

Journeys in translation: refugee poems

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the experience of a literary translation seminar at the University of Torino, developed as part of the international translation project *Journeys in Translation*. The seminar examined and translated six poems centred on the question of refugees. The discussions brought to the fore the inextricable relations between linguistic/figurative knots and issues related to refugees migrating to contemporary Europe, in all their human and humane facets. More specifically, the six translated poems offered the participants a chance to reflect on issues such as the reversing of one's ingrained perspectives and the adoption of the Other's vision; the language of war; the spatial constraints of diasporas and migration policies; the questioning of stereotypical dichotomies between different cultures; and the genre of journalistic poetry with its potential to enrich media reports. A series of theoretical reflections and practical activities around translation emphasised the privileged role of literature for an ethical approach towards otherness.

Keywords

asylum seekers, refugees, migration policies, poetry, postcolonial translation, translation theory

In the spring of the academic year 2016-2017, I taught an MA course in English Literature and Translation, with a special focus on translating postcolonial texts. The course had already started when I came across a collection of poems on refugees by various authors, *Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for Those Seeking Refuge* (Five Leaves Publications, 2015). The book had been conceived as a collective response to the so-called refugee crisis, which struck the British public opinion in the summer of 2015.¹

In the light of my current studies on new forms of slavery in today's Britain, I found the collection of great interest. And I was even more pleased to discover the existence of an international translation project attached to the book, *Journeys in Translation*, an open call to translate 13 poems (or some of them) selected from the collection into any language. Ambrose Musiyiwa (one of the poets and inspirers of *Over Land*) launched this initiative to encourage people to reflect, through working between languages, on our attitude towards those seeking refuge (with a final event to be held in Leicester on 30th September 2017, International Translation Day).

I found this a unique opportunity to help my students engage in practical work on this urgent postcolonial issue. Musiyiwa declared that the collection aimed at showing that those

“who are seeking refuge are people and not numbers, insects or environmental phenomena” (Bradshaw 2016). This is where the role of art indeed comes into play. Gabriele Del Grande, the Italian film director and social activist who was recently jailed by Turkish authorities for his work with Syrian refugees, once noticed that all the media over-exposure on refugees, in the end, “does not move the debate one bit. On the contrary, it risks distorting the story. [...] Instead, we increasingly need more lengthy stories and more time to process the encounter with the human side of the story [...] we need to dare to imagine a common future. And only art can help us in so visionary a task” (Korzhenevich 2016, 109).

In a world scarred by barriers and fences, translation cannot but be seen as part and parcel of this artistic endeavour. I thought my students would have an opportunity to contribute to this effort in giving voice, in going beyond the “short-lived, strategic sentimentalism” fostered by mainstream media on contemporary refugees (Bromley 2016). Working on the raw material of the poetic line would allow them a deeper encounter with the issues at stake: this belief of mine is rooted in a vision of literature as a privileged way to have access to otherness, thanks to its ability to express complex and diverse realities and to develop an ethical approach towards them (Santerini 2008, 11-15, 30).²

Even though the seminar was not compulsory for students attending the course, 23 of them attended it, plus two students working on their MA thesis in literary translation (all their names are listed below). Before starting the seminar, I optimistically imagined that in four classes (eight hours altogether) we would translate all 13 poems. Thanks to the quality of the students’ participation, and the long discussions in which we often engaged, we barely managed to translate six of them.

Rod Duncan’s *but one country*

our home
is but one country
truly, the whole earth
is there for them to settle
5 tell us if you can, where else
shall we go when they have come?
they do not belong in our homeland
you should blush when you say to us
we must turn our vision up-side down

10 we must turn our vision up-side down
you should blush when you say to us
they do not belong in our homeland
shall we go when they have come?
tell us if you can, where else

15 is there for them to settle
truly, the whole earth
is but one country
our home

A picture-text poem: there could not have been a harder start. Or a more instructive one, as far as translating poetry is concerned. As a sort of warm-up, I said something about concrete poetry, and how the very shape of a poem can already be meaningful. With regard to this specific poem, students offered several options: a mirror, an egg, a planet, a seed, to mention but a few. These reflections made evident one restriction we would face in our translation: the length of each line.

Then a closer reading revealed another, even stricter restriction. The poem is indeed a mirror, the second section being exactly specular to the first. Therefore, the same sequence of lines, if turned upside down, should be just as fluently readable. This mirror structure is a key message-carrier: we are given a xenophobic worldview first, and then one based on solidarity, and these two are linguistically presented as the two sides of the same coin, as made of the same ideas – a reference to how easy it can be to jump the fence to the other side, because it is only a question of perspective?

The most symbolic lines here are those included in the turning point between the two visions, ll. 9 and 10 (“we must turn our vision up-side down”), which embody what the poem skillfully (and literally) does. Turning a point of view, and a worldview, upside down, is a recurrent strategy in postcolonial literatures. To establish a link with the Italian context, I mentioned the example of Wu Ming’s short story *Momodou* (2008), where the killing of a Senegalese immigrant by two policemen, first narrated through a newspaper article, is narrated by going backwards in time in order to show a completely different perspective on the accident.

It was quite a lengthy prelude to our collective translation work, but I was glad that we could face a practical example of something we had come across in the translation theory examined during the course: the need to interpret the nuances of a text before translating it, the awareness that critical studies and translation studies are closely intertwined (Cavagnoli 2012, 75; Tchernichova 2010, 199). This is even more appropriate for a postcolonial translation, given the established identification of the figure of the migrant with the practice of translation in its widest sense – linguistic, cultural, and geographical (Albertazzi 2013, 135-141).

Following Paola Faini (2014, 100-101), during the course I kept repeating that a translator’s aim should not be directed at a mnemonic knowledge of a foreign language – a sort of mission impossible. As students of translation, their main objective should be the cultivation of their sensitivity to literary language, learning to notice its features and to ask themselves what an equivalent in Italian might be. So here is the translation produced during the seminar:

but one country

our home
 is but one country
 truly, the whole earth
 is there for them to settle
 5 tell us if you can, where else
 shall we go when they have come?
 they do not belong in our homeland
 you should blush when you say to us
 we must turn our vision up-side down

 10 we must turn our vision up-side down
 you should blush when you say to us
 they do not belong in our homeland
 shall we go when they have come?
 tell us if you can, where else
 15 is there for them to settle
 truly, the whole earth
 is but one country
 our home

un unico paese

casa nostra
 è un unico paese
 davvero, la terra intera
 può essere un posto per loro
 diteci, se voi potete, dove altro
 dovremmo andarcene se arrivano?
 loro non appartengono alla nostra terra
 dovrete vergognarvi quando ci dite che
 dobbiamo capovolgere il nostro punto di vista

 dobbiamo capovolgere il nostro punto di vista
 dovrete vergognarvi quando ci dite che
 loro non appartengono alla nostra terra
 dovremmo andarcene se arrivano?
 Diteci, se voi potete, dove altro
 può essere un posto per loro
 davvero, la terra intera
 è un unico paese
 casa nostra

Among the many realizations that emerged during the collective work, the one that most struck me was how the implications of the simple possessive “our” (l. 1) acquires a completely different, more inclusive and humane, aspect in l. 18 at the end of the poem. Isn’t the message of the whole poem, after all, incarnated in the meaning of “our”?

After translating the first xenophobic half quickly, we began to work on the second part. Predictably, on countless occasions we found a good translation for a line, then we went back and realised that it would not work if read *à rebours*. Translating this poem, in other words, implied a repeated exercise in shifting from one perspective to its opposite – again, the main message of the poem itself, that effort to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes which constitutes the foundation of humanity.

There were also countless times when we found a good-sounding solution for some line, only to realise that its length would mar the shape of the whole poem. Later, one student offered to change ll. 4 and 15 into “possono tranquillamente abitare” (“they may simply live in”): an ingenious solution in itself, but slightly too long, unfortunately. It is a sad truth for any translator of Anglophone literature into Italian that the monosyllabic, compressed nature of the source text is hardly reproducible in our markedly polysyllabic language – an obstacle particularly evident when tackling poetry.

The translation above is the result we came to. At the end of it, when we had all reached a deeper grasp of the poem, I again asked students what its shape reminded them of. Their answers were curious: the two halves of an iceberg, a subterranean world akin to Dante’s *Inferno*, a mountain or a boat reflected on the surface of a lake, two faces looking at each other, a reptile’s or feline eye, the equator line dividing two hemispheres.

Malka Al-Haddad's *Children of War**Children of War*

Every child in my land suffers torment of wars.

Every child in my land suckles milk mixed with fear.

I ache, ache from the gun at my side:
your gift, Father, the day before they killed you.

- 5 You told me your gun would be my best friend.
It has been with me each day and each night. And still

Every child in my land suffers torrents of wars.

Every child in my land suckles milk mixed with fear.

Figli della Guerra

Ogni figlio della mia terra soffre i tormenti della guerra.

Ogni figlio della mia terra succhia latte misto a paura.

Fa male, fa male la pistola al mio fianco:
il tuo regalo, Padre, il giorno prima che ti ammazzassero.

- 5 Mi hai detto che la tua pistola sarebbe stata la mia migliore amica.
È rimasta con me ogni giorno e ogni notte. E ancora

Ogni figlio della mia terra soffre torrenti di guerra.

Ogni figlio della mia terra succhia latte misto a paura.

The first problem that we had to face was in the title. A simple word like “children” poses a doubt for the Italian translator: “figli” (literally, “sons”) was preferred to “bambini” (closer to “kids”) by a great majority of the students at the seminar: first, because it carries what seems to be the central idea of the poem, that this childhood is tragically the product of war and of a corrupting adult generation; secondly, it echoes with other keywords of our Italian version containing the F sound, such as “soffre” (“suffers”) and “fa male” (“I ache”). On the other hand, the loss of the connotation with the contemporary tragedy of “bambini soldato” (“child soldiers”) is to be regretted – probably one of the many losses which are inevitable in poetry translation.

The reverse rhyme (alliteration + assonance between “milk” and “mixed”) in line 2 is lost, too, but compensated by the internal rhyme in line 1 (“terra” and “guerra”). Compensatory strategies, too, was another issue we came across quite often during the course (see Morini 2002, 38). The same goes for ll. 3 and 4, where the loss of the significant alliteration between “gun” and “gift” is compensated by another alliteration between “pistola” and “Padre”.

It was decided to translate “It has been” (l. 6) with “È rimasta” (closer to “It stayed”) in order to emphasise the unrelentingly oppressive presence of the gun; besides, “È stata” would

have produced an unpleasant repetition with line 5 that is not present in the English version.

Luckily, “torment” and “torrents” are similar words in Italian, too, so that the wordgame (and its ensuing sense of painful repetition and circularity which is paralleled by the poem’s anaphoras) was easily maintained.

Lydia Towsey’s *Come In*

Come In

For the migrants and refugees arriving in Europe

We are sorry for our neighbours,
those of them that do not know
the way to show a welcome;
they have read the book of doors
5 but forgotten how they open.

We are sorry for the landlord,
he’s always been a problem
and the agents in his office,
need we say they do not act –

10 to be clear:
they do their nothing
not on our behalf.

Sorry for the state in which you find us,
it isn’t like we didn’t know you would be coming
15 and for the pains we know you’ve suffered;

please be easy, slip your shoes off,
take this blanket
it’s the least we can do.

I am sorry for our manners,
20 when we visited you last
the mess we left,
the reason you have had to call today.

Entrate

Per i migranti e i rifugiati che arrivano in Europa

Ci dispiace per i nostri vicini,
per quelli che non sanno
come dare il benvenuto;
hanno letto il libro delle porte
5 ma dimenticato come si aprono.

Ci dispiace per il padrone di casa,
è sempre stato un problema
e i dipendenti nel suo ufficio
non agiscono, inutile dirlo –

10 parliamoci chiaro:
il nulla che fanno loro
non è a nome nostro.

Dispiace per lo stato in cui ci trovate,
non è che non sapessimo del vostro arrivo,
15 e per le pene che sappiamo avete sofferto;

accomodatevi prego, toglietevi le scarpe,
prendete questa coperta
è il minimo che possiamo fare.

Mi dispiace per i nostri modi,
20 l’ultima volta che vi abbiamo fatto visita
il disordine che abbiamo lasciato,
il motivo che vi ha costretti a passare a
- trovarci oggi.

The first general observation that I proposed after reading the poem had to do with its colloquial, everyday linguistic register. That was connected to another golden rule for translating poetry: not every poem is ‘lyrical’. Therefore, one should refrain from ‘lyricising’ and elevating a poem written in plain, straightforward English, lest one miss the equivalence between the source and the target text. Though apparently easy, the task of translating this kind of poetry sets traps for the translator, who must pay the most scrupulous attention to those few significant elements which make the poem interesting (Morini 2002, 43).

In this case a translator should not miss any of the elements of the extended metaphor which constitutes the backbone of the poem: the welcoming of foreigners described as the welcoming of strangers into one’s home.

The whole issue of refugees in contemporary British culture, after all, is pervaded by similar spatial metaphors, not only because of the many barriers, fences, and boundaries limiting their right to free movement. Once they have arrived in England, asylum-seekers are often detained or limited in their movements by the so-called dispersal policy: they cannot work, they live on vouchers which are exclusively for food, they have no right to change their address or to use public transport: “fixed in a given location,” states David Herd (2016, 136), they have a “deeply compromised relation to public space.” This is why Jerome Phelps, member of the NGO Detention Action, once declared (2016) that “necropower is to a large extent organised spatially” since people are designated outside of the political community both outside and within UK borders.

Towsey’s poem confers flesh and blood on this idea that, in David Farrier’s words (2012, 58), citizens occupy the same geographical space as refugees while living in a “fundamentally different” state. And it tries to overcome this situation from its very title, developing the house/home metaphor throughout. Other literary, refugee-related projects similarly worked on a creative reformulation of spaces. The collection of stories *Refugee Tales*, for instance, developed from an itinerant project along Chaucer’s Pilgrims’ Way between London and Canterbury, as an explicit attempt to re-envision a deeply-charged national space in a more “ethically sustainable” way (Herd 2016, 140).

Personally I had, at the back of my mind, Franca Cavagnoli’s reflections (2012, 137) on the translation of Joyce’s story “Eveline,” whose text is founded on the recurrent image of the home/house. Our first intention, then, was not to miss any nuance of Towsey’s extended metaphor in order not to weaken its force: culture identified as the “book of doors”; the British government and its agents as the problematic landlord and his uncooperative employees; the unprepared state of England at the arrival of refugees as the house’s untidiness; the British colonial and postcolonial aggressiveness depicted as their devastating first visit to the home of these refugees.

“Sorry for” presented the first problem: is it also meant as a way of apologising, or simply as a general expression of regret? “Ci dispiace,” we thought, maintains this Janus-like significance. Citizens having read “the book of doors,” but having forgotten how to open them, might be seen as a hint at the fact that being educated is not always an antidote against intolerance: contemporary kinds of racism are sometimes not centred on biology but on culture, grounded on ideas of supposedly exclusive (if not superior) cultural values (Hardt and Negri 2000, 192). Apart from the extended home/house metaphor, this is the only image in the poem that is not directly denotative, so we decided to keep it as abstract as it is; any over-explanation would risk weakening its suggestiveness.

Other elements were deemed worth maintaining. The double negation in line 14, which a striving for clarity might tempt to erase, actually conveys the typical circumlocutory tone of a flimsy, embarrassed excuse. Finally, the last stanza (basically saying ‘you are now here be-

cause of the mess we made in your house’) points to a historical awareness about the colonial roots of globalisation: if racist theories present themselves as natural, the study of history can be helpful in unveiling their constructedness (Hall 1980, 7-10). But here the subject of being sorry turns from “we” to “I” – a sign that this awareness is unfortunately grasped by an even more restricted number of people?

Marylin Ricci’s *Framed*

Framed

Mum always covered her head
before leaving the house;
and, of course, in our place of worship.

Cotton, sometimes chiffon or printed:
5 *A Present from Skegness*, framed high
cheek bones, flattened bouncy curls.

Her mum wore a hat, even at tea,
her grandmother, a long woollen shawl
gathered with a pin beneath her chin.

10 Today, a daughter-in-law in the village shop,
Hijab framing big brown eyes.

Cornici

La mamma si copriva sempre la testa
prima di uscire di casa;
e, ovviamente, nel nostro luogo di culto.

Cotone, a volte chiffon o stampato:
5 *Saluti da Skegness*, incorniciava zigomi
pronunciati, appiattiva riccioli ribelli.

Sua mamma portava un cappello, persino
- per il tè,
sua nonna, un lungo scialle di lana
raccolto da una spilla sotto il mento.

10 Oggi, una nuora nel negozio di paese,
l’Hijab a incorniciare grandi occhi castani.

As in the previous poem, history plays a fundamental role here. The poem is constructed along a series of images, photos of women from different generations. Behind it we can find an idea of historical and geographical continuity that erases the differences between cultures, and works against the supposed irreconcilability of some hotly-debated non-European cultural traits – namely, Muslim head covers for women. European women, the poem shows, have also covered their heads for centuries.

This can be conceived as a way to escape the flatness of contemporary media’s portrayal of refugee issues. As one editor of the collection said, “There was an agreement that the focus would not be just on poems about the current situation but would create parallels with past experiences of refugees and exile” (Bradshaw 2016). In creating a sense of historical depth, this specific poem goes even beyond the boundaries of refugee experiences.

Part of the poem’s cleverness lies in its misleading start: being included in a collection about refugees, one would immediately assume that the woman in l. 1 belonged to a non-European culture. It is only from the reference to Skegness in l. 5 that we start sensing that these lines are about British women. It was deemed important, then, to avoid over-explaining and rationalising the poem’s elliptical language, lest the surprise effect be spoilt. Following the same principle, “hijab” was not translated, in order to avoid falling into the “power differentials” between Western and non-western translations (Robinson 1997, 31). Postcolonial translation

theory holds that rationalising, making explicit and embellishing have operated in Western translations as assimilative tendencies which deformed cultural otherness (Tchernichova 2010, 203).³

Line 9 contains an internal rhyme which could not be maintained, but that was compensated by a half-rhyme between “scialle” (“shawl,” l. 8) and “spilla” (“pin,” l. 9). The title was probably the hardest part to translate. We did not like, not least for phonetic reasons, the literal translation “Incorniciate.” “Foto di famiglia” (“Family Photos”) or “Ritratti di famiglia” (“Family Pictures”) were proposed, too. In the end, the choice of “Cornici” (“Frames”) prevailed, because it was considered important to maintain a continuity between the title and the expressions “incorniciava” (l. 5) and “incorniciare” (l. 11) – continuity, after all, is one of the key ideas behind this poem. It must be said, on the other hand, that even “Cornici” was not completely satisfactory, if only because in Italian it does not carry the same journalistic connotation as “Framed” (another immediate expectation, on refugees and media, that the poem overturned).

Emma Lee’s *Stories from ‘The Jungle’*

Stories from ‘The Jungle’

- Everything Abdel sees is smeared, despite his glasses.
 With the sleeve of a dusty shirt, he pushes grime
 from the middle to the edges of his lenses.
 They’ve witnessed family fall victim to war crimes.
 5 He could shower for a fortnight and never feel clean.
 English is an official language in Sudan.
 At sixteen he wants to join relatives already in England.
- To dodge military conscription, Sayid, 20, fled from Syria.
 Inspired by the story of one of his heroes, William Gibson,
 10 Sayid got to Egypt, then packed on a small boat to Lampedusa,
 through Italy to France, from where he can only move on.
 On a borrowed laptop he listens to Syrian pop music.
 He’d love to cook. He still has to pay a trafficker
 weekly for the right to chase lorries to his brother in England.
- 15 With a bandaged hand Abdul, 21, tells of imprisonment
 and gestures to describe the electric shocks he received
 after his arrest by the Sudanese government.
 His tribe also harassed by rebel militia. He feels deceived
 by traffickers. Despite his razor-wire injury,
 20 he’ll try again. Sudan was an English colony.
 He wants to stop looking over his shoulder.
- When a tiger stalks, play dead. But it’s hard not to run.
 When his friends were arrested in Eritrea, Hayat fled
 and moved from Ethiopia to Libya and across the Mediterranean.
 25 He became tiger, his prey an England-bound train. His hunt failed.
 His broken arm cast, he hunkers in a makeshift, tented cave.
 A tiger fails nine of ten hunts. He’s five down, four more to brave.
 English is the only European language he speaks.

At Baath University in Homs, his English Literature studies
30 were interrupted by conscription. Firas drew and followed an isopleth.
Three family members were killed by Syrian government forces,
he couldn't bear to see or be responsible for any more death.
Skin torn by razor-wire, he still dreams of Oxford spires.
Relatives live in several English towns, all with universities.
35 He wants to use the language he's immersed himself in.

Ziad was a respected lawyer in Daara. Now he fidgets,
grubby and injured from climbing fences, dodging
security and avoiding dogs. The pack of cigarettes
crinkles as he weaves it in his fingers, emptying
40 a last curl of tobacco. He didn't smoke them but can't finish
with the packet. He translates legal arguments into English.
He wants to join relatives and practice law again.

Storie dalla 'Giungla'

Tutto quello che Abdel vede è sporco, nonostante gli occhiali.
Con la manica di una camicia polverosa, sposta il sudicio
dal centro ai bordi delle lenti.
Hanno visto la famiglia cadere vittima di crimini di guerra.
5 Potrebbe lavarsi per settimane e non sentirsi mai pulito.
L'inglese è una lingua ufficiale in Sudan.
A sedici anni vuole raggiungere i parenti già in Inghilterra.

Per evitare la leva obbligatoria, Sayid, di anni 20, è scappato dalla Siria.
Ispirato dalla storia di uno dei suoi eroi, William Gibson,
10 Sayid è andato in Egitto, poi si è stipato in un barcone verso Lampedusa,
attraverso l'Italia fino in Francia, da dove può solo andare avanti.
Da un portatile preso in prestito ascolta musica pop siriana.
Vorrebbe fare il cuoco. Deve ancora pagare un trafficante ogni settimana
per il diritto di inseguire camion verso il fratello in Inghilterra.

15 Con una mano bendata Abdul, di anni 21, racconta della prigione
e descrive a gesti le scosse elettriche che ha subito
dopo l'arresto da parte del governo sudanese.
La sua tribù presa di mira anche dalla milizia ribelle. Si sente ingannato
dai trafficanti. Nonostante la sua ferita da filo spinato,
20 ci proverà di nuovo. Il Sudan era una colonia inglese.
Vuole smetterla di guardarsi alle spalle.

Quando una tigre ti insegue, fingiti morto. Ma è difficile non correre.
Quando i suoi amici sono stati arrestati in Eritrea, Hayat è fuggito
e ha viaggiato dall'Etiopia alla Libia e attraverso il Mediterraneo.
25 Si è fatto tigre, la preda un treno per l'Inghilterra. La sua caccia è fallita.
Il braccio ingessato, si rannicchia in una tana di tende improvvisata.
La tigre fallisce nove cacce su dieci. Ne ha fatte cinque, ancora quattro da affrontare.
L'inglese è l'unica lingua europea che parla.

Alla Baath University di Homs, i suoi studi di Letteratura Inglese
30 sono stati interrotti dalla leva. Firas ha tracciato e seguito un'isopleta.
Con tre famigliari uccisi dalle forze governative siriane,
non sopportava di vedere altre morti o di esserne responsabile.
Con la pelle lacerata dal filo spinato, continua a sognare le guglie di Oxford.

I parenti in Inghilterra vivono in diverse città, tutte universitarie.
35 Vuole usare la lingua nella quale si è immerso.

Ziad era un rispettabile avvocato di Daara. Ora si agita senza sosta,
sudicio e ferito per le recinzioni scavalcate, per le guardie e i cani
che ha schivato. Il pacchetto di sigarette
crepita mentre se lo passa fra le dita, svuotandolo
40 del suo ultimo ciuffo di tabacco. Le sigarette non le ha fumate, ma non riesce
a liberarsi del pacchetto. Traduce argomentazioni giuridiche in inglese.
Vuole raggiungere i parenti e tornare a esercitare.

The final footnote to the poem says: “These stories are based on newspaper reports. Names have been changed”. This is a quite clear acknowledgement of its sources, just as it was quite evident to us that the language of this poem is close to journalism: many prose-like sentences stating plain facts, arranged in long lines with a good number of run-on-lines. As in the case of Towsey’s *Come In*, it was necessary to maintain this tone without falling into the temptation of making the text more lyrical than it actually is. It was believed, for instance, that the factual reference to these migrants’ age (such as “Sayid, 20”) would find a satisfactory equivalent in “Sayid, di anni 20,” which is just as newspaper-like.

At the same time, *Stories from ‘The Jungle’* is not a simple shift of newspaper reports into a poetical-line structure. Occasionally, images acquire a metaphorical or symbolic valence, and phonetic patterns amplify the message. In line 2, we thought that the ethical connotation of “sudicio” for “grime” might better convey the tragedy of Abdel’s ordeal, besides chiming with surrounding key-words such as “sporco” (l. 1) and “centro” (l. 3). The rhyme between “grime” (l. 2) and “crimes” (l. 4) was lost, but compensated with “guerra” (l. 4) and “Inghilterra” (l. 7). Luckily for our translation, this could help emphasise the link between what these migrants run away from and where they dream of finally landing. England is mentioned at the end of most stanzas, with succinct explanations of the reasons why it became their goal – a particularly trenchant feature of this poem, given the topicality of the Calais Jungle in the British media’s debate about refugees. The same compensation was continued in the following stanza, where “weekly” (l. 14) was moved to the end of the previous line so that “settimana” could rhyme with “siriana.”

Still in the second stanza, we were faced with the bizarre choice of translating the diminutive “small boat” (l. 10) not with its literal equivalents “barchina” or “barchetta” (which would also sound almost like a form of endearment and therefore totally out of place), but with the augmentative “barcone” (literally, “large boat”), which is nowadays widely used for the run-down boats carrying migrants across the Mediterranean and has thus acquired a markedly derogatory connotation. Another significant detail is “looking over his shoulder” (l. 21). In Italian, it can be translated as “guardarsi le spalle” or “guardarsi alle spalle,” but the former risks being read too literally (“looking at one’s shoulders”), and not metaphorically as the original text requires.

Stanza no. 4 is constructed on an extended metaphor associating migrant and tiger. The one noticeable translation choice here is in l. 26, where “cave” was translated with the not-so-literal “tana” (“den”) in order to continue the animal imagery. Stanza no. 5 has an internal rhyme in l. 33 (“wire” and “spires”) which was lost in translation, and only partially compensated with an alliteration (“con,” “continua”) which might lay emphasis on the persistence of Firas’s dream of studying in England. In the closing stanza there is an alliteration on D between “dodging” (l. 37) and “dogs” (l. 38), which was re-shaped into “scavalcate” and “schivato” (for “climbing” and “avoiding”).

We found a sentence in the last stanza (“He didn’t smoke them but can’t finish / with the packet”) not so clear, and discussed its possible meaning at length, in the hope of getting it right; as Morini (2016, 111) writes, even the most obscure poems by Dylan Thomas have their logic, and therefore this must be grasped before starting the translation process.

Finally, in the last line a correct translation of “practise law” could have been “fare il legale.” However, this revealed itself as a clear example of how a theoretically correct translation can jar with its specific context. “Fare il legale” can also suggest “to be a legal migrant”, as the opposite of the insidiously pejorative “illegal” that is widely used today. That would have implied the insertion of a double meaning that is not present in the source text, so we opted for a less intrusive (and more professional) “esercitare” (“operate”). Both “small boat” and “practice law,” then, represent two examples of Umberto Eco’s distinction between linguistic and cultural faithfulness (2002, 123), when abandoning the former may lead to reinforce the latter.

Siobhan Logan’s *The Humans Are Coming*

The Humans Are Coming

She wants to be an astronaut
crossing black holes and spiralled galaxies to find
extraterrestrial life.

5 Her big sister pushes the wheelchair
rattling over a chalky path, kicking up pebbles
white as the Milky Way.

And now an Alien kneels in a field
arm extended to furry probe, communing
with the space-buggy girl.

10 She tells the story of her burnt-out planet
its skeletal, grey rubble, her scattered
iPhone archived family.

Yet Life is an adventure, she believes
that starts in a rubber dinghy, waves rolling
15 high in the turbulent cosmos.

While her strong-armed sister is Ship’s engineer

this teenager in spectacles, toothy-grinned
sits always at the helm.

Determined to be in the landing-party
20 she greets every New-World city, every stranger
with a message of peace.

Despite missing her mother, she's bold
as a first-generation Martian who re-configures
the ancient notion of 'home'.

25 Now the night-sky has Two Sisters, sparks
in a drifting constellation, their camp-fires
pin-pricking our universe.

Arrivano gli umani

Lei vuole fare l'astronauta
per attraversare buchi neri e galassie a spirale alla ricerca
di vita extraterrestre.

Sua sorella maggiore spinge la sedia a rotelle
5 che sferraglia su un sentiero di gesso e fa schizzare ciottoli
bianchi come la Via Lattea.

E adesso un Alieno si inginocchia in un campo,
il braccio teso come una sonda impellicciata, stabilendo un contatto
con la ragazza sulla carrozzina spaziale.

10 Lei racconta la storia del suo pianeta in cenere,
le macerie scheletriche e grigie, la famiglia
dispersa nell'archivio dell'iPhone.

Ma la vita è un'avventura, lei crede
che abbia inizio su un gommone, le onde
15 che si gonfiano alte nel cosmo tumultuoso.

Mentre la sorella dalle forti braccia è la Motorista di Bordo
questa adolescente occhialuta, il sorriso a 32 denti,
siede sempre al timone.

Decisa a far parte della squadra di sbarco
20 saluta ogni città del Nuovo Mondo, ogni sconosciuto
con un messaggio di pace.

Anche se le manca la madre, è coraggiosa
come un marziano di prima generazione che riconfigura
l'antica nozione di 'casa'.

25 Ora il cielo notturno ha Due Sorelle, scintille
di una costellazione alla deriva, con fuochi da campo
a puntolare il nostro universo.

Like Lydia Towsey's *Come In*, this poem is based on an extended metaphor pervading it from beginning to end. More precisely, we are faced with an inversion of a well-established pattern that describes foreigners as "aliens," based on the bureaucratic term "alien" which does not have a similar outer-space-oriented equivalent in Italian. Through yet another exercise in upturning one's perspective, the two girls are the human astronauts visiting alien worlds – that

is, European countries. One student rightly noticed that this may recall Fredric Brown's classic sci-fi story "Sentry" (1954), where the narrator who kills an alien enemy is finally revealed to be an alien killing a human. The choice of this image is curious: astronauts have long been considered the hero-models of our age, while recent writers and commentators have used a similar definition for those migrants who cross continents and face fatal dangers in search of a better life (Gatti 2007, 117).

In the title, the choice was to shift the verb to initial position (in Italian, word order is less strict than in English) and thus to confer some end-emphasis to the word "humans" (I had in mind the 1966 Cold War send-up movie *The Russians Are Coming*, translated as *Arrivano i russi*).

In the translation, careful attention was paid to the reproduction of the space-life details composing the dominant metaphor, so that among the usual options we tended to go for specific astronomical (or space-related) terms equivalent to the original, such as "galassie a spirale" (l. 2) or "stabilendo un contatto" (l. 8). The alien approaching the girls in stanza no. 3 was not easy to make sense of, at first; then we realised it may be a journalist with a long furred microphone, but any over-explaining translation was avoided: isn't the perspective, here, supposed to be the girls'? Shouldn't we reproduce their unawareness about some details concerning these 'alien worlds'? In line 10 "burnt-out" was translated with "in cenere" ("in ashes"), conveying the image of both an exhausted planet and a war-ravaged country.

In order to confer a sort of epic tone to her enterprise, "starts" (l. 14) became "abbia inizio," higher in register than the simpler "inizi" or "cominci"; the same goes for "ancient notion" (l. 24): "antica nozione" sounds appropriately archaic, besides being nearly equivalent to the English expression. It is worth noticing how this simile ("as a first-generation Martian who re-configures / the ancient notion of 'home'"), which once more reverses the dominant metaphor, employs a terminology that postcolonial studies are widely familiar with.

In stanza no. 4, the dense expression "scattered iPhone archived family" was translated as if it were "family scattered in the iPhone archive," to emphasise this technological presence as the girl's only 'family' for the moment. Unfortunately, the double meaning of "landing-party" (l. 19), expressing both the girl's space-crew and her joyous attitude, could not be maintained in Italian.

The closing stanza has a lyrical suggestiveness, the poetry of outer space and its immensity. The translation tries to reproduce it through the echo between "sorelle" and "scintille" ("Sisters" and "sparks"). Furthermore, there is a double implication in "pin-pricking," which implies "studding" and "goading" (European conscience): in Italian, "pungolano" might suggest both.

However, it must be said that our collective translation had to stop, after stanza no. 3, because of time constraints, not least because of the long spells of discussion which were held over many details. This is the main reason why I would like to thank, for their stimulating

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Notes

¹ For further information on this collection, see Bradshaw 2016.

² Santerini makes reference to works by Martha Nussbaum, Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty.

³ Tchernichova makes reference to works by Antoine Berman.

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