

## The Translation of Contemporary Drama: McCafferty's *Quietly* on the Italian Stage

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### Introduction

Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* was successfully produced on the Italian stage in October 2014 at the thirteenth "Trend" theatre festival, dedicated to new British dramaturgy. The translational process that brought this play from its premiere at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 2012, to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, and, finally, to the Teatro Belli in Rome, encompasses some crucial issues that intersect diverse disciplinary fields such as Translation Studies, Theatre Studies, and Irish Studies. This essay argues that the translation, staging, and reception of *Quietly* in Italy are specifically affected by general tendencies in drama translation as seen against the backdrop of contemporary globalization.<sup>1</sup>

### The spatio-temporal coordinates in drama translation: Globalization and Irish drama

Much research in drama translation has focused on the categories of space and time. Patrice Pavis, who was among the first semioticians to investigate these categories, began from the premise that time and space are two fundamental factors which cannot be neglected: "We cannot simply translate a text linguistically: rather we confront and communicate heterogeneous culture and situations of enunciation that are separated in space and time" ("Problems" 25). According to Pavis, the translator and the text of his/her translation are situated at the intersection of the source language and culture with those of the target, to which they belong in differing degrees. The translated text belongs to both source and target culture. In theatre translation, a further consideration is that the relationship between "situations of enunciation" must be added to the text. The text, in fact, makes sense only in its "situation of enunciation" ("Problems" 26), which is usually initially virtual, since the translator takes a written text as a point of departure. The translator knows that the translation cannot preserve the original, but is intended rather for a future situation of enunciation with which the translator is barely, if at all, familiar. Theatre translation is, therefore, "a hermeneutic act" ("Problems" 26): in order to find out what the source text means, questions must be asked from the target language's point of view. This hermeneutic act—interpreting the source text—happens

through discrete phases in a series of transformations, or “concretizations” (“Problems” 27).<sup>2</sup> From a different methodological perspective, Sirkku Aaltonen, in her full-length study on drama translation, remarks that “the choice of a translation strategy, a ‘faithful’ translation, a reactualisation or an imitation (that is to say, an adaptation), is linked with the spatially and temporally confined codes which through these strategies become represented in the discourse of the completed translations” (*Time-Sharing* 45). She then clarifies, with an appropriate metaphor, that the relationship between the source text and its translation is not the result of an independent choice because this choice is always related to “the time and place of the occupancy” (47). In particular, she focuses on how the reception of a foreign text is influenced by different notions of time and place which change according to the type of relationship the source text has with the target text and culture. Thus, a text can be translated according to a strategy which makes it compatible with the aesthetics of the receiving theatre which integrates it within the repertoire of the receiving culture or which reveals a reaction to the Other (53-61). According to the prevalence of one strategy over another, Aaltonen shows that the resulting translations and theatre productions can vary a great deal. For example, in her previous study of twentieth-century Irish realist drama translated into Finnish, *Acculturation of the Other*, she demonstrated how the proximity of the two cultures, the Irish and the Finnish, allowed movement “from a specific (Irish) milieu to a more generic (European) image” (55). The observations of Pavis and Aaltonen remind us that time and place in drama translation give rise to a certain fluidity in the choice of a translation strategy. However, for them translation and staging is still a linear process which can be followed from one phase to another. Consequently, in their examples—be they the adaptation and production of *The Mahabharata*, the great Sanskrit epic of India (Pavis, *Theatre* 187), or the Shakespearian translations and productions in nineteenth-century Finland (Aaltonen, *Time-Sharing* 66-67)—the time and place of the source text and culture and those of the target text and culture are still discernible.

In more recent times, under the influence of globalization, this linearity has come under scrutiny in Translation Studies and has had a profound influence on drama translation. From a sociological point of view, Nicole Oke has suggested that globalization is concerned with the effects of spatial and temporal changes and that most theories of globalization tend to conflate the axes of space and time (310-26). In the field of Translation Studies, Esperança Bielsa and Susan Bassnett have remarked that, with globalization, the compression of time and space and the elimination of

territorial boundaries have left the role of translation unresolved: “in this experience of simultaneity of the world’s geography a key social relation that is obscured is translation, which necessarily mediates between different linguistic communities” (28). With globalization, there has been an exponential increase in the demand for translation, allowing translation to take two diametrically opposed directions. The first is that translation becomes the material precondition for the circulation of meaning on a global scale and, therefore, by making the translator visible, brings into question Lawrence Venuti’s notion of “the translator’s invisibility.” In this scenario, translation, besides mediating between the local and the global, has the role of mediating between cultures and represents the brighter side of interconnection; an open-ended exchange between one time and another, between one space and another. Translating helps to convey and highlight differences between cultures and traditions. As Michael Cronin notes, “What translation history tells us is that interdependence has often crucially been born of a dependence on the translation either of earlier emblematic texts from the culture(s) and language(s) of a people or of new ideas from a different philosophical and political tradition” (41). The second, darker view of translation “as transparent medium of fluid interchange” (Bielsa and Bassnett 29) is representative of the translator’s total invisibility on a global scale in instantaneous communication. In this case, translation blurs differences between cultures and traditions as it is disembedded from its original context. As a consequence, the categories of time and space become negligible and diversity is suppressed. In other words, translation and translators would be the agents of what Michael Cronin has termed “clonialism.” According to Cronin, “colonialism of the nineteenth century and its fear of the Double as the colonial subject who was too human for comfort gives way to . . . the ‘clonialism’ of the twenty-first century with its endless replication of the same High-Street multiple in the pedestrianized zone and the same US sitcom on the television screen” (128). In this context, where translation is seen in terms of reproduction and similarity, translators and translated texts are considered the embodiment of “globalization-as-homogenization, a McWorld bereft of difference because under clonialism everything turns out to be a replica, a simulacrum, a copy of a limited set of economically and culturally powerful originals” (129).

The choice of translation as a necessary means of meaning circulation or as mere replica deprived of any reference to a local context and historical moment has serious implications for drama translation in general and contemporary Irish drama abroad in particular. In fact, many translation

theorists who privilege the performative over the representational and focus on “the process of (re)signification integrated in the overall event in its various phases of production” (Bigliuzzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 1) have tried to gauge drama translation from the point of view of its potential for signification within new spatio-temporal coordinates, that is, those of the performance in the receiving culture. This potential, however, does not emerge in discrete stages, as proposed by Pavis and Aaltonen, but through analysis of the multifaceted and multidimensional process which translating for the stage implies.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, scholars of Irish drama have reflected on the potential of signification of many recent plays in order to establish whether they are mere simulacra, a replica of an imagined Ireland in a globalized world. In discussing the success of Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *Riverdance*, Lionel Pilkington is adamant that the Ireland portrayed in them is “a state of being,” a country distancing from its troublesome history and ready to be digested by the global market, both by those living in Ireland and by those who are not. This idea, which goes hand in hand with not remembering, is “a dominant trend that involves an emptying out of all ethical attachment to a country and a history (as opposed to a state) and a full-scale, no-holds-barred embrace of compliance and adaptability” (73). According to Pilkington, for many Irish playwrights, such as Conor McPherson, Enda Walsh, and Eugene O’Brien, the prevailing image is that of a “deterritorialized Irishness,” which is “a condition of repetition, haunting and fascinating and irrational allegiances” (74). Patrick Lonergan is more conciliatory in his view and adopts a middle-ground position where globalization is an obvious fact and he is aware that audiences in other countries would respond differently to Irish plays. However, what is vital for him is not “to fall into the trap of authenticating one response while deriding another” but to “bring an awareness of how local preoccupations shape their understanding of globally diffused plays” (223).

#### **McCafferty’s *Quietly*: A case study<sup>4</sup>**

McCafferty’s *Quietly* and its Italian translation/adaptation are informed by globalization and its dynamics. Here I concentrate on three notions that work as guidelines to the translation process from the original play to its new audience. First, the deictic orientation of the communicative situation among characters in the original and in the translation/adaptation. Second, the possible capacity of the translation to “write forward” (Johnston 375), according to which the semantic charge and the hermeneutic potential of the original is reactivated for a new audience through space and time.

Third, the analysis of the paratextual elements, that is, the Italian reviews of the play as a zone of transaction between the original, the translation/adaptation in Italian, and the new audience.

*Quietly* opens in a pub in Belfast,<sup>5</sup> a Northern Irish version of Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* or Conor McPherson's *The Weir*, where a Polish barman, Robert, while watching Poland playing against Northern Ireland in a World Cup qualifier, is joined by the Catholic Jimmy and the Protestant Ian, both in their fifties, who have arranged to meet after sixteen years. In an atmosphere of rising tension and violence, broken by the exchanges between Jimmy and Robert in the role of the observer, the story of the protagonists unfolds. At the time of another Northern Ireland-Poland match in 1974 Ian, as a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, threw a bomb in a pub where six people watching the match, including Jimmy's father, were killed. This bombing proves devastating to both protagonists' lives. After the loss of his father, Jimmy abandoned his studies and joined the IRA, but was incapable of offering solace to his mother in her grief. On the other hand, Ian, who had a clumsy sexual encounter with a girl given to him as a reward to celebrate the successful attack, years later came to know that she had become pregnant and had an abortion. When the two men depart in what seems to be a reconciliation, the play ends with another outburst of violence. From outside the pub, Northern Ireland fans start to throw stones and shout "Polish bastard;" echoing Jimmy's and Ian's speaking of "orange" and "fenian" bastards throughout the play.

The translation by Natalia di Gianmarco is a literal one and provided the basis for both verbal and non-verbal changes in performance made by the directors, who were also the actors playing Jimmy and Ian. These changes result in a different deictic orientation of the source text as compared to the target text. As noted in the late 1970s, "in the theatre . . . meaning is entrusted *in primis* to deixis" (Elam 140), which can be defined as the verbal indices which actualize the dramatic world, the "here and now" of the performance. Moreover, deixis subsumes and activates other channels of communication and accounts for the visual, kinesic, and proxemic relations of the characters on stage. Consequently, in drama translation the recreation of a text through its verbal and non-verbal counterparts for new audiences always involves a new communicative situation which changes the dialectical interplay for the new dramatic here-and-now of the translated text.

Changes in deixis re-orient the Italian translation/adaptation of *Quietly* from the offset and this, in turn, has consequences for the receiving Italian audience. In particular, two scenes from the original play and its

translation/adaptation best exemplify how deictic references are responsible for triggering a different interpretation of the play in Italian. These scenes are the opening of the play and the height of Jimmy's and Ian's confrontation (McCafferty 11-12; 23; McCafferty in Italian translation, n. pag.). Comparing some deictic markers—especially those words referring to time and place and to the encoding of the participant relations<sup>6</sup>—in these two scenes helps to show how the dramatic world of translation/adaptation differs from the original.

In the first scene, the original play shows Robert receiving and sending text messages. The spatial and time deictic markers—"a bar in Belfast, 2009"—define the framework of the dramatic situation on stage. However, in the exchange of text messages there are other examples of spatial and social deixis ("Poland;" "I can't live like that/ I'm not happy either/ Do u luv me/ Of course I do"), which are anaphoric references to Robert's off-stage world. In this case, "deixis has the potentiality of putting entities into the dramatic world and keeps them alive, entities which are only perceptible through the discourse [and] . . . may exist in another space and possibly in another time than the time and space on stage" (Van Stapele 336).

These deictic markers, therefore, help to create Robert's background—the reader/audience will later discover that he has a wife and a girlfriend—and establish his character as the impartial observer from Poland. Although Emilie Pine sees him as a "handy device" that lacks any depth, I believe that his presence is nonetheless relevant for the communicative situation as he represents another participant in the original dramatic world, a visual presence entering into contact with Jimmy and Ian on stage. In the Italian translation/adaptation, spatial and time deictic markers become more vague—the action takes place in the back of a pub ("*retro di un pub*")—and spatial and social deixis as anaphoric references to Robert's background disappear. Some attempts are made to reproduce the spatial and time deictic markers of the original—"a bar in Belfast, 2009." Specifically, the national anthem of the Irish Republic is heard and the flag of the Irish Republic is seen. Yet the sense of vagueness of the location remains because the Italian audience may not be familiar with these non-verbal signs. In addition, these attempts are somewhat ambiguous as the anthem and the flag are not those expected for the Northern Ireland football team.

Most importantly, in the Italian translation/adaptation, the dramaturgical choice of the two directors/actors was to reduce Robert's character to an off-stage presence. This choice, especially evident in the encoding of the three characters' interactions, radically changes the dynamics of the play, as observed in the second scene. In the original play, the main

verbal exchange is that between Ian and Jimmy, but there is a secondary exchange between Ian and Robert, the latter commenting on the football match while serving beer. Ian and Robert's exchanges serve to downplay the incipient violence of Ian and Jimmy's conversation about what happened that day which changed their lives. The main and the secondary exchange also create two temporal levels: Ian and Jimmy mainly discuss past events, whereas Ian and Robert bring the conversation back to the present. Throughout the play, Robert thus has the double role of someone who is extraneous both to the wider historical context of the Troubles and to Jimmy's and Ian's personal story. Furthermore, the secondary exchange between Robert and Ian serves as a reminder of Robert's situation as a foreigner in a foreign country and indirectly anticipates the final act of violence perpetrated by the Northern Ireland fans against Robert. In the Italian translation/adaptation, Robert's off-stage presence eliminates this secondary line of communication since there are no references to the football match and most of Robert's lines referring to his own situation have been cut with the result that Jimmy and Ian's exchanges acquire a symbolic value.

The representation of Jimmy and Ian's confrontation is explained in the two directors/actors' note to the play:

If it is true that the Troubles are not only present but are central to the story, it is also true that the two men who meet in that pub in *Quiethly* are—in the end—just two men, whom history and fate have put on the opposite sides of the fence. . . . However, both history and personal stories are unique and, at the same time, ineluctable: each generation must face afresh the conflict, the trauma and its personal re-elaboration, as if it had never happened before. This is the human condition and destiny. For this reason, in our interpretation and staging, we decided to give an “absolute” value to the two men's encounter . . . which, although dealing with the Irish conflict and its specific matters, would mirror any other conflict that torments and divides men and women of our damned present.<sup>7</sup>

This “absolute” universalistic approach deriving from the joint effort of the translator and the directors/actors makes the translation lose a lot of the value and subtleties of the original. Robert's off-stage presence eliminates various lines of communication and references specific to the play, thereby not allowing the Italian audience to grasp certain aspects, such as the role of Robert as the impartial observer and as object of new violence, perpetrated by the Northern Irish fans against the foreigner. As Brian Friel cautions: “the canvas can be as small as you wish, but the more accurately you write and the

more truthful you are the more validity your play will have for the world” (qtd. in Hickey and Smith 223). Giving up some of the accuracies and specific truths of *Quietly* risks the “validity [of the] play . . . for the world.”

*Quietly*, as an act of translation, acquires meaning only when considered within its framework of reception, “an act of locating and crossing, simultaneously finding a place for communication, and opening up and moving across new space” (Johnston 367). For Johnston, the greatest achievement of a drama translator lies in what he terms “writing forward,” maintaining the context of the original and, at the same time, projecting that context into the emotional landscape of the new audience, a transposition from “core experiences lost” (Johnston 371), to those newly recreated.

Foremost among the “core experiences” which get inevitably lost in the re-creative process at work in *Quietly* on the Italian stage, there is the dense web of intertextual connections the play establishes with the Northern Irish dramatic tradition of the Troubles. Since the late 1960s, the relationship between theatre and the Northern Ireland conflict has dealt with a “complex series of expectations, sensitivities, entrenchments, imperatives and responses, questioning the very essence of both writing and performance” (Jordan 100). The connection between politics and drama has a long tradition in Ireland, dating back to the early productions of the Abbey theatre, when the stage became implicitly and explicitly the arena where the soul of the nation would find its communal expression. Similarly, the Troubles and its many violent manifestations, reflecting competing nationalisms and conflicting identities, exploited the public nature of drama to address issues of civic strife. In a sort of mutual mirroring, the politics of the Northern conflict have often borrowed from a vocabulary of performance and spectacle, whereas playwrights have explored the performative possibilities of the conflict (McDonald 233). These possibilities resulted in a variety of different dramatic modes. According to Christopher Murray’s tripartite template, the plays’ structures ranged from the “O’Casey model” through the “Romeo and Juliet *typos*” to “the Theatre of hope” (189-99). The Northern Irish plays of the 1980s and the 1990s dramatizing violence frequently featured topics such as sectarian difference masking class struggle or the tension arising from a love affair between a Catholic and a Protestant, often rendered in a humorous mode (189-99). These plays include conventional domestic dramas such as Christina Reid’s *Joyriders* (1986) and Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* (1985); history plays such as Brian Friel’s *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1988), Seamus Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy* (1990), and Gary Mitchell’s *Tearing the Loom* (1997); and the more experimental dramas such as



Marie Jones's *A Night in November* (1995) and Owen McCafferty's *Mojo Mickybo* (1997).<sup>8</sup>

In *Quietly*, the sporting metaphor, which has often been employed to assert national identity, is powerful and strongly recalls its use in Marie Jones's *A Night in November*. In both plays, a football match is "the device" that allows the characters' personal stories to be inscribed on the wider backdrop of Northern Irish history. The profound implications that the football match has in the original play becomes somewhat lost in Italian because the match is not shown on TV, only the commentary is heard in the background. This confirms the universalistic approach of the translation/adaptation that partly "sanitized" the specific Irish context. This change in the spatio-temporal dimension of the play, the creative translation options, and, most of all, the importance of target-audience relocation practices is especially clear in the paratextual elements surrounding the Italian production.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Quietly* was staged in an Italian theatre festival called "Trend," dedicated to "new British dramaturgy." However, "British dramaturgy" is a misleading label for an Italian audience, as it blurs the identity of Owen McCafferty as a Northern Irish playwright. *Quietly* was performed along with other British plays and this "new dramaturgical" context has consequences for its reception, as shown in reviews that appeared in Italian newspapers and online magazines. Although references to the Troubles are made, the critics' prevailing focus was on the universal dimension of Jimmy and Ian's painful confrontation.

For example, *La Repubblica*, one of Italy's leading newspapers, commented:

[*Quietly* is] a clash of blunt objects, of hard feelings sharpened by waiting, of uncomfortable memories from the underground. *Quietly* is a wrench from the triviality of life, from the ordinariness of two existences marked by grief. . . . We have a feeling of perennial defeat, as if conflicts can never be eradicated, as if they were an inbred human plague.<sup>9</sup>

Although an acclaimed and successful performance, the emphasis on the "universal dimension" of McCafferty's play nonetheless risks masking the Troubles at a time of globalization. According to Johnston,

good plays, and sometimes even bad ones, have the potential to suspend their spectator temporarily between two differentiated worlds, so that liminality is a constant promise in theatre performance; translated plays additionally generate, or may generate, spaces-between, confluences of

cultural streams and thoughts, language and experience, confluences in which the work of the play, its rooting in other times and places, become real and visible once again in the experience of an audience. (377)

Johnston is, however, adamant that the “itinerary of encounters,” (379) such as *Quietly* on Italian stage, must rely on commonality more than universality, because universality makes us lose sight of the bilateral negotiations of cultures. Thus, in Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly*, the translation/adaptation process, which might have brought more effectively the subversive potential for “truth and reconciliation” (Gardner) or, as some would have it, for “truth and recrimination” (Hennessy), is diluted into a more domesticated “universality of conflict.” Therefore, although it is comparable with those contemporary plays translated into Italian that are respectful of the original setting and historical moment, McCafferty’s *Quietly* does fall into the trap of homogenization, of portraying the Troubles as any other conflict in our globalized world.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recently there has been an upsurge of translated contemporary Irish drama on the Italian stage, including McCafferty’s *Mojo Mickybo* (trans. Noemi Abe, 2002); Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2004) and Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* (trans. Fausto Paravidino, 2006); Mark O’Rowe’s *Terminus* (trans. Serenella Martufi, 2009); Enda Walsh’s *Misterman* (trans. Lucia Franchi, 2012); Marina Carr’s *Ariel* (trans. Sara Soncini and Maggie Rose, 2007), *Woman and Scarecrow*, *Marble*, and *Cordelia’s Dream* (trans. Valentina Rapetti, the latter in 2015).

Given the translators’ diverse backgrounds, this list testifies to a general tendency towards the promotion and production of contemporary drama in Italy: Sara Soncini, Maggie Rose, and Valentina Rapetti are translators with academic backgrounds, Fausto Paravidino is a playwright himself, Serenella Martufi is a drama translator, while Lucia Franchi is a professional translator who was commissioned to do a literal translation. Their positions thus exemplify the contemporary fragmented universe of drama translation, in which translational competence and dramaturgical ability intertwine in more complex ways than in the past.

<sup>2</sup> Pavis lists five concretizations, which may be summed up as follows. First, there is the original play. Second, the original play is read by the translator, who, as a *dramaturg*, reconstructs both the plot and the characters as well as the supra-segmental elements, that is, the systems of echoes and correspondences of the original text. Third, the translator undertakes a dramaturgical analysis and makes the text readable for the new readers/spectators. Fourth, the translator proposes a performance text, by examining all possible relationships between textual and theatrical signs. Fifth, there is the appropriation of the text by the audience, who discover it anew. Pavis concludes that “it would not be an exaggeration to say that the translation is simultaneously a dramaturgical analysis, a *mise en*

*scène*, and a message to the audience, each unaware of the others” (“Problems” 29). Pavis’s series of concretizations exemplify how notions of time and place multiply in drama translation.

<sup>3</sup> Among the many studies focusing on translation as performative with specific reference to drama translation published in recent years, I found particularly helpful Baines, Marinetti, and Perteghella (eds), *Staging and Performing Translation* (2011); Marinetti, “Translation and Theatre: From Performance to Performativity” (2013); Aaltonen, “Theatre Translation as Performance” (2013), and Emer O’Toole “Cultural Capital in Intercultural Theatre: A Study of Pan Pan Theatre Company’s *The Playboy of the Western World*” (2013).

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to the translator Natalia Di Gianmarco and to the directors/actors of the Italian production, Paolo Mazzarelli and Marco Foschi, who kindly provided me with the script and the directors’ notes.

<sup>5</sup> At the Edinburgh Festival in 2013 *Quietly* won a Writers’ Guild Award for Best Play, an Edinburgh Fringe First Award, and The Stage Award for Best Actor.

<sup>6</sup> I refer to this as “social deixis” in its widest possible meaning, according to Horton’s definition. For him, participant relations “can be read off from the text in a large number of markers which serve to encode, more or less directly, relative status, group membership, the type of transactions being conducted, the mutual degrees of formality and intimacy and general attitudes obtaining between interlocutors” (55).

<sup>7</sup> *Se è vero che la questione irlandese è non solo presente ma centrale in tutta la vicenda, è vero anche che in QUIETLY quelli che si incontrano in quel pub sono—in fondo—solo due uomini, due uomini che come tanti altri sono stati messi dalla storia e dal destino sulle opposte barricate di un conflitto . . . . Ma la storia, sia quella generale che quella privata, è irripetibile e allo stesso modo inevitabile: ogni generazione ricomincia da capo di nuovo l’esperienza del conflitto, del trauma, dell’elaborazione, come se ciò non fosse mai avvenuto prima. Condizione e destino dell’esistenza umana. Ecco perché, nelle semplici scelte di interpretazione e di messa in scena, abbiamo cercato di dare spazio al carattere “assoluto” dell’incontro fra i due . . . che, pur parlando del conflitto irlandese e delle sue specifiche questioni, possano rimandare a ogni altro conflitto che affligge e divide gli uomini e le donne del nostro dannato presente.* (Foschi e Mazzarelli, Note di regia, translation mine)

<sup>8</sup> Far from being exhaustive, this list of plays not only testifies to the huge variety of Northern Irish drama, but also to the collective tropes and dramatic devices which Northern playwrights have at their disposal.

<sup>9</sup> *Un match di corpi contundenti, di rancori affilati dall’attesa, di memorie scomode da sottosuolo, Quietly è uno strappo inatteso alla banalità del vivere, alla quotidianità anonima di due esistenze segnate da un dolore . . . . E si avverte un sentimento della sconfitta perenne, come se dai conflitti non si potesse mai prescindere, quali fossero un’epidemia congenita all’uomo.* (De Simone, translation mine)

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