

Translingual Peripheries: Ilaria Boffa's Practice of Everyday Poetry¹

In my rejection of imposing a profound change on myself by going over to writing in a different language, I perceive a fear of losing my identity, because it is certain that when we switch languages we become someone else.

—Czeslaw Milosz²

Ilaria Boffa was born in Italy in 1972 and lives in Padua. She has a degree in Economics and works for an international non-profit organization. A prose writer for years, only at the age of thirty-eight did Boffa start to write poetry, when she felt the need to create a personal space of expression, a metaphorical *non-lieu* that allowed her to give form to her multi-sensorial, corporeal subjectivity. Her poems were published in two anthologies, *Glocalizzati* (deComporre Edizioni, 2014) and *Viaggi DiVersi* (Ezio Pecora, 2013) and unpublished work appears in online journals (*Atelieronline*, 2017). She has published two volumes of poetry in English, *Spaces* (Limina Mentis, 2015) and *The Bliss of Hush and Wires/Periferie* (Samuele Editore, 2016). A selection of poems written between 2010 and 2014, *Spaces* explores both the poet's physical and emotive reality in a rough and even tentative way. Driven by a marked experimental tension, Boffa's first collection attempts to freely link form and image without the limitations perceived in her own linguistic background. The choice of English is, for this exophonic poet, original and significant, nervously folding challenges with possibilities. In the postcolonial, transnational realities we inhabit, authors who choose a different language for their literary work are an ever-growing flock. They come to this decision for various reasons, most commonly after a personal experience of displacement, dislocation, or migration, and with various degrees of ambivalence, discomfort, or hopeful anticipation.

A new language is a virgin territory, both strange and seductive. Exploring it can be liberating. Engaging with it can become a subversive act, as in the case of those writers who abandon the colonizer's tongue to adopt the language of their chosen

destination country. It can fulfill the need for atonement and redemption, a rebirth that is both individual and cultural, a revisiting of the past that aims at mending a broken subjectivity, at restoring the memory of a communal history interrupted by colonial rule. In the case of Boffa, the choice is not driven by trauma, or by the necessity to redress a painful past, but rather by a sentiment similar to that which Beckett expressed to a friend, the need to “tear apart” the veil with which his native language had covered reality. To continue to write in his native language had become for Beckett a limitation, a hollow, meaningless exercise. Boffa’s poetry bears witness to a similar condition. Her native language, classical, standardized, and perhaps even frozen in its seductive past, felt insufficient to communicate the complexity of contemporaneity, the plurality of forces, impulses, and energies that compose our modern experiential world.

The sound (of the English language), rich in consonants, interrupted, nervous, and at times even syncopated, expresses less romantically the sense of melancholy, nostalgia, and absence, at the same time adding speed and tension to the verse. These are elements that are so much part of our daily existence, which in my opinion is so in need of deceleration. Self-translation of the poems in Italian has also been very difficult, as I find it hard to recognize myself in my native tongue. It is almost as if I were experiencing the dissolving of my (cultural) identity. Essential was finally the effort to hold on to images and contexts, recovering or letting go the rhythm I was seeking.³

Transferring, translating the self into a new linguistic territory, to destabilize one’s cultural location, is a way to open up new expressive spaces, a u-topos full of uncertainty, instability, a liminality that promises fluctuation, unrest, but also the prospect of new imaginative experimentations.

As much as flesh and blood, we are composed of and by words. If homo sapiens is a species defined by language, then switching the language entails transforming the self. While it can be liberating, discarding one’s native tongue is also profoundly unsettling; it means constructing a new identity syllable by syllable. (Kellman xiv)

The concept of home, despite attempts to pin it down to national boundaries, exceeds spatiality and at the same time produces it, linguistically, culturally, and even politically. Languages are new homes, open up new geographies, complex interstitial spaces where the subjectivity implicates the other/s through code switching, in a

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destabilizing re-negotiation of meaning. Languages are therefore not English, Spanish, or Italian, but Englishes, Spanishes, and Italians. They imply a transgression of borders, speaking to those new, decentered sensitivities that are produced by our globalized reality. Poetry is a migratory journey and the subjectivity that evolves from it is the manifestation of a deep cultural transformation. Elaborating our (im)permanence in this new condition, the poetic voice bears witness of the dissolution our bodies experience in the space they inhabit, physical, emotional, and affective.

Vague and sticky

It's like sliding into nothingness
a vague and sticky sensation of loosing references
clinging onto a special memory
as a branch jutting out the precipice
craved and unexpected during the fall.

And then submerge and re-surface from water
till you confuse your arms and legs
because they flow blurred and faint
following movements of the turmoil
you cannot stop or soothe.

There are such incredible times in solitude
when you can touch the unreal so solid
and absence becomes obsession
that stretches fingers in their need to reach
it awaits a miracle.

It's like a jump into the void
this vague and sticky sensation
pulsing in the veins a forthcoming transformation
it rises and rises and rises
for it will exceed the whole weight of your being.
(*Spaces* 59)

Boffa's verses record the descent into this new condition, where subjectivity perceives a dramatic shift, the sensation of being everywhere, of pulsating at the rhythm of the universe but also at the nervous beat of the industrial world. The present is haunted by past memories, that appear like night-birds, invading the subconscious with reminiscences of a past where connections among all living forms were natural, authentic. Then, we were spaces, depths, vertical thoughts.

The poet's experimentations with the poetic medium have embraced the "unnaturalness" of a non-native language, negotiating the possibility of otherness in a linguistic space that is at the same time unfamiliar and hospitable. Explored and charted with the expectation of a fragmented and yet fuller experience, Boffa's language injects meaning through the choice of a new form, where lexicon, syntax, and composition are articulated in a sort of evocative "primitiveness." English's foreignness becomes a habitable dwelling that calls upon "those who are expatriates in their native land—the fellow travelers, castaways, shipwrecked, exiled, defectors—" those who, "If [they] lived here, [would] be home by now" (Fulton, "Poetry" 46).

Like for Alice Fulton (*Feeling*), Boffa's attention to form is the result of her engagement with thoughts and feelings, but is also driven by the desire to understand one's presence in the world. She therefore privileges poetry for its ability to express wayward emotions, corporeal and emotive reactions, and physical settings that tend to go unnoticed in our frenzied experiential realities. Her poetry reproduces existence as a sort of fractal poetics, a woven fabrics where words emerge out of life's own imperfections, shaping a practice of every day poetry that aims at piercing the dull surface of the objective world to connect us with its deeper symbolic, teleological meaning. Abandoning any form of solipsism, Boffa's verses embrace the "inconvenient knowledge" of our material existence in the world (Baumgartner), transforming peripheral episodes, events, visions into epistemological moments. Deeply engaged with the physical and biological reality around her as much as with her existential landscape, in her verses Boffa seeks to produce emotive responses, articulating what would remain an unvisited reality into a moment of insulated bliss, a transfixed sublime that is unsettling as it is epiphanic.

In Boffa's most recent collection, the title's opposition of *The Bliss of Hush and Wires/Periferie (Peripheries)* records the spatial liminality and the ambiguous rapport between reality and the poetic wor(l)d. The verses express a subjectivity that is overwhelmed by the complexity and mutability of reality. An impression of awe pervades the pages, as the poetic voice meets technical progress. There, verticality meets horizontal lines, heaven intersects with earth, myth with modernity. Privileging the spatial element, Boffa embraces the encounter with the world as a complex and stratified experience. Her sensorial being re-negotiates its marginal, peripheral location, by experimenting with the sensations, impressions, and emotions it

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produces. Peripheral perspectives allow a deeper, slower, tangential gaze. From this plane the present acquires additional meaning, its imperceptible otherness is revealed, sharpening our understanding. Peripheries and margins are not exclusively spatial, they are rather opportunities to explore beyond the visible, revealing to the lyrical subjectivity the unseen, mysterious topographies of reality. The search is both thematic and stylistic, as images change perceptions, intensifying meaning and resulting in an expression that is delicate, full of lightness, and yet persistent.

The Distance I

There's a distance that cannot be covered.
The journey appears circular, a repetition
of the night and its perimeter.
When a dog runs, it does not look behind,
there's no measure of its own being.
Retrievers know how to please their master.

But linden trees soothe each frail creature. Step by step
over the meadow, the look crosses corn fields.

A fallow land will bring silence. (28)

Striking in this collection is the structure, shaped as a triptych where the number three appears in the first section as a series of threefold poems, while its multiple is replicated in the second and third sections containing respectively nine poems and nine short texts. In the first section, the ternary structure invites a reading that perceives the poetic rhythm as a melody. This form urges the reader to understand every event as foundational, corresponding to a distinct moment of the experience that the poetic voice excavates in search of a shrouded meaning. The word is nourished when it is able to encapsulate reality, thus every movement of the poem, particularly in the second and third parts, flows into an interrogation, a reflective passage: “would you come to the suburbs?” (38) is not a haphazard question but an invitation to share modernity's malaise.

Peripheries become a condition of perception, perhaps the only one to have validity today. “Periphery is physical awareness of discontinuity” (38) and in this geographic discontinuity of borders, margins, and edges the poetic voice is intent in recovering what is human: “It's there, it's our horizon” (44). It is not an undemanding task, on the contrary. It is like walking on a tightrope, where one

constantly fears the loss of equilibrium, the possibility of dissolution. “will we fade into it?” (50) or hopes in a landing, in quietude: “Come along now. Rest / Rest” (62).

The author’s choice of English reveals the emotional affinity to a language favored for its immediacy and emotional essentiality. These traits are alluring for those born in a Romance context, where literary overuse has rendered language often affected and lacking in substance. English is the poet’s courageous choice, and her aspiration to a particular sensitivity, despite the obvious verbal and syntactical difficulties, is rewarded by the polished yet unaffected style of the verses. In line with the title of the volume, English is the borderline space, the margin from which to observe one’s own reality, keeping in balance the self and its precariousness. Inhabiting the urban peripheries helps to understand one’s geography, language, and existential condition. Along the peripheral margins, one can measure the solidity of affective relations and emotional connections. Distance, separation, and being are caught in the endless circularity of every departure and return, of life’s ups and downs. Peripheries hold together and separate. They reflect our contemporary condition: waiting for, getting lost, and finding oneself again. It is time, history, nature, it is the rediscovery of one’s body and of its links to the earth and its energy. “Today I see just trees, expanses of trees. / I am a tree. My roots dig down till the centre of the earth / and a shiver climbs back to the top of the canopy” and, afterwards, “I’m sap, dense sap” (32) within the marginal condition the poetic voice can reach her own space, her core: “Now I know who we are” (32). Peripheries contain a proliferation of images and visions. The tightrope walker, the swallows, the city, living beyond the border, are themselves borderline appearances. Symbols of liminality, like Venice, these elements are part of a cartography of signs that connect opposites, human and celestial, highs and lows, the confusion of encounters, of emotions that engender wonder, disillusionment, and bliss. “In the suburbs every morrow is gaseous / and poignant in its ordinary nature, a space delay / suspension before and after history acceleration” (52).

Suspended marginality looks onto the precipice of unrevealed secrets, between the *terrafirma* and the *banlieues*, where the dream cannot become reality and memories are recovered only within the poetic universe. Hush means silence, quietude, stillness, while oxymoronic sounds the contrapuntal presence of wires and electric cables, insistently promising the connections, communications, and relations of an age that worships velocity. Instead, Ilaria Boffa’s poetry promises a dis-location, the distance

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that invites us to listen, to feel the splendor of solitude that is such even if it evokes pain, suffering, and disorientation. Walter Benjamin would call periphery a passage, a non-place like poetry, made of history and time, yet a-temporal and a-historical, vast and deep, impossible to fill, like what is transitory, because peripheries are circular and continuously in motion,

Enraptured by the unreal, she veils transience.

We'll come uninvited (78).

Again (80).

One More Tomorrow, the second part of the collection, houses nine poems that span thematically, bracketing actuality, between the first and the final interrogation, “will the sun die?”; “did the sun die?”; a plea, “Give us one more tomorrow” (84); and a closing pang, “Is this the wait?”

Did the Sun Die? One More Tomorrow

They're here again
the intruders with their caravans,
and the closer they get
the more enchanting they are.
They guide to an access
disclosing the whole.
Intruders withdrawn.

So is this their gist?
No periphery, no world, no nature.
Neither beyond nor away.
Swirling and bouncing
the present disappears
and we desperately hang on
our impending future future.

Is this the wait? (100)

To be born is to exist, to inhabit the many insignificant events and images that flow on a wide screen, casual and incomprehensible. Life is a movie whose sound was lost and whose meaning remains unclear. Observed from the margins, life can be perceived with clarity. It is obscure, discombobulated, fleeting, it is the angel looking

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with compassion at those who vainly labor to give it a form, to make it meaningful. If the past seems like a faraway place, since the word does not record it, the present is a large space awaiting an epiphany, a liberation.

Waiting for someone or something
an alliance, a frontier of the soul
that lasts, authentic and intimate. (88)

While the comfort of enchantment is pushed back, “it was a long time ago” (90) the darkness of the present is not inevitable, one can escape it, be shielded from it. Is determination a struggle, a retreat, or a new beginning?

Where can she hide?
Where if not in Nature! to the earth
to the terminal called the province. (90)

Peripheries are hope, if hope is still conceivable, beyond the limit of time. To embrace the future takes effort, faith, as does thinking of peripheries as renewal. “I need the end actually, and I live the suburbs as a necessary rip to fall apart and refine the attunement” (94). It is a pause and a deferment,

Neither beyond nor away.
Swirling and bouncing
present disappears
and we desperately hang on
our impending future future (100)

Hush and Wires' third section contains nine prose texts. The impressions exceed in verticality, while the poetic style continues to channel energy, lingering on images, memories, and sensations. The word remains vibrantly aerial and its messages deliberately incomprehensible. Communication is to have access, to tune into reality. Today the urge is in plurality, where everything is part of the all, producing a unity that exalts the sense of inadequacy and temporariness. Bodies, urban spaces, and objects of our daily life can be re-membered, be given different interpretations, as the gaze lingers on them, the voice is effusive, caught in the seduction of the poetic time of the cymbal. It is poetry's triumph, glory, and sadness, a space from which to observe life as it dissolves. It exists in its fascinating and obsessive folds. It is a dream, appearing in imperceptible and

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evanescent images that reach us through the filter of memory. The past resurfaces through them allowing, alas, only a discontinuous vision.

The attempt to recover memories and meanings is explicit. From the past life can only be retraced, partially, leaving a desire that is both inarticulate and incomplete, the impression that dispersion and weariness make it difficult to breathe. The wires are thinning, becoming the indistinguishable filaments of a spiderweb that embraces time, circumstances, death. Boffa's every page constitutes a fragment, the tessera of a mosaic where only fleetingly can one perceive both the passing of existence and become, painfully, aware of its transience. Only poetry can register those vibrations, if only peripherally, in solitude, in the time-space gaps.

#7

Hérons soar away up above the village interfering with repeaters. It's a dialogue established.

At the foot of the hills, the mist, its porous redolence. A felt on the keys for night time playing. (116)

Precarious and impenetrable is the flying of the herons, interfering with the transmitters, as their intrusion now appears as the only true conversation, inferred by the persistent actuality of the wires. Peripheries reveal the permanence in what is transient, the consciousness of the transitory nature of life, the discreet meaning of silence that continues to beguile the poet and keep her attentive, vigilant.

#9

when you suffer of myodesopsia you have to deal with ghosts. apparitions floating languidly in the vitreous humour. They exist as objects and they are permanent. on the way, eyelashes flutter in synch with footfall. It's about dewdrops lining gumboots or the annoying drizzling against glasses. Even the landscape stands out apocalyptic, fragmented by stray meteors.

She won't offer resistance by atomizing, she won't claim her bones back. Inside him, melted with him, she feels unbroke. She writes— come, come to visit my area, harvest me. The dogs are mating. I'll be awake. (120)

A restless inquisitiveness marks Boffa's authorial voice and her upcoming poetic collection, *A Million Sounds* (Samuele Editore, 2019), provides further evidence of her interest in experimentation. A project based on the notion of 'field recording' allows Boffa to explore the fields of eco-poetry and eco-poetics and to test her verses against issues such as globalization and global warming. Driven by her natural interest for the combination of human voice and urban soundscapes, Boffa has started to collaborate with international avant-garde musicians, recording her poems over their instrumental pieces to produce an originally innovative multisensorial approach to the poetic experience (Ilaria Boffa and Lucien Moreau, 2018). The pursuit of marginal sounds and the symbiosis with peripheral artists open up new spaces for the representation of the quotidian, whose architecture forms the background for the poet's visions, images, and rhythms. Boffa links "Concrete (visual) poetry" and "space poetry" with the measure of music to invite us to reflect on our post-human way of life, and to re-think our physical and emotional relationship with the natural environment.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Freely borrowed from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall, University of California Press, 1984.

² Czeslaw Milosz, *Milosz's ABC's*, trans. Madeline G. Levine, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 220.

³ "Il suono ricco di consonanti, interrotto, nervoso e a volte sincopato esprime in maniera forse meno romantica la malinconia, la nostalgia, l'assenza, ma senz'altro aggiunge velocità e tensione. Elementi che ritroviamo in questa esistenza così bisognosa, a mio avviso, di decelerazione. L'auto-traduzione dei testi è stata ancor più ardua per la mia personale difficoltà di riconoscermi in italiano, quasi sperimentassi una dissolvenza di identità. Resta inoltre il grande lavoro nel rendere con la medesima sintesi immagini e contesti, recuperando o lasciando andare il suono voluto." Taken from the author's correspondence with the critic. The translation is mine.

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