

Translating Brendan Kennelly's Poetic prose: The Crooked Cross or the Claustrophobic Representation of a Classic-Irish Odyssey

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Abstract: *The aim of my article is to highlight the presence of some classical epic topoi in Kennelly's *The Crooked Cross*, such as the theme of heroism, emigration, exile, as well as of a sort of pagan religion. I will underline how these themes are here developed in a way that makes this short novel an example of a claustrophobically authentic Irish epic, not so intellectually and systematically built as in Joyce's *Odyssey*, though not less classic and universal.*

The microcosm of the Irish village here represented, with its oral tradition, its folkloric and legendary material, supplies a fertile soil of cultural, literary and stylistic interrelations suggesting an interesting underlying crosscultural communication. I will also focus on some of the linguistic features of this work and on the problematic aspects to be faced in the process of translation into another language/culture.

The Crooked Cross, published in 1963, is the first of the only two novels written by Brendan Kennelly. His second novel, *The Florentines*, was published in 1967.

The Crooked Cross is set in the author's native village, Ballylongford, in County Kerry, and the action takes place during the hot summer of 1955.

Last year, on the occasion of the inaugural Brendan Kennelly Summer Festival, which took place in Ballylongford and is expected to become a major national and international event, Kennelly wrote a page I am here quoting as the most suitable introduction to his village, the "Crooked Cross" of the title, and to the novel itself:

The Ballylongford (hereinafter called Bally) I was born and reared in was a quiet yet lively place, constantly threatened by emigration, committed to football,

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devoted to talk, fond of the drink, electric with stories, cherishing its ‘characters’ and always proud of its sporting tradition and achievements. Most of all many of the Bally people were, and are, subtle wizards of laughter.

I was born in 1936 and left Bally for Dublin in 1954. So I had eighteen very enjoyable years in the village. When I was thirteen or fourteen my family moved down main street to the pub at ‘The Corner’. That pub is still run by the family. My brother Alan and his wife Brenda have been running the place for years. I loved working in it at night listening to the talk, the stories, the songs and ballads. I loved these happy singers. The early fifties were, perhaps a more relaxed time than now: the drinking often went on till two or three in the morning. I remember frying sausages well after midnight for men whom Guinness had made hungry and myself enjoying the taste of Donnelly’s skinless sossies with a host of peckish drinkers. Sometimes we were “raided” by vigilant Gardai; but somehow or other, things worked out all right.

Four roads meet in the middle of Bally. There’s a companionable sense of convergence about those roads; it’s as if life is pouring in from four directions, four sources. But life is also pouring out of Bally along these same four roads; that life has poured out to England, America, Australia, indeed to many parts of the world. The numbers of young men and women who have left Bally over the past hundred years must be quite stunning. It is, therefore, a reason for sustained celebration that people are once again converging on Bally for this Summer Festival. Let’s hope that everyone will have an enjoyable time. May the four roads lead to a Festival of fun and craic, exchanges of ideas, poetry, pictures, song, stories. May old friendships be affirmed; and may new friendships be made and enjoyed.¹

This page contains many of the themes and motifs of *The Crooked Cross*, a novel that could be defined as an epic in prose with the rhythm of a ballad, or better, quoting Fielding, as a “heroicomic poem in prose”. Such a statement, at first, might sound slightly ambitious for this work, however, after a careful analysis, it will prove extremely adequate. The novel, in fact, is a sour epic of an Irish village threatened by drought and of his inhabitants, sometimes heroic, more often comic, while facing this awful situation. The dry spell is the evident metaphor of a more general dryness, a spiritual and social aridity that becomes responsible for the emigration of the inhabitants of the village which, at the end, is populated only by few emblematic figures, true “characters” as Kennelly himself defines them.

There is the poet of the village, the local bard who makes a rhyme about everything and everybody. His name is Paddy and is inspired by Paddy Drury, a true versifier, a satirical poet of the oral tradition in North Kerry. There is the Old Sailor, now half-crippled and always in his armchair, telling his heroic deeds in front of an audience of children who regularly gather in his shabby house to listen to his tales

offering in return a few chores for him. The first chapter is devoted to the character of Sheila Dark O'Donovan, a beautiful fortune-teller, a tinker woman; the final chapter is about a water-diviner called to the village in order to detect an underground stream. At the end, he succeeds in detecting water with the help of a twig, bringing delight and hope into the hearts of the villagers.

The heroism I have hinted at, is that sort of heroism close to Celtic mythology whose deeds and feats are characterized mainly by legendary, folkloric aspects, by a sort of magic and of superstitious religion.

The whole novel may also be read as a “disturbing Christian allegory”: one of its character is called Goddy, the water-diviner is called the Pope and the name of the village itself, Deevna, sounds like the adjective *divine*. When I asked Kennelly himself the reason of this noun he said that *Deerna* was meant to be the first title of the book. *Deerna*, in fact, represents the phonetic sound of the Gaelic expression *Do Thighearna*, which means *To the Lord*. Then, the typist saw *v* instead of *r* and typed *Deevna*, keeping by chance a lucky closeness to the adjective *divine*. The final title, *The Crooked Cross*, is a metaphor with a double valency, religious and social. As a religious symbol, this cross, being crooked, stands for a sort of castrating and oppressive religion. At the same time, it conveys a concrete meaning in so far as this image indicates both the irregular, let's say “crooked”, crossing of the two main streets of the village, and the Celtic crosses in Irish graveyards which are always crooked, that is, inclined, bent.

Now, to go back to our previous definition of “heroicomic poem in prose”, if the word *poem* may be a bit inappropriate, we certainly can speak of a poetic prose, where the poetic trait is given both by the epic feature of the story and by the language itself, a language which is affected by Gaelic, the Irish language. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is caught by a sort of rapture of the language, by a hypnotic movement given by the echoes of a “melodious speech”, a sweet underlying language, a singing language such as Gaelic is with its ceremonial sayings and its ancient poetic tradition, a tradition that is essentially formulaic.²

The variegated material of popular ballads, of gossipy anecdotes and sayings is incorporated in the narration of this novel and this helps convey a hypnotic rhythm that often sounds as poetry.

Kennelly claims he has always liked listening to people talking and in this story he tried to convey the spontaneity and the sound of their conversation. So, as Terence Brown states, “the presence of an oral community is the text's originating source”. Terence Brown sees in Kennelly's novels:

the 'prentice work of an artist who was to remain throughout his career open to the hybrid possibilities of literary form, its fertile instability. Lyric intensity, symbolism, imagistic juxtaposition and epic directness of style enter their episodically fragmented realism as if to signal the author's impatience with any too univocal a text, anticipating the radical heteroglossia of his later achieve-

ments. [...] The ubiquitous presence of story as a generating force in Kennelly's art is, by contrast, a factor which tends to stabilise the heteroglossia of his variegated texts. (Brown 1994, 57; 51)

Terence Brown quotes from the sonnet "Master", in *Cromwell*, where Kennelly makes Edmund Spenser say: "Trouble is, sonnets are genetic epics./ Something in them wants to grow out of bounds".³ This statement stands as the best comment on Kennelly's whole work, in so far as it highlights the generic impurity and instability of Kennelly's writing, "his refusal to be bound by safe artistic taxonomies." (Brown 1994, 50)

In the introduction to the collection of poems *Poetry my Arse*, Kennelly starts as follows:

This poem concerns a poet, poetry, language and various forms of relationship. The poet, Ace de Horner, moves through his poetry, the city, different relationships. He broods on words, people, streets, dreams, the Liffey, Janey Mary, his self. And he broods in such a way or ways that terms such as poem, novel, story, drama or play merge with each other to form an Acenote which he often finds very odd. His brooding estranges whatever he broods on. The poem he writes may not be the poem he wishes to write or even the poem he believes he has written. His own concoctions (he will not call them creations) are frequently bizarre to himself. Am I really guilty o'that? He seems to wish to control what laughs at the notion of being controlled. (Kennelly 1995, 13)

The Crooked Cross presents a mixed literary form with passages of intense lyricism and the agile and flexible pace typical of epic narration. To give an example of the poetic prose in this novel I will refer, once again, to the same passage chosen by Terence Brown in his essay, not simply because I feel safe with his authority but mainly because this very passage proves particularly suitable to highlight some of the problems I had to face in my translation and it will allow me to develop the main motif of my paper: *the claustrophobic representation of a Classic-Irish Odyssey*.

The passage is contained in the novel's central chapter, "The Walk". The whole chapter is about a poor girl who, being the only child of a widowed mother, is forced to work in a few houses of the village. The passage describes this girl while escaping the malicious gossip of her employer, who pronounces her pregnant, and walks towards the countryside finding relief and freedom from the oppressiveness of the village in her total immersion in nature: she bathes naked in the river. This epiphanic passage is rich in images and symbols and is a powerful piece of poetic prose:

Then she gripped projecting pieces of rock with both hands and clambered up till she sat on the almost flat surface. The three white rocks were known locally as the Cow, the Bull, and the Calf. The Bull was the centre one. Anne sat on it

for a few moments, her wet, naked body as white as a hound's tooth in the sunlight, her dark hair clinging wetly to her shoulders. Then she stretched out on her back and let the sun fall on her belly and legs. She closed her eyes. Under her back, the white surface of the rock was warm and she didn't mind the minute fragments of gravel which stuck to her wet skin from the rock-surface. It was all freshness and beauty; it was all clean water and warm sunlight, green grasses and yellowy flowers, berries and the blueness of the pool. Her closed eyes saw nothing but blueness of water and sky and her naked body exulted in the feeling of utter cleanliness. She was back in the morning of the world when the first light was breaking over undiscovered fields, and nothing was unclean or fallen. She thought how wonderful it would be if one could be clean for ever. (Kennelly 1963, 81-2)

The quoted passage is characterized by an apparently deliberate absence of synonyms. The author keeps using the word *wet* and never replaces it with the synonym *humid* for example. The adjective *warm* is repeated, as well as *clean*. The iteration of these words gives musicality to the language, a musicality further enhanced by the numerous alliterative sounds. In my translation into Italian I have tried to maintain this musical aspect by keeping the same words as much as possible, such as *umidi* for *wet*. Besides, I have done what in Italian does not sound as stylistically appropriate, that is I have often expressed the possessive pronoun before the parts of the body: one of the well-known signals of an awkward translator. The article alone would be necessary, however, in this passage, as in many others, I have kept the third-person personal pronouns (I will underline them in the quoted passage) any time I thought it useful to convey the original rhythm and to create alliteration with nearby words:

Poi afferrò con entrambe le mani pezzi di roccia sporgente e si arrampicò finché si sedette sulla superficie quasi piatta. Le tre rocce bianche erano note sul posto come la Mucca, il Toro e il Vitello. Il Toro era quella al centro. Anne vi si sedette per pochi istanti con il *suo* corpo nudo e umido bianco come il dente di un segugio alla luce del sole e i *suo*i neri capelli umidi attaccati alle spalle. Poi si stese sulla schiena e lasciò che il sole le cadesse sul ventre e sulle gambe. Chiuse gli occhi. Sotto la schiena la superficie bianca della roccia era calda e non le davano fastidio i minuscoli frammenti di ghiaia che si erano attaccati alla pelle umida dalla superficie rocciosa. Era tutto freschezza e bellezza; tutto acqua pulita e sole caldo, erbe verdi e fiori giallastri, more e il blu del laghetto. I *suo*i occhi chiusi non vedevano altro all'infuori del blu dell'acqua e del cielo e il *suo* corpo nudo esultava alla sensazione di assoluto nitore. Era tornata all'alba del mondo quando la prima luce irrompeva su campi inesplorati e nulla era contaminato o decaduto.

Pensò a quanto sarebbe stato bello poter essere puliti per sempre. (Kennelly 2001, 112-3)

The novel is also interspersed with true rhymes, Paddy's poetic production. Paddy "half-chanted" (14) his first lines:

Come in, dark woman from the Maharees
With your step more light
Than a feather in a breeze. (14)

No rhyme to signal poetry, just the chanted rhythm, as the author's voice points out before remarking the sudden shift to prose: "Welcome to Deevna", he said, lapsing into prose. (14)

Hereinafter, Paddy's lines are in the form of quatrains with alternate rhymes as in the ballad form. In fact, Paddy's verses are sometimes nonsense, often invective and in general just two or three quatrains of a ballad as a chronicle of everyday events, that is events about Deevna and its inhabitants. What I have done in this case has been to keep the rhyme as much as I could:

"I see Paris,
I see France,
Red is the colour
Of my underpants." (Kennelly 1963, 20),

in my Italian translation reads as:

"Vedo Parigi,
Vedo le Ande,
Rosso è il colore
Delle mie mutande". (Kennelly 2001, 36);

sometimes even changing the rhyme scheme:

Naked Cully lived alone
And never was he seen,
But he quenched the thirst of everyone
And kept the village clean. (Kennelly 1963, 29)

become:

Naked Cully da solo viveva
E mai lo si vedeva,
Ma la sete saziava ad ampio raggio
E teneva pulito il villaggio. (Kennelly 2001, 48)

I have often tried to keep the rhyme even to the detriment of the metre as in the following lines:

"I'd give my body and my soul,
My sister, son and daughter,
My money, clothes, belongings all,
For a drop of Naked's water." (Kennelly 1963, 30)

which have been translated as follows:

“Il mio corpo e la mia anima darei,
Mia sorella, mio figlio e mia figlia,
I miei soldi, vestiti, tutti gli averi miei,
Per avere dell’acqua di Naked una sola bottiglia.” (Kennelly 2001, 49).

At this point, I would like to take into consideration what can be considered the specular counterpart of this passage in particular, and of the whole novel in general. I am referring to a poem, *The Walk*, about walking from the village centre, “the Crooked Cross” mentioned in the first line, to the island of Islandman.

The Walk

Start at the Crooked Cross
Pass Martin Carmody’s and the Sacred Heart
over the bridge and the light summer dust
See the river winding with cold, clear art

till it consents to recognise the Atlantic.
Is Molly in? Stories of lovers endure
longer than the lovers themselves. The thick
mud of the Moneen grips your eyes for

a moment but you walk on your way
past Aghavalin where Kitchener was baptised,
past Bambury’s wood under God’s burning eye

on to the castle where a small light betrayed
O’Connor. And there it is: the island,
fisting the sea, clear as a plover’s cry.⁴

The Walk is an example of *prosaic poetry*: formally, it is a Petrarchan sonnet of 14 lines divided into two quatrains and two tercets. The lines rhyme but the rhyme scheme is quite random and there is an enjambement at the turn of each stanza. Direct speech (should we properly say *free indirect speech*?) is incorporated in the narrative flow: Is Molly in? (l.6); And there it is (l.13). We can detect many alliterative sounds, assonances, the same stylistic devices we have just noticed in the novel. The language certainly conveys a fluent walk but in a claustrophobic epic territory.

All the places here mentioned resound of mythic echoes, while they essentially describe the domestic places of the poet’s native landscape. The Crooked Cross, as the reader knows by now, is Ballylongford. Carmody’s and the Sacred Heart are two pubs

(the Sacred Heart takes its name from the woman-owner's favourite phrase: "O Sacred Heart of Jesus"). Molly is a popular lover. The Moneen is a muddy place over which the river passes. Aghavalin nowadays is an old Protestant graveyard, once a little church. Kitchener is the famous Kitchener of the sentence: "Your Country needs you". He was born two miles outside the village and fought in World War One.

The Walk ends at the island which is not fully an island: there is a little road leading to it. The road is sometimes covered by the tide. So it is an island then.

What the poem says is that no walk leads out of the Crooked Cross, it is instead a walk throughout its local history and even if "the river [is] winding with cold, clear art till it consents to recognise the Atlantic", the Atlantic is not the goal and the eye withdraws to stay inland and stop at the island from where it does not look at the sea which, in fact, is paradoxically fisted by the island and not the opposite.

The novel *The Crooked Cross* conveys the same sensation of immobility albeit with a tension to movement, at least in the form of emigration. It tells the static epic of Irish history as it is lived in Ireland's smallest villages. The novel starts and ends with the following emblematic lines:

If life in little places dies,
Greater places share the loss;
Life, if you wish, may not be worth
One passing game of pitch-and-toss;
And yet a nation's life is laid
In places like the Crooked Cross. (Kennelly 1963, 8; 124)

Patrick Kavanagh once wrote of "Losing faith in Ballyrush and Goirtin, / Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind / He said, 'I made the Iliad from such a local row.'"⁵

Brendan Kennelly was to echo this in his just quoted lines but what Homer whispered to his mind was rather the word *Odyssey*. However, what he has created is a classic Irish Odyssey, that is, an Odyssey lacking its main theme: the journey out of one's own land. No Ulysses goes out from Deevna if not by means of imagination and the potential Ulysses who actually emigrate from Deevna never come back to tell and share their experiences. They just disappear. And, among those who stay, we can identify potential travellers who are entrapped either physically or spiritually. Goddy O'Girl, "the man with the figure of a God and the heart of a mouse" (p.12), is paralysed in his spirit and is unable to satisfy his desire to escape. The Old Sailor could be a sort of Ulysses, he has travelled a lot, albeit more with his fantasy than in reality and now he cannot move because he is half-crippled and all he can do is to tell his stories to the children of Deevna. His main deed was when he swam from Tureen Quay to the town of Kilkee in County Clare, a story he recounts with an epic emphasis which reminds the reader of Ulysses swimming towards the land of the Phæacians. Homer's Ulysses is he

who knows because he has seen everything, he has travelled a lot, thence his versatility. None of the characters in *The Crooked Cross* embodies such a personality: Ulysses's features live in many of them, split into empty shreds and thwarted by static characters. He lives in Paddy's rough wit, in the Old Sailor's invented stories and courage, in Goddy O'Girl's patience, so that the novel lacks a single personality which could give unity to the work. On the contrary, Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey* gives unity to the whole work which is not made of a single episode with many characters but of a single character who goes through many adventures. Nevertheless, the *Odyssey* itself is echoed in *The Crooked Cross*, as a unitary work on the whole, though built by interspersing pieces taken from oral tradition, by drawing from already extant verses or group of verses expressing a certain idea or concept, from recurrent schemes of typical scenes.

With *Ulysses* Joyce had already created a claustrophobic Odyssey in a paralysed place: Dublin, but his was an intellectually and systematically built novel where the connections with the Homeric work were explicitly declared. Kennelly's "Odyssey" instead, seems to be almost unconsciously linked to the classic model and succeeds in being authentically Irish while keeping a more universal epic trait. *The Crooked Cross*, more than *Ulysses*, conveys the atmosphere of the Homeric epic: both epics are told by local bards who mix reality and legend in such a way as to make their borders naturally overlap often with the complicity of an archaic magic-shamanic element. Piggott, in his famous work *The Druids*, claims that Celtic literature was orally created and handed down by a barbaric society, just like the original version of the Homeric poems. (see Piggott 1998, 50)

Kennelly, in my opinion, succeeds in creating a true Irish epic in so far as he does not force its local material in order to adjust it to the classic model: he does not introduce either wars or divine quarrels, he rather focuses on Irish reality through a spiritually and stylistically epic perspective.

Many in fact are the themes and motifs that *The Crooked Cross* shares with Homer's *Odyssey*: heroism, emigration, exile, as well as a sort of pagan religion with some magic aspects. A religion which is embodied by the Pope, the water diviner, a sort of pagan god, or by Naked Cully, the hidden god who saves the people of Deevna by supplying them with water. The magic element is also embodied by Sheila Dark, the fortune teller, a sort of tempting and seductive witch similar to the Circe of the *Odyssey*. The same Anne Dillon of the passage we have quoted is described as a Nausicaa near the banks of the river.

Then there is the assembly of the village which meets when important decisions have to be taken and it reminds the reader of the Achaeans summoned to full assembly. Also in the *Odyssey* the assembly is the expression of a rural society based on a primitive democracy represented by the assembly.

There is no systematic correspondence between the *Odyssey* and *The Crooked Cross*; however, the novel is embedded with many epic motifs and images which appear as discursive configurations or mere stylistic devices which remind the reader of the Homeric work.

An example is given by the presence of the dog, Lightning:

There was a dog especially that caught the eye and disgusted and repelled everybody who saw it. This was an old sheepdog, black in body, with a white neck. At least, these were the colours it had been, until it was stricken with a terrible attack of the mange, the scourge of all dogs in hot weather. As a result of this awful affliction it was like a waking corpse. Nearly all the fur and hair had disappeared from its body, leaving practically all the flesh visible. The flesh was a horrible raw red, covered with scabs and sores of all sorts, which festered and stank in the terrible heat. Ironically, the dog's name was Lightning. Lightning slouched along the hot, dusty street, stopping now and again to lick its sores. Every living thing and person shunned it, but nobody took the trouble to destroy it. Sometimes a child, in its innocence, would approach it, but would scamper off on seeing the grotesque state of the body. (Kennelly 1963, 31-2)

Its description is very close to that of Argos in the *Odyssey*,⁶ though here the dog does not belong to any master, does not embody faithfulness: it is an empty, slightly oleographic image functional to the whole description.

The figure of One-eyed Palestine, is in fact described as a Cyclops:

"I'm the only man in this place," he would say, his one eye glinting with pride, "who can say that he saw the grave of Jesus the Jew." So he got his name through his disability and his distinction [...]. Palestine was a big man, with a massive head, strong shoulders and a brown moustache. Physically, he was a giant. He had a quick mind, and enough imagination to appreciate the appalling nature of his boredom. (Kennelly 1963, 47)

A few lines later we read: "When sober, Palestine was a man of few words." (47); but as soon as he sees a pint in front of him:

He downed it without taking the glass from his lips and ordered another which promptly got the same treatment. A third pint stood in front of him before his tongue loosened a little. [...] Palestine drank steadily for the next three hours, all on his own. Little talk between himself and the widow. But the alcohol was having its effect on Palestine who, when he began to get "merry", like to talk nonsense to himself and to the world. [...] One-eye Palestine sweated and drank like a hog. (48-9)

This description of the drunk Palestine reminds us of the *Odyssey*'s Cyclops, drinking the wine Ulysses offers him:

All the characters of the book are like epic characters, flat like cardboard cut-out figures, more symbols than individuals. However, the most stunning parallelism is that between the poet of the *Odyssey* and the poet of *The Crooked Cross*, Paddyo himself who shares with the homeric poet that knowledge of different stories coming from different sources. But Paddyo is a satiric poet and in many of his lines he ridicules the formulaic tradition and the repertoire of epic predictions and anecdotes. Paddyo finds a complimentary figure in the Old Sailor, the true storyteller of the village.

The Crooked Cross at the end proves to be an unintentional parody of the *Odyssey*, though the parody does not affect the model as much as the represented Irish reality and conveys once again a denunciation of its paralysis: an endemic paralysis connatural to Irish nature. Kennelly draws characters and motifs from the *Odyssey* mixing them with, and adapting them to, the Irish material. These motifs often live in his text in the form of epiphanic moments which, unlike Joyce, are not introduced as mere and isolated stylistic devices, in so far as they contribute to the developing of a story and to the characterization of the general setting.

Therefore, the microcosm of this Irish village, with its oral tradition, its folkloric and legendary material, supplies a fertile soil of cultural, literary and stylistic interrelations suggesting an interesting underlying crosscultural communication, an aspect that could be investigated more deeply and, in relation to which, to conclude, I wish to mention a book I have recently read and which has enhanced my interest in cultural interrelations. I wish I had discovered it a bit earlier so that I could have carried out more detailed research. The title of the book is *Homer in the Baltic/An essay on Homeric Geography*. The author, Felice Vinci, claims that

The real scene of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can be identified not in the Mediterranean Sea, where it proves to be weakened by many incongruities, but in the north of Europe. The sagas that gave rise to the two poems came from the Baltic regions, where the Bronze Age flourished in the 2nd millennium B.C. and many Homeric places, such as Troy and Ithaca, can still be identified. The blond seafarers who founded the Mycenaean civilization in the 16th century B.C. brought these tales from Scandinavia to Greece after the end of the “post-glacial climatic optimum”. Then they rebuilt their original world, where the Trojan War and many other mythological events had taken place, in the Mediterranean; through many generations the memory of the heroic age and the feats performed by their ancestors in their lost homeland was preserved, and handed down to the following ages. (Vinci 2001, 1)

It is certainly a revolutionary theory and it is rather difficult to accept it at the beginning: it subverts completely the traditional beliefs regarding Homer. However, the essay is so well researched and documented that, so far, it has convinced all its readers, including myself.

In the 4th chapter, “Ulysses and Norse mythology”, we read

The Northern location for the events of the *Odyssey* suggests a possible relationship with another important Northern European mythology, that of the Celts. The Celtic poets, known as “fili”, entertained the Court’s noblemen, just as the Homeric bards did. Their favourite themes included “adventure” (“echtra”) beyond human bounds and “wanderings” (“immram”) from island to island over far-off seas (Cataldi, Introduction to *Ancient Irish Tales and Fables*). This, of course, reminds us of Ulysses when he was intent on narrating his fabulous adventures and wanderings in Alcinous’s palace. What is more, one of the favourite destinations in Celtic tales are the paradisaical islands situated in the middle of the ocean, towards the far west, where divine women refresh and make love to the heroes coming there. They also offer them immortality and everlasting youth, as we see in *Immram curaig Mæle Dùin (The Voyage of Mael Dùin’s Ship)* and *Immram Brain maic Febail (The Voyage of Febal’s Son Bran)*. All of this is identical to the island of the goddess Calypso, remote in the ocean towards west, who had promised to make Ulysses “immortal and ageless (“athànton kai agéron”) forever” (Od. V, 136; VII, 257). Incidentally, one could match the name of Ogygia itself with the Celtic island of everlasting youth, which is called “Tir-na n’Og”. In a word, “Ogygia” may mean “the Land of Youth”. (Vinci 2001, 42-3)

What I have found particularly interesting is the presence of themes shared by the Homeric poems and the mythologies of Northern Europe, including Celtic mythology and, in particular, the occurrence of these themes in Kennelly’s novel.

In the *Kalevala*, Finland’s national epos made up of fifty runes and cantos, rune XXXIV tells of a girl who disappears while picking berries and searching for strawberries at the foot of the mountain and is desperately looked for by her mother everywhere. This episode reminds us of Persephone, whom Hades abducted while picking flowers and her mother went looking for her (Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*). It also reminds me of Anne Dillon who, while walking out of Deevna to the countryside, before bathing in the river stops to pick blackberries from a cluster of briary bushes and when she goes back home her mother had been looking for her.

Besides, Vinci quotes the following lines from the *Kalevala*:

My brother’s old dog, which I fed as a child and trained as a young girl, will mournfully bark behind the manure heap, inside the cold winter pens; he will surely recognize me as the daughter of the house. (Vinci 2001, 41)

These lines belong to rune XXIV which tells of a married woman who returns to the paternal house after many years and expects her old dog to recognize her, a scene

which reminds us of the famous scene of the dog Argus in the *Odyssey* and of Kennelly's description of the dog Lightning in the passage quoted above.

These are certainly not sufficiently stunning analogies to claim a close contact between Homer and Northern European mythology, however they are a curious coincidence, let's say just a suggestion, which have offered me the pretext to further investigate in order to detect interesting similarities in *The Crooked Cross* and in Irish literature in general. The research has just started.

Notes

- 1 This passage is at page 3 of the pamphlet *The Brendan Kennelly Summer Festival* issued on the occasion of the inaugural Festival devoted to Brendan Kennelly from 9th to 12th August 2001.
- 2 See Gianni Celati, "Introduzione" a Flann O'Brien (1987), *La Miseria in Bocca*. Milano: Feltrinelli, p. 10-11
- 3 The complete sonnet "Master", contained in *Cromwell* (p.63), reads as follows:
"I am master of the chivalric idiom" Spenser said
As he sipped a jug of buttermilk
And ate a quate of griddle bread.
"I'm worried, though, about the actual bulk
Of *The Faerie Queene*. She's growing out
Of all proportions, in different directions.
Am I losing control? Am I buggering it
All up? Ruining my best intentions?
As relief from my Queene, I write sonnets
But even these little things get out of hand
Now and then, giving me a nightmare head.
Trouble is, sonnets are genetic epics.
Something in them wants to grow out of bounds.
I'm up to my bollox in sonnets" Spenser said.
- 4 This poem does not belong to any collection, it appears inside the cover of *The Brendan Kennelly Summer Festival*.
- 5 Quoted by Padraig Ó Concubhair in "Local Historical Themes in the writings of Brendan Kennelly" in *The Brendan Kennelly Summer Festival*, p. 10
- 6 Now, as they talked on, a dog lay there
lifted up his muzzle, pricked his ears [...]
It was Argos, long-enduring Odysseus' dog
he trained as a puppy once, but little joy he got
since all too soon he shipped to sacred Troy.
In the old days young hunters loved to set him
coursing after the wild goats and deer and hares.
But now with his master gone he lay there, castaway,
on piles of dung from mules and cattle, heaps collecting
out before the gates till Odysseus' serving-men
could cart it off to manure the king's estates.

Infested with ticks, half-dead from neglect,
 here lay the hound, old Argos.
 But the moment he sensed Odysseus standing by
 he thumped his tail, nuzzling low, and his ears dropped,
 though he had no strength to drag himself an inch
 toward his master. Odysseus glanced to the side
 and flicked away a tear, hiding it from Eumaeus,
 diverting his friend in a hasty, offhand way:
 “Strange, Eumaeus, look, a dog like this,
 lying here on a dung-hill [...]

what handsome lines! But I can’t say for sure
 if he had the running speed to match his looks
 or he was only the sort that gentry spoil at table,
 show-dogs masters pamper for their points.” (Homer, 1996: XVII, 363-4)

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