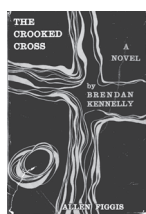
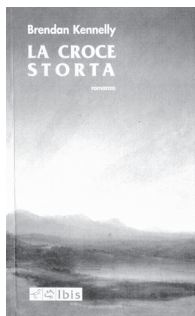


The Crooked Cross *by Brendan Kennelly – Allen Figgis, Dublin, 1963*



Aurora F. Bernardini

**Allen Figgis, Dublin, 1963. *La Croce Storta* – Italian Translation
by *Giuliana Bendelli. Ibis, Como, 2001.***

Remanescent in a certain way of Solgenytsin's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, this *quasi* – parabola, *quasi*-allegory is the first novel by Brendan Kennelly (the other is *The Florentines* of 1967).

Born in Ballylongford in 1936 and presently professor of English Literature at Dublin's Trinity College, with twenty published books, Kennelly is recognized today as Ireland's most popular litterateur. Particularly important, according to the appreciation of John B. Keane – another famous Irish man of letters who knows him personally – are his collections of verses, easy to keep for the rhymes and rhythm that make them lasting, for example as in *A Time for Voices* and *The Book of Judas*.

The novel allows one to understand the reason for Kennelly's popularity: the direct, simple style, close to the orality of the anecdotes and the songs in the pubs (the author himself worked in the family's pub during his youth) making his public identify immediately not only with his way of telling them, with the protagonists' attitudes that go from triviality to epic, but also with the distresses of the little Irish town "forgotten by God", whose problems, alas, are always so actual and universal.

The small town, situated on the southwestern coast of Catholic Ireland (Ballylongford – probably – the village where the author was born, which in the book is called Deevna, a typographical error of the pronunciation "Do the Heerna" "from the Gaelic "Do Thighearna – "To the Lord")¹ faces a severe drought. It could be, refers the author, the drought of 1955, when the life of the town was maimed by desperation, illness and, mainly, by the exodus of young people. The book was written in only one week, under the impact of the vision of nine youths that were leaving Ballylongford to emigrate.

"If I speak *about exile*, paralysis, – explains the author to the Italian translator Giuliana Bendelli who interviewed him in 1994, 40 years after the first publication of the novel – ² I do it because these terms are concepts in my mind, and not notions apprehended from Joyce or anyone else". Concepts are also the sentences that strategically sew the text here and there, aiming at the essence of the questions. He says, for example:

“One of the greatest scourges to humanity is indifference. The slime of the human pit is not the immoralist, the thief, the murderer or the liar.

It is the indifferent man or woman, the creature who has given himself up to a corroding futility of the heart and whom you want to fling “from your presence as you would excrete or vomit foul matter out of your guts”.³

Or in the end of the book, when the author is thinking about the innumerable young people that abandon the place: “In a very real sense, the little village was dying. Youth gives significance to childhood and to old age. It is the pinnacle of power and beauty; if it is taken away or destroyed, childhood and old age become meaningless and absurd.”⁴

The episodes that constitute the novel, tied by the evanescent vision of the young seductive “deviner” Sheila Dark that appears at the beginning and at the end of the book, go from the pub of Goddy, heart of a rat in the body of a god, pass by the shame of Naked Cully, meet the familiar tragedy All-Or-Nothin”, describe the fury of Mosheen against his father One-eye Palestine, accompany the poems and daring songs of Paddyo, the poetical walk of Anne Dillon, the fire in the house of Sailor and his cat Cleopatra, the feats of Pope, another kind of deviner, and, finally, the discovery of a spring of water that brings back hope to the population.

“Kennelly has this mysterious ability to help the people, to help them to retake the route of their existence and to follow it, in a safe way”, says his friend John B. Keane⁵, without sentimentalism and with a grain of salt, when he adds that with him the advice of the friend didn’t work because of his nature of a mule and when comparing Kennelly’s ability both as a poet and as the excellent football player he was.

It is the same grain of salt that gives flavour to the book, intermixing a certain crude violence of fact and of expression with the naive trivialities of the speeches of the protagonists (real personages, obviously). “But his presence and his allure were such that gave the trivialities an unexpected intensity which made the familiar unexpected again.” Wise words of the critic Declan Kiberd who praises in his essay “Brendan Kennelly, a teacher”⁶ the capacity that he had to keep alive the interest of his pupils.

Does the Italian translation succeed in keeping the interest of the reader? Yes, in what concerns the epic, the primitive, the picturesque, the violent sense. Yes, for the caring and affectionate way how are brought to the reader the supplementary information gathered in the preface and in the critical essays. A little less, in what touches the so vivid and authentic oral speech (some songs, some poems...) of the characters of the book. There the Italian version seems... translated and not re-created.

But this is a characteristic of almost all literary translations into current Italian, which only a translator with the panache and style of a Gadda or a Pasolini could possibly shake off.

Notes

- 1 The explanation can be found in the preface to the Italian translation by Giuliana Benelli, p. 16.
- 2 See preface to the Italian translation, p. 15
- 3 *The Crooked Cross*, p. 126
- 4 *Idem*, p. 143.
- 5 John B. Keane in the essay “The Bard of Ballylonford”, pp. 169-175 of the Italian translation.
- 6 See the essay with this name at p. 183 of the Italian translation.