

*Enriching Exegesis through Translation: The Case of Constance Markievicz's Writings***

by Loredana Salis*

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Focusing as a case study on the Italian translation of Constance Markievicz's writings, this paper reflects on the exegetical value of translation. Born into the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, Irish nationalist Markievicz waged an unrelenting war of words against English power in Ireland for nearly two decades, and she combined it with the armed fight and activism she is best known for. Her eventful life and daunting actions have been evoked retrospectively and through anecdotes that depict her either as a heroine or an extravagant woman, an «average revolutionary» and a «pestilent harridan». Her writings, by contrast, have received partial critical attention and remain mostly uncollected to this day. Rarely, that is, she has been allowed to speak for herself. In such respect, the critical edition of Markievicz's writings in translation is a rewarding starting point. Translation can make a significant impact upon literary and historical scholarship: it revisits contexts, it tests secondary sources, it pursues «the *intentio* of the original», and «liberates» (Benjamin) the language therein imprisoned. Markievicz's writings are exemplary of the way translation can liberate her voice, rethink perceptions of her, shed a different light on her and her words, ultimately contributing to our knowledge of her times and of ours.

Keywords: Constance Markievicz, translation, exegesis.

Constance Markievicz (née Constance Georgina Gore-Booth) was born into the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in 1868. Within the next four decades, she would become a prominent Irish nationalist, and fight strenuously

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against English rule in Ireland. Throughout her militant years, and until her death, in 1927, ‘Madame’ Markievicz, the ‘Countess’, as she was also known in her days, combined an unrelenting war of words with the armed fight she is mostly remembered for, and to which a host of academic publications and biographies are inspired. Depicted by some as a heroine, and by others as an extravagant aristocrat, an average revolutionary or a pestilent harridan, this unconventional woman was also an artist and a prolific writer, whose works have received sparse critical attention and remain mostly uncollected, unpublished and unread to this day. Scholars have rarely allowed her to speak for herself, that is, nor have their investigations relied on the numerous texts which Markievicz penned in twenty years of active political engagement. In such respect, a critical edition of her letters, articles, poems, plays and speeches represents a valuable resource for old and new readers. More so, if those writings are explored in translation and through translation. It is my argument here that translation can be used and, where possible, ought to be used to enrich the critical ground; and to the double aim of asserting and assessing its exegetic potential, I shall consider the Italian version of two short texts by Constance Markievicz.

On translation

To the present scope translation will be intended as a «privileged form of critical reading [*which leads to*] the most intimate mechanisms and gears [*of the artistic text*] » (de Campos, cf. Bruno 2012: 15). An «act of removal», in Johnson’s dictionary (1755: 2086), translation is «the process of expressing the sense of a word, or a passage into another language»; it allows for the «conversion» from one medium into another, and for its «transformation, alteration, adaptation» to a diverse use (*ibid*). All of this suggests its cultural implications, and in this context helps me focus, from the perspective of a literary scholar, on that which is gained, rather than lost in translation.

Translation, to recall Walter Benjamin’s definition, is the «afterlife» of a text (Benjamin 1996: 254): it revives and makes accessible to wider and different audiences works that have been forgotten and neglected, somehow deemed unsuitable or uninteresting. Translation «shines upon the original, but does not cover it» (ivi: 260), rather revealing its nature as «a unit of structure which is deployed in the service of an overall rhetorical purpose» (Hatim and Mason, cf. Mason 2010: 86). This is what Novalis, the 18th century German philosopher

meant by «mythical translation», which «brings something relatively new into the target culture, enlarging it by offering and introducing new (hitherto unknown) features into it» (cf. Vermeer 1992: 5). A mythical translation, in other words, «transforms the target culture by transforming a source culture object and raising the target culture to a higher level, i.e. by developing it» (*ibid.*). And it is for such reasons that translation may not always be verbal. The process involves the author, the translator and their respective readers, and it sheds light also upon the culture to which translation is directed and for which it is produced.

Transformation, development and the notion of translation as not-necessarily verbal are especially functional to my scope here and to my contention that just as exegesis is crucial to the process of translation, so is translation crucial to the exegetic process. To put it differently, translation shapes, modifies and contributes to hermeneutics by enhancing a scholar's reading experience and ability to read literary texts in a critical way. The combination of literary criticism and translation is «mutually strengthening», if not «indispensable» as Marilyn Rose argues in a study on the theme of translation as analysis (1997: 11; 14). Literary translation, after all «is a form of literary criticism» since «translating [...] helps us get inside literature [...] We [...] feel we are moving inside what we are reading, examining literature from the inside» (*ibid.*: 14).

How so? How does translation allow me to examine literature from the inside? How does it affect or add to my knowledge and thinking of a literary text? Going back to Constance Markievicz, how could my translating her work enhance my critical understanding of her? How in essence would my giving her a voice in my mother tongue allow for a diverse, enhanced experience of her world, her ideas, her times? It is perhaps worth clarifying that the concept of translation as analysis is applicable to any language and culture; and it may prove useful also to scholars who can read originals or need not a second language to access their primary sources. This is the case with interlingual translations and remediations, through which a literary text is actualised and adapted for the theatre stage, for instance, or for the screen, for a public reading, a dance performance or a musical. These types of translations will equally enrich a scholar's work of exegesis and therefore expand her/his critical ground.

Exegesis is a powerful term. It means «leading out», «showing the way to someone (*ex-égésis*)» (OED online). As literary scholars and critics we use exegesis to suggest, unveil, compare our understanding

of the narrative texts we work with. In sharing our analytical views, we are somehow led out, and we show the way to others – our peers (at conferences and through publication), and our students (in the classroom). Our work of exegesis ensues from an in-depth reading of texts, of which translation is a possible and valuable tool – one that gets me into literature, leads me towards its most intimate mechanisms. Translation is *ipso facto* an act of reading, which reminds us that readers are not passive recipients, and reading is not innocent. Rather, it is revolutionary, or else reactionary; it is violent (Venuti, cf. Baker, 65) but also creative (de Campos, cf. Vieira 1992: 67) – it «cannibalizes the text in order to absorb it and transform it» (*ibid.*). Through translation, especially *en face* translation, we «come to terms with the mechanisms of meaning production and aesthetic effects in the source text» (Bruno 2012: 3). The process thus becomes the «depository of a comprehensive critical understanding of the original» (*ibid.*), which entails a certain degree of responsibility on our part (as readers/translators/critics) before solutions are proposed.

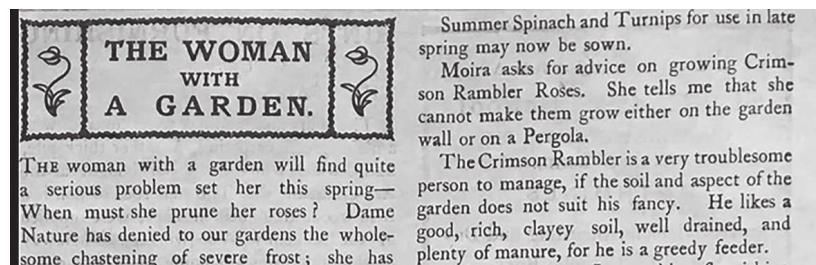
To decide upon a word's meaning, one must consider aspects of textuality as well as intertextuality and contextuality, given that with time a word may have changed its significance, perhaps it has acquired a different one in another language. Source and target contexts are searched, explored, mapped thus giving the translator insights into contexts and then back into texts. In the case of a Markievicz piece, I am bound to read, re-read, and cross-read words that she uses allegorically and metaphorically to be able to interpret and translate them as correctly and as faithfully as possible. In doing this, I end up reaching deeper and wider into the text, and into her world. Two practical examples will help us look further into these aspects. One is an article on nationalist gardening from 1909, the other is the introduction to *Fianna Handbook*, from 1914. Both translations are to be published in the Italian edition of the political writings of Constance Markievicz: the first I assessed and approved as editor of the volume but did not translate¹; the second is a new translation I made as I was not satisfied with an earlier version of it². In both cases the approach is source-oriented so as to preserve linguistic peculiarities and culture-

¹ The volume, to be titled *Scritti politici di Constance Markievicz*, is a selection of texts translated into Italian by Lucia Angelica Salaris.

² Marta Petrusiewicz, *Manuale dei Fianna. Introduzione della Contessa de Markievicz*, in *Un sogno irlandese. La storia di Constance Markievicz, comandante dell'I.R.A. (1968-1927)*, Roma, manifestolibri, 1998, pp. 77-79.

specific elements. Features of Markievicz's writing style are never standardised in the name of readability or acceptability of the target text, and where preservation is hard to achieve, compensation means are deployed to reduce translation loss (cf. Gadd Colombi 2018: 75) and thereby maintain dichotomies along with elements that are not culturally equivalent.

FIGURE 1
The Woman with a Garden



The Woman with a Garden is the title of a nationalist gardening column by Armid (Markievicz's pseudonym, after the goddess of herbs and healing) appeared between 1909 and 1911 in *Bean na hÉireann*, a monthly launched by *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (INE), the nationalist-feminist organization of which the Countess was a member and a keen contributor. Relying on a popular horticultural type of allegory, each month the eponymous woman would advise her «fellow countrywomen» who wished «to make the most of that little bit of their native land that falls to their share in this life» (Markievicz 1909: 3). In keeping with the politics of INE, Markievicz pursued a more active and responsible public role for women in the management of Ireland and of Ireland's liberation from the English coloniser. In this, Madame's column combined the nationalist and the feminist causes, often regarded as antithetical (Murphy 1997), and envisioned the domestic garden as a microcosm of the national Garden, capital G. (Mickey 2013: xix). On the page such a unique green space became a virtual forum for the women of Ireland, a school in democracy and in the vindication of the rights of a land unjustly occupied. The narrative draws upon the Romantic association of Nature with women – women as nurturers of all things natural – while the framework and

style are typical of mid-Victorian conduct manuals, a popular read also in households across Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. Markievicz's rhetoric is both engaging and agreeable, hardly concealing the author's rebel thoughts and design of a distinctively revolutionary gardening practice.

In March 1909 Armid wrote:

Now our enthusiastic gardener's fingers hitch to hold her knife, and when she walks through her rose borders, she can hardly restrain herself. Every tree [...] seems to be crying aloud for the knife. But the **wise** gardener will restrain herself [...] (Markievicz 1909a: 3).

The passage is rendered with a fairly literal translation:

Ecco che alla nostra giardiniera prudono le dita, tanta è la smania di impugnare il coltello, e quando si muove tra le siepi di rose riesce a stento a trattenersi. Ogni singolo albero [...] sembra implorare a gran voce il suo coltello, ma la giardiniera saggia si tratterrà [...].

A largely faithful source-oriented translation seeks to retain conceptual words, i.e. words referring «to a concept which, with its sole meaning, plays a central role within the logic [*of the text*]» (Gadd Colombi 2018: 83). Markievicz uses them not at random, rather linking them directly into the main themes of the column and of the monthly itself. In this way, issue upon issue, she develops a special grammar or a code for the *communitas* of fellow countrywomen – her readers – to instruct them and form their political conscience. The language is simple, with repetitions, dichotomies and action verbs shaping a message of distinct tone and scope. This is easily replicated in translation (eg. the repetition of 'knife' (coltello) and 'restrain' (trattenersi), while compensation strategies proved necessary in at least two cases). The enthusiastic gardener's fingers hitch, literally «le dita entusiaste della giardiniera prudono» becomes «alla giardiniera le dita prudono tanta è la smania» in which the Italian 'smania' succeeds in giving a stronger image of those enthusiastic fingers in the English text. The 'smania', an almost unrestrained enthusiasm, is kept at bay by wisdom – notwithstanding the hitch and the crying aloud – and this is the wisdom of the gardener who, like in *Richard II*, knows all too well when to cut or prune her plants.

The intertextual reference surfaces in consequence of translation. As I linger over each word, I see an analogy with the garden imagery in Shakespeare's history play, itself an allegory and a prophecy of

imminent decline for that merciless sovereign who razed the Irish soil at the height of England's colonial power. Readers of Markievicz's *Notes* were thus indoctrinated and nobilitated in the performance of a less canonical task, similar to that of Shakespeare's gardener (1999: 386)³. Here is one fine example:

The woman with the garden will find quite a serious problem set her this spring – *When must she prune her roses?* Dame Nature has denied to our gardens the wholesome chastening of severe frost; she has smiled on the leaves of last summer, and lo and behold! they are with us still (1909a: 3).

In translation Markievicz's style and lexicon are reproduced as faithfully as possible, nonetheless I am compelled to ask what the hitch is about, what the urge? In the passage, timing is clearly the essence – *When must she prune her roses?* – therefore, fidelity to the verb tenses guarantees that the same effect is retained – the solution to the 'serious problem' is not so much *how* but *when* action is to be taken. In Italian this is rendered by way of deixis and of the present tense:

La donna in giardino / Una donna che possieda un giardino
si troverà questa primavera ad affrontare un problema serio: quando potare
le rose?

Echoing the title of the column, the first part of this sentence literally means 'la donna col giardino' or 'in giardino', possibly a self-referential phrase through which Markievicz places herself as a model and a guide for a prospective female gardener – 'una donna che possieda un giardino' – who will equally face 'un problema serio' this spring.

The 'serious problem' concerns roses, their presence, survival and rebirth. The Rose – capital R – is the western flower of Life, an eloquent religious and national symbol, and a strong intertextual reference, especially with Blake – *The sick rose* (1794) – Althea Gyles's designs (Antonielli 2011: 272)⁴, and with Yeats, who edited Blake's

³ «O, what pity is it / that he had not so trimmed and dressed his land / as we this garden! We at time of year / do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit trees, / lest, being over-proud in sap and blood, / with too much riches it confound itself / Had he done so to great and growing men, / they might have lived to bear, and he to taste, / their fruits of duty. Superfluous branches / we lop away, that bearings may live. Had he done so, himself had borne the crown, / which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down» (III, iv, 56-67).

⁴ Miss Althea Gyles designed book covers for Yeats' *The Secret Rose* (1897); *Poems* (1899), and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899).

work (1893), authored rose poems and stories which Markievicz had read, and viewed the rose as ‘the meeting point of the natural, the magical, the mythical and the eternal worlds – the symbol of the apocalyptic rebirth into an era of inner immortal values announced in the «everlasting Voices of the wind» (Billigheimer 2002: 280). It is not incidental, therefore, that Markievicz has roses everywhere in her writings, as well as her prison sketches and embroidery:

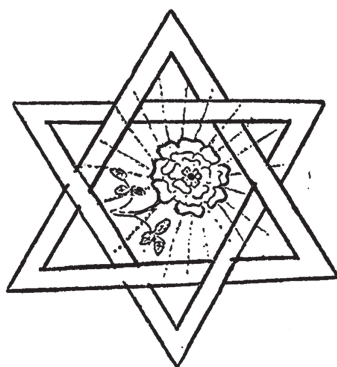
FIGURE 2

Two of a set of eight buttons embroidered by Markievicz when she was in Holloway Prison, London (June 1918-March 1919)



FIGURE 3

The Rose, back-cover of *The Death of Fionavar*, by Eva Gore Booth, Markievicz's elder sister (1916)



In the July 1909 column, the traditional Roisin, and the ‘Roisin Dubh’ (the little black rose) are emblems of an unfree or rebel Ireland; elsewhere its ‘purple glory’ is the glory of ‘a bright flower (Ireland) in the garden of the world’ (Markievicz 1910, 12). But in this case the rose is red:

The Crimson Rambler is a very troublesome person to manage, if the soil and aspect of the garden does not suit his fancy. He likes a good, rich, clayey soil, well drained, and plenty of manure, for he is a greedy feeder (Markievicz 1909a, 3).

The personification of this flower species confirms a reading of the text as allegorical, interventionist and consonant with the politics of INE. In translation some liberty was taken:

La Rosa Rossa rampicante è un soggetto piuttosto molesto difficile da gestire, se la terra e le caratteristiche del giardino non gli vanno a genio. Predilige un suolo buono, ricco e argilloso, e che sia ben drenato, e grandi quantità di letame, perché è molto avido di nutrimento.

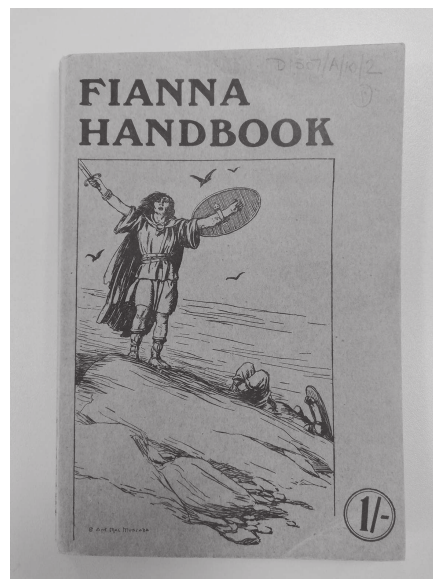
A “Crimson Rambler” (capital C, capital R) is a rose of «a rich deep red colour inclining to purple [*that*] grows in all directions» (OED online). Literally it is a «rosa rampicante rosso cremisi», which was simplified as «rosa rossa rampicante», although that is not exactly a Crimson Rambler. The qualitative loss is evident, but not irreparable, if adequate compensation is used⁵. *Rosa* is a feminine noun in the target language (and in most languages) as is ‘persona’, therefore the masculine ‘soggetto’ is used instead to respect the possessive *his* in the English text. Markievicz’s choice begs my question as to what her Crimson Rambler stands for, and who the «troublesome person» behind this flower may be. The Crimson Rambler was a «novelty plant [...] from England» popularised in gardening catalogues of the 1890s as far as the United States (Mickey 2013: xix). Markievicz may be referring to the English – the red rose of Lancaster – or to the Irish rebels and their sacrifice, with crimson being the colour of blood, of Christ’s blood

⁵ For instance, his free ‘rambling’ character is rendered in the verb choice, ‘predilige’, literally ‘prefers’ to translate ‘likes’, and in the tense ‘che sia’, where the conjunctive renders the notion of his being invasive (‘avida di nutrimento’), and the kind of ‘troublesome subject’, who is ‘piuttosto molesto da gestire’, ‘free and unfettered by stiff masonry’, ‘libero e senza restrizioni murarie’. The passive is lost but compensated by “restrizioni murarie”, where ‘restrictions’ replaces the ‘stiff masonry’ in the English text.

more specifically (Antonielli 2009: 165-166), which became central to nationalist iconography and rhetoric. Or, the text may be deliberately ambivalent, and therefore say one thing and its opposite at the same time, while educating readers into thinking along Markievicz's lines. As a translator I am bound to find a solution and take responsibility for it⁶, but as a critic I can leave the dilemma unsolved (or avoid the question altogether) and point out certain features and their coherence with Markievicz's agenda and with her *call* for the women of Ireland to partake in the liberation of their country.

The gardening column belongs to the same period as when Madame delivered a lecture to be published years later with the title of *A Call to the Women of Ireland* (1919). A key-term in her production, 'the call' is found across most of her writings, and it is also the main conceptual word in our second translation.

FIGURE 4
Fianna Handbook. The 'little green book' – frontcover



⁶ «Il traduttore non può saltare nulla, non può lasciare iati, è costretto a scegliere, e quindi, quasi sempre, a rinunciare a qualcosa» (cf. Paci 2017: 40-41).

The *Fianna Handbook* was issued for the Boy Scouts of Ireland in 1914, some six years after Markievicz gave life to a movement named after the mythic warriors of Fionn⁷ and modelled – paradoxically, if not ironically – on Baden Powell's Boy Scouts. By 1914 the Countess had become President of the Fianna, and in that capacity she wrote the introduction which is the object of our attention here. The text is relatively short (3 pages, out of 180) and it is another typical Markievicz piece, both in form and content. The language is simple, the grammar essential, the vocabulary basic with stylistic and lexical choices facilitating comprehension for younger and unschooled ears. Indeed, the primary target is the average teenager – aged 11 to 18 – upon whom the future of the Nation rests. These Boys are called to join the Fianna and «win Independence and Freedom of their country». The structure is equally simple and straightforward. Speaking on behalf of the Council she presides, 'Countess de Markievicz' (this is how she signs the piece) begins by stating the purpose of 'our little book' and its place in that mission which is «above all [...] to help and guide the army of young people who are [...] banding themselves together in a glorious brotherhood of glory and hope» (Markievicz 1914: 6).

Markievicz evokes «the spirit of Cathleen ni Houlihan» (*sic.*, par. 2), drawing upon Ireland's ancient tradition and heroes (i.e: «the wisper of the wind»; «the flaming words of dying patriots», Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone), and on the narrative force of the *aisling*, recalled by W. B. Yeats in his hugely influential play of 1899, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, a manifesto of the Celtic Revival and of that cultural nationalism now supplanted by militant nationalism. Madame talks to «the older generation [*that*] shook their head and doubted», before she turns – in par. 3 – to «the best and noblest children» of Ireland, to win her Freedom (again, capital F), «for the price of Freedom is pain and suffering» (ivi: 7). She looks out to America (par. 4), a former English colony, and an inspiration to Ireland, upon which she can count for her fight (through the Irish diaspora and the many exiled nationalists). Ireland's prospects are likened to those of India and South Africa, and to all the colonised people «who throughout the world work and fight, live or die for their country's freedom» (ivi: 8). Freedom is not a dream, it is Ireland's fate, a certainty, albeit high in its price. As the piece draws to the end, its martial tone overcomes – «we will not fear [...] we will not tire [...] we will not flinch» (*ibid.*) – and with that its

⁷ The original name was The Red Branch Knights, changed into Fianna when Bulmer Hobson was involved in this venture, in 1909. Cf. Hay (2011: 442).

ultimate message is spelt out – «Ireland wants you, Ireland is calling you. Join Na Fianna Eireann, the young army of Ireland» (*ibid*).

Direct and clear, the text poses challenges that lie beyond language matters, prompting its translator to seek solutions that will expand the critical ground. Here too, textuality, contextuality and intertextuality entwine, crucial and unavoidable:

Lo spirito d'Irlanda è libero perché i figli d'Irlanda non hanno mai avuto paura di pagarne il prezzo. Il percorso verso la libertà potrebbe ricondurci sulla strada già battuta da Robert Emmet e da Wolfe Tone. Seguendo le loro tracce noi non avremo paura; impegnandoci come si sono impegnati loro noi non ci stancheremo, e se dobbiamo morire come sono morti loro, lo faremo senza esitare [...]. È questo il nostro messaggio alla gioventù d'Irlanda, oggi. L'Irlanda vuole voi, l'Irlanda vi chiama. Unitevi ai Na Fianna Eireann, l'esercito giovane d'Irlanda.

A literal translation would betray the tone and intent. I avoided long sentences where these may have affected the pattern and the rhythm of the translated text. Again, the repetition of conceptual words and fidelity to sound served to recreate meaning and pace in the target text – 'sacrificio' for 'sacrifice', 'onore' for 'honour', 'spirito' for 'spirit'. Fields of expression were maintained, while explicative measures (i.e. in-text elements or footnotes to decode culture-specific elements that would otherwise remain inaccessible to the reader of the target text) proved necessary in some cases (most especially proper nouns, *eg.* Emmet and Tone, and references to the culture and history of Ireland). Unhappy as I was with the extant Italian translation, the work of a historian wanting to highlight Markievicz's place in the cause of Ireland, I drafted and redrafted mine, negotiating its lexicon with propaganda texts of the time to replicate the prophetic and normative tone of a piece meant to show readers, in 1914, their road to freedom.

The date was and is significant. Fianna was recruiting as early as 1909, so it would have made sense to circulate the *Handbook* back then, and yet publication was delayed. In decoding Markievicz and re-coding her I needed to look at a much larger picture and locate this text within a wider ideological, cultural and political framework⁸. It

⁸ This involved reading Baden Powell's *Scouting for Boys*, both in English and in translation so as to understand the scouting movement and its history in UK and Ireland. I investigated the *Handbook*, its structure, contents, the cover, and a picture by Markievicz in the volume. I considered academic work on the construction of the Irish child in the years coming up to WWI especially Boylan, and Gallagher (eds) 2018.

became clear how words in translation should reflect the atmosphere of that moment – with Home Rule, WWI and conscription being pivotal to its dissemination two years ahead of the Easter Rising, in 1916. The politics of my translation intertwined with the politics of Markievicz's nationalism, leading me to reproduce a piece of military propaganda. In the process, I ended up leaving in peace neither author nor reader – to paraphrase Schleiermacher (cf. Venuti 2000: 54), in other words I needed Markievicz to move towards me – her reader – while I also wanted to and needed to move towards her. This helped narrow the interliminal space between two cultures of which the original texts and their Italian versions are an expression. I was then able to gain insight into the source text, which gradually unveiled and opened to me, developing my reading capacity, enriching my critical ground.

In conclusion, much can be learned about a work of literature by translating it (cf. Parks 1998: vii), that is by revisiting contexts, testing secondary sources, pursuing the *intentio* of the original, and 'liberating' the language therein imprisoned. Markievicz's writings are exemplary of how the analytical tool of translation enables readers to connect with her voice and think of her in a different way, ultimately contributing to our knowledge of her times and of ours. In these terms, translation becomes an adventure (cf. Serpieri 2015), it is not a final destination nor is it a target, but a phase in a process, an open-ended journey across the critical ground (Flusser, cf. Rainer 2008: 117) wherein our understanding develops, beyond the translated page.

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