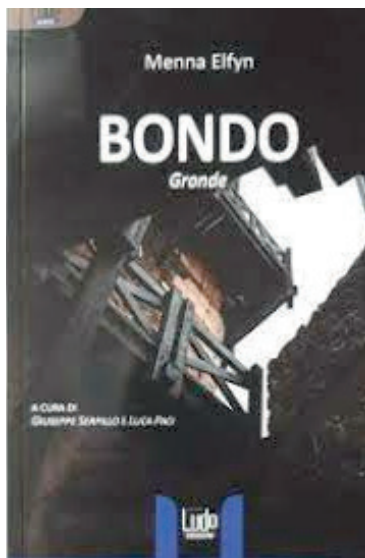


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Loredana Salis

Bondo/Gronde

Menna Elfyn. 2020. Bondo/Gronde. Giuseppe Serpillo (a cura di). Traduzione di Giuseppe Serpillo e Luca Paci. Sassari: Ludo Edizioni, 125 pp., € 10.00, ISBN 978-88-31918-32-9



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Bondo is the title of Menna Elfyn's second bilingual (Welsh and English) poetry collection from 2017, selected and republished in 2020 as *Bondo/Gronde* with *en face* translations by Giuseppe Serpillo and Luca Paci (the former Emeritus Professor of English and Irish and a translator; the latter a poet, a translator and an academic). Born near Swansea in 1951, Elfyn is an awarded writer 'in love with words', known primarily for her poetry, although she has also authored novels, plays, and libretti, as well as editing some Welsh poetry collections. She teaches creative writing and works as a newspaper columnist and a documentary maker. Involved with the Welsh Language Society, she has long been a minority language activist, who took part in civil disobediences for the rights of the Welsh language and against apartheid in the 1960s. A peace campaigner, she was arrested at the US army base in Brawdy

in the Eighties. Today she is President of Wales PEN Cymru and an advocate of children's rights (in 2002 she was appointed Poet Laureate for the Children of Wales).

Bondo/Gronde is one of several volumes of poetry translations, the third in the Italian language (following *Autobiografia in versi* in 2005, and *Impronte. Poesia gallese contemporanea* in 2007). It features 26 poems, divided in two sections – *Benedizione delle gronde* (Benediction of Eaves), and *Poesie dello svelamento* (Songs of Unravelling) – translated into Italian “directly from the original” because the English version proved to be unfaithful to its source in terms of “imagery, rhythm, style and form”. ‘Gronde’ (*eaves* in English) is one of three possible meanings for the polysemic *bondo*. It refers to that part of the house that protects it from the rain and where birds make their nests or find a refuge; it is the name of an Indian ethnic group whose mother tongue, like Welsh, is an endangered minority language. Thirdly, as Luca Paci writes in the introduction to section I of the collection, *bondo* is a Welsh slang word for the English ‘bond’ (there is a clear assonance between the two terms). ‘Bondo’ thus embraces the concepts of tie and affiliation, nurture, and protection, all of which are central to these poems as well as to their Italian translations. One aspect is of special importance, and that is the bond with the past. The theme runs through the entire collection and appears to be crucial to Elfyn’s work as a creative writer; it is key to her conception of poetry as a site for memory, a place where the present meets the past, or else it goes searching for it. Thus viewed, poetry is the place where the present can negotiate its boundaries – there it negotiates its *bondo*. Writing therefore becomes an act of memory – of both remembering and forgetting, which are inseparable, to the point that one makes the other since: “Remembering is possible only on the basis of forgetting” (Ricoeur 2004: 442). Elfyn’s plea for memory – “Remember me” – is a plea *not to forget*; like a beautiful flower – *nontiscordardimé*, forget-me-not – her poetry cannot and will not forget; it will seek its way to a past, which is being forgotten (‘in un mondo che se ne sta scordando l’esistenza’, *Marwnad ...*).

Writing is remembering, as noted, and similarly, translating and reading function as acts of memory. This is evident in *Bondo/Gronde* and in the way memory is used among its pages. To begin with, the entire collection and some of the poems were written *in memoriam* – of Nigel Jenkins, the Welsh “poet, patriot and wanderer”, who passed away in 2004; of John Rowlands, the Welsh novelist, and former Professor of Welsh literature at Aberystwyth University, who died in 2015 (*Il Samaritano*, “The Samaritan”); of Hedd Wyn, a Welsh poet-soldier who died in WWI (*Verità contro i ferri di cicatrice*, “The truth against needles”; and *Hedd Wyn*); of Michael Hartnett, the Irish poet who “said goodbye to English” (*Marwnad ...*). The duty to remember is also a duty not to forget on the part of the poet, who dedicates some among her most powerful lines to “all the despots at the Hague” (*Prontuario per una tenera tortura*). Citations and intertextual references are used to recall and acknowledge the place of eminent voices from the past in the poet’s present – among them Italo Calvino, John Berger, Seamus Heaney, and Emmanuel Lévinas. Memory manifests itself also as *alétheia* (ἀλήθεια), a Greek term that means unravelling, ‘lo svelamento’, and which indicates poetry’s capacity to unveil and reveal. Both acts of unravelling are acts of memory; both entail remembering and forgetting (*lète*, oblivion, is the root word for *alétheia*) and conceive of them as necessary

to attaining the truth (truth is another word for ἀλήθεια, intended as objective truth, *vis à vis* opinion, *doxa*).

By engaging with memory, the poems question and investigate memory in their demand for truth, against opinion and alternative facts, that is against false, illusory, and biased truth. People, places, feelings, nature are thus unravelled, or else they become a repository to memory and help the poet recall things past – they make poetry create and maintain a *bondo* with the past. Hence “the birds”, for instance, which “remember their old songs” (*Scuola di canto per storni*, “Singing School for Starlings”); “dolore e morte” (pain and death), which are “un inchiostro invisibile”, an invisible ink, nonetheless an ink that leaves its indelible and (therefore) unforgettable mark (*Il Samaritano*). “G. F.” is commemorated “for his dedication to peace” (*In bici per amore*, “Love Rides High”), while “le minoranze sparse”, marginalised people around the world are recalled in ‘Neb-Ach’ (‘nobody’s language’). And “language”, before the immutable silence begins, prevents loss and reminds us that “origliamo ai bastioni del cuore” (we [...] should eavesdrop at the ramparts of the heart, *Marwnad* ...). The concept of loss is bound to the concept of memory; it is itself part of the memory process – indeed letting go of something or losing something are a kind of happy forgetfulness that occurs by choice or by necessity. Loss, in such a case, enables reconciliation and forgiveness; it is healthy, given that ‘to remember everything is a form of madness’, as Brian Friel writes in *Translations* (1980), a play which is thematically consonant with Elfyn’s aesthetics. Thus, it is not fortuitous her reference to Michael Hartnett (1941-1999) and to that Irish poet’s decision to let go of the enemy’s language, lamenting for Gaelic, a lost language, to which he re-turned. Loss, here, becomes a question of *nostos*, a homecoming proper to a people and its culture, a remembering effected through losing/letting loose of the English language.

The work of memory, whether private or collective, can re-create or strengthen the bond between an individual and his/her culture, land, people, and roots. This is what happens in the Aberfan sequence, which is dedicated to the memory of a disaster occurred in Aberfan, a small mining town in south Wales. On October 21, 1966, a massive avalanche of coal waste slid downhill killing 144 people 116 of whom were school children. Remembering that tragedy – one of UK’s worst mining disasters considered to be completely avoidable – is a way of articulating, understanding, and coming to terms with loss. It is a way of dealing with its traces: “imprigionato sotto cumuli di scorie”, trapped under the debris, this kind of loss can never leave and be forgotten (*La scuola*, “The School”). And yet the media forgot, in 2016: “Non l’hanno ricordato [...] lo scorso anno”. How come? How could that happen? – the poem and the poetess ask as they plead for truth and justice. Memory, here, helps connect people who suffer or have suffered; memory, here, creates bonds. In *Omelia* (“Homily”) a father speaks from the pulpit, the Sunday after his son’s death: “Solo per poco siamo separati” (“We are only parted for a little time”). The will to remember prompts Menna’s writing and its Italian translation: “Non lo dimenticheranno il suo SERMON”. Thus, poetry negotiates between oblivion and pain; it transmutes into a healing process that forgives the past (letting go of it) and learns to be present to the present (*Mystery Tour*). This sort of happy forgetting allows for peace to be found, in the end – and “pace” (*peace*).

is significantly the last word in the volume. The poem that ends this collection is entitled *Il cancello* ("The Gate"), in which "closed" gates are associated with death and suffering, whereas life is about *living with* and accepting "bolts" and "wounds". The process of acceptance signifies resilience and it occurs by way of remembering (of the dead husband, of the grandmother, and of mother); it is achieved through poetry and translation. Both keep the gates unbolted, both remain open to infinite worlds and help attain peace (of the mind and of the heart). *Bondo/Gronde* ends with a double translation of *The Gate*, a choice that is profoundly indicative of Elfyn's aesthetics and of the politics of her Italian translators in terms of the infinite power of the creative word.

Traumas, however, may not always be negotiated. Wounds remain, and the pain, sometimes, is unbearable. The past is grafted onto the collective olfactory memory, and it has become unforgettable: "il pane avrebbe *per sempre* avuto il sapore di carbone" ("bread would forever taste like coal", *Getta il tuo pane sulle acque*, "Cast thy Bread"). In *Misure* ("Measurement") memory is "still", to the point that the dead "remain the same size", they cannot and will not change ("hanno sempre la stessa statura"). Aberfan is a one-word song that clutches your throat, it is absolute stillness, "totale infermità" (*Och*). These are instances of a memory that is 'literal' in Tzvetan Todorov's understanding of it, a memory that is not constructive and locks you down, it turns censorious and thus betrays the living and the dead so that no one is to blame: "ci si assicurava che nessuno venisse incolpato" (*Deo gratias*, "Air & Grace"). Faith is lost to empty words, words of 'truth', in the Welsh sense of the term, *i.e.* "falsehood, blandishment, nonsense, rigmarole" ("Truth versus *Truth*"). There is a fascinating echo of *alétheia* here, and of the apparent ambivalence of that Greek term, which means truth and falsehood at the same time, one being complementary to the other, both being indispensable to knowledge (Paris 2002). Truth is inextricably linked to memory, a memory that in this case is non-negotiable. Hence *bondo*, the necessity of it and for it, which is the place of poetry – of writing poetry, of translating poetry, of reading, and therefore of sharing poetry.

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