
Margherita Zanoletti, eds., Noonuccal Oodgeroo. *My People/La mia gente*. (Milano: Mimesis, 2021), 348 pp., ISBN: 978-88-57576-76-3

Reviewed by Arianna Autieri

The anthology *My People/La mia Gente* edited by Margherita Zanoletti (Mimesis 2021) fills a major gap in the postcolonial translated literature publishing scene in Italy, introducing in the country the most famous collection of poetry by the Australian Aboriginal writer Oodgeroo Noonuccal. With the remarkable contribution of Zanoletti's notes and introductory prefaces, and an introductory essay by Alexis Wright, *My People/La mia Gente* also fills a critical gap in studies on Aboriginal Australian literature: despite having been published in five editions and being highly successful among the public, in fact, as Zanoletti laments, no exhaustive study on *My People* had been published before (Margherita Zanoletti, "My People di Oodgeroo Noonuccal: una prospettiva traduttologica", in M. Zanoletti, ed., *My People/La mia Gente*, by Oodgeroo Noonuccal [Milano: Mimesis, 2021], 50).

My People, a "classic of postcolonial literature" (ibid.), gives voice to the tragic history of Aboriginal Australians – a history still "unknown to the majority of Italians" (31; my translation) – and thematises the vital interrelationship between nature and the indigenous populations of Australia – a theme particularly significant for a world facing an ecological crisis. It includes Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first collections of poems, *We Are Going* – already introduced to the Italian public by Zanoletti and Di Blasio in 2013 – and *The Dawn Is at Hand*, eight poems that were written between 1966 and 1970 (the year of the first publication of *My People*), and seven later pieces. It also contains a prose *Interlude* and a transcription of Oodgeroo's 1989 speech for the Griffith University, pronounced when she was awarded her honorary doctorate on April 22, 1989. *My People/La mia Gente* is a bilingual publication that presents the texts of *My People* alongside their Italian translations. As a translation of a postcolonial text, this edition stands out for its refined, theory-informed, and sensitive translation approach: Zanoletti shows an awareness of the "ethical aim of the translating act" and an intent to "receive the Foreign as Foreign" (Antoine Berman, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign", trans. by Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. by Lawrence Venuti [New York: Routledge, 2012], 241). Where translations are introduced by detailed introductory prefaces and accompanied by explicative notes and a glossary, another merit of this edition is that it re-establishes the fruitful link between translation and commentary, a link which was "broken" "when critical discourse established itself as an autonomous entity" (Antoine Berman, *The Age of Translation*, trans. by Chantal Wright [New York: Routledge, 2018], 27) but which appears particularly significant for a worthwhile exploration of literature.

Opening Zanoletti's edition is a text by Aboriginal writer and Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne Alexis Wright. The text is a transcription of the speech given by Wright at the annual *Fryer Lecture in Australian Literature* (9 November 2020) – one hundred years after Oodgeroo's birth – translated for the first time into Italian by Zanoletti. The choice to include Wright's words at the beginning of the Italian edition of *My People* is a particularly effective means to signal to the Italian reader the historical and contemporary significance of Oodgeroo's

compositions. Wright sheds light on the role that Oodgeroo's literary and activist efforts had for Aboriginal Australian people, reminding her audience that Oodgeroo "spoke of decades of genocidal, oppressive laws depriving our relatives – our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents – of basic human dignity, robbing their spirit, and denying their legal rights" (Alexis Wright, "In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?", in *Monthly* [December 2020-January 2021], www.themonthly.com.au). Moreover, Wright considers how Oodgeroo's discussion of the intrinsic connection between nature, men and land in her writing is an inspiration in the era of the "Anthropocene" (ibid.). Where Wright wonders what Oodgeroo would say of the current climatic crisis, which is manifesting itself violently in Australia, following Wright's introduction the reader recognises in Oodgeroo's writing a possible inspiration for appreciating the earth "as the main character in stories extending the shadow of its long arc over generations to come" (ibid): in Oodgeroo's words "But time is running out/ And time is close at hand, / For the Dreamtime folk are massing / To defend their timeless land" (in Zanoletti, ed., *My People/La mia Gente*, 29). In this context, suggesting that "[t]here should be no more talking about Aboriginal literature as a small offshoot of Australian literature" (Wright, "In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?"), Wright indicates Oodgeroo as a major representative of Aboriginal literature and argues that she would deserve the organisation in Australia of celebrations similar to Joyce's Bloomsday or Yeats' birthday in Ireland.

Following in the anthology is the aforementioned text by Zanoletti, "*My People di Oodgeroo Noonuccal*", which is a comprehensive and wide-ranging preface that gives details on the author's life, her work and its major themes, and offers a translation perspective on her poems. The preface aims to provide the Italian readers with "some essential reading tools to connect Oodgeroo's life and work, and highlight the originality and significance of her artistic and intellectual contribution" (Zanoletti, "*My People di Oodgeroo Noonuccal*", 33; my translation). It is divided into three sections.

The first section includes a detailed biography of Oodgeroo in the context of Australian history. In particular, this section points out how Oodgeroo's literary work, which brings Aboriginal history to the eyes of white Australia, parallels her role as an activist for Aboriginal rights; her activist and literary efforts are read by Zanoletti as significant for the success of the campaign that led to the "correction of section 51 and abolition of section 127 of the Australian constitution" – a historical triumph for the recognition of aboriginal people as "Australian citizens" (39; my translation).

The second section offers the reader of the anthology some key tools to address Oodgeroo's poems. Opening this section is a passage where Zanoletti explains how, as a half Indigenous and half European woman, Oodgeroo relies on English as a means to "colonise a wider public" (57; my translation), but appropriates it by using Aboriginal lexicon, phrases and indigenous cultural references. In this context, Oodgeroo's language appears both familiar and foreign to the typical English speaking white reader, a fact that made the presence of a "glossary" necessary since the first edition of *My People* (1970) – and that will be maintained in the Italian translation. Here Zanoletti signals that Oodgeroo's poems do not follow a chronological or thematic order, and that "this apparent disorder [...] is sometimes read as a subversion of imperialist canons, as an anti-linear narrative modality" (61; my translation). To help the reader address this "disorder", Zanoletti, therefore, classifies Oodgeroo's poems i) chronologically and ii) thematically. She introduces two thematic schemes: the first scheme classifies Oodgeroo's sociopolitical protest poetry and distinguishes: protest poems; ecological poems; poems of belonging and of hope; the second scheme classifies traditional

Aboriginal storytelling poems, and distinguishes: oral narration; women; the cycle of life; and narratives between past and present.

The last section of Zanoletti's preface offers the reader a translation perspective on Oodgeroo's work. Zanoletti highlights that *My People/La mia Gente* is a translation of poems by an author who is also a translator – an author who translates from orality to written language, from a variety of Aboriginal languages to the dominant language, spoken by white people, a translator who is also a “mediator” between Aboriginal Australia and white Australia. In this context, the Italian translators are also “mediator[s] of different signs and languages, sometimes from different hemispheres” (34; my translation). Where the linguistic challenges of Oodgeroo's work are considered – e.g. “pidgin” expressions, aboriginal terms, other hybrid linguistic forms, and oral narration – the translators' mediating role is manifested in what can be defined as an “ethical” translation aim (Berman, “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign”, 241). Zanoletti affirms that translators should attempt not to “ridicule the source text by imitating the grammar distortions” (Zanoletti, “My People di Oodgeroo Noonuccal”, 93; my translation) – echoing Berman's words “[a]n exoticization that turns the foreign from abroad into the foreign at home winds up merely ridiculing the original” (Berman, “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign”, 250); in line with this aim, for instance, translators in this anthology have chosen to maintain aboriginal words and include a glossary at the end of the collection. The translators' approach is also made visible to the reader of this preface thanks to the inclusion of three examples of pre-translation analysis of three poems – “Cookalinee”, “Biami”, “Kiltara-Biljara (Eagle Hawk)” – an analysis which also aims to highlight the “hermeneutic value of the translation process” (Zanoletti, “My People di Oodgeroo Noonuccal”; my translation).

Where the translator's task is here effectively presented in its many facets, and the translators' aims and Zanoletti's role as an expert in the field are fruitfully made visible to the reader, the Italian translations in this anthology are also beautiful pieces of poetry. In this context, the writer of this review thinks that the inclusion of a short passage with a less “subjectless” (Berman, *The Age of Translation*, 40) description of the translators' creative efforts may have been a valuable addition to this anthology – especially because *My People/La mia Gente* includes target texts by two translators, Zanoletti's and Di Blasio's, and, necessarily, two different, albeit somehow similar, translating styles. Where traditionally the mark of the translators is “considered a flaw which has implications for the translation's fidelity and veracity” (Berman, *The Age of Translation*, 41) we believe that Zanoletti's detailed introductions and notes, her and Di Blasio's refined and ethical approach to translation – which allows the role of Oodgeroo as a mediator between two cultures to emerge in the Italian translations, despite the difficulties inherent in poetry translation – as well as their inventive translating choices make evident that the translators' agency and creativity can, in fact, be considered an added value to the source text itself.