

CADERNOS

27

DE LITERATURA EM TRADUÇÃO



Os Muitos Mapas da Irlanda

From the Irish glens to the Argentine pampas: the poetry of Elaine Gaston

*María Graciela Eliggi
UNLPam, Argentina*

Abstract: Elaine Gaston’s poetic work reveals a voice charged with the time and place of her time. Her literary production received the praise of poets such as Medbh McGuckian who expressed that Gaston “writes as truthfully and tenderly as Heaney about sorrow, love and the difficulties and joys of developing out from a narrow Ulster experience to embrace the whole world as home” (McGuckian, 2012). Anne-Marie Fyfe on her part refers to Gaston as someone who can “capture a life rooted in a particular rural landscape (...) who confronts equally the everyday complexities of north-of-Ireland life, the unrootedness of contemporary experience with its leavings and returnings, and the ineluctable shifts of the heart, all in a language that is taut, direct and moving” (Fyfe, 2015). Linda France also highlights Gaston’s skill to go “back to the source, raid memory and unearth the tenderness of family, the ties of a shared language and intimacy with the land...” (France, 2010). It is my aim to let readers know her poetry which speaks of the local, people and events close to her emotions and “recollected in tranquility” with a deep global reach.

Keywords: Elaine Gaston – Northern Ireland – poetry – language

Poet

Elaine Gaston, is a poet from the north coast of Ireland and was educated at Oxford University. She gained her PhD on dialect in women’s poetry from the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen’s University, Belfast (QUB) where

she was given the No Alibi's/QUB Poetry Award. She has received awards from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and was runner-up in the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize, Australia. Her poetry collection (Doire Press) was Highly Commended in the Patrick Kavanagh Award. As part of her studies she lived in Buenos Aires where she retains strong links. Her poetry has been translated into Spanish and Russian. egaston01@qub.ac.uk

Comments (regarding translation + original)

Translator's comments on "Offering"

I met Elaine Gaston back in 2008 in Belfast and learned of her writing-her passion- for her love for her place and her Northern Ireland background personal history. Elaine herself was full of her own land and of her own people and that is what she expresses in her poetry. In an interview with her she referred to her work as "memory-based, autobiographical poems of my early life; some are love poems; some deal with the situation in Ireland in an indirect way. I suppose there are recurrent themes to do with landscape, early memory, loss, departure and return to a troubled and subsequent post-ceasefire North, and hope for the future. I have experimented with language to find out what suits me; I try to integrate the vernacular of my upbringing with a more universal appeal" (Gaston in Eliggi et al, 2012).

"Offering" is a sonnet about a family funeral. It won third prize in the Academi/Cardiff International poetry prize 2008 and was published in *New Welsh Review*. It was then published by Doire Press as part of the Collection *The Lie of the Land* (2015), Aile, Inverin Co. Galway, Ireland.

The sonnet speaks of simple things and simple people in the context of rural Northern Ireland, probably back in the 70s or 80s and describes events that were part of the everyday life of the dwellers of such a place. By providing a list of the different gifts the neighbours left in the house, the reader gathers that the relationship among them was one of friendliness and conviviality which went beyond political or religious differences. Everyone wanted to share part of their everyday goods with those that had suffered the loss of a loved one. Emotion mounts with each line. The final quatrain, provides a strong and reflexive closure since it makes no distinction of religion, a common problem that prevailed in the area and that was a matter of division rather than union. Death made the community reflect on their search for hope and common grounds.

In the translation I followed an unrhymed pattern privileging the sequence of events and things described in the poem. I kept the original division in 10 lines and a final quatrain.

Two words that refer to specific food or drink with Irish roots were kept as in the original, namely *brack* and *poteen*. Their meaning can be inferred due to context but they could also be explained in two brief footnotes. Finally, in the quatrain, line 3, the expression “left foot or right” called my attention. At first I understood basically that whether you had one position or the opposite one, they all shared the same feelings. On second thoughts the word *foot* made me think it could hide another meaning, perhaps different, perhaps not. After my search I found the explanation which appears below which suits the context of the poem and explains why foot is important here. Anyway in the translation the words “católicos” and “protestantes” were used for “left foot or right”.

What follows is part of the search carried out to find out their meaning which is only part of the preliminary phase.

Irish words/ expressions in the poem

<https://blog.thepotstill.irish/>

Poteen/ Poitín: unaged spirit from 40 % ABV to mouthwatering 90% ABV. It’s most commonly made from barley or potatoes, but can be made from just about anything, including milk and tree bark.

Oxford Learners’ Dictionary (Irish English)

- **Poteen:** strong alcoholic drink made illegally, usually from potatoes.

Word Origin: early 19th cent.: from Irish (fuisce) poitín ‘little pot (of whiskey)’, diminutive of *pota* ‘pot’.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary

- **Poteen:** whiskey illicitly distilled in Ireland

Irish *poitín*, literally, small pot, diminutive of *pota* pot.

Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers

- **Poteen:** (in Ireland) illicit spirit, often distilled from potatoes.

Brack:

Irish Barmbrack (Báirín Breac)

Barmbrack is a traditional Irish sweetened bread. In Gaelic it's known as báirín breac, or "speckled loaf" due to the way it is dotted with raisins. The tradition was to add to the cake mixture a pea, a stick, a piece of cloth, a coin, and a ring. Each item had a special significance for the person who discovered it in their slice of cake. The person who received the pea wouldn't marry that year; the stick meant an unhappy marriage; the cloth indicated poverty and the coin riches; while the person who found the ring would wed within the year. Nowadays it's usually just a ring that's added to the batter, which is a good thing as it does seem unfair to give people food that could bring them such bad luck!

<https://www.foodireland.com/storefront.html>

Left foot or right: an allusion to 'Left Footer' a derogatory term, applied to Roman Catholics, which has military, rather than agricultural, origins. The phrase evolved during the time when the protestant militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was in the process of being absorbed into the regular British Army in readiness for the first war. In the rhetoric employed by those who 'stood' for the defence of Ulster and the preparation for war – 'Standing for Ulster', 'Standing up for Jesus' 'Marching towards the Somme' – podal imagery was, and still is employed widely. The right foot, was equated with the 'best foot' and as such 'left footer' became a euphemism for someone not involved in the struggle for Ulster, i.e. a Roman Catholic. The phrase is still in popular usage in Ulster today.

Guardian.co.uk/Notes and Queries/ Semantic Enigmas

Translator's comments on "Seasoned"

Seasoned was written about Elaine Gaston's father when he was recovering from an operation on his back. 'Seasoned' was first published in BBC 'Study Ireland, Poetry'. It was then published by Doire Press as part of the Collection *The Lie of the Land* (2015), Aile, Inverin Co. Galway, Ireland.

The poem is written following a narrative-descriptive style, it is in fact a clear biographical sketch of a brave man who along his life knows of duties and performs them with courage and responsibility; both at work and at home. A man who shows strength and who would never give up on his duties being at the same time a caring father to his children. The poem revisits the life of this man and establishes a comparison- implied in the first stanzas- which will be made clear and explicit along the last one before the final couplet. Making use of a synecdoche, the

poet completes the characterization of the central figure in the poem by comparing the man –through his back- to an old Irish oak. Someone who bore the weight of thousands of lives together with his own without breaking, but who at this stage has grown old or vulnerable.

The title of the poem presented a difficulty to be rendered in Spanish. Even though several translations were possible: “experto”, “experimentado”, “veterano”, “conocedor”, “añejo” and in fact the characteristics of the person described included most of those qualities, that is, to have knowledge and experience, to be strong and also long serving, none of them in itself represented all the previous meanings. Re-reading that stanza in which the comparison with the Irish oak is introduced, helped to clarify this point. The word “añoso” was chosen- even though it was not suggested as a direct possibility- due to the fact that it applies mostly to trees, it implies the idea of an old plant, one that may have witnessed and experienced lots of difficult circumstances, but is still alive and resisting. I must say it was a decision made but I am sure there might be other options, better perhaps, to be discovered in future readings. This is in fact part of the translators’ obsessions.

Irish words/expressions in the poem

Sheughs (*Ireland*.) a ditch, especially a field boundary ditch usually used to drain fields and mark their boundaries.

Poems

Offering

by Elaine Gaston

For months after the funeral they came
from all over and if we were not about
each left a simple offering at the house,
a bag of spuds set in the porch, no name,
A pheasant, plucked, from the road up the back,
a couple of mackerel, poteen, whiskey,
Madonna and child in a holy picture,
on the windowsill a tin with a big farm brack,
a whole cheese from away down the glen,
a pot of stew still warm on the doorstep.
Between these gifts there was no difference,
Left foot or right we were all one in this,
Scouring our minds for hope in the face of death,
We hurled prayers into the same sky, same earth.

Translation

Las Ofrendas

Elaine Gaston (translated into Spanish by María Graciela Eliggi)

Durante meses después del funeral venían
de todas partes y si no estábamos
cada uno dejaba una sencilla ofrenda en la casa,
una bolsa de papas en el porche, sin nombre,
un pavo, ya pelado, del camino trasero,
un par de caballas, *poteen*, whisky,
un cuadro bendecido de la Virgen y el Niño,
sobre el alféizar de la ventana, una lata con una gran hogaza de *brack*,
una horma entera de queso de la cañada,
una olla de guiso aun tibio en el umbral.
Entre esos obsequios no había ninguna diferencia,
católicos o protestantes, todos éramos uno en esto,
buscando denodadamente alguna esperanza frente a la muerte.
dirigíamos nuestras plegarias al mismo cielo, a la misma tierra.

Seasoned

by Elaine Gaston

He cannot bend to tie his shoe.
I stoop to make the knot
that takes me back
to when he carried fully grown men
down stairs in the middle of the night,

found them in floods or snowdrifts,
hailed them up cliffs on stretchers,
pulled them out of sheughs and bogs,
'all in a days's work',

he held mothers' hands in ambulances,
gave the kiss of life
in porches, on roadsides,
delivered babies in toilets
of country bars long after closing.

At home he bathed us on a Saturday night,
bent over the tub, sleeves rolled up,
arms covered in suds,
told stories of him as a boy
when once he cycled twenty miles to run a race
and won, then cycled twenty home.

His back, a solid Irish oak,
bent, moved, straightened,
to each particular need.
Now its knots tell the years
of a thousand people who leant on him,
shoulders that carried other people's lives
as well as his own.

He cannot bend to tie his shoe
and I have learned to make the loop.

Translation

Añoso

by Elaine Gaston (translated into Spanish by María Graciela Eliggi)

Ya no se puede agachar a atarse los cordones.

Me inclino para hacerle el nudo

que me hace recordar

cuando él cargaba hombres robustos

escaleras abajo en el medio de la noche,

hombres que encontraba durante las inundaciones o ventiscas,

que cargaba en las camillas hacia arriba del acantilado,

que rescataba de las acequias y de los pantanos,

‘todo en un solo día de trabajo’,

,

sostenía las manos de las madres en las ambulancias,

hacía respiración artificial

en los porches, al costado de la ruta,

asistía partos en los baños

de los bares de campo mucho después de que cerraran.

En casa los sábados a la noche nos bañaba,

inclinado sobre la bañera, mangas arremangadas,

brazos cubiertos de espuma,

nos contaba sus historias de cuando era un niño

cuando una vez pedaleó veinte millas para correr una carrera de bicicleta

y la ganó, y luego volvió a su casa, pedaleando otras veinte millas más.

Su espalda, sólida como un roble irlandés,

se inclinó, se movió, se enderezó

frente a cada necesidad.

Ahora sus nudos cuentan los años

de los miles de personas que se apoyaron en él,

hombros que llevaron las vidas de otras personas

junto a la suya.

Ya no se puede agachar a atarse los cordones

Y yo aprendí a hacerle el nudo.

Translator`s biodata

María Graciela Eliggi is a translator and ELT/Literature & Literary Theory professor and researcher from Argentina. Founder and coordinator of the “Edna O’Brien-Colum McCann” Free Extracurricular Chair of Irish Studies and the Irish diaspora at the National University of La Pampa (2021-). She coordinates a research program (UNLPam 2015-2023, 5 projects) on contemporary Irish literature, history and the Irish diaspora to South America. First president and co-founder of AEIS (Asociación de Estudios Irlandeses del Sur), member of ABEI and SILAS. She translated the following works: *In their own words/ En sus propias palabras. Interviews with Irish contemporary writers/Entrevistas a escritores irlandeses contemporáneos*. ISBN 978-950-863-160-2, 2011. *Roger Casement en Sudamérica. El caucho, la Amazonía y el Mundo Atlántico 1884-1916*, Angus Mitchell. ISBN 978-950-863-165-7, 2011. *Roger Casement en Sudamérica. El caucho, la Amazonía y el Mundo Atlántico 1884-1916*, Angus Mitchell. ISBN 978-950-863-177-0, 2012. *Argentina e Irlanda- 1816, 1916, 2016- actores, acciones y conmemoraciones*, 2018. EPUB. ISBN 978-950-863-340-8. *Shaw, Crítico* Rosalie Rahal Haddad, 2019. EPUB. ISBN: 978-950-863-371-2. *Roger Casement. El Revolucionario Místico*. Angus Mitchell, ISBN 9789508634689, 2022.

mgeliggi@yahoo.com // estudiosirlandeses@humanas.unlpam.edu.ar

Works cited

ELIGGI, María G. et al. *In their own words/ En sus propias palabras. Interviews with Irish contemporary writers/Entrevistas a escritores irlandeses contemporáneos*. Santa Rosa, UNLPam, 2011. ISBN 978-950-863-160-2.

FRANCE, Linda. Arc Publications, 2010 in *The Lie of the Land*. Aille, Inverin, Doire Press, 2015. ISBN 988-1-907682-38-4.-

FYFE, Anne-Marie. Seren Books, 2015 in *The Lie of the Land*. Aille, Inverin, Doire Press, 2015. ISBN 988-1-907682-38-4.-

GASTON, Elaine. *The Lie of the Land*. Aille, Inverin, Doire Press, 2015. ISBN 988-1-907682-38-4

MCGUCKIAN, Medbh. The Gallery Press, 2012 in *The Lie of the Land*. Aille, Inverin, Doire Press, 2015. ISBN 988-1-907682-38-4.-

Internet Sources

<https://blog.thepotstill.irish/>

<https://www.foodireland.com/storefront.html>

Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary

Oxford Learners' Dictionary (Irish English)