

## A Poet and a President. A Conversation with Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland

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I will never forgive myself for this. I managed to be late on the day of my appointment with the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. Our meeting had been arranged way ahead of time and it had been scheduled on a day of August 2014, at 11 o'clock. The national daily *Avvenire* had asked me to interview him (see Michelucci 2014) over the recently published Italian translation of some of his poems, *Il tradimento e altre poesie*, edited and translated by Enrico Terrinoni, and published by Del Vecchio (Higgins 2014).

That morning I left Dun Laoghaire, where I was on vacation with my family, early enough. But I hadn't planned to get lost in the intricate expanse of Phoenix Park, on the outskirts of Dublin, where the official residence of the President is located. In this gigantic area of parkland there isn't a single road sign that helps the traveller reach the *Áras An Uachtaráin*, 'The President's House'. And while time was passing by inexorably, my GPS stopped working.

I took the wrong turn a couple of times. Then, thanks to the directions of a young female jogger, I finally found the gate of entrance. Unfortunately when I passed through the gate, it was a quarter past 11 and it had started to rain.

"I am an Italian journalist. I have an appointment with the President", I said hastily to the guard, who let me pass without even asking for my ID. Quickly, I covered the last hundreds of meters leading to the residence and, after parking my car right in front of it, I got off and rang the doorbell. I confess that in spite of the rather autumnal weather, I was sweating. I was afraid that my being late would make that long-awaited meeting vanish. I sighed in relief only when another guard opened the door to usher me in, and assured me that the President was waiting for me. "Your car needs to be moved to the parking lot next-door", the guard said, "if you give me your keys, I'll do it".

In order to kill time in my absence, my wife and children were supposed to visit the zoo nearby, but Irish rain, which was now pouring down, had made it impossible. When I saw the guard letting them in, I started sweating again. I wasn't worried about Edoardo, who was 8 already, but about the often uncontrollable exuberance of my daughter Vittoria, who at that time

was only 4. While we were waiting in the President's lobby anything could happen: fruit juice could spill over tapestries and antique sofas, ancient and valuable china could be broken, and kids could start running wildly among the marble busts of past Presidents. Luckily nothing happened. The President just got out of his room and greeted us all warmly.

Our conversation was about 45 minutes long, and took place in the large office which the President has filled with books and personal keepsakes. Michael D. Higgins has always combined political engagement with an acute cultural and artistic discernment. Poetry is his elected means of expression. He has become the living paradigm of the symbiotic relationship that culture and politics have always had in his country. He is the tangible example of how literature and civil rights, poetry and pacifism can intermingle and communicate. His literary output harks back to the tradition of the Aisling, the ancient Irish epic poets, and of the Fenian poets from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His poetry reflects an idea of society that calls for personal involvement and commitment.

As a socialist poet and philosopher, who has always fought for peace and human rights, it seems right to compare him to another great man of letters who occupied those same rooms: Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), the man who, in the 1930s, became the first President of newly independent Ireland. A promoter of cultural nationalism, Hyde translated popular Celtic texts and fought to preserve ancient traditions which had almost been erased by centuries of colonialism. Higgins' vision is more far-reaching than that of his illustrious predecessor. In his poetry he is more interested in giving voice to the poor, to the "lowliest", who don't have a way of making their cries heard.

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The style of this interview reflects the informality of a conversation. Pauses, interruptions and repetitions have been edited out.

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*M: The first question I would like to ask you is about your personal concept of poetry: you are a man who has always been involved in politics, in the fight for peace and civil rights. How can poetry, a moment of private reflection, be linked with a public commitment to politics?*

H: I think the important, combining work is words, the nature of words, of language. I intend, in years to come, when I get free again, to return to poetry. I am working on a long poem. It had been my hope that if I was finished in time, I would include it in the Italian anthology, which I am very honoured has been published. This issue of words and of language surfaces in

the poems in different ways. And, you are right; words in the public spaces articulate grief, memory, which is a memory of humiliation, and this informs the writing of people like Sartre and others. I believe that also in autobiography there is an element of remembered humiliation, and then there is the recovery of possibility, of the possibilities of joy. The long poem I am having the difficulty with has a number of lines such as “The night is long and I awake remember, the night is long and I afraid recall”; and really it is an invocation of a life – I am 73, after all – a life that has been involved with language. When I speak I pour out words in public spaces, words that express great grief and anger, great griefs, in famine places. These bodies I have seen in rubbish dumps or whatever. But for many it is a kind of disconsolate sense of a lost version of life. As regards poetry, you see, my relationship to this is a strange one. In a way, it is like the relationship of a child outside the railings, looking into the park where people are playing games: the structure of the game is well known, there are things you have to know in order to participate, and so forth. At the same time, in that innocence there is an urge to belong, the recognition that some of this is artifice. What I do recall, what I do say is, to make it simple, that the great silence of life precedes words; and when words are used today they need to be very carefully used. But then, when words are enclosed tightly within, let us say, a limited time version of the rational, they begin to lose their life. And thus in World War I, which people are celebrating now – although celebrating is the wrong word – they are recalling people as Robert Bridges [1844-1930], poet Laureate in England in 1915, who produced a set of heroic poems invoking all the myths in order to hide the most awful carnage that was taking place in the trenches. I have a new unusual view though, which encourages me slightly towards people like the Anglican Archbishop Rowan Douglas Williams [1950-]. If I understand it, Williams has a concept of the divine, which would interest both utopians and what you might call people involved in emancipatory movements: he considers words as the divine seeking to make itself manifest. You could see it in the projects of emancipation, the exercise of the divine, so the divine is neither allocated, nor bounded by certainties of existence, be they good or not, so that it is probably best located in uncertainty. And, in a curious way, I see quite a lot in that, and it was a deluded friend of mine, the late John O’Donohue [1956-2008], who died and to whom I’ve dedicated one of my poems, any day lost, he’d say, was one of possibility. And, when you write a poem recalling people’s lives, you are suggesting to people what to do and what not to do. But really, what you envisaged as possibilities is much wider than what you can in fact recall, or even try to shape visually. So, in many cases at the end of one’s life, the possibilities buried in memory, the things attempted but perhaps never achieved are maybe the richest, and that is what O’Donohue considered important about the utopian tradition. Sometimes I keep referring to it as the

wild that has not yet succeeded in being born. And that has implications for human rights, for economics, for trades, for politics, for the public life. When asked about these dark poems of mine, I'd reply that occasionally in my collections I could get as far as irony, just to relieve the thrust of the book, or whatever, striving for a kind of authenticity. It's a great privilege to be able to record them now. I should tell you, I have one poem that is in the collection, I think ... one I rarely read because it is a bit obscure, but I think it's more truthful; it is called "One's Own Story":

Our own story must always be lonely,  
and when we pray from fear,  
it must be a mumble,  
out of some terror,  
instilled,  
a cry of the wounded,  
without much hope of healing.

But if the truth be told,  
our own story  
brightens in the light of other stories,  
older stories that glimmer,  
lost in a long tail of time.

We need these scraps  
made luminous  
to relieve the darkness  
of our fall  
from the imagined divine  
towards that space  
where the occasional sparkle  
of the human  
remains a prospect,  
in the still space  
of our loneliness,  
as we pray  
for the gift of love. [Higgins 2011, 69]

The awful damage that was done to people is terribly important to me, by the quenching of their appropriate ethical censoring capacities to love each other. It is what makes me so critical of authoritarianism of any kind, including the dreadful authoritarianisms of bureaucracy foreseen by Max Weber.

*M: How have your life and political career been marked by the betrayal of your father and the Republicans during the Civil War as you recount in your famous poem?*

H: I think that is the poem I am most often asked about, and perhaps I project onto my father some of my own thinking. But what I suppose is very critical in it is the distinction between independence, Home Rule, nationalism, republicanism, and so on. And I stand back from any judgmentalism, but historically we went through a period where people were questioning the motives of those who fought for Irish independence. My father was from a family of ten, and many of them emigrated to Australia, and through a small legacy from Australia my father was the only one of the ten to get two to three years of education. He became an apprentice at a grocery and then went to Ennis, to Limerick, to Cork, and so on. But after he was involved in the War of Independence. It is very important to recognise that the people who were the most active were those who had not inherited any land, the shop boys, the apprentices, the trades people, and so on, and at that time you had to sign an indenture saying you would not open a competing business within so many miles where you were indentured. If you like, they were the militants in the War of Independence. And the Civil War came, which was about whether to accept the Treaty or not. My father's brother would accept the Treaty, my aunts might have been doubtful, my father was on the Republican side, and was arrested and imprisoned in 1922-1923. Now, I have a feeling that nationalist struggles today are all over the world. I once wrote to say that any serious republicanism must have the glow of egalitarianism at its centre. All nationalisms are non-emancipatory, some nationalisms are about the right to have one's own independence from capitalism. But in the different revolutionary tradition in Ireland, there were those who also wanted to be free in a wider sense, rather than just being free to trade within a capitalist system. And there were those who said: "we'll be equal, we will have education, we'll have the right to health, we will have the right to feel proud of ourselves as people, to experience joy together". This was a curious kind of civic egalitarianism, which even the Church could not ignore because in its condemnation of *Rerum Novarum* it offers us an alternative, a kind of corporativism. But the notion of the collective, of the "worldtogether", of the public space, all of this, the public world, and all the different separatisms do not carry that. So, what I suppose my poem is referring to today is that, yes, the country became independent, we had a tragedy that was the Civil War, which had an effect on memory when members in the same family couldn't speak to each other because of what they had done to each other, by way of exclusion, and by way of all they had thought about each other. In addition to that, the making of a new state and the case for independence, was also made as a cultural case by writers, writers in the Irish language, writers in the English language, poets, mystics, and so forth. By the time the new state was founded, there was in fact a conservative, administrative, bureaucratic class that moved in, achieved a hegemony, and ultimately came to running the State. This was the tool that would turn their faces against sensibility in

literature, film, and dance and the experience of the public world. And that inevitably led to bad decisions in relation to censorship, and to a version of the Church's relationship to a State that was authoritarian, intrusive, and unhelpful. And then, what happened to the old Republicans? They got old and you'd find them in hospitals, and I visited my father as one of them. It occurs to me to try and put my mind back and think: "What was he like at my age? Working in the shop and thinking, 'What kind of Ireland will happen?'" What are people of my age now? I am 73, I have used words in the public space, I like the life of the *piazza*, of collective singing, and when in my new work I am writing, for instance "The night is long and I awake recall the making of the march the prayer's feet behind banners, bright and daring..." this is due to the changing nature of alternatives in the present time: the world has become private in that particular kind of communication. I think a great importance was attached to collectivity, to people who found their courage because they were behind the banners, singing the songs, the miners, the people in the Dublin Lockout, and certainly they did not have transformative moments. So, is there a collective space now, in a world where everyone is privately sending messages? It is the same reason why I think that good thinkers within the Church, people like Rowan Williams and others, started resuming a faith in the public square. Is it possible to keep a transcendent vision of faith in the present condition? I think the answer is that "it must happen". But you have to do it in a different way. So I ask myself, why am I happiest when I am performing my poems? Because I can make a connection, and I like that. I actually think I like it as well when I am in combination with musicians and others. I regard music as maybe the first sound, because it precedes words. Remember, the first sound is not a word, it is the scream of birth.

*M: And, concerning your personal concept of betrayal, do you think that, in a way, the State betrayed the Irish people, even during the recent economic crisis?*

H: In relation to this, wherever we are, not just in Ireland or in Europe, the best guide is the speech I gave at the Chicago Council for Global Affairs. It is not a matter of conscious betrayal, I don't criticise governments, it is not my business; and when I was speaking at the London School of Economics about the role of public intellectuals, or at the Sorbonne about the French intellectual tradition and how it had many differences, for example, in the period of the Empire, the Enlightenment period, you had philosophers against Empire, what I meant is that there is a failure of scholarship. I think that since I gave those speeches, you have had the French economist Thomas Piketty [1971-] and his work is getting more attention now, in France and elsewhere. My main point about it is, first – I am going to try to make it brief for you – the suggestion that there is a single paradigm of the con-

nection between Economics, Society, and Life is so dangerous; it is also, in a scholarly sense, abstract and wrong: Keynes, who is not a raving Socialist by any means, writing on economics spoke about Physics envy, that is, they wanted to claim the State as a being of Science, when in fact Economics is a craft, and it is a craft dealing with human materials. The suggestion that you would have rating agencies issuing comments on sovereign governments and, in turn, these opinions influencing central banks, which in turn effects how you will manage scarcity, vulnerability, social transfers and so forth, is itself quite absurd. So what is needed is a plurality of teaching in Economics. It is simply wrong to teach young Economics students that there is only one, single model of Economics, and that it involves a particular version of the market. It is nothing to do with being Left or Right, it has to do with the democratic right to be offered a pluralism of models in economic thinking. This affects how policies are formed, and, in relation to the discourse, if you get narrow economic teaching, you equally get a very narrow commentary in relation to media, because that is all they comment upon, which is coming out of this narrow strain. This is a very interesting debate in Europe, and it is better in some places with a tradition of teaching philosophy, locating these issues within ethics, and ethics itself within philosophical systems, including mistakes. But I think now we are headed very much into a kind of new economic thinking, and younger economists are seeing through this. When I gave my speech at the University of Chicago, at the Harris School of Public Policy and some other institutes, I said that in many cases you really need to be able to have all the intellectual tools available to you in order to be able to deal with new complex relationships, like those we are going through. For example, how do you deal morally with the issue that for every unit of capital that is productively invested on our planet, eight units are circulating around the world as a kind of toxic shadow waiting to come to earth through toxic bubbles in housing? Do you see? The public, who have spent generations after generations struggling towards democracy, in the assumption that they would be able to decide their lives morally and fully, with their own mistakes, their own joys and achievements, they instead are somehow secondary to a technocratic management of a single model that is in turn unable to deal with a speculative cloud – that, in fact, is enslaving the world. It is very interesting that what you speak about is getting space for this in a commentary. But Pope Francis and I are of the same mind, and I think his speeches on it have been excellent.

*M: Your poems do not only deal with Ireland. Latin America, which you know very well because you were there over a long period, is another of the principal themes in your works. What kind of teaching could we receive from devastated countries like, for instance, El Salvador? In what way do they help us avoid shutting our eyes in the face of reality?*

H: Well, it was in 1982 that I was asked to leave Salvador, just after the massacre at Morazán, and it was very moving to go back there as President of Ireland, and to meet people like Jon Sobrino, who is the surviving Jesuit of those Jesuits at UCA, the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas”, who were murdered, people like Ellacuría and others. And I think it will tell you how things do change in the world, and can change. I think San Salvador’s airport is now going to be called “Oscar Romero Airport”, and this is a very good thing. I was received by President Mauricio Funes, in the Parliament and with honours, and I visited the Jesuits. It was very moving. When I was writing “Foxtrot in El Salvador” [also in Higgins 2014, 94-97], it was the worst time of the killings, which would take place during the night, and bodies would be dumped in the rubbish dump, and you knew from the way hands were tied or the stomach had been opened which group was responsible. It was a kind of signature of death, and then they were all moved into the morgue after that. At that time I was debating in my mind an essay, I think it might have been an essay by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal [1898-1987], and it was about conscience. Faced with this kind of realities, you could try and move on and not see, but if you take these things into yourself you have to accept the transformation that will take place for yourself, both personally and spiritually. This is maybe the challenge of our time, for someone like myself, for example, who was very interested in socialist theory but was not a materialist... Why could not I be fully a materialist? It is perhaps for this reason, I think that today you have to take the vulnerability and wound of the world into yourself, so as to be able to experience the joy of solidarity that comes with it. There are great moments, like the turn between 1982 and today, when I go back to Central America. So therefore, there is joy on the journey but the greatest joy is achieved when the fullness of vulnerability is experienced. This is why we are now in our darkest moments, because we have slaughter and confrontation and killings taking place between minority religious groups and majority religious groups, often within the faith system, between faith systems, and so forth, and they are all based on distortions of what was prophetic and what is in fact accepted as the intention of the human spirit involved in the beginning. It is a tragedy and what I think is that in many cases it is the fact that it has become attached to the armaments industry, that it has become attached to new methods of killing and destruction and exclusion, and also great increase in violence that is anti-human, and particularly the rise in gender-based violence, even on the edges of refugee camps where people have fled. So, this is the time when there is need for global leadership, and there is need for more than arid, dry words. One of my books, remember, is called *An Arid Season* [Higgins 2004], and I wrote that book when there were lots of passionate speeches which brought me to the public world. We give way to press releases, to statements, to accommodating texts that have turned into ashes before you get to the end of them.



*M: It is now the first anniversary of the death of Ireland's most important poetical voice. What do you think Seamus Heaney has left to your country?*

H: I think he has left to the whole Earth the value of generosity. It was a life to which no limit was placed on what he would do, for small groups or larger groups. You must remember as well that he, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and some of those Northern Poets had a great knowledge of Greek Myth standing behind them – I am thinking of Michael Longley's line, Priam's line, in the poem "Ceasefire": "[I kneel] and kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son" – [Longley 1984], but they also had a mythic sense that touched what was universal, and then they took the contemporary, and framed it in their own way. But one of the things that was Heaney's greatest strength was his working of language, of the thump of language, from *Beowulf* for example, or also the language that was the language produced by the collision of two languages, Irish and English. In his poem "The Barn" [in *Death of a Naturalist*, 1991 (1966), 5] and in others poems as well, there is a great sense of not losing the opportunity in the lives that we have, of taking the moments of love and treasuring them, like the sides of a car battered by the wind. But friendship is important, love is important, the location of both between a gentle nature is important, generosity towards other beings and being inclusive is important. So it is not as much the words of Seamus Heaney that people like myself who were his friends miss, but his presence, too and the great generosity I have seen in him so often at the end of readings giving young people so much time, and help, and the great patience of the man.

*M: Finally I would like to discuss the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising, which is directly connected with another centenary, that of World War I. How is your Country preparing for this very important anniversary, what does public opinion feel about it?*

H: I think there is now a widespread agreement that the context of 1916, the larger context of course, is 1914 and World War I. 200,000 Irish people participated in World War I. 50,000 perhaps died. World War I was a great catastrophe that stretched disaster all across Europe. When you think you have four layers of thousands of miles of trenches with people being slaughtered and wading through fields of the dead, it is so important not to forget those who died, were injured, those who had their families at home, and those who objected to the war as well, the conscientious objectors. They all have to be remembered, but there is nothing to celebrate, except to recall the tragic mistake of how the blundering detractors of Empire would have suggested a huge human cost, and you condemn the dynamics taking place in Ireland, namely, the belief that participation in the Great War would have in fact assisted the Irish Independence, whereas others had already seen the broken

promise, as Ulster had organised the way-in differently. And then I think, when you are interpreting the leaders of 1916, it is entirely inappropriate to be looking at them through a military frame or a military optic of insurrection. They were poets, they were writers, they had a version of an Ireland that they perhaps knew themselves could not come to be in the short term, but that would have certain values: it invoked previous attempts at freedom and it invoked the echo of the suppression of the personhood of nation, and then it envisaged, in its own way, what might come to be in the future; it is interesting that it was kept alive by the Irish diaspora, particularly in the United States. It is a complex issue for the government. I am quite clear in my own mind as to how I feel about it; I have no discomfort of any sort, I think we should take advantage of this complexity that this is now a challenge of all our values of truth, complexity, and authenticity. We should not use it to belabour each other with silly or wrong versions or simplicities. They are not helpful at all.

“The Betrayal”

*A poem for my father*

This man is seriously ill,  
 the doctor had said a week before,  
 calling for a wheelchair.  
 It was  
 after they rang me  
 to come down  
 and persuade you  
 to go in  
 condemned to remember your eyes  
 as they met mine in that moment  
 before they wheeled you away.  
 It was one of my final tasks  
 to persuade you to go in,  
 a Judas chosen not by Apostles  
 but by others more broken;  
 I was, in part,  
 relieved when they wheeled you from me,  
 down that corridor, confused,  
 without a backward glance.  
 And when I had done it,  
 I cried, out on the road,  
 hitching a lift to Galway and away  
 from the trouble of your  
 cantankerous old age  
 and rage too,  
 at all that had in recent years  
 befallen you.

All week I waited to visit you  
 but when I called, you had been moved  
 to where those dying too slowly  
 were sent,  
 a poorhouse, no longer known by that name,  
 but in the liberated era of Lemass,  
 given a saint's name, 'St. Joseph's'.  
 Was he Christ's father,  
 patron saint of the Worker,  
 the mad choice of some pietistic politician?  
 You never cared.

Nor did you speak too much.  
 You had broken an attendant's glasses,  
 the holy nurse told me,  
 when you were admitted.  
 Your father is a very difficult man,  
 as you must know. And Social Welfare is slow  
 and if you would pay for the glasses,  
 I would appreciate it.  
 It was 1964, just after optical benefit  
 was rejected by de Valera for poor classes  
 in his Republic, who could not afford,  
 as he did  
 to Travel to Zurich  
 for their regular tests and their  
 rimless glasses.

It was decades earlier  
 you had brought me to see him  
 pass through Newmarket—on—Fergus  
 as the brass and reed band struck up,  
 cheeks red and distended to the point  
 where a child's wonder was as to whether  
 they would burst as they blew  
 their trombones.  
 The Sacred Heart Procession and de Valera,  
 you told me, were the only occasions  
 when their instruments were taken  
 from the rusting, galvanized shed  
 where they stored them in anticipation  
 of the requirements of Church and State.

Long before that, you had slept,  
 in ditches and dug-outs,  
 prayed in terror at ambushes  
 with others who later debated

whether de Valera was lucky or brilliant  
in getting the British to remember  
that he was an American.  
And that debate had not lasted long  
in concentration camps in Newbridge  
and the Curragh, where mattresses were burned  
as the gombeens decided that the new State  
was a good thing,  
even for business.

In the dining-room of St. Joseph's  
the potatoes were left in the middle of the table  
in a dish, towards which  
you and many other Republicans  
stretched feeble hands that shook.  
Your eyes were bent as you peeled  
with the long thumb-nail I had often watched  
scrape a pattern on the leather you had toughened for our  
shoes.  
Your eyes when you looked at me  
were a thousand miles away,  
now totally broken,  
unlike those times even  
of rejection, when you went at sixty  
for jobs you never got,  
too frail to lead vans, or manage  
the demands of selling.  
And I remember  
when you came back to me,  
your regular companion of such occasions,  
and said: 'They think that I'm too old  
for the job. I said I was fifty-eight  
but they knew that I was past sixty'.

A body ready for transportation,  
fit only for a coffin, that made you  
too awkward  
for death at home.  
The shame of a coffin exit  
through a window sent you here,  
where my mother told me you asked  
only for her to place her cool hand  
under your neck.  
And I was there when they asked  
would they give you a Republican funeral,  
in that month when you died,  
between the end of the First Programme for Economic Expansion  
and the Second.

I look at your photo now,  
 taken in the beginning of bad days,  
 with your surviving mates  
 in Limerick.  
 Your face hunts me, as do these memories;  
 and all these things have been scraped  
 in my heart,  
 and I can never hope to forget  
 what was, after all,  
 a betrayal.

“Il tradimento”<sup>1</sup>

*Una poesia per mio padre*

Quest'uomo è gravemente malato,  
 aveva detto il dottore una settimana prima,  
 e chiese una sedia a rotelle.  
 Fu  
 dopo la telefonata  
 perché venissi  
 a convincerti  
 a entrare  
 condannato a ricordare i tuoi occhi  
 che incontrarono i miei in quel momento  
 prima di farti portar via sulla sedia a rotelle.  
 Fu uno dei miei ultimi compiti  
 persuaderti a entrare,  
 un Giuda scelto non da apostoli  
 ma da altri più abbattuti;  
 fui, in parte,  
 sollevato quando ti portarono via sulla sedia a rotelle,  
 lungo quel corridoio, confuso,  
 senza girarti indietro.  
 E dopo averlo fatto,  
 piansi, per strada,  
 mentre facevo l'autostop per Galway e via  
 dal fastidio della tua  
 irascibile vecchiaia  
 e anche il livore,  
 per tutto quello che in anni recenti  
 ti era capitato.

<sup>1</sup> La traduzione è tratta da Higgins 2014, 29-39. Ringraziamo l'editore per aver concesso il permesso di ripubblicarla in questa sede. / This translation is included in Higgins 2014, 29-39. Our sincere thanks to the publishers for permission to reproduce it here.

Tutta la settimana aspettai di venirti a trovare  
ma al mio arrivo, eri stato trasferito  
dove mandavano  
chi muore troppo lentamente,  
un ospizio di carità, non li chiamano più così,  
ma nell'emancipata era Lemass,  
scelsero il nome di un santo, "St. Joseph".  
Era forse lui il padre di Cristo,  
il santo patrono dei lavoratori,  
la scelta folle d'un qualche politico pietista?  
Non te n'è mai importato.

E non parlavi molto.  
Avevi rotto gli occhiali d'un inserviente,  
mi disse la santa sorella,  
dopo l'accettazione.  
Suo padre è un uomo molto difficile da trattare,  
come ben saprà. E all'Assistenza Sociale son lenti  
e se può pagarli lei, gli occhiali,  
gliene sarei grata.  
Era il 1964, dopo il rifiuto di de Valera  
di dare alle classi povere l'assistenza oculistica  
nella sua Repubblica; non potevano permettersi,  
come lui,  
di andare a Zurigo  
per farsi fare visite regolari e  
occhiali senza montatura.

Decenni prima  
mi avevi portato a vederlo  
sfilare per Newmarket-on-Fergus  
mentre attaccava la banda di ottoni e strumenti ad ancia,  
guance rosse e tese fino al punto  
che un bambino si chiedeva se  
potessero scoppiare, nel soffiare in  
quei tromboni.  
La Processione del Sacro Cuore e de Valera,  
mi dicesti, erano le uniche occasioni  
in cui i loro strumenti venivano  
rispolverati dalla capanna di lamiera arrugginita  
dove erano stati riposti in attesa  
delle esigenze di Stato e Chiesa.

Molto prima, avevi dormito,  
tra fossi e ricoveri sotterranei,  
pregato in preda al terrore durante le imboscate  
con chi più in là avrebbe discusso

se de Valera fosse stato fortunato o geniale  
a far ricordare ai britannici  
d'essere americano.  
E quelle discussioni non sarebbero durate molto  
nei campi di concentramento a Newbridge  
e nel Curragh, dove bruciavano materassi  
mentre gli usurai capivano che il nuovo Stato  
era cosa buona  
anche per gli affari.

Nel refettorio del St. Joseph  
lasciavano le patate in mezzo al tavolo  
in un piatto, verso cui  
tu e tanti altri Repubblicani  
tendevate mani fiacche e tremanti.  
I tuoi occhi bassi mentre le pelavi  
con l'unghia lunga del pollice che molte volte ti avevo  
visto usare per incidere la pelle da te rinforzata per farci le  
scarpe.  
Gli occhi quando mi guardasti  
erano lontani migliaia di miglia,  
ora totalmente abbattuti,  
ancor più dei tempi in cui venivi  
respinto, quando a sessant'anni  
cercavi lavori che non trovavi mai,  
troppo debole per guidare i camion, o per star dietro  
alle esigenze della vendita.  
E ricordo  
quando tornavi da me,  
abituale tuo compagno in quelle occasioni,  
dicendo: "Mi ritengono troppo vecchio  
per quel lavoro. Gli ho detto che avevo cinquantotto anni  
ma sapevano che ne ho più di sessanta".

Un corpo pronto a esser trasportato,  
buono solo per una bara, il che rendeva  
troppo scomodo  
farti morire in casa.  
La vergogna di uscire in una bara  
attraverso una finestra ti aveva spinto qui,  
dove mia madre mi disse che avevi chiesto  
fosse solo la sua mano fredda  
a reggerti la testa.  
Ed ero lì quando chiesero  
se farti un funerale repubblicano,  
nel mese in cui sei morto,  
tra la fine del Primo Programma di Espansione Economica  
e il Secondo.

Guardo la tua foto adesso,  
scattata all'inizio di giorni bui,  
con i compagni sopravvissuti  
a Limerick.  
Il tuo volto mi ossessiona, come quei ricordi;  
tutte cose incise  
nel mio cuore,  
e non ho speranza di scordare  
quel che fu, dopo tutto,  
un tradimento.

Traduzione di Enrico Terrinoni

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