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Lost (and Found) in Translation. Women and Emigration in Two Poems by Eavan Boland, Translated into Italian, with an Italian *Envoi**

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Abstract:

Taking as its cue the concept of emigration and translation as connected to the idea of metamorphosis, this paper focuses on Irish women's experience of emigration with the traumas that change of place, language and *mores* provoke. In her poetical and critical works Eavan Boland, now an outstanding female voice of Irish poetry and literary scholarship, provides a remarkable and perceptive reading of that experience, juxtaposing it to the symbolized role of mothers of male heroes or to that of an ugly, grizzling and dangerously demanding old woman as represented in the Irish tradition. This contribution is also an exercise in translation, a *metaphorical mirror*, i.e. a *reflection of/on* a text: it offers Italian translations of "The Emigrant Irish" and "Mise Eire", two poems by Boland, and of Padraic Pearse's poem in the Irish language "Mise Éire", which inspired the second, with some considerations and critical remarks. The Italian *envoi* consists of "Fogli bianchi", a poem about emigration written by Eugenio Lucarelli, now working in Switzerland, translated into English and *Gaeilge* by Irish speaker and musician Kay McCarthy.

Keywords: Eavan Boland, Eugenio Lucarelli, Irish language and tradition, Irish women and emigration, Kay McCarthy

* All the poems included in the essay have been used by permission of the poets.

Eavan Boland

“The Emigrant Irish”

Like oil lamps we put them out the back,
Of our houses, of our minds. We had lights
Better than, newer than and then
A time came, this time and now
We need them. Their dread,
makeshift example.
They would have thrived
on our necessities.
What they survived we could not
even live.
By their lights it is time to
Imagine how they stood there, what they stood with,
That their possessions may become our power.
Cardboard. Iron. Their hardships parcelled in them.
Patience. Fortitude. Long-suffering
In the bruise-coloured dusk of the New World.
And all the old songs. And nothing to lose.
(Boland 1995, 129)

“Gli irlandesi emigrati”

Come lampade a olio li abbiamo messi via,
Riposti in fondo ai nostri pensieri. Allora
Avevamo luci migliori, più nuove e ora
È venuto il momento, proprio ora
Ne abbiamo bisogno. Del loro tremendo
esempio e improvvisato.
Sarebbero vissuti alla grande con ciò per
noi solo necessario.
Col poco che per noi non sarebbe vita, loro
sono sopravvissuti.
È tempo di immaginare alla loro luce
Come ressero e con che,
Le loro misere cose ci diano forza.
Cartone e latta. I sacrifici stipati lì dentro.
Pazienza. Coraggio. La lunga pena
Nel livido crepuscolo del Nuovo Mondo.
E tutte le vecchie canzoni. E niente da perdere.
(Italian trans. by de Petris)

Pádraig Pearse (Pádraic Mac Piarais)

“Mise Éire”

Mise Éire:
Sine mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra

Mór mo ghlóir:
Mé a rug Cú Chulainn cróga.

Mór mo náir:
Mo chlann féin a dhíol a
máthair.

Mór mo phian:
Bithnaimhde do mo shíorchiapadh.

Mór mo bhrón:
D'éag an dream inar
chuireas dóchas.

Mise Éire:
Uaigní mé ná an Chailleach
Bhéarra
(Pearse 1912)

“I am Ireland”

I am Ireland:
I am older than the old woman
of Beare.
Great my glory:
I who bore Cuchulainn, the brave.

Great my shame:
My own children who sold their
mother.

Great my pain:
My irreconcilable enemy who
harasses me continually...

Great my sorrow
That crowd, in whom I placed
my trust, died.

I am Ireland:
I am lonelier than the old
woman of Beare.
(English trans. by de Petris)

“Sono io l'Irlanda”

Io sono l'Irlanda:
Più vecchia della Vecchia
di Beare.
Grande la mia gloria:
Io che ho generato il prode Cuchulainn.

Grande la mia vergogna:
I miei figli mi hanno
venduta

Grande il mio dolore
Perseguitata dal nemico
inesorabile..

Grande la mia tristezza
I prodi in cui posi la mia
fiducia sono morti.

Sono io l'Irlanda
Più sola della Vecchia
di Beare.
(Italian trans. by de Petris)

Eavan Boland

“Mise Eire”

I won't go back to it –

My nation displaced
Into old dactyls,
Oaths made
By the animal tallows
Of the candle –

Land of the Gulf Stream,
The small farm,
The scalded memory,
The songs
That bandage up the history,
The words
That make a rhythm of the crime

Where time is time past.
A palsy of regrets.
No, I won't go back.
My roots are brutal:

I am the woman –

A sloven's mix
Of silks at the wrists,
A sort of dove-strut
In the precincts of the garrison –

Who practises
The quick frictions,
The rictus of delight
And gets cambric for it,
Rice-coloured silks.

I am the woman –

In the gansy-coat
On board the 'Mary Belle',
In the huddling cold
Holding her half-dead baby to her
As the wind shifts East
And North over the dirty
Waters of the wharf.

“Sono io l'Irlanda”

Non tornerò più sull'argomento-

La mia nazione dislocata
In vecchi dattili,
giuramenti fatti
al lume di una candela
di sego.

La terra della Corrente del Golfo,
della piccola fattoria,
della memoria sterilizzata,
dei canti che coprono
di bende la storia,
di parole che danno ritmo
al crimine

dove il tempo è sempre il passato.
Una paralisi di rimpianti.
No. Non ci torno più su.
Le mie radici sono brutali:

Sono io la donna –

Una sciattona con lerci
Polsini di seta
Che si pavoneggia
Nei pressi della caserma –

E pratica
Veloci sfregature, servizi di bocca
che danno piacere
per i quali riceve percalle
e seta color del riso.

Sono io la donna

Dallo scialle di lana
A bordo della 'Mary Belle'
Nella calca di gente gelata,
che si stringe al petto
il figlioletto mezzo morto
mentre il vento vira a est
e a nord sulle luride acque del molo,

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that

a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before.
(Boland 1995, 102)

che mescola le gutturali
dell'emigrante alle vocali
della nostalgia che non sa
né gliene cale che

una nuova lingua
sia una specie di ferita
che dopo un po'
rimargina in una imitazione accettabile di ciò
che c'era prima.
(Italian trans. by de Petris)

Eugenio Lucarelli

“Fogli bianchi”

Fogli bianchi. Ecco
Cosa siamo.
Imbrattati dall'inchiostro
anonimo
Del destino qualunque.
Accatastati e inermi
Nei vagoni dei lunghi addii;
Risme smisurate
Di speranze torturate
Malmenate, violentate,
calpestate
E persino dimenticate
Negli scaffali polverosi
Della segreteria dell'attesa vana:
E' caduto un foglio pulito da
ogni pretesa,
L'ho rimesso a posto
Sporcandolo di amarezza e
disillusione
Ora sono anch'io tra quegli
scaffali!
(Lucarelli 2018)

“Blank sheets of paper”

Blank sheets of paper. There.
That's what we are.
Bespattered with the
anonymous ink
Of a just-any destiny.
Heaped and helpless
In the third-class cars of long adieus;
Endless reams
Of hopes, tortured,
Battered, raped and trampled
underfoot,
Forgotten even
Upon the dusty shelves
Of the secretariat of pointless
expectation:
A blank sheet fell cleansed of any
claim,
I put it back in place
Dirtying it with bitterness and
disillusionment
Now I too stand among those shelves!
(English trans. by McCarthy)

“Bileoga”

Bileoga de pháipéir bhán. Sin
sinne.
Loite le dúch gan ainm cinneam-
háin ar bith i ndán dúinn.
Plódaithe, lag-nochta, gan
chosaint
i gcarráistí traéin na mbeannachtaí
síoraí
líonta móra gan chríoch
ár ndóchais, céasta,
buailte, éignithe, brúite,
dearmadaithe fiú
ar seilfeanna dheannachúla
rúnaíochta na ndochas díomhaoiné:
Do thit bileog bán amháin, gan
éileamh, anuas,
Chuir mé ar ais arís é
agus é salaithe agam le searbhas is
díomá.
Anois tá mé féin i mo sheseamh i
measc na seilfeanna sin!
(Irish trans. by McCarthy)

The title of this contribution harkens back to *Lost in Translation*, the film written, directed and produced by Sofia Coppola in 2003. The addition of the

word “found” was suggested to the present writer by the unexpected emotional enhancement and transformation of the co-protagonists. The male lead, Bill Murray, a man living out his latter days and the young, self-doubting Scarlett Johnson, experience a kind of empathy of far greater significance than an erotic rapport, which does not actually take place. This special relationship made of fondness and feelings stems from the fact that the two Americans find themselves catapulted – *trans-lated* – by events into a totally “other” culture, that of a hotel in Tokyo. It should be remembered also that Coppola’s title is, in turn, a quotation from Robert Frost: “poetry is what gets lost in translation” which seems particularly meaningful in this context where the emphasis is on translating poetry and its cultural and political value (cf. Polezzi 2012).

A second source of inspiration was Brian Friel’s *Translations* (1980), a play that has influenced Eavan Boland’s poetry and the work of other poets from her same generation. In *Translations*, Friel bestows masterly artistic form on the theory expressed by his colleagues Tom Paulin, Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney, among others, who were involved in the Field Day enterprise, and contributed to the seminal Field Day plays and pamphlets on the acceptance of the complex discontinuity of the Irish tradition and the need to forge a unifying future for Ireland, not so much in political as in cultural terms. These intellectuals dreamt of a “fifth province”, that of the mind, an ideal space suggested by the term *cúige*, literally *one fifth*, used in Irish to translate *province*¹ implying a fifth ideal possibility in addition to the four geographical provinces of the island defined at the beginning of the 17th century. To Friel, the act of translation is a metaphor for all this.

Translations is a historical drama set at the time of the English Ordnance Survey of the country at the beginning of the 19th century when the first signs of the Great Famine were also raising their head. The principal aim of the play was, however, to offer a novel reading of ways in which its ominous past had generated contemporary Ireland. Translation may be necessary, as in the case of emigrants or of the colonizers, who want to control the alien territory but it may also be inspired by love like that between the English soldier Yolland and the Irish girl Máire in Friel’s play. The English cartographers in charge of the Ordnance Survey were required to translate Irish place-names into English, thus depriving the Irish inhabitants of Baile Beag, where the two words literally mean *Town* and *Small*, into the Anglicised Ballybeg of their *ubi consistam*, with its demeaning suffix *-beg*, meaning to *mendiccate*. The very act of translating engenders Yolland’s infatuation for Ireland and his love for Máire, who, hoping to see him again and not knowing he has already been murdered by her own people during an ambush, asks the local schoolmaster, Hugh, to

¹ In medieval Ireland, although the number of districts into which the island was divided varied, there were often five provinces, hence *cúige*: the fifth province was *Midhe* (Meath).

teach her English. He gives her a wise piece of advice, “I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies?” (Friel 1981, 67).

Translation is a kind of pruning of the original, but it is also the addition of a new graft, of new sounds, and new ideas that are inscribed in the different language and culture into which the work is translated. The standard definition of “translation” includes: 1) the removal or conveyance from one person, place, time or condition to another; 2) the action or process of expressing the sense of a word, passage, etc., in a different language; 3) transformation, alteration, change; changing or adapting to another use. Now rare (cf. s.v. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 1993).

The third definition is especially significant in the present context as it conveys both a sense of change of position in space and a semantic shift implying “changing or adapting to another use”. The poems chosen here allow us to focus on important concepts especially because they have undergone the reactive practice of translation which produces linguistic, cultural and emotional enrichment. In actual fact, the author is holding a mirror up to the poems, as it were, hoping that their Italian reflection may be of some use to today’s Italian readers who, having forgotten Italy’s past mass emigration, are now at a loss when faced with the epochal immigration to their shores of people from the south of the world. For this reason, the article ends with an Italian *envoi*, that is a poem entitled “Fogli bianchi”, written by an Italian migrant to Switzerland, and translated into English and Irish by Kay McCarthy, a musician and a competent user of the Irish language, though not a native speaker, who, as part of the Irish diaspora emigrated to Italy some fifty years ago, married there, and brought up her bilingual-bicultural daughter in her adopted country, is now back in Northern Ireland. Her experiences, as she herself claims, make her a rightful member of both the Irish and Italian diasporas.

The first poem, “The Emigrant Irish” by Eavan Boland², was first published in *The Irish Times* on June 4, 1983. The inversion of the two substantives, “Irish” and “Emigrant”, traditionally presented in that order when describing the plight of single emigrants (as, for example, in the song recorded

² Eavan Boland was born in 1944 in Dublin. Her father was a career diplomat and her mother a painter. She graduated from TCD. In 1969 she married novelist Kevin Casey, moved to the suburbs of Dublin and had two daughters. She is currently a professor at Stanford University, where she has taught since 1996. Her work deals with Irish national identity, and the role of women in Irish history. In the preface to her *Collected Poems* published in 1995 she wrote: “I have tried to leave intact the untidy and telling shape which the truth of any poet’s work is. [...] When I [...] moved into the shadow of what I had learned to think of as an ordinary life [...] I had no clear sense of how my womanhood could connect with my life as a poet, or what claims each would make on the other” (Boland 1995, xi). Throughout her career she had managed to connect the two aspects of her life and to give an original contribution to Irish literature.

by tenor John McCormack in 1928, “The Irish Emigrant”)³ underlines the right to Irish nationality of emigrants from the country because they remain Irish even as exiles. The strength of this syntactic inversion is confirmed by the meaning of the poem itself: the experience of emigration belongs to the Irish nation and culture which often appears to have forgotten this highly important fact. The use of the personal pronoun *we* is also significant and it indicates that everyone is at fault. In these terms, Boland performs an act of both re-appropriation and denouncement.

In the 1980s, 1984 to be exact, Rome hosted a seminar as part of the EAAS’s (European Association for American Studies) biennial convention on the subject of “Immigrant Literature”. Remarkable was the absence on that occasion of an authoritative critical voice in the representation of the rich heritage of Irish-American literature, while the symposium reflected extensively on the literary fruits of the encounter between European and Jewish writing and that of the United States of America. More than a decade after the publication of Boland’s poem, President Mary Robinson⁴, in an address to a unified sitting of the Irish Houses of Parliament, the *Dáil* and the *Seanad Éireann*, on February 2, 1995, the 113th anniversary of James Joyce’s birth, availed herself of the definition “Irish Diaspora” to re-evaluate the undeniable cultural roots of Irish emigrants worldwide, associating it with the definition of *Ulysses* as an “epic of two races (Israel – Ireland)” (Joyce 1975, 271), given by Joyce to Carlo Linati, marking the beginning of a new post-colonial phase in the interpretation of Irish literary culture (cf. Anselmi 2005).

The second poem is “Mise Éire” by Patrick Pearse (Pádraic Mac Piarais) (1879-1916). It is a kind of compendium of Ireland’s national iconography, so much so that it used to be studied by heart by Irish school children. This brief poem sums up the cultural tradition whereby Ireland is personified in two mythical figures: *An Chailleach Bhéara*, the old hag who refers back to pre-Christian magical times, and the distraught *Mater-Dolorosa*-like Christian mother of heroes betrayed by her own offspring. The strength of this identitarian tradition confirms the passive role allocated to women by Ireland’s society and culture, although women are the object and subject of both awe and fear. The first “translation” undertaken by female-poets, from the last century to the present, regards a transfer of gender, therefore the point of view is no longer a man’s. The woman-poet makes herself subject in or-

³ See <http://unitedireland.tripod.com/the_irish_emigrant_song.html> (05/2019).

⁴ “After all, emigration is not just a chronicle of sorrow and regret. It is also a powerful story of contribution and adaptation. In fact, I have become more convinced each year that this great narrative of dispossession and belonging, which so often had its origins in sorrow and leaving-taking, has become - with a certain amount of historic irony - one of the treasures of our society. If that is so then our relation with the diaspora beyond our shores is one which can instruct our society in the values of diversity, tolerance, and fair-mindedness” (Robinson 1995).

der to give voice to the “entwined destinies” of a woman who transits into the crude reality of colonised Irish society. This explains the choice in “Mise Eire” (spelt without a *fada*, accent, on the E of Eire), by Boland, who assumes a practically polemical attitude towards Pearse. This poem was published in the *Irish Times* on the June 16, 1984 (another significant Joycean reference). The author overturns the meaning as well as the historical and ethical value of the lines by Pearse, who was also a revered hero of the 1916 Easter Rising – speaking in the name of women until then left “outside history” (Boland 1990). No more lies to mask defeat intended as castration to be concealed in the self-absolving and “andro-centric” poetic tradition:

I won't go back to it—
 My nation displaced
 into old dactyls,
 oaths made by the animal tallows
 of the candle—
 Land of the Gulf Stream,
 the small farm,
 the scalded memory,
 the songs
 that bandage up the history,
 the words
 that make a rhythm of the crime
 Where time is time past.
 A palsy of regrets.
 No, I won't go back.
 My roots are brutal. (Boland 1995, 102)

For Boland it is better to denounce the unembellished truth of Ireland, Britain's first colony, a reality experienced at the expense of women, making them either prostitutes or emigrants. At this point the woman poet's attention focuses on that “kind of scar” caused by emigration which made it necessary to learn a new language in a new land, relegating the mother tongue to a feeling of nostalgia, to a *vóσtoς* of an improbable if not impossible return. It was no chance that “A Kind of Scar” became the title of a seminal essay in which Boland summed up her poetics as a woman and a poet.

By way of final reflection, this paper presents the poem “Fogli bianchi” by Eugenio Lucarelli, published in the daily newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* in a column significantly called *La valigia di cartone* (The Cardboard Suitcase) and translated here both into English and Irish by Kay McCarthy. The Italian poem takes us back to Boland's “The Emigrant Irish”, in which emigrants are simply erased from national history. In this case the human being becomes a name in the registers of bureaucrats, as it happened on Ellis Island, New York, and is now happening in Europe. The Italian transla-

tion of Pearse's lines is based on a number of English-language translations, ranging from an anonymous dual-language version of the poem online, to one included in *Woman and Nation* by C.L. Innes (Innes 1993, 25), and to a version by Lady Gregory (who knew and spoke Irish) used by Yeats (who did not) in his edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (1938).

The most suggestive difficulty regarded the term "Cailleach". According to the Patrick S. Dineen's *Irish-English Dictionary*⁵, the term indicates literally "a veiled woman, from *caille*, a nun, a woman celibate, a nun wearing black drapery. In more modern Irish it refers to an old woman, a hag, a witch". According to Alexander Macbain's *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*, *cailleach* means the "veiled one" or "the old woman" (Macbain 1911, 63). In some stories of the old tradition the Cailleach appears to the hero as a hideous old woman, and when he is kind to her, she turns into a lovely young lady who rewards him for his good deeds⁶. The *Book of Lecan* (c. 1400 a.d.) claims that *An Chailleach Bhéara* was the goddess of the *Corcu Duibne* people from the Kerry region. In Scotland the *Cailleach Bheur* serves a similar purpose as the personification of winter; she has a blue face, and is born old at *Samhain* (October, 31), but grows younger over time until she becomes a beautiful maiden at *Bealtaine* (May, 1). Her grandchildren and great-grandchildren are believed to have formed the tribes of Kerry and surrounding areas. Some authors believe she descends from a very early – most probably pre-Celtic – divinity who moulded the land and controlled the forces of nature, including harsh winter. There are suggestions that she may be a survival of an early earth goddess demonised, or reduced at least, to preternatural status, by the Christian church (cf. D'Este, Rankin 2009).

McCarthy suggests translating "Cailleach" as "strega" in Italian for the sake of the "e-a" assonance in "Strega di Beara". The "a" before the "r" of Beara is not pronounced, it is there only to balance the final "a" because of an Irish-language spelling rule called *caol le caol agus leathan le leathan*⁷; ("narrow with narrow, broad with broad"), but the translation recuperates the English *old woman* (in Italian *vecchia*) which links well with *beara* [be-ra]. As to the English translation, the version used here is an anonymous one available online (Pearse 1912). It is interesting to note that the last four lines before the final refrain are missing from Innes' version, and in the version made available by Lady Gregory and used by W.B. Yeats in a conference, the line "Modern Ireland" before "Great my shame" seems to involve modern Ireland in the betrayal of the country perpetrated by her children⁷.

⁵ First published in 1904; reprinted, with additions, several times between 1927 and 1996.

⁶ She may be the inspiration of the like "Cathleen ni Houlihan" myth.

⁷ "I am Ireland, / Older than the Hag of Beara. / Great my pride, / I gave birth to brave Cuchulain. / Modern Ireland / Great my shame, / My own children killed their mother. / I am Ireland, / Lonelier than the Hag of Beara" (Yeats 1965, 22).

To conclude, it is worth pointing out what McCarthy observes in a private email exchange with the author in connection to her translation of Lucarelli's poem in Irish:

I was able to render “ecco cosa siamo” with two whispered words “sin sinne” (pronounced as per English rule /shin / /shɪnnel/). *Sinne* is the plural of *Mise* (pronounced as per English rule /mɪshel/). These are simply two personal pronouns in their so-called “strong form”. The “weak” forms are *Sinn* /shin/ (we) and *Mé* (I) and they are pronounced exactly like the equivalent Italian pronoun. In Irish the strong personal pronoun can stand alone without the copula “is” /iss/; therefore *Mise Éire* actually means *I Ireland*, though the verb is implied. So strong is the suffix added to the simple pronouns in Irish: *mise* (I), *tusa* (you singular), *seiseann* (he/it), *sise* (she/it), *sinne* (we), *sibhse* (you plural), *siadsan* (they), that the copula becomes redundant. *Is mise Éire* would weaken the sonorous solemnity of *Mise Éire* [two trochees], both as meaning and as prosody.

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