Milena Agus, Daddy’s Wings, translated by Brigid Maher (Scribe Publications, 2011)

Ten years after its publication in the New Left Review, the brilliant article by Jonathan Arac ‘Anglo-Globalism?’ still seems to have provocative relevance. Whilst Arac’s harsh criticism of Franco Moretti’s essay ‘Conjectures on World Literature’ – published in the same journal two years earlier, in 2000 – has been gradually debunked by other world-literature scholars, such as Vilashini Cooppan in 2004, his warning that transnational literature is mostly exchanged by means of the English language and Anglophone culture and thus might be homogenised by these hegemonic forces, cannot be easily forgotten and put aside. In order to deal with these cultural pressures, a great deal of work – as one of the first thinkers in the field of world literature, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, already knew in 1827 – has to be entrusted to translators.

It quite often happens, for instance, that non-Anglophone texts, when translated into English, lose their linguistic and stylistic features and lose their ties with specific – i.e., regional, or trans-regional – locations.

Luckily, this is not the case with Daddy’s Wings by Milena Agus, translated into English by Brigid Maher for the Australian publishing house Scribe in 2011, three years after its publication in Italy as Ali di babbo.

Maher’s translation manages to manipulate Agus’s multi-lingual text brilliantly, transforming the double mechanism of domestication and foreignisation of the Italian text, which blends Italian and Sardinian (sometimes with explanatory paraphrases or footnotes, sometimes without giving any clue), into a tripartite mechanism reproducing the same equilibrium between Italian, Sardinian and English.

This linguistic refinement provided by the translator might help Anglophone readers to place themselves in a story which is set mostly in Sardinia and is narrated by a Sardinian writer without misleadingly feeling the severity of the cultural and political conflict actually taking place, as the plot might reveal. Before giving a brief summary of it, it is important to notice how the translator’s work underlines the fact that Agus’s text is not a vindictive localist novel, but rather highlights all the effects of the existing tension between ‘continental people’ and ‘islanders’ on the lives of the characters, sometimes exploring this wound profoundly and sometimes describing it in a milder but still impressive way. The choice of the narrator – who is, not coincidentally, a young girl with a typically changeable mood and attitude to life – reinforces the author’s ideological standpoint.

The plot revolves around the struggle of a Sardinian woman known in her village as Madame to preserve her house and small hotel from the greedy assault of developers who want to buy her property in order to build a new tourist resort there, thus exploiting one of the last bits of untouched territory on that part of the Sardinian coast. This is the central point of an otherwise multi-faceted family narrative ironically recorded by the young girl’s blinking eyes.

It is precisely the self-knowledge gained by this child throughout the thirty-five sketches making up the novel, and her finally coming to terms with the figure of the missing father – symbolised by the ‘daddy’s wings’ of the title – that permits a comparison between Milena Agus and the Australian writer Barbara Hanrahan (1939-1991), as the Australian press has already noted in their reviews of the book.

The young narrator and Madame, together with the narrator’s aunt, mother and grandmother and the neighbours’ grandmother, all seem to be ‘strayed queens’, to recall the title and themes of Hanrahan’s key novel Where the Queens All Strayed. Even in this case, however, Agus depicts the psychological development of her female characters without entering deeply into the conflict between psychoanalytical and gender perspectives (leaving it to Hanrahan, as Annette Stewart’s essay Woman and Herself: A Critical Study of the Works of Barbara Hanrahan has shown), preferring to describe it with the lightest of touches and smiles.

Once again, then, it is Italo Calvino’s imperative about lightness – discussed in the first of his Six Memos for the Next Millennium – that informs Agus’s text. This does not mean that the themes of Daddy’s Wings are treated in a light-hearted or superficial way. As has been mentioned above, Agus’s stylistic choices present a very conflicted background, emphasising the negative, and sometimes even tragic, effects, but this does not prevent her always giving a glimpse of light. Notwithstanding the loneliness and misery of her characters, she never gives up on the possibility of love and happiness, as she is always ‘seek[ing] and learn[ing] to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then mak[ing] them endure, giv[ing] them space’, as Calvino has it.

This glimpse of light is rendered metaphorically through the possibility that the child narrator will fly away on daddy’s wings, but this psychological journey can also be related to the possibility of other physical and textual travel.

In fact, some passages of the story are set in Italy and Paris, clearly removing the possibility of any hypothesis of localism – which could be a serious limit for this kind of novel – and confirming that such a ‘truly’ Sardinian story is in fact a trans-local story, making the different places, cultures and stories meet and mix together. The presence of hybridising processes does not substantiate, on the other hand, a fully enthusiastic trans-local reading. Exemplary, in this respect, is the characterisation of the narrator’s aunt, who has been researching Leibniz in many foreign universities, but is unable to apply her intellectualist jargon to her native reality, whereas the narrator’s grandfather and the narrator are fully able to grasp the essential meanings of their experiences in life, even without having left the island.

The physical and intellectual journeys, whether material or imaginative, which cross the text may prepare us for the transnational journey of the novel itself, which has already had tangible resonance in Australian literature. Maher’s powerful translation is a great starting point.

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9 Italo Calvino. Invisible Cities (Harcourt Trade, 1974) 164.