

Two Poets and a Kite: Seamus Heaney and Giovanni Pascoli

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Twelve years ago, in 2001, Seamus Heaney, the famous Irish poet (Nobel Prize winner in 1995) was invited by the University of Urbino to receive a *laurea Honoris causa*. On that occasion he delivered a beautiful and extremely learned *lectio magistralis*, whose title, “Towers, Trees and Terror”, sounded significant and emblematic if we consider that only two months earlier the terroristic attack on the Twin Towers of New York had taken place. In his *lectio*, among other things, he quoted and translated an ode by Horace to underline the fact that anything can happen and that God can overturn the highest things and face the most powerful people at any time.

Anything can happen. You know how Jupiter
Will mostly wait for clouds to gather head
Before he hurls the lightning? [...]
[...]
Ground gives. The heaven's weight
Lifts up off Atlas like a kettle lid.
Capstones shift, nothing resettles right.
Telluric ash and fire-spore boil away.¹

Seamus Heaney stayed in Urbino for three days, and I had the honour and the pleasure to show him around the city, the Ducal Palace and the surrounding countryside. When we arrived at Cappuchin Hill, I explained to him that this was the place which had inspired our poet Giovanni Pascoli to write “L'Aquilone”, a poem that recalls the time he spent in Urbino as a boy in Raffaello boarding school, when he and his schoolmates flew kites. It is an old local tradition, and even today, every year in September, children, young

¹ Cf. Heaney 2007: 156. The last four lines of the quotation were added later than 2001. The complete poem, with the definite title “Anything Can Happen”, is now included in Heaney 2006. [Ed.]

people and adults from the different areas of the town challenge one another in a fierce competition. It was the first time that Heaney had heard anyone speak of Pascoli, but it must have aroused his interest, and he later asked me for a simple, literary translation of this poem. Years later Seamus Heaney reminded me that, just after our walk on Cappuchin Hill, I had found a postcard for him of a painting that showed a boy flying his kite outside the city gates, a postcard he kept long afterwards because he told me “I had not finished with that image of the boy and his plaything”.

When I then read his superb translation/interpretation of Pascoli's poem, I realised how dear this topic was to him and how it tied in with his own personal experiences. And there was, in fact, in the *Station Island* collection, a poem entitled “A Kite for Michael and Christopher” in which he, the father, teaches his two sons the art of launching a kite and keeping it up in the air. A metaphorical lesson for life based on a constant attention and the capacity never to give in; to have the strength to endure even the pain caused by the taut, thin, cutting string in one's hands.

Before the kite plunges down into the wood
and this line goes useless
take in your two hands, boys, and feel
the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief.
You were born fit for it.
Stand in here in front of me
and take the strain. (Heaney 1984: 44) ²

His long poetic experience can also be seen as the art of keeping in a constant and often painful equilibrium the many difficult and tormented choices of a man living all the tensions found in a region such as Ulster, his place of origin, an area constantly threatened by the violent consequences of a civil war. His double cultural roots – his ancient Gaelic inheritance and his Anglo-Saxon education (he speaks and writes in English, a language that he feels is not fully his own) – are the bases for the subtle, complex implications of a “divided self”, his linguistic and symbolic mediations, his sense of alienation, wandering and exile.

The poem “A kite for Michael and Christopher” was written in 1979 and almost thirty years later he translated Pascoli's “L'Aquilone”.

As Heaney pointed out last year at the University of Bologna, at the conference for the centennial anniversary of Giovanni Pascoli, he tried “to

² The Italian edition of *Station Island* is in G. Morisco (a cura di 1992). The translation of the poem “For Michael and Christopher” will be included in the forthcoming edition, *Seamus Heaney*, Meridiana, Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

get the thing into verse and struggled with the *terza rima*, then he gradually entered into a familiar world, for the landscape of Pascoli's poem reminded him of the home ground of his own childhood".

At pp. 40-5 is the amazingly beautiful translation of Seamus Heaney³.

Heaney has proved to be an excellent and sensitive translator many times in the course of his long poetic career, but he has always preferred the terms "imitation", "paraphrase" and even "transfusion" to the word "translation", so much so that he openly admitted that he never feels quite satisfied until the translation he has carried out sounds "like a Heaney poem", until he hears it both as language and as sonorous vibration. There are several examples of this, and the range of the times when he unites his own voice is very extensive, shifting from an almost faithful translation of the text (see Canto VI of *The Aeneid*, Books X and XI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or his masterly version of the epic Anglosaxon poem *Beowulf*, or, yet again, a medieval poem/epic in Gaelic, *Buile Swibne* – just to mention the best-known examples) to reach a more complex re-contextualization, as, for example, in his Virgilian *Eclogues*, where the contemporary experience of the poetic self is enriched by a vaguely mythical aura thanks to the continual allusions recalling the ancient text. Heaney explains his method in some critical essays (often the fruit of lectures held at Harvard or Oxford, where he taught for years), essays that reflect not only his ability for acute critical analysis but also a particular intellectual honesty since he explains the genesis and the aesthetic outcome of his work, thus facilitating a comprehension that would otherwise be extremely difficult.

Heaney, on the other hand, may quite rightly be defined as the most significant example in Europe today of a "landscape poet" if we take the term "landscape" in its widest and most complex sense, that is to say, a multi-layered stratification of the natural, social and symbolic heritage of place. The solidity of the Irish countryside, its green hills surrounded by mist, the black sods of peat and the mossy waters are constantly accompanied by the inhabitants, humble heroes forgotten by the great public of the mass media, to whom his poetry restores visibility and a voice. His poems, from the very first to the last two, "District and Circle" (2006) and "The Human Chain" (2010), are populated by a countless array of characters, gruff, old, clumsy countryfolk, fishermen, barbers and country priests, shepherds and labourers, tinkers and travelling musicians. They are all people who live in contact with the earth (in this respect, his affinity with Giovanni Pascoli is clear: these two spirits feel in a similar way yet maintain an authentic relationship with simple everyday reality), people who reflect the sense of a shared culture, people who have

³ This journal thanks Seamus Heaney for his kind permission to reproduce the following text of "The Kite". [Ed.]

remained on the edge of society and now gain a central place, the privileged subject-matter of poetry. Everyone is included, even, and above all, members of the family, parents, brothers, cousins, and then mothers and children; what is private becomes public, something of value to be shared with the reader, together with, increasingly often, the pain of loss and regret. At this point, one cannot fail to notice the similarity with Pascoli's poetics: something transient, something banal and precarious, such as a daily gesture, is made permanent, enriched with a symbolic value, which refuses to be dissolved because it is held fast in a line that is increasingly knowledgeably constructed.

The imaginative and evocative power creates a true and proper human chain in which everyone, poet, character and reader, feels included. This is the case of the poem that provides the title to the latest Heaney collection, "The Human Chain". Here the poet's eyes observe a line of volunteers passing sacks of grain to one another while soldiers fire over the heads of the crowd. Then it is revealed that he himself is the one who loads that heavy sack onto his shoulders and carries it with great difficulty until he manages to heave it onto the cart.

The same relief, a letting-go that is almost a final act, can be sensed in the last poem in the volume. Once again, there is a kite, but now it explicitly pays homage to Giovanni Pascoli. However, after the first two lines, which sound typical of Pascoli, Heaney's voice takes over and it unwinds in a series of echoes that recall Yeats, himself and his poem of twenty-five years earlier. But this time it is not his sons who hold the string but he himself that lets the kite hover on suspended wings. It is he himself, the poet, who with his feet well-planted on the ground, gazes up with a sense of waiting until (and here again you cannot but think of the last three lines of Pascoli's "Kite") the line breaks and the kite flies away, light and elated, a separate and free being...

Rises and my hand is like a spindle
Unspooling, the kite a thin-stemmed flower
Climbing and carrying, carrying farther, higher

The longing in the breast and planted feet
And gazing face and heart of the kite flier
Until string breaks and- separate, elate-

The kite takes off, itself alone, a windfall (Heaney 2010: 85)

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for Gabriella, a miglior linguista, with love –
Seamus

THE KITE

A translation of 'L'Aquilone' by Giovanni Pascoli (1855 –1912)

There's something new in the sun to-day – but no,
It's something older, previous: at this distance even
I sense the violets starting to peep through

Beside the Convent of the Capuchins,
On the wood floor, between the stumps of oak
Where dead leaves shilly-shally in the wind.

A breath of mild air breathes, its gentle frolic
Cajoles hard clods, combs the yielding grass
Round country churches and in each green nook –

Air from another life and time and place,
Pale blue heavenly air that is supporting
A lift and waft of white wings on the breeze –

And yes, it is the kites! It is the kites! This morning
There's no school and we have come trooping out
Among the briar hedges and the hawthorn.

The hedges bristled, shivered, spiky, stripped,
But autumn lingered in red clumps of berries
And spring in a few flowers, still blooming white.

A robin hopped around the leafless branches.
In the ditch a lizard showed its darting head
Above dead leaves and vanished: a few quick scurries.

So now we take our stand, halt opposite
Urbino's windy hill: each scans the blue
And picks his spot to launch his long-tailed comet.

And there it hovers, flips, veers, dives askew,
Lifts again, goes with the wind until
It rises to loud cheers from us below.

GIOVANNI PASCOLI, "L'AQUILONE"⁴

C'è qualcosa di nuovo oggi nel sole,
anzi d'antico: io vivo altrove, e sento
che sono intorno nate le viole.

Son nate nella selva del convento
dei cappuccini, tra le morte foglie
che al ceppo delle quercie agita il vento.

Si respira una dolce aria che scioglie
le dure zolle, e visita le chiese
di campagna, ch'erbose hanno le soglie:

un'aria d'altro luogo e d'altro mese
e d'altra vita: un'aria celestina
che regga molte bianche ali sospese...

sì, gli aquiloni! È questa una mattina
che non c'è scuola. Siamo usciti a schiera
tra le siepi di rovo e d'albaspina.

Le siepi erano brulle, irte; ma c'era
d'autunno ancora qualche mazzo rosso
di bacche, e qualche fior di primavera

bianco; e sui rami nudi il pettirosso
saltava, e la lucertola il capino
mostrava tra le foglie aspre del fosso.

Or siamo fermi: abbiamo in faccia Urbino
ventoso: ognuno manda da una balza
la sua cometa per il ciel turchino.

Ed ecco ondeggia, pencola, urta, sbalza,
risale, prende il vento; ecco pian piano
tra un lungo dei fanciulli urlo s'inalza.

⁴ Pascoli's text is here printed on facing pages to help readers compare the two poems (from http://www.poesieitaliane.it/poesie_italiane_p_01.php?idt01=22, 10/5/2013). [Ed.]

It rises, and the hand is like a spool
Unspooling thread, the kite a thin-stemmed flower
Borne far away to flower again as windfall.

It rises and it carries ever higher
The longing in the breast and anxious feet
And gazing face and heart of the kite-flier.

Higher and higher until it's just a dot
Of brightness far, far up...But now a sudden
Crosswind and a scream...Whose scream was it?

My companions' voices rise to me unbidden
And familiar, the same old chorus
Of sweet and high and low. And there isn't one

Of you, my friends, that I don't recognize, and yes,
Of us all, you in particular, who droop your head
On your shoulder and avert your quiet face,

You, over whom I shed *my* tears and prayed,
You who were lucky to have seen the fallen
Only in the windfall of a kite.

You were very pale, I remember, but had grown
Red at the knees from kneeling on the floor -
All that praying in the flagstoned kitchen.

And ah, were you not lucky to cross over
With conviction in your eyes, and in your arms
The plaything that of all things was most dear.

Gently, I well know, when the time comes
We die with our childhood clasped close to our breast
Like a flower in bloom that closes and reforms

Its petals into itself. O you, so young, the youngest
Of my dead, I too will soon go down into the clay
Where you sleep calmly, on your own, at rest.

S'inalza; e ruba il filo dalla mano,
come un fiore che fugga su lo stelo
esile, e vada a rifiorir lontano.

S'inalza; e i piedi trepidi e l'anelo
petto del bimbo e l'avida pupilla
e il viso e il cuore, porta tutto in cielo.

Più su, più su: già come un punto brilla
lassù lassù... Ma ecco una ventata
di sbieco, ecco uno strillo alto... - Chi strilla?

Sono le voci della camerata
mia: le conosco tutte all'improvviso,
una dolce, una acuta, una velata...

A uno a uno tutti vi ravviso,
o miei compagni! e te, sì, che abbandoni
su l'omero il pallor muto del viso.

Sì: dissi sopra te l'orazioni,
e piansi: eppur, felice te che al vento
non vedesti cader che gli aquiloni!

Tu eri tutto bianco, io mi rammento.
solo avevi del rosso nei ginocchi,
per quel nostro pregar sul pavimento.

Oh! te felice che chiudesti gli occhi
persuaso, stringendoti sul cuore
il più caro dei tuoi cari balocchi!

Oh! dolcemente, so ben io, si muore
la sua stringendo fanciullezza al petto,
come i candidi suoi petali un fiore

ancora in boccia! O morto giovinetto,
anch'io presto verrò sotto le zolle
là dove dormi placido e soletto...

Better to arrive there breathless, like a boy
Who has been racing up a hill,
Flushed and hot and soft, a boy at play,

Better to arrive there with a full
Head of blond hair, which spread cold on the pillow
As you mother combed it, wavy and beautiful,

Combed it slowly so as not to hurt you.

Meglio venirci ansante, roseo, molle
di sudor, come dopo una gioconda
corsa di gara per salire un colle!

Meglio venirci con la testa bionda,
che poi che fredda giacque sul guanciaie,
ti pettinò co' bei capelli a onda

tua madre... adagio, per non farti male.