’era una sorta di atmosfera di violenza medievale in quel luogo. Lì, gli Orsini, gli ispettori del Papa, avevano impiccato I ladri. I lupi, e c’erano ancora lupi, avevano assalito le pecore. I pirati, infedeli alla Chiesa e allo Stato, ne avevano fatto un rifugio. Qualcosa di quella libertà di spirito, quella barbarie e aristocrazia, ancora vagheggiava nell’aria. Era un luogo che si era tenuto lontano dalle grandi potenze del commercio e della politica che avevano monopolizzato il resto dell’Europa, ed era rimasto fedele ad una sua originaria intensità, che riconduceva ad un passato più profondo, che respirava un’aria più fresca nelle montagne. Ci saremmo tornati più volte in quanto luogo spirituale dell’anno, così come il villaggio demoralizzato un miglio o due più giù, era la nostra dimora fisica.
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Finito di stampare nel mese di
Marzo 2018
Presso la ditta Fotograph s.r.l - Palermo
Editing e typesetting: Edity Società Cooperativa per conto di NDF
Progetto grafico copertina: Valeria Patti