

Translating Irish Literature into Italian: The Challenges of Decoding the Unfamiliar

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This article explores some aspects and implications of a translation policy widely adopted by Italian publishers, here termed ‘pseudo-transparency.’ The analysis of the Irish author Dermot Bolger’s novel *The Journey Home* provides an exemplary case study to illustrate that following the norms of pseudo-transparency may result in an impoverished reading experience, as textual and paratextual elements of the target text make difficult for Italian readers to ‘decode’ the cultural complexity of the source text.

Key words: Irish literature, Italian culture, transparency, domestication

Cet article explore quelques-unes des dimensions et des implications d’une politique de traduction très souvent adoptée par les éditeurs italiens, politique que l’on désignera ici par le terme de « pseudo-transparence ». Partant du cas exemplaire du roman *The Journey Home* de l’auteur irlandais Dermot Bolger, cette analyse montre que le respect des normes de la pseudo-transparence peut mener à une expérience de lecture appauvrie puisque les éléments textuels et paratextuels du texte cible rendent difficile pour les lecteurs italiens le « décodage » de la complexité culturelle du texte source.

Mots clés : littérature irlandaise, culture italienne, transparence, domestication

In this article I intend to illustrate, through a case study, the manner in which the norms of translation often imposed by publishers may influence the potential interaction of the target text with the target audience. An analysis of the novel *The Journey Home*, by Irish author Dermot Bolger, will serve to highlight some of the issues which may arise in regard to the cultural specificity of works of literary fiction in translation. For the purpose of discussing the translation strategy used for this text, Lawrence Venuti’s theoretical notion of ‘transparency’¹ is re-elaborated as ‘pseudo-transparency.’ The use of this term is intended to emphasise that the Italian translation, while clearly pursuing the goal of stylistic smoothness, does not make a conscious effort to domesticate foreign cultural items through ‘transparency’ in the

conventional sense. Rather than silencing through ‘violence,’² ‘pseudo-transparency’ seems to perpetrate an accidental silencing through negligence. The relative marginality of Italy and Ireland - respectively the source and target cultures for this case study - in terms of European identity and cultural hegemony is part of the reason for approaching the discussion of translation in a way which significantly differs from the ideologically charged terms employed by Venuti.

In an Irish-Italian context of exchange, the translation ‘function’ is not easily related to political pressures. Thus, the influence of ‘power’ on translation policies manifests itself almost exclusively in the form of economic imperatives. The most recent developments within the discipline of Translation Studies often involve a post-colonial approach, and cases where the power balance between two countries is fundamentally ‘neutral,’ so to speak, have scarcely been investigated. For this reason, the polemics which Venuti’s approach has sometimes encountered amongst Translation Studies scholars are not immediately relevant to the implicit endorsement of ‘minoritizing’³ translation made by this article, since the process of translation between Italy and Ireland establishes a cultural dialogue between two communities which may be considered ‘equal.’

The hypothesis proposed by this article is that the Italian publisher’s failure to mediate *The Journey Home* at a cultural level has ultimately produced an ‘illusion of transparency,’ which is tentatively captured here by the introduction of the prefix ‘pseudo-.’ The primary objective of pseudo-transparency is to seek linguistic ‘domestication.’ As is well known, this concept essentially dates back to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s distinction between ‘naturalisation’ and ‘alienation’ as the two main opposing approaches to translation.⁴ Domestication leads to the production of target texts marked by a high level of readability, achieved by virtue of a text which is

stylistically appropriate in terms of the target language's grammar, syntax, and idioms. When cultural items belonging to the source language culture are kept in a translation employing homogenising language, they risk merely creating a sense of 'exoticism,' which ultimately makes it difficult for "newness to enter the world," as Homi Bhaba has put it.⁵

This article questions some Italian publishers' assumption that a linguistically fluent translation renders the source text more accessible to the target readers. Indeed, this analysis of *The Journey Home* will suggest that an Italian text striving to conceal its translational nature by erasing the sense of foreignness of the novel ends up making it largely incomprehensible to the target readers. The absence of any form of explanation in the paratext implicitly denies the need for mediation, thereby advocating the fallacious presumption of a common understanding between domestic and foreign readers. Although most of these standards are not directly traceable to written rules handed over to Italian translators, they are unanimously acknowledged by them, as they are aware that presenting a work challenging the *status quo* would simply mean facing rejection.

One recent testimony to this state of affairs was given during a public seminar by Franca Cavagnoli, Italian translator of Nobel Prize-winners such as V. S. Naipul and J. M. Coetzee, who resignedly acknowledged the force of 'acquired habits' within the Italian publishing environment. Even a translator of her stature, highly aware of the cultural complexity behind the source texts she translates, cannot totally dismiss editorial norms which expect translations to be broadly 'standardised' and to meet the aesthetic criteria predominant within the receiving culture. By the same token, although Cavagnoli would be suitably qualified to provide introductions or indeed any kind of critical intervention for the texts she translates, she maintained during her

lecture that none of this material would be included if the publishers deemed it irrelevant or counterproductive, which they did on the vast majority of occasions.⁶ Cavagnoli's statements support the argument that translators often follow the silent *diktats* of the agenda of the publishing industry, which in turn often answer 'entrepreneurial' needs, since the survival of the business can only be guaranteed by an economic return. Important exceptions, in the form of specialised publishers such as Iperborea, which has almost total exclusivity over Italian translations of Scandinavian literature, prevent us from drawing conclusions which might be considered reflective of the overall activity of the publishing industry in Italy. Iperborea is in fact particularly attentive to the need for 'cultural mediation' of the material it publishes and often invites introductions and/or notes from translators or experts in the field. At the same time though, as regards Italian translations of contemporary Irish fiction from over the past twenty years (1990-2010), the publishers' insistence on a uniform style and pre-established editorial formats, has been verified for a large number of samples. The analytical approach proposed to assess the translation of *The Journey Home*, which perfectly exemplifies this trend, may prospectively be suitable to describe behavioural translation norms on a wider scale and for different contexts of exchange.

The main argument which the textual analysis of Bolger's novel intends to foreground is that some texts, especially literary fiction, need to be supported by a paratextual apparatus in order to regain their semantic significance in translation. In Italy, a call for translators' visibility at a paratextual level could be further backed up by statistics showing that the typical profile of an Italian reader should not be averse to the use of paratexts in order to explain the cultural significance of novels, if necessary. The sociological profile of Italian readers can be approximately determined thanks to

evidence about reading habits in Italy, which seem to challenge the constructed reader catered for by Italian translations of contemporary Irish fiction. The publishers' agenda, in fact, often seems to address readers of fiction as fundamentally acritical consumers who look to literature for diversion.

First of all, it is worth noting that the percentage of college graduates in Italy during the early nineties, when *The Journey Home* was published, was still a mere 6%. This placed the country very close to the bottom of the European average.⁷ Yet the people in this population bracket, according to data registered in 1993, constituted 63.4% of those responsible for the purchase of books,⁸ a figure which suggests a link between higher education and the habit of reading. This is further supported by a statistic from 1995 showing that 38% of book purchasers, proportionally the highest percentage in the study, buy more than 20 books per year whereas, conversely, only 3.7% buy fewer than 2 books per year.⁹ This data is reflected in a statement made in 2003 that 'keen readers' in Italy, i.e. those reading between 10 and 12 books per year, represent between 5-6% of the total population, yet sustain 80% of the entire publishing market.¹⁰ More recent statistics, at this stage much less detailed than the previous data, seem to suggest a less dramatic breakdown,¹¹ yet they confirm that an unquestionable conclusion to be drawn from this series of figures is that, in Italy, the bulk of the reading public consists of highly educated 'keen readers.'

This would suggest that the translator's failure to engage with the themes of a novel, which seems to be a common practice endorsed by many Italian publishers of contemporary literature not designed to serve a 'scholarly' function, is a measure calculated for the benefit of people who rarely purchase books. Pseudo-transparency, by obscuring the cultural complexity of a novel in translation, is designed to attract those readers who would actually benefit from the inclusion of critical tools in the

paratext. This means that, paradoxically, those who would select a book by virtue of its accessible format are normally also those less likely to possess the interpretative skills to overcome the comprehension obstacles caused by pseudo-transparent translations of culturally ‘distant’ works. In other words, additional information in introductions and notes would be particularly helpful for those readers who might be hesitant to buy translated novels if they should not appear ‘transparent.’

The main contention, however, is that this might have detrimental effects on the overall reception of the translated book, since the resulting reading experience might be impoverished even for those readers with the willingness and competence for deeper engagement with the text. Pseudo-transparent translations are more likely to become reassertions of pre-conceptions in the target culture, contrary to what most works of literary fiction might be expected to provoke.

The Journey Home provides the examples necessary to show how the strategy of pseudo-transparency may affect the final outcome of a translation. Bolger’s novel is particularly susceptible to misinterpretation by foreign readers, as the Irish context is deliberately utilised by the author, yet a certain degree of familiarity with this setting is taken for granted, as often happens when a work of fiction puts emphasis on a socio-historical background. The unmediated presence of culture-specific themes is also very common in literature and is almost always a problematic area in the process of cultural transposition, since the assumed knowledge of the implied readers of the source text very rarely corresponds to the actual knowledge of the intended readers of the translation. The following analysis of the Italian translation of this novel will highlight the fact that the effort to cultivate translation as the articulation of a delicate balance between known and unknown, between the appreciation of difference and the independent re-articulation of that difference, is often fraught with syntactic and

semantic constraints. At the same time, the analysis brings into question the adequacy of pseudo-transparency to appropriately articulate the novel's crucial themes, since it shows that this policy effectively prevents any integration of the 'other' into the receiving language and its conceptual world.

Aspects of the Linguistic 'Normalisation' of Pseudo-transparency: Subordinating the 'Foreign'

Conor McCarthy, in an article for the *Irish University Review*, underlines the fact that Bolger's work "tends to depict the condition of Irish modernity, without offering a sustained analysis of it."¹² As far as *The Journey Home* is concerned, McCarthy sees this as a problem, mainly because Bolger's reading of the suburban Dublin experience of modernity exposes a position with which the reviewer fundamentally does not agree. The contention made by this article is better expressed by Terence Rafferty's conclusions about the American reception of the novel, or rather the lack of it. Rafferty notes in an article for *The New York Times Book Review* that at the core of *The Journey Home* lies the trial of young suburban Dubliners who "can't get a grip on what it means to be Irish anymore, can't decide if they even want to be and don't understand why their lack of a clear national identity should leave them feeling so hollow and so desperate."¹³ That, he believes, is the reason for the American audience's difficulties in relating to the novel, and accordingly the reason it reached the US only in 2008 in a University Press edition.¹⁴

In the novel, the advance of the urban landscape is endowed with a distinct symbolism: the progression of a new Irish identity in contrast with the old rural one. Hence the landscape becomes the poignant 'objective correlative' of the character's identity. Hano's internal quest is visually represented by the protagonist's journey

across the urban scenery of Dublin and, later on, the Irish countryside. In this sense, the ‘journey’ of the title encapsulates the essence of the novel: not only does it refer to the physical, cultural and metaphysical journeys undertaken by the characters, but it also evokes the protagonist’s struggle to find a place of rest, somewhere he can really belong.

The Italian title, *Verso Casa*, literally meaning ‘towards home,’ misses this focus by shifting the attention towards the word ‘home,’ while the crucial part of ‘the journey’ is left to be weakly expressed by a preposition of movement, ‘verso.’ This title does present a challenge, as the word ‘home’ cannot be adequately translated into Italian. However, there would have been no difficulties in incorporating the word ‘il viaggio’ in the Italian title: ‘il viaggio verso casa.’ The fact that ‘the journey’ has been overlooked suggests that the translator has failed to underpin her work of linguistic transposition of the novel with other critical discourses. Yet the strategies employed by translators are often the inevitable outcome of factors such as meeting tight deadlines and striving to meet what the publishers perceive to be the audience’s expectations. The reasons for such an omission, however, can only remain speculative.

What can be pointed out with some degree of certainty is that the decision not to translate the word ‘journey’ in the title undermines the semantic cohesiveness of the novel created by the numerous internal repetitions of this word. The after-effects on the poetic function of the prose are evident in passages like the following: “How can you learn self-respect if you’re taught that where you *live* is not your real *home*? At fourteen I tried to bridge the gap by *journeying* out into my father’s *uncharted countryside*.”¹⁵ In Italian this passage reads: “Come potevamo imparare a rispettare ciò che eravamo, se ci veniva insegnato che il luogo in cui *abitavamo* non era la

nostra vera *casa*? A quattordici anni, cercai di colmare quel vuoto *esplorando le inesplorate campagne* di mio padre.”¹⁶ [How could we learn to respect what we were, if we were taught that the place we inhabited was not our real house? At fourteen, I tried to fill in that void by exploring the unexplored lands of my father]. The force of the expression ‘journeying into an uncharted countryside’ is not aptly captured by ‘*esplorando le inesplorate campagne*.’ ‘Campagna’ in Italian normally refers to small pieces of land outside town owned by urban citizens, thereby evoking a controlled and civilised idea of nature. The Italian expression recalls something rather ordinary, experienced by most children in Italy, and the peculiarity of ‘uncharted’ and the vastness expressed by ‘countryside’ are missing.

Moreover, ‘journeying’ is translated with the variation ‘*esplorando*,’ or ‘exploring’. This is rather significant since, consistently with the novel’s conscious engagement with a generation of dispossessed, ‘journeying’ gives the idea of ‘going through,’ thus underlining Hano’s failure to possess those territories. This connotation is lost in the verb ‘to explore’ as used in the Italian version. The toning down of the leitmotiv dispossession/belonging continues with the substitution of ‘to live’ with ‘*abitare*,’ ‘to inhabit,’ which causes a similar shift of significance as the one from ‘home’ to ‘house,’ as will be explained below. ‘Inhabit’ is part of living, a practical part, which does not evoke all the connotations of experience inherent to somebody’s identity as does the verb ‘to live.’

All these choices are coherent with a translation strategy which favours stylistic smoothness. ‘*Abitare*’ is a natural choice to combine with ‘*casa*,’ certainly more commonly used than the English counterpart ‘inhabit.’ Yet this “complete naturalness of expression”¹⁷ works against the textual intention of the source text, in which the recurring themes and all their reverberations are consciously emphasised by the

language used by Bolger. The efficacy of the title is further compromised by the fact that 'casa' is a less poignant word than 'home,' since the Italian language does not conceptualise in one word the sense of belonging to a place. 'Casa' would be an equally valid translation for 'house,' so the distinction between a building and the place of one's emotional belonging becomes rather blurred. 'Casa' in Italian may be used to refer to the place where you and your family belong, but the same word refers to your rented accommodation, or a friend's house which you visit occasionally. Overall, by translating the title as 'verso casa,' both the sense of a search for a home, and by extension the sense of an identity, are less immediately evident to the target readers.

Moreover in the original novel, the word 'house' is often used with connotations of vacuity and loss of identity, which precisely symbolise everything that Hano, in his search for a 'home,' is trying to overcome. The following passage clearly shows some difficulty in keeping these two dimensions juxtaposed in the target text. In the Italian version the word 'casa' and the verb 'abitare' are used to describe both the experience Hano is fleeing from and what he is aspiring to:

Quelle nuove villette, tutte rispettosamente in fila lungo la strada, sono state dipinte a colori vivaci per proteggere i loro *abitanti* da ciò che verrà. Sono solide e robuste come le *case* a schiera in cui sono nato, ma è questa *casa* diroccata nel bosco il nostro futuro, *la nostra destinazione ai confini del mondo*. Lo capisco soltanto ora: presto non rimarrà altro *luogo* al quale quelli come te e me potranno appartenere, nel quale sentirsi a *casa*. Strade di città o di aperta campagna farà poca differenza, *abiteremo* ruderi e lotti abbandonati, tutti quei *luoghi* da cui non riusciranno a cacciarci.¹⁸

[Those new bungalows, all respectfully aligned along the street, have been painted in bright colours to protect their inhabitants from what will come. They are solid and resistant as the terraces of houses where I was born, but is this crumbling house in the wood our future, our destination at the edge of the world. Only now I understand it: soon no other place will be left to which those like you and me could belong, in which to feel at home. City or rural country streets it will make little difference, we'll inhabit ruins and empty lots, all those places from which they won't be able to send us away.]

This translation fails to create the contrast between the false security of 'houses' and the sought-after sense of 'belonging,' a contrast that subtly emerges in the source text, where the sense of belonging is 'nowhere' to be found:

Those rows of new bungalows clinging in defence to the main road, how brightly painted they looked, like a bulwark against what will come. How solid they seemed like the terraces of *houses* where I was born. But this crumbling house in the wood is the future, is our destination, is *nowhere*. I never understood it till now; soon it will be all that's left for the likes of you and me to *belong* to. City or country, it will make little difference, ruins, empty lots, wherever they cannot move us from.¹⁹

This juxtaposition between dispossession and belonging reappears at regular intervals throughout the book. In the source text 'nowhere' functions as the definition of a non-place: the denial of the existence of a place or the spatial collocation of an object, or simply a place that cannot be found. Paradoxically, it indicates the only way Hano has to affirm his own identity. In effect, 'nowhere' stands against all those places created by false identities. In Bolger's text, denying attachment to any one place is an affirmation of a more genuine identity.

No single Italian word expresses those concepts together. In Italian 'non-luogo' could be used as a philosophical neologism to express the same concept, but its impact would be very different from the common English use of 'nowhere,' and it would not convey the further acceptations of the word. The translation fashions the phrase "is our destination, is nowhere" into "la nostra destinazione ai confini del mondo"²⁰ [our destination at the edge of the world], which is understandable given that 'nowhere' does not have a direct equivalent in Italian. More questionable is the decision to use repeatedly the word 'luogo,' 'place,' to describe Hano's destination, which somehow contradicts the deeper meaning of the original.

Another passage presenting similar difficulties is the following: "Here we are again," Shay said, 'back to nowhere. The fuckers will never find us here.'²¹ The translation adopts the same solution as the previous example did for 'nowhere': "Eccoci qua," disse Shay, 'di nuovo ai confini del mondo. Nessuno ci scoverà mai.'²² ['Here we are,' Shay said, 'once more at the edge of the world. Nobody will ever find us.']. The decision to use the same expression as in the previous translation shows a certain coherence and an awareness that the word 'nowhere' constitutes an important

semantic unit. The problem is that the coordinates of ‘nowhere’ are variable and sometimes metaphorical in the Irish novel. They may reflect the mental state of the character who is uttering the word, rather than a geographical reality. In this case, Shay is simply referring to his house just outside the district where he and Hano grew up.

The expression “the edge of the world” chosen for the Italian translation is more specific than ‘nowhere,’ as it suggests marginality, which is not necessarily the case in the contingent situation of the novel. In *The Journey Home* ‘nowhere’ is a place outside the world, the liberation from the ‘where’ that has had such a heavy, negative influence on Hano’s and Shay’s lives. Also, in the Italian translation the colourful expression ‘the fuckers’ is missing. The Italian ‘Nessuno ci scoverà mai’ [*Nobody* is ever going to find us] suppresses an aspect of Shay’s personality by downplaying his feelings in that moment. More importantly, the source text implies that the power of this imaginary ‘non-place’ consists in being an alternative to a ‘whereness,’ which produces only ‘fuckers.’ The Italian translation, by replacing this expression by ‘nobody,’ misses the point that Hano’s and Shay’s ‘nowhere’ is not hidden from everybody, but only from those who have been corrupted by living within the world.

The lack of a single Italian expression that could stand for the different intended meanings of ‘nowhere’ in English prevents the translation from being systematic. “We came from *nowhere* and found we *belonged* nowhere else”²³ is translated as “Venivamo da un *luogo* inesistente e non appartenevamo a nessun altro *luogo*.”²⁴ [We came from a non-existent place and we did not belong to any other place]. Due to the restrictions of the Italian language, or rather a different subdivision of lexical matrices, the choice may be justified for want of a better option. Yet it upsets the lexical ‘balance’ of the source text, since it fails to recreate the mesmerising semantic

refrain achieved by the continuous repetition of words like ‘nowhere’ and ‘belong.’ The indiscriminate use of ‘luogo’ fails to convey the idea of Hano’s mental spaces as ‘somewhere else,’ distant from all the ‘real places.’ A translation less concerned about achieving a perfect formal acceptability by Italian standards could arguably make visible those themes in the novel which do not relate to the immediate experience of the target audience. If the assimilationist ideology of pseudo-transparency were challenged by choosing to use un-idiomatic language, the translators would become visible and the text would be revealed as ‘alien.’ In the case of *The Journey Home*, this could have provided a useful foreground to certain issues central to the novel.

It could be argued that stylistic choices that break the illusion of transparency would draw attention to linguistic deviations not present in the source text. This is true, but it should not be automatically dismissed as a ‘bad’ thing. It can be conceded that Bolger’s prose style is possibly less than punctiliously constructed, and most likely constitutes a mode of expression affected by the specific literary-socio-cultural context in which the novel is rooted. The contexts in which the translator and the Italian reader receive the novel are different. This means that the same words are bound to evoke a different web of resonances, and at times lose their original depth. The translator needs to reconstruct the linguistic texture of his source material in ways which meet the criteria of acceptability in the target language and culture.²⁵ This should not mean, however, that the pursuit of fluency and uniformity has to be the preferential mode of translation on every occasion. In a work of literature, the complexity to be conveyed to the target reader transcends the informative level, and some aesthetic qualities of individual novels as works of art can only be recovered, or perhaps re-elaborated, by disregarding what is perceived to be the natural flow of the target language. For this reason, when dealing with a work of literary fiction, the

employment of an ‘artificial’ language that performs translation as “an act of cultural restoration which aims to question and possibly re-form, or simply smash the idea of, canons at home”²⁶ should at least be conceived as a viable alternative.

The Landscape Symbolism: Implications of the Absence of Cultural Mediation in the Paratext

Respecting the linguistic and cultural differences of a novel, however, is only the first step towards exposing the translational dimension of the text. A translated text can achieve a more thoughtful interaction with the target readers’ horizons and expectations only by striving to contextualise foreign elements in ways which are intelligible to the receiving culture. The main difficulty posed by *The Journey Home* is its rootedness in Irish culture. This section will address elements such as the absence of any substantial critical interventions and the inappropriateness of the cover of the Italian edition of *The Journey Home*. It will show that, without some significant attempt on the publisher’s part to bridge the gap between the text and the target readers and to support the translation by means of paratextual features such as endnotes, critical introductions or appendixes, or more effective elements of mediation on the book cover, the complex and original aspects of this novel are unlikely to be fully appreciated.

In *The Journey Home*, the ways in which elements of urban and natural landscapes and their interaction contribute to enhance the message of the novel are numerous, yet the translation sometimes simply overlooks crucial aspects of the symbolic importance attributed to the landscape. For instance, when Hano and Katie, during their road trip, pass the “half-built fields along the North Road into the countryside of Kilshane Cross,”²⁷ the Italian translation qualifies Kilshane Cross as a “paesino” [a little village], and turns the “half-built field along the North Road” into “i cantieri in

costruzione che costeggiavano la North Road”²⁸ [the building sites along the North Road]. This glosses over the vital information that there were once ‘fields’ where the building sites have been erected. Nonetheless, the failure of the translation to foreground the association in Bolger’s novel between Irish identity and landscape is not simply due to deviations in the translation proper. The following examples show that the impression of easy accessibility given by reliance on the linguistic re-elaboration of the source text is ultimately deceiving.

The fact that the landscape plays such a central role, both in the plot and in its metaphorical repercussions, makes the translation problematic because ‘filters’ or ‘interruptions’ in the system of reception are inevitable. At a simpler level, the objects named may not correspond to any single referent for Italian readers. This applies not only to the proper names of counties, cities, roads, rivers and other geographical hallmarks, but also to names of natural elements, which have a broader cultural meaning in the Irish mind. This issue is exemplified by the concept of the ‘bog,’ used in the text not only as a natural element but also as a marker of identity. In *The Journey Home*, ‘bog’ frequently recurs in the characters’ thoughts and dialogues. The first time the word appears in the source text is during Hano’s encounter with Shay:

‘Francis’, I said. ‘Francis Hanrahan’
‘What did they call you at home, Francis or Frank?’
‘Francy.’
‘Good Jesus! Where did you leave the *spade*?’
He looked at me closely.
‘You’re no more from the *bog* than I am. Would you settle for Hano?’²⁹

For most readers familiar with Irish culture it would appear evident that here and elsewhere ‘bog’ is used as a synecdoche to refer to the rural parts of Ireland, with all their historical associations of poverty and backwardness or, alternatively, as repositories of a more authentic Irish identity. A single word, therefore, is used in a way which evokes an ageless dichotomy between tradition and modernity which

assumes a particularly poignant meaning within the context of Irish history. Some of the later phases of the British colonisation of the island, in fact, which had such a long-lasting effect for Irish people, were largely justified in terms of the advance of ‘progress.’

The translation, however, cannot sustain these meanings, because the Italian language has a single word, ‘torba’, to designate ‘bog,’ ‘peat’ or ‘turf.’ The word ‘torbiera’ can be used to refer to a territory, but the more direct referents ‘torba’ and ‘torbiera’ refer to the material itself, without any of the value of cultural heritage that ‘bog’ has in Ireland. The Italian translator, therefore, is content to keep the general meaning of Shay’s pun, achieved by reiterating the word ‘vanga’ [spade], as an allusion to the rural community:

‘Francis’, risposi. ‘Francis Hanrahan’
‘Come ti chiamano i tuoi, Francis o Frank?’
‘Francy’.
‘Oh, Cristo! Hai lasciato la *vanga* di fuori?’
Mi guardò più da vicino.
‘No tu non sai nemmeno cosa sia una *vanga* esattamente, non meglio di me, almeno. Ti va se ti chiamo Hano?’³⁰

[‘Francis,’ I replied. ‘Francis Hanrahan’
‘How do your parents call you, Francis or Frank?’
‘Francy.’
‘Oh, Christ! Did you leave the spade outside?’
He looked closer at me.
‘No you don’t even know that it is a spade exactly, not more than I do, at least. Are you ok if I call you Hano?’]

Nevertheless, such a solution falls far short of capturing the internal cross-references created by the source text which, through a metaphorical use of the Irish landscape, gives substance to the meaning of the novel.

‘Bog’ keeps reappearing in dialogues to refer to everything that Hano, being from Dublin, is not. Moreover, the traits associated with bogland are also those shown by the Irish countryside through which Hano flees after having committed a crime, an

escape that also proves itself to be a crucial step in the protagonist's path towards self-definition:

They left the shelter of the turf bank and began to cross the brown landscape, skirting the pools of black water, manoeuvring their way across the flooded stretches by stepping from tuft to tuft of coarse grass. After a mile the ground improved and they could walk more freely.³¹

The typical elements of a bogland, such as the 'turf bank', the 'brown landscape' and 'the pools of black water' will clearly be a metaphorical reprise of the novel's subtext for the Irish reader. Not so for the Italian reader, for whom the 'paesaggio spoglio' and 'scure pozze d'acqua' are the mere physical description of what is defined as a 'torbiera,' a place they probably encounter for the first time in the novel, and which does not carry any particular meaning for them:

Si alzarono dal loro riparo nella torbiera e s'incamminarono in quel paesaggio spoglio, costeggiando le scure pozze d'acqua o cercando di evitarle saltando da una zolla d'erba all'altra. Per più di un miglio il terreno continuò a essere paludoso, poi il cammino si fece più agevole.³²

[They got up from their shelter in the turf bank and they began to walk in that bare landscape, along the pools of dark water or trying to avoid them jumping from one tuft of grass to the next. For more than one mile the soil remained swampy, then they could walk more freely.]

In the source text, the symbolic significance of the wilderness of the bog is further enhanced by the fact that it functions as counterpoint to the dystopic angle from which progress is presented in this novel. Hano's reflections towards the end of the book illustrate this point:

For a while longer the lorries will keep coming, widening the roadways with their tyres, dumping the plastic sacks into the quarry until the holiday homes grow so close that the continentals will object. Our role is to offer tranquillity, not rivers awash with the eyes of dead fish.³³

For an Italian reader to share the textual perspective of the novel is difficult, as Italians belong precisely to those 'continentals' who, looking at Ireland from outside, 'will object' to the degradation of their holiday homes. By reading the book they are 'spying' on a sensibility which is not their own. Quite emblematically in the translation 'our role' becomes 'il ruolo della nostra isola', 'the role of our island,'

which keeps the first person plural possessive, but emphasises the fact that it is somebody belonging to the Irish island who is talking:

I camion continueranno a fare su e giù ancora per un po', allargheranno la strada con i loro pneumatici e getteranno i loro sacchi di plastica nella cava. Quando le villette per le vacanze cominceranno a essere costruite troppo vicino alla discarica, dal continente si solleverà un coro di proteste. Il ruolo della nostra isola è quello di offrire tranquillità e non fiumi infestati dai vitrei occhi di pesci morti.³⁴

[The trucks will keep coming and going for a while, widening the roadways with their tyres and dumping their plastic sacks into the quarry. When the holiday homes will start to be built too close to the dumping ground, a cry of protest will rise from the continent. The role of our island is to offer tranquillity and not rivers awash with glassy-eyed dead fishes.]

The original also carries an implicit critique of the image of the island as it has been promoted abroad, the image that, being a target of this policy, Italians are likely to have of Ireland: "The last corner of Europe, the green jewel free from the paths of acid rain. A land preserved intact for the community. German tongues clicking in amusement at how it was run in the last years."³⁵ Bolger's concise picture is one full of bitterness. The Italian version tends to unnecessary expansions, and a good part of the bitterness in the tone is lost:

[...] l'ultimo angolo verde d'Europa, il gioiello di smeraldo della Comunità sarà così protetto dalle piogge acide. Un paradiso per turisti che risuonerà delle voci divertite dei tedeschi che denigreranno l'operato del governo irlandese negli ultimi anni.³⁶

[...] the last green corner of Europe, the emerald jewel of the Community will thus be protected from the acid rain. A heaven for tourists, which will resonate with the amused voices of German people, who will denigrate what the Irish government has done in the latest years.]

The target text does adapt the stylistic devices typical of the tourist industry to Italian equivalents yet, by replacing the sombre sarcasm of the source text by a more formal tone, it makes it probably even less likely that the reader will interpret the passage in terms of the author's postmodern use of those same mediums he is criticising.

Another passage presenting some postmodern features is the long following paragraph about Dublin, where stereotypical views of Irishness are inserted into a futuristic description of the country:

[...] I'm released back into a city ringed by golf clubs. Exclusive restaurants between the green canals, sporadic insurrections still in the shanty towns. The crowd of youth not dispersed by the water cannon but by the bored cameraman finally screwing the cover over the lens. Out there electric fences will hum in the evenings, crackling when a stray dog stumbles against them. In the white pillar beside the solid wooden gates an intercom will wait for messages. Motorists gliding silently through the woodlands, the drone of Dutch and French over the car telephones. And the chosen million Irish left: red-haired girls in peasant aprons bringing menus to diners in the converted castles, at one hand of the scale; at the other, middle ranking civil servants who will close their eyes at night, knowing that once we could have stood up as equals, not been bought out like children by the quick lure of grants. Irish officials, knowing they began too late to reach the top posts, will swap electronic gadgets with their neighbours, wondering some evenings about the times of their youth, never speaking of them in front of their children, like parents a century and a half before ashamed of their Gaelic tongue.³⁷

The stereotypes are still recognisable in Italian, and Italian readers are probably able to realise that Bolger's references to features of Ireland, normally found in a touristic brochure, are meant to be a poignant critique, one that can also be universalised in terms that transcend Irish circumstances.

Yet, although the ending of the novel ideally places *The Journey Home* close to books such as *1984* or *Brave New World*, its universal scope is more difficult to grasp because, rather than being used to decontextualize, as is often the case, the postmodern elements here serve to hypercontextualise the setting. The closing sentence of the paragraph: 'wondering some evenings about the time of their youth, never speaking of them in front of their children, like parents a century and a half before ashamed of their Gaelic tongue,' has an immense emotional resonance with Irish readers. For Italian readers, however, the language issue in Ireland is no more than an acquired notion to them, at best. This insistence on aspects peculiar to Irish culture necessarily precludes the full involvement of Italian readers, all the more so that no explanatory material is offered.

The same disregard for any active form of cultural mediation, shown by the absence of introductions, notes or postscripts, is echoed by the cover chosen by Italian publisher Fazi for the pocket edition. This, as the caption in the colophon explains, showcases the photo of a young couple taken from the student movement in France during the 1960s, and both the features of the people depicted and the urban landscape

in the background are very far from evoking any connotation of Irishness. The Irish quality of the book is partly recovered by a short blurb from *The Irish Times* assessing Bolger's novel as "the best novel about Dublin after Joyce." Essentially, the promotion of the novel relies on the appeal of decontextualised rebellion, juxtaposed with a Dublin of Joycean remembrance. Although these two tags may indeed be associated with Bolger's novel, the reductive terms of this simplistic façade, which aims at achieving accessibility for Italian readers, also leaves them without any relevant interpretative key.

Conclusions

This article has indicated, as a possible line of investigation for Translation Studies, the need to assess whether, and to what extent, issues like semantic difficulties or the presence of culture-specific themes - vastly discussed among translation theorists - are dealt with in the *practice* of translation. This case study has provided examples of how a translation policy of pseudo-transparency may achieve linguistic and stylistic domestication on the textual level and how this, in turn, may create the *impression* of cultural domestication. The analysis has also shown that, in reality, 'pseudo-transparent' translations are more likely to generate 'puzzled' looks, as readers are often unable to get a grip on the subtexts in translated texts; or else, when they get a 'basic' grip, it is often not enough to appreciate the subtle nuances of the original literary texts.. Additional evidence about the effects of strategies like pseudo-transparency is needed but, overall, the preliminary findings presented here seem to bring some of the publisher's priorities into question.

A few editions by smaller Italian publishers do counteract the *diktats* of pseudo-transparency by means of including notes, or even small essays by the translators, or

interviews with the author. As far as Irish contemporary fiction is concerned, the attitude displayed by the publisher Le Lettere in Florence could be mentioned as a case in point. The Italian translation of a novel by Cork author Conal Creedon, for instance, is supported by a robust critical introduction by Irish literature expert Fiorenzo Fantaccini, the translator of the novel, and a final interview with the author, which was released specifically for the occasion of his publication in Italy. Publications of this kind, however, remain the exception within a publishing environment which generally leaves the ‘keen readers’ wondering why the qualitative nature of translations from the work of a Nobel Prize-winning author are not so dissimilar from that of the latest crime thriller or ‘chick-lit’ phenomenon.

Stripped of its metaphorical qualities, *The Journey Home* is turned into a bleak, depressing novel, and the significance of those elements deeply rooted in the source text’s language and culture are likely to be diminished. When forewords or introductions, translator’s notes and glossaries are not recommended or not allowed by publishers, readers are not provided with the means to approach ‘foreign’ material with an informed look. The analysis has shown that the Italian translation of this novel was preferentially aimed at imagined readers unable or unwilling to access its deepest layer of significance, and that this supposedly market-based strategy may well have been counterproductive to the book’s actual market success. Promoting a translation strategy that took account of the novel’s cultural specificity, instead, could have stimulated a “heterogeneous discourse” which, by releasing the shock of “not understanding,” may have ultimately resulted in a precious “space for learning.”³⁸ In this sense, a target text performing a ‘minoritizing’ translation could have better expressed the meaning of *The Journey Home* through an expert use of opaqueness and foreignising technique. Such a disclosure of alterity would enable placing the foreign in

a context of relationships and associations familiar to the target readers without resulting in assimilation. From this perspective paratextual comments could perform an active interaction with the translation proper and become to be accepted as an integral part of the target text.

Overall then, the decision to present *The Journey Home* in the easy-reading format and discourage translators from embracing a critical perspective as a positive, even necessary, approach to translation, ended up reducing the interpretative options for the readers. In particular, while allegedly making the target text appealing to a larger audience, ‘pseudo-transparency’ limited the hermeneutic possibilities of the novel even for the highly educated ‘keen reader,’ that statistics have outlined as the profile corresponding to the majority of book buyers in Italy.

Notes

¹ See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

² Lawrence Venuti, L., “Translation as cultural politics: Regimes of domestication in English,” *Textual Practice*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1993), p. 15.

³ Lawrence Venuti, “Genealogies of Translation Theory: Schleiermacher,” *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1991), pp. 125-150.

⁴ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” in *Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig*, ed. and trans. André Lefevere (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), pp. 67-89.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, “How newness enters the world: postmodern space, postcolonial times, and the trials of cultural translation,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 212-235.

⁶ Franca Cavagnoli, “Cultural Hybridity and Liminal Space in Post-Colonial Literary Translation,” public seminar given at Moore Institute, National University of Ireland, Galway (28 September 2011).

⁷ Data collected 1994. See Giovanni Peresson, *Le cifre dell'editoria 1997*, (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1997), p. 32.

⁸ Peresson, *Le cifre dell'editoria 1997*, p. 221.

⁹ Giovanni Peresson, *Le cifre dell'editoria 1995* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1995), p. 288.

¹⁰ Aldo Signorini, “The images of the keen reader in European research,” in Permanent European Reading Watch, <http://www.grinzane.net/Osservatorio2003/Osservatorio2003_ENG.html>. Website consulted Jan. 20, 2010.

¹¹ See AIE (Associazione Italiana Editori), *Rapporto sullo stato dell’editoria in Italia 2009*, <<http://www.aie.it>>. Website consulted January 20, 2010.

¹² Conor McCarthy, “Ideology and Geography in Dermot Bolger’s *The Journey Home*,” *Irish University Review*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1997), p. 98.

¹³ Terence Rafferty, “New Dubliners,” *The New York Times Book Review*, April 20 2008.

¹⁴ Terence Rafferty, “New Dubliners.”

¹⁵ Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 8. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Dermot Bolger, *Verso Casa*, trans. Lucia Olivieri (Roma: Fazi Editore, 2001), p. 15. Emphasis mine. Back translation mine. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent back translations are mine.

¹⁷ Nida quoted in André Lefevere, “German Translation Theory: Legacy and Relevance,” *Journal of European Studies*, no. 11 (1981), p. 11.

¹⁸ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 314. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 264. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 314.

²¹ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 76.

²² Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 98.

²³ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 7. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 14.

²⁵ Gideon Toury, “The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation,” in *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995), pp. 53-69.

²⁶ Lawrence Venuti, “Genealogies of Translation Theory: Schleiermacher,” p. 146.

²⁷ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 233.

²⁸ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 337.

²⁹ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 17. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 27. Emphasis mine.

³¹ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 146.

³² Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 178.

³³ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 292.

³⁴ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 347.

³⁵ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 292.

³⁶ Bolger, *Verso Casa*, p. 347.

³⁷ Bolger, *The Journey Home*, p. 292.

³⁸ James Boyd White, “On the virtues of not understanding,” in *Between languages and cultures: translation and cross-cultural texts*, eds. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Carol Maier (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), p. 337.

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