La palabra a los teatristas: la traducción de obras dramáticas de W.B.Yeats para la escena contemporánea italiana.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo trata de los problemas, desafíos, soluciones y estrategias en la traducción para la escena de obras dramáticas desconocidas para los artistas de teatro por falta de traducciones adecuadas. La situación analizada se hace paradójica porque se trata de la producción dramática de un autor que en el mismo país es celebrado –y traducido– como poeta famoso.

Es el caso de W.B.Yeats y de la compleja acogida de su obra en el panorama italiano: aunque el autor irlandés sea muy reconocido como poeta en Italia, su obra dramática no ha suscitado el mismo interés. Esta falta de traducciones y publicaciones lleva como consecuencia natural la ausencia de representaciones para el público teatral, directo destinatario de la investigación y práctica de Yeats como dramaturgo. A lo largo de un siglo, después de haber sido la primera forma bajo la cual W.B. Yeats se tradujo en Italia en revistas especializadas a principios del siglo veinte, el teatro de W.B.Yeats no ha sido publicado sistemáticamente como sus poemas, a excepción de pocas ediciones de algunas obras traducidas por escritores, que han dado a su teatro una impronta literaria, alejándolo aún más del medio para el que fueron escritas. En cambio, alrededor de los años noventa, la reiterada publicación de sus "*Five Plays for Dancers"* se descubre debido a la atracción que el mundo mitológico celta ejerce en el público general de lectores italianos y no a un nuevo interés por la producción dramática deYeats.

En este marco, el artículo reflexiona sobre aspectos prácticos de la traducción de algunas obras de W.B.Yeats para la escena contemporánea. El trabajo del traductor profesional que conoce la obra general del autor y tiene experiencia profesional en teatro no sólo se muestra indispensable para que los artistas tengan interés en poner en escena estas obras, sino que revela también cómo la traducción con estas características anticipa el espacio de trabajo de directores y de actores, entregándoles un texto que respeta el original y al mismo tiempo prevé su investigación en el contexto teatral contemporáneo, que se pone en equilibrio entre 'leibilidad' y 'actuabilidad' y restituye la justa dimensión de exploración del medio teatral para el que las obras de Yeats fueron creadas.

Palabras clave: W.B. Yeats, traducción teatral, problemas y estrategias de traducción, teatrista.

The title of this XIII meeting is very challenging if taken literally in the case of the past, present and future of the translation of Yeats's dramatic works in Italy. Very famous as a poet, the Irish author does not enjoy a position among renowned playwrights whose works are read or staged in Italy. One of the reasons is the way in which his plays were translated in the past, causing a lack of interest by artists and therefore by audiences.

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Nor among Italian theatre scholars is Yeats an outstanding figure[1], in spite of the fact that his were many innovations that were adopted by several theatre artists who put into practice his intuitions in later periods. I believe that Yeats's neglect in theatre studies is a direct consequence of the reception of his plays in Italy through the translations of poets and scholars, who contributed to the literary rendering of his dramatic production, meant to be read rather than staged.

The prejudice that Yeats was mainly a poet for whom theatre was a pastime is not only Italian, but it also belongs to English-speaking countries. This is why it will be useful, for the purpose of the present analysis, to see to what extent he was involved in theatre practice. His plays convey his *ante-litteram* experimentations that later represented, in the work of later European artists, the core of the twentieth century theatre research, that still today is at the heart of contemporary performers' craft.

The title of this essay has multiple meanings: "giving voice to theatre-makers" means first of all to listen to their voice as one amongst sources for discussion, secondly it refers to the importance of making translations available that keep into account performance and lastly, where possible, to record feed-back on the translated play-texts by contemporary theatre professionals such as actors, directors, stage designers and musicians, as the staging process provide translators with a precious experience for their work.

To begin with, it is vital to take a look at the frequency and quality of the translations of Yeats's plays published in Italy. To do so, this paper will refer to the Fiorenzo Fantaccini's seminal work recently published in Italian on the reception of W. B. Yeats's work in Italy from 1905 to 2005[2], and from his preceding essay contained in the volume concerning the Irish poet's reception in Europe[3]. Both these works provide a precious list of the translations of Yeats's dramatic works in Italy, accompanied by original reviews. Fantaccini gives evidence that Italy received first Yeats's plays and only later his poetry, as "[...] the tendency to consider Yeats only or mainly a dramatist prevails in Italy up to the 1930s[4]." The first Ita lian writer to "import" Yeats in our country is Mario Borsa, who, as early as 1905, states "that the basic elements of Yeats's poetry can also be traced in his plays, which, because they are founded on dreams and have themes and characters inspired by the heroic age of his country, may not translate well to non-Irish sta ges"[5], whereas in 1914, "by contrast, Federico Olivero finds the provincial side of Yeats's dramas the more important one.[6]" 1914 is also the year when translations by the Lombard writer Carlo Linati, which will mark the first fifty years of the century, were published. Invited to translate

[1] With the exception of Nicola Savarese, who focuses on the dramaturgical interest Yeats had for the Noh theatre, in N. Savarese, Teatro e Spettacolo fra Oriente e Occidente, Roma, Laterza, 1992, p. 405-419) and Clelia Falletti (see note 21).

[2] F. Fantaccini, *W.B. Yeats e la cultura Italiana*, Firenze University Press, 2009.

[3] P. K. Jochum, ed. by, *The Reception of W. B. Yeats in Europe*, London and New York, Continuum, 2006.

[4] F. Fantaccini, in P. K. Jochum, *op. cit.* p.96.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

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Synge's Riders to the Sea by the musician Franco Leoni, who wanted to set the play to music, Linati subsequently read Yeats's plays, and decided to translate them into Italian. It is interesting what Fantaccini reports from Linati's *memoirs* on the meeting he had in London with the poet, who appeared to him «'very much taken with a scenic mysticism, to those refined questions of light, darkness and mystery that were fashionable in Italy too, but many years later»[7]. From a translation perspective, Fantaccini writes: "Linati's rendering of Yeats's poetical text into Italian prose is not without faults; his taste for imposing Tuscan idioms and erudite nuances on the original is disconcerting."[8] As a consequence, "[...] the book did not sell well, but this did not discourage Linati, who continued to translate more of Yeats's work"[9]. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to consider the different outcome of Linati's adaptation of *The Land of Heart's Desire* for a musical rendering by Franco Leoni, staged in Milan in 1920. The libretto, wites Fantaccini, "is a successful attempt to adjust the Tuscan note of the translation to the requirements of the score[10]."

The year 1926 sees the reading of Yeats as a dramatist by Mario Vinciguerra that Fantaccini does not hesitate to define a "crushing criticism"[11], whereas Guido Ruberti in 1928 "defines Yeats and Synge two playwrights whose nature «is too local, their reach too small for them to aspire to an effective influence on the great evolution of the European dramatic literature.»[12]" In 1934 Camillo Pellizzi's "judgement on the whole is negative: Yeats's plays are not effective, too lyrical and too little dramatic, they are suitable for reading but not for the stage[13]." If, following Yeats's awards of the Nobel Prize in 1923, the great Sicilian novelist Tomasi di Lampedusa finds that "the esoteric content of the more recent *Four Plays for Dancers* 'overpowers its formal splendour' [...], years later he "again writes on Yeats [...] partly revising his earlier positions; he considers Yeats's theatre marginal [...]" [14]. Fantaccini argues that until 1935, Yeats's presence in the Italian cultural scene is limited to interventions in a 'an old-fashioned-academic style'[15] and adds that "the popularity [of Yeats's creative activity] was partly achieved in the 1940s, when Linati's versions of Yeats's plays were repu-blished[16]." Fantaccini specifies that the Italian writer had revised his translations and now "the result was less inventive and more faithful to the Yeatsian text[17]."

If the 50's are opened by the great scholar and translator Agostino Lombardo who "considers [Yeats's] dramatic production of lesser value if compared to his poetry"[18],

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[7] *Ibid,* p. 97.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] F. Fantaccini, *W.B. Yeats e la cultura Italiana, op. cit.* p.173 (my translation).
[12] *Ibid,* my translation.
[13] *Ibid,* my translation.
[14] F. Fantaccini in *The Reception of W. B. Yeats in Europe, op. cit.,* p. 98-99.
[15] *W.B. Yeats e la cultura Italiana, op. cit.* p.173 (my translation).
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] F. Fantaccini in *The Reception of W. B. Yeats in Europe, op. cit.,* p. 97.
[18] *W.B. Yeats e la cultura Italiana, op. cit.* p.181 (my translation).

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Fantaccini writes that in the whole decade "the interest for Yeats as a playwright seems almost exhausted[19]." It will be between 1966 and 1969 that the publication of Yeats's plays in Italy will amount to eleven plays, the greatest number up to the present. Two more pieces of information from Fantaccini's precious and detailed account are to be highlighted here: the fact that the only translations presented as "stageworthy" are those by Gigi Lunari, published in the anthology *Teatro Irlandese* (Irish Theatre) in 1961, and the appearance in 1963 of the title *Drammi Celtici* (*Celtic Plays)*, a selection by Roberto Sanesi. I have focused elsewhere on the "refractions" testifying to the fashionable appeal that Irish mythology began to exert in Italy in the 1990s as probably playing a role in the translations of Yeats's five plays on the hero Cuchulain, published with the title Five *Celtic plays* and *Celtic Plays*, in 1990 and 1999 respectively[20], although the latter is the first edition of translations the writer Giorgio Manganelli did in the 50's. In the century-long account by Fantaccini there are of course a couple of exceptions regarding good translations of single plays, but on the whole the reception of Yeats's theatre in Italy is the one presented above, which certainly did not contribute to creating an interest in his dramatic production, let alone the availability of his 26 theatre plays.

The publication of Yeats's "Cuchulain Cycle" in the 90's, coincides with the interest of theatre studies for Yeats's experiments with the Japanese Classical theatre that he introduced in Europe. The essay by Clelia Falletti, *Yeats e l'attore di cultura poetica* (Yeats and the actor of poetic culture)[21], does not follow the general criticism on Yeats, polarized in the "conflict" between poetry and theatre, but gives instead an insight into Yeats's practical theatre experience, developed around a special attention for the actor's training.

The importance the stage had for Yeats can be found in many of his writings. Useful are some passages that highlight how much his poetic theatre was shaped and reshaped by his daily practice with actors, stage directors, composers and dancers. Talking about his early version of T*he Shadowy Waters,* the famous poet writes to actress Florence Farr: "I am surprized at the badness of a great deal of it in its present form. The performance has enabled me to see the play with a fresh eye. It has been like looking at a picture reversed as in a looking glass[22]." In another letter dating 1905, after he finished his play *Deirdre*, the surge of creative enthusiasm makes him confide to the same actress and Muse: "I do believe I have made a great play out of *Deirdre* [...] most powerful and even sensational (...) I always saw your face as I wrote. Very curiously your face even more than your voice and built the character out of that[23]." Only two years later, the preface to the printed edition of the play displays a very different tone. Now the admission that stage practice produces a completely different

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[19] *Ibid* (my translation).

[20] *Il Ciclo di Cuchulain. Cinque drammi Celtici*, Garzanti, 1990 Trad. di Melita Cataldi; *William Butler Yeats, Drammi Celtici*, Milano, Bur, 1999 Trad. di Giorgio Manganelli, a cura di Viola Papetti.

[21] C. Falletti, "Yeats e l'attore di Cultura Poetica", in *Quaderni di Teatro* , Anno IV, n. 16, giugno 1982.

[22] C. Bax, ed by, *Florence Farr, Bernard Shaw and W.B.Yeats*, Dublin, The Cuala Press, MCMXLI, p. 48.

[23] *Ibid*, p. 60.

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perspective in the playwright, unthinkable of for the poet who works in isolation, is not only a confidence entrusted to his private correspondence. In the section entitled 'alterations' in the volume *Deirdre* (1907), Yeats writes: "There are two passages in this play as published which I always knew to be mere logic, mere bones, and yet, after many attempts, I thought it impossible to alter them. When, however, Mrs. Campbell offered to play the part, my imagination began to work again. I think they are now as they should be[24]." In the 1911 edition of the same play, it is again the changes in *Deirdre* to be commented upon by the author, this time to give credit to the inspiration generated in him by the precious new methods of lighting and staging developed by Gordon Craig, the famous innovator of XX century European theatre, thanks to which Yeats hoped he could create: "a theatre that will please the poet and the player and the painter[25]." The movable "screens" created by Craig and his study of light, both made possible by inventions in theatre engineering such as hydraulic lifts, are techniques Yeats experimented with in order "to lay the events of my plays [...] allowing the scene to give the words and the words the scene[26]." At the Abbey production of *The Countess Cathleen* in 1911, revised with renewed enthusiasm thanks to Craig's technical innovations, Yeats was sitting "near the operator of a limelight in the balcony, calling the cues for lighting changes [...], one scene ra-pidly merging into another, actors entering through the audience and by the wings[27]."

Collaboration with Craig deeply affected Yeats's practice and therefore the writing of his plays. It is impossible to comment extensively here on the revolutionary use of masks that the collaboration between Yeats and Craig inspired. The many masked characters in Yeats's plays are a central element in his dramaturgy and represent the fulfillment of his dream expressed in 1910: "I should like the Abbey to be the first modern theatre to use the mask[28]." Even Craig's famous
theory of the "*Uber-marionette*" met Yeats's favour, as it came after years in which the playwright had been striving to find the proper acting style, very diffe-rent from naturalism and realistic details, and it influenced his idea of tragedy as expressed in *The Tragic Theatre,* published in Craig's theatre magazine *The Mask* in October 1910. On his part, Craig considered Yeats "to be 'a great play-writer, and without question the greatest of the Irish-play writers'[29]."

It is important to bear in mind that both Craig's theories of the Mask and the *Uber-marionette* not only were at the origin of Yeats's experimental dramaturgy, but also that today, having become a tradition in performers' training in the course of the

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[24] *Deirdre by W.B.Yeats, Being volume V of Plays for an Irish Theatre*, London: A.H. Bullen, Dublin: Maunsel Co., LTD, 1907, p. 1.
[25] *Plays for an Irish Theatre by W.B.Yeats*, A.H. Bullen, London & Stratford Upon Avon, 1911, p. xii.
[26] *Ibid,* p. XIII.
[27] J.W. Flannery, W.B.Yeats, "Gordon Craig and the Visual Arts of the Theatre", in R. O' Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds ed. by, *Yeats and the Theatre*, London and Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1975, p. 103-4.
[28] From a letter to Lady Gregory, ibid, p. 99.
[29] *Ibid*, p. 84.

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XX century, they pose a choice regarding acting and directing. If Yeats himself "altered the relationship between characters", for example revising the whole dialogue of the Wise Man in *The Hour Glass* as a response to the Fool's mimes, now determined by the mask he wears,[30] in the same way, for a translator that has familiarity with such theatre traditions, the knowledge that the text is to be delivered by masked characters can affect his/her language choices. Examples can be found in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, staged –through my translation– as a masked performance by a theatre group in 1995 and 1997 for the Catania Summer Festival, and by a company in Northern Italy in 1998.

The rhymed songs of *Deirdre* pose a different challenge, when the purpose of the translation is to provide verses that can be not only read, not only acted, but also sung. For their translations I am working on the original music from 1907 with a composer and a soprano, as Yeats's theory on the delivery of verse accompanied by music poses a specific challenge to actors, who, in his words, are "called upon to don a kind of vocal mask" too[31].

It is interesting to give voice to Yeats's main actors to understand how much performers felt protagonists of his theatre experience, much ahead of the whole shift, later in the century, from a supremacy of the text to that of the actor. William G. Fay writes in his memoirs: "And here is my great point that can never be sufficiently emphasized. The Abbey Theatre was first and foremost a theatrical, not a literary movement. It was the creation not of men of letters but of actors" and to clarify his point he uses the famous Norwegian playwright for comparison: "Ibsen made a theatre to suit his plays. We of the Abbey made our theatre first and then got plays to suit it, which, I venture to submit, is the natural order[32]." Remembe-ring the early performances, W.G. Fay talks about Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* in these terms: "We liked it very much and thought the company gave an excellent performance, one thing being very noticeable: the admirable delivery of Mr. Yeats's verse, which was not so speakable then as in his later plays, for he had little experience of writing for the stage. Later he had the Abbey Company to experiment with and made *On Baile's Strand* as easy to speak as any play of Shakespeare[33]." These accounts highlight the great difference between Yeats's work and that of other playwrights of the time, as criticized by Frank J. Fay as early as 1901: "Nearly all the plays by Irish authors whose works I have witnessed have showed lack of familiarity with the footlights. [...] The popular impression is that a play leaves the author's hands complete; but the fact is, save in very few instances, a great deal has to be done at rehearsals. The dramatist in his novitiate puts things into his work that become impossible on the stage[34]." When Frank J. Fay writes this, the Abbey Theatre is still to be founded, but Fay is defend-

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[30] *Ibid*, p. 99.
[31] J.W. Flannery, *W.B. Yeats and the idea of a Theatre*, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 197.
[32] W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, an autobiographical record*, London, Rich & Cowan, LTD, 1935, p. 106.
[33] *Ibid*, p. 112.
[34] F. J. Fay, *Towards a National Theatre. The Dramatic Criticism of F.J. Fay*, The Dolmen Press, 1970, p. 76.

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ing the preceding experience from which the national theatre originated, "The Irish Literary Theatre", that "has not talked learnedly about the drama; it has had plays written, and produced them[35]."

As the stage was the context in which Yeats's plays were born and to which they tend as its cultural recipient, translations that keep into account performability are vital to measure the validity of those plays in the transfer to a different language, country and time. Within the larger field of literary translation, Rose Schwartz says: "I call the translation process 'finding a voice'. There's a point in the translation where I suddenly feel very confident and I know what the mood should be, I know what the characters should say and I know what the register of language should be. It can take quite a while to reach this point[36]." Such a consideration is very fitting if applied to the translation of a text that will be given to actors to be performed. The voice we hear and we get almost familiar to while translating belongs to us and our reading of the author's but it is the actors, who neither know the original text, nor all the choices we have made, who will give voice to the characters on stage. Anthea Bell echoes Rose Schwarz: "you can pretend to be all sorts of different people, thinking your way into their minds and, you hope, saying in [your language] what they have said in their own[37]." The actors' interpretation of characters whose voices we have contributed to mould is a precious test for our work. Just like Schwarz says, there is no general rule: "there is no right, objective or single translation; your translation is your reading of that author. Your choices are inevitably going to be subjective, your vocabulary is a personal vocabulary, different from anybody's else[38]." It is easy to understand that familia-rity with the translated author on one hand and with theatre practice on the other, with its rules of effectiveness –of the text amongst all other elements– can help a translator of theatre plays create an actable play-text that will coexist with all the other elements of the performance before reaching the audience. This is a "second passage" I consider essential for a translator who has an interest in the theatre, because it proves the validity of the text in the general composition. The charming result is that the elements of action, set, music and lights, that is, the author's and/or director's choices, are capable of creating endless effects around the textual information we have provided. When the play is not a free adaptation but it aims to follow the original text, the difference between the translator's and director's task is well expressed by Anthea Bell: "the difference is that unlike an actor or director, a translator is not licensed to offer a bold, provocatively new interpretation of a text. We owe a duty to our authors and our readers alike. But ours is still, like acting, an interpretative craft[39]." The opinion of Antoine Vitez, poet, translator and actor, is more extreme: "A great translation, because it is truly a literary creation, already contains its *mise en*

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[35] *Ibid*, p. 84.

[36] R. Schwarz, "A Dialogue on a translator's intervention", in S. Bassnett, and P. Bush, ed. by, *The translator as writer*, London and New York, Continuum, 2006, p. 10.

[37] Anthea Bell, "Translation: Walking the tightrope of illusion", in *The Translator as Writer*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[38] R. Schwarz, op. cit. p. 11.

[39] A.Bell, op. cit., p. 59.

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scène. Ideally, the translation ought to dominate the *mise en scène,* not the reverse[40]." An actor's interpretation and a director's "vision" that arise from a play text - often the only surviving thing that connects us to the past- can free translation from the "slavery" in which it is often constrained in theatre. Let us consider, for example, the numerous literal translations from languages not spoken by directors, who creatively work on the word-for-word content to create a new interpretation of the original text. For Vitez, the main source for inspiration rests on the text by the original author, where even what escapes translation is of vital importance: "That which is not translatable, which refuses to let itself be reduced to familiar forms, is what I find interesting[41]." Vitez doesn't believe in the idea of getting "writers to cooperate with acting companies" as a way to "the production of good texts serving the need of the theatre[42]." Defense of the original author supports his motivation: "What annoys me in this idea is the implicit distrust that it reveals of the irreducible Poet. It is the irreducibility of the Poet which is important to me."[43] His assertion is very useful in the consideration of theatre authors who, like Yeats, imbued their dramatic productions with experimental techniques that only later in the century became theatre traditions: "Claudel's work could not be played according to the techniques existing at the time he wrote it. It was far in advance of the production techniques of his time. The same applies to Checkov's work. It could not really be staged until the director Stanislavski became fascinated by Checkov's work and decided to produce his work[44]."

Paraphrasing James Flannery's statement that, "by rediscovering the histrionic techniques necessary to perform Yeats's own plays [...] the theatre may rediscover an important portion of its true identity and purpose[45]", the same could be argued of drama translation, for which identity and purpose the degree of performability is of primary importance. In the preface to the published acting and poetic version of *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats declared: "I am most anxious that this book, which will go among people who have a technical interest in the stage, should show that I understand my trade as a practical dramatist. It will injure me if it contains a play which is evidently unfit for the stage as it stands[46]." In the case of the fortune of his dramatic production in Italy, unsuitable translations for the stage have surely damaged his craft, failing to interest theatre-makers, and preventing his fame as a playwright from being established for a whole century.

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[40] P. Pavis, ed. by, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, London and New York Routledge, 1996, p. 125).
[41] *Ibid,* p. 126.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] J. W. Flannery, 1976, op. cit. p. 211.
[46] *Ibid,* p. 295.

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