Transposing Ireland

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Somebody writes a poem, a tale, or a play. Then, years, decades, or centuries later somebody else, living perhaps across an ocean, tries to render it into his own language.

If you think about it, this is really bold, to say the least.

I had the fortune and the pleasure of translating a number of remarkable Irish writers, and it is through it (or through them) that I have formed some opinions and thoughts, stemmed only from my personal experience, which I'll try to describe here.

I would like to point out first two simple ideas about my view of translation itself.

They are not at all original, and like the most part of this talk I have repeated them on some other occasions, because the truth is that I do not come across new ones very often. One of them is that, to some extent, everything written, and even everything said, is translation – words change from an emotional, pre-linguistic notion or impulse to an articulate meaning in the process of being expressed. (In this sense, translation works also as a sophisticated maieutic, an instrospection of our obsessions and insights of the real). And the other is that translation occurs on a two-way path, and must necessarily hold a contradiction, that is, it entails the double task of bringing the text closer, and, just as importantly, of mantaining its strangeness. I'll come back to this point in a moment.

To my mind, translation is like a football game in which you're loosing 6 or 7–0 before even starting. If you're good, maybe you will end up by loosing only 3–0. But you will never reach a draw, not to mention a victory.

There's hardly a translator who has never heard the motto *traduttore, traditore* (or *translator, traitor*) discharged upon him as a joke, as a criticism, or simply as the empty formula that it is. As far as literature is concerned, is undeniable that translators will always commit a certain betrayal. But in fact, this is perhaps not so different from the betrayal commited by the readers, and, sometimes, by the authors temselves. Words, in general, do not reflect so *clearly* our own thoughts. And thought itself is seldom *that* clear. Both for writers and translators, *le mot juste* is more often a yearning than a real achievement. Academic and scholarly bibliography on the matter is not less vast as it is impractical. When it aims, as it so often does, to demonstrate the ontological, ultimate impossibility of translation (or, for that matter, of language itself or communication between human beings), it doesn't discover anything new. But the ordinary mortal who lives in the West is grateful that someone has taken the trouble to present to him, in his own language, the poems by Li Po, or *The Thousand and One Nights*, or the Holy Scripture itself. And we trust that we will get at least part of the meaning.

Nothing allows us to easily translate into Spanish –and perhaps not even into English– a title like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but it is anyway good fortune for us to have the possibility of reading Wilde in our mother tongue, if we are not, like Wilde, "condemned to speak the language

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of Shakespeare". James Joyce and the Spanish versions of Joyce are not the same writer, of course, but they do have a kinship.

Let's think of a musician playing a jazz standard: he will highlight this or that shade, he will add, or omit, arrange or adapt some notes. Pretty much like him, a translator will make his personal choice of words and forms to represent the author's discourse with another code. To Baudelaire, the *"quaint and curious"* volumes of forgotten lore from *The Raven* were *"précieux et curieux"*, whereas to Mallarmé they were *"curieux et bizarre"*: that is, translation means necessarily a re-writing. The new subordinate molecule emerging from this process synthesizes forcedly two aesthetics. That's the challenge and the danger of it.

Anyway, like many other people, I think that setting up any norm about the subject is useless and futile. That said, the only hope is to try and establish a certain emphathy with the author, to trust, and to cross your fingers. But of course, as Chaucer put it, *men may die of imaginatioun*.

As we all know, translation often requires ceasing to be just a *technical* reader in charge of conveying a specific meaning, and trying instead to set up a sort of broader bridge, since, almost as a rule, the meaning lies not only in the written text but in a whole culture behind the text – or a cultural difference in reading and describing realities and abstractions that are, nevertheless, many times universal. It is true (I am taking an image from Jack London), it will be a bridge made up of separate ice blocks, with the constant risk of falling down into chilly waters. But is there any other way?

Translation should be then a linking process in a search for equivalences without a contrived symbiosis, without an imposition in the voice. But translation itself is also a fiction, a play — there is a *histrionic* quality required: the *suspension of incredulity* referred to by Coleridge should work in the target language as well. Against this ideal, a whole sea of words and expressions rooted in traditions, habits and customs unknown, history, places, names, hundreds of shades, sometimes even a real ocean in between. And every now and then, surprising similitudes.

But going back to the subject, I'll try briefly to explain my relation with Irish literature (or I should say, Irish literature written in English, which I am aware leaves out a substantial part of the whole). I am not a theoretician or a critic, and I wouldn't dare to attempt an academic approach. I can recognize some elements of style, technical skills, the historical significance in a wider process, etcetera. But my relation with Irish literature, besides the *painful business of money*, is mainly based on, and limited by, the foggy regions of taste. Taste –literary, musical, whatever– is an elusive, whimsical matter. It doesn't match necessarily our knowledge of things. There are many books, paintings, tunes, movies, food, even persons we should like, in terms of *elements*. We recognize their importance, their value perhaps, but we don't like them. We don't enjoy them. They don't touch us. (And this is also true in the opposite sense, when we enjoy things supposedly poor.)

It's perfectly possible for two different individuals to be in front of the same painting saying *O great*, both of them intensely and sincerely moved, but each one for a different reason. What's more, forms that raised our admiration in the past not necessarily produce the same reaction today. Things, no doubt, are *incorrigibly plural*. So maybe *truth* is not the point, maybe the point is how we articulate ourselves with the truth we choose to believe in. And, in any case, as Emily Dickinson put it: *"Beauty is not caused. It is."* This is, in the end, an aesthetic discussion at least 25 centuries old now, and I'm certainly not the one who will solve it.

However it may be, for me this issue is clear when, while reading an author and afterwards, words keep on smoldering in my brain. And I simply associate this feeling with what I process as a good writer. Not a very professional approach, but very useful as a practical source of intensity. And, for reasons completely unknown to me, Ireland, with its excentric, healthy disproportion between demography and literary production, has many writers, both prose and verse writers,

who provide me with this intensity, this *pathos*, or more plainly, with this elemental pleasure. This is why I translate Irish literature, a literature of a nation and a culture largely driven to translate, re-create, and melt itself into English.

But I would like to make here a brief digression: if I read Shakespeare or Cervantes or Borges, I don't consider the *Englishness*, *Spanishness* or *Argentinianness* in each one. We all belong to a specific place, time and culture, and this platitude is certainly not the main point, no matter how much we can appreciate this or that particular color. I've never been to Greece, and I know very little about it, but the *Illyad* still can speak to me, as to all of us. Edgar Poe never shared the voice of Whitman, never foreshadowed Mark Twain or Ring Lardner. Andreiev is surely more akin to Maupassant than he is to Gorki. It has been said that there's no way you can write as a foreigner: even a foreign attitude is part of the culture you belong to. You have here from Wilde to Joyce or Kavanagh or Beckett or McGahern, and a really long list of others in this respect. What I am trying to say is that I see them as great writers, not as a great *Irish* writers. Their voices are *universal*, their sometimes undeniable Irish tones and topics are made universal by their talent, not by geography. As Jean Franco observes, the local which is not ornamental nor picturesque affects the human. Let's think of Van Gogh Japanese watercolors, or Gauguin Polynesian scenes. Or, on the wrong side, let's think of the dull chauvinism so common in so much of the national folklore in almost every country in the world.

So, behind the Irish literature is Ireland; but into what Spanish, into what Spanish culture should it be translated? Like English, Spanish is not *one* language, and certainly not *one* culture, but a more or less common code used sometimes very differently in different countries. So the answer is: into as many as it is necessary, *but*.

It would be a gigantic blunder to turn a dialogue in Cork into a dialogue in Patagonia or in a Mexican town, as it would be a huge blunder to change the 19th century speech into our present speech. The irreality of a forced transpolation, physical or chronological, would make the scene artificial, would break the *suspended incredulity*.

Private Mulvaney, a wonderful character in some short-stories by Rudyard Kipling, speaks like a perfect *stage Irishman*, as Professor Kiberd defines this term, both in his accent –or its transcription according to Kipling's musical ear– and in his hilarious, baroque articulation. He is serving the Queen in India during the British Rule. To try to produce in Spanish a phonetic and stylistic imitation of the speech of an Irish soldier serving in British colonial India is, to my view, necessarily fruitless, simply because there is no concrete Spanish equivalent of those experiences. Such a pretension would run the risk of compulsively moving the characters to another geography, and reducing the necessary unfamiliarity which, again in my opinion, is part of the pleasure when you read works of other times and cultures. So, the criterion should be perhaps to preserve as much as possible the *tone* and the syntax of the speakers, counting on the sagacity of the readership. Of course, Murphy's Laws are inexorable, and the referred blunder has been commited, so you can find some Spanish translations with Mulvaney speaking like a Sevillian bullfighter. Or you can hear Christy Mahon dazzling Margaret Flaherty as if in a bar in Salamanca.

There's a well-known Spanish translator of Shakespeare — and I mean *really* renowned as the canonical translator of Shakespeare. And there's a Shakespeare quote from *Measure for Measure* used by Eliot in *Gerontion*: *"Thou hast nor youth nor age, but, as it were, an after-dinner's sleep, dreaming on both"*. I will save you the Spanish, but the 17 English words turn to 30 words in the canonical version. This could be harmless in itself, but the style suspiciously drifts away from Stratford-on-Avon to the warmer plains of La Mancha, and Shakespeare acquires a Quixotic accent. This is what I mean when I point out the importance of maintaing the strangeness of the text.

From a more political viewpoint, the use of the Spanish standard aimed at by Spain, a use many times as much despotic as it is objectionable, has at least the virtue of being minority. Of course, this doesn't prevent the colonial pretentiousness. Forty or fifty million native Spanish speakers *against* (that's the impression it gives) three hundred million of Latin American Spanish speakers? Why not? It all depends on where the gold is. (By the way, a writer is someone who wakes up in the middle of the night to change a word or a comma in a line, or who spends months or years working on a story; a translator, at least when he earns his living as such, is someone who is given 40 days to translate it — maybe two months when the publishing house brags about being a "promoter of culture", and 40 days only if survival and bills are not pushing him to do it faster.)

Whatever, the illusion of oneness accepted, we can say that in general terms Spanish is "longer" than English. That is, it takes usually more words than English to express the same thing. Some people say it's around 25 percent longer. I never counted it. For instance, there's no way to say in Spanish *"my father's car"*. What we say is *"the car of my father"*. Fives words instead of 3. A simple preposition like *"above"* in many cases will be for us *"por encima de"*. Again, three words against just one. Or, lacking *"his"* and *"her"* as different pronouns for masculine and femenine, we are frequently forced to say *of his*, or *of her.* The Penguin pocket edition of Moby Dick is about 530 pages. A Spanish edition, exactly the same size and font size is about 900 pages. Mathematics aside, this is not an advantage or disadvantage in itself, but just a difference on account of the use of connectors, prepositions, and so on. Nevertheless, it can be inconvenient for translators, in terms of style — of a fluid and readable Spanish version, and one that will respect at the same time, as much as possible, the *tempo* of the original text.

Let's think of Dylan Thomas and the first line of *Ceremony After a Fire Raid*. Just a single term: *"Myselves"(... the grievers / grieve / among the street burned to tireless death...)* No matter the innovation, the meaning is immediate and clear. It has been translated into Spanish in different ways, from *"The beings that I am"*, which is maybe an acceptable idea but too long a solution, to *"My egos"*, which is much shorter, indeed, but also horrible. So, you can imagine what happens with poor Manley Hopkins.

So, as style is closely related to rhythm and breathing, the pillars of *tension*, it is a priority to find a way of preserving at least an echo of the original cadence. I had the inmense pleasure of translating *Creatures of the Earth*, a collection of short stories by John McGahern. Embarrassingly enough, many times during the work I found myself asking, "How would *he* put it in Spanish?" Given the longer phrasing of Spanish, the solution I could think of was sometimes the supression or changing of some words. In *The Country Funeral*, for instance, there is the following paragraph: *"Eight cars followed the hearse to Killeelan, and only the Mercedes turned into the narrow laneway behind the hearse. The other mourners abandoned their cars at the road and entered the lane on foot. Blackthorn and briar escaped against the windscreen and sides of the Mercedes as they moved behind the hearse's slow pace."* You will probably agree on the free-flowing of the paragraph, with a sibilant *"S"* sound all through it. The word *hearse* appears 3 times in the fragment, somehow as marking a beat. Well, in Spanish the word for *hearse* doesn't exist as a simple word, but as several double and poorly musical terms, the most common one being *coche fúnebre*, something like *funereal car* in English. To repeat it 3 times in such a brief passage would have been correct in terms of fidelity, of course, but a crime in terms of harmony. (The solution that came to my mind was to use it only the first time, and then replace it with the Spanish terms for *vehicle* and *car*, both clear enough in the context, in order to lose a beat, but not *all* the fluidity.) McGahern also uses to repeat in evocations, purposely of course, some words like *light*, *white*, *blue, green* (colours in general) – strongly visual terms. All through a paragraph, or even a whole story, these words produce sometimes a sort of subliminal, *mantra* effect. But notice that most of these English terms are monosyllables. In Spanish, they are

generally two or three-syllable words. So, their presence is not so subliminal, and paradoxically, sometimes it's necessary to suppress a *blue* or *green* adjective in a particular sentence in order to get a more subtle closeness to the whole.

Other problems are raised by very common and simple words. Terms like *nod* or *wave* contain usually a semantical synthesis of two actions. A hypothetical English dialogue could be, for example, *"Come," he waved. "All right," she nodded.* The two actions unified in each case are *"he said waving his hand"* and *"she answered making a gesture"*. (Of course, verbs can be different ones). This blending possibility does not exist in Spanish, and we don't have straight words for *wave* or *nod*. So, we are forced to say, for instance, *"Come," he said with a gesture of his hand. "All right," she answered bending her head."* But then, what's really central to the dialogue, *"Come"* and *"All right"*, gets blurred among a series of insubstantial details. So, many times the recommendable sacrifice is to translate it economically as *"he said" "she answered"*.

Or, again John McGahern, this time a scene from *Wheels* where the main character gets back home and speaks to Rose: *"Did you get the letter that I was coming?"* I suppose there's nothing strange or ambiguous for you in these sentences, but in the question *"Did you get the letter that I was coming?"*, *you* is singular or plural? Does the speaker refer just to Rose or to Rose and his own father? The thing is that, in Spanish, singular and plural pronouns are different, so we are forced to take uncertain decisions.

Then there are words like *"town"*, whose reach in Ireland and the English-speaking world has evolved over time from a small population to a present big city, whereas in Spanish the definitions of village, town, and city are not so elastic, demanding from the translator a precision rather artificial. Or terms like *"crescent"*, this curved line of houses, with no possible translation among us. Or local uses like *"I was backing up the matted furrows"*.

What to do when faced with Odysseus seeing *"The ruffled foreheads of the waves / Crocodiling and mincing past..."* in Eiléan Ni Chuilleanáin' superb poem "The Second Voyage"? "Crocodiling" is a strange verb, even in English I suppose. To translate it into Spanish by creating an non-existing verb from our noun "cocodrilo" would only produce a comic effect, ruining a powerful image. Some years later I finally found a reasonable solution for it, I think, but my first version was already published, and the damage was done. Or how to solve a coined word in Harry Clifton's remarkable poem "Vaucluse"

I see, I remember
Coldly now, as I see ourselves
And the merchants from Africa, glozening
Liquor on the shelves
Of celebration, everyone dozing
In transmigratory dreams
Of heroin, garlic, and cloves —

where *glozening* refers to "talking about" plus the physical glitter or gloss of the bottles? I know this simply because the author himself told me so. But what would I have understood otherwise? And what would have been the value of another interpretation, even if it was aesthetically sustainable? What Harry Clifton would I have created to a Spanish reader? And so, what other creatures did I produce without knowing?

And how to translate ambiguity? In the last line of *Inniskeen Road*, *"... I am king / Of banks and stones and every blooming thing"*, was Patrick Kavanagh speaking of *flourishing* things? I should think yes, but he is complaining about an undesirable possession, so why couldn't a man so many times kicked out from pubs have been speaking of *bloody* things instead, or also? And how would I suggest this blooming chance in Spanish, having no Spanish word with this double potential?

There's the question of music, too. As a rule, rhymed translation of rhymed verse leads to pitiful distortions. How to render the stanzas in Yeats' *The Lake of Innisfree* or in *Easter 1916* with a similar easiness, or apparent easiness, and keep to the images? Or the stanzas in Patrick Kavanagh's *To The Man After the Harrow*? From the simplest children's rhymes and songs to a substantial part of MacNeice, Kinsella, Brendan Kennelly, the entire *Chamber Music* by Joyce, and dozens of other examples, rhymed verse poses a special challenge (of course, this is not at all only for Irish poets or the English language exclusively). And many times the only honest thing you can do is to declare yourself incompetent and hope for someone else to pick up the gauntlet. The artistry behind rhymed verse is frequently too refined to degrade it, and it is not dishonourable to admit your own limitations.

No rhyme now, but simple complexity: let's say you are selecting poems for a brief anthology, and you are somehow obsessed with Austin Clarke's *Martha Blake at Fifty-One*; in the edition by Hugh Maxton of Clarke's "Selected Poems", this 24-stanza piece has 24 notes throwing light on the syntax and the meaning of some words and phrases, as well as on religious, historical, literary, and local references. Or you are enthralled by *Mnemosyne [nimosáin] Lay in Dust.* The notes for it take up ten pages, in smaller font. That's when you choose another poem.

Naturally, all those considerations are not necessary to translate into Spanish a couple of lines like, "*the dead still whisper / in their silent graves, 'I'm cold, I'm cold.'*" But the next line in Tony Curtis's "Penance", is *"Enough bog here to stoke the fires of Hell"*. And we dont have bogs here. Not the bogs with the connotations of an Irish bog. We have the Spanish word for it, and local bogs pretty much like tropical sets – with their own connotations, but not at all those of their northern cousins. So something more than just peat will be inexorably lost in the journey.

The same occurs with words like *sea* – the first, reflex image of the sea is not the same for a Caribbean islander, reader or translator, and for a writer in the Aran Islands; the emotional connotation of a word like *gate* is quite different in an urban and in a rural context, just as the word *wall* in its regular translation will hardly depict for us the low stone walls separating poor, derelict acres of land in Connemara.

So, words and expressions are often tricky in their apparent simplicity. I suppose in all languages echos tend to be more important than the words themselves, but they are absent in dictionaries (the translators' tool *par excellence*). I'm not lamenting it. In fact, this is part of the richness in every language. A tree, or a plant, the name of a bird or a street or a football team or a brand of cigarettes — the way we connect ourselves with words, the smells, the memories, the images they involve — all these things are hardly translatable. We can only render the linguistic, not the interactions. Perhaps the readers, as the last link in the chain, will be able to restore part of the picture through their own complicity and sensitivity. One of our main writers in Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges, put once as an example the word *"siestita"*. It's a diminutive term, and the literal meaning is *"little nap"*. But there's a great difference if you say in our local Spanish *I'll take a short* or a *brief nap* and if you say *I'll take a little nap*. In the first case, you are speaking about a span of time, in the second case you are speaking of a span of time, but adding an emotional, affective nuance.

And of course, there is the silence. Because tension, from humor to tragedy, is as a rule the result of things stated –openly, obl**i**quely, or even brutally– and things unstated, underlying. That is, a sophisticated, intelligent balance between words and omissions (and, by the way, silence is the hardest nuance to render.)

Things like these exist in every language, I guess, and are really difficult to translate, and this only if you are lucky enough to see them, in the first place, when you're not perfectly bilingual. In

addition, at least in Spanish dictionaries, you will not infrequently find a definition to a word that is linguistically correct, but you´ll never hear the word used that way. So, quite often, dictionaries impose on the translator a sort of *zen* procedure: to know them so as to ignore them.

All this, referred to practical aspects of translation. But *this is not what I meant, at all*. All this is work, not *experience*.

Good books are a form of reflection, they make us think beyond the text, they let us imagine a more stable dimension than the reality offered by the external frame. For an instant, you believe in the possibility of a translatable key, in a sort of space where archetypes float, harmonies that you vainly aim to grasp, even if it be in a fleeting, fragmentary way. What moves us is the illusion of translating voices to an intimate language, strangely impersonal and timeless, that provides some comfort to our condition. And this way, good books have a perhaps more important effect: they get us out of our own monologue.

Aware of being part of a work in progress, writers commonly hold a mental conversation with other writers, contemporary or past, compatriot or not, whether it be for aesthetic coincidences, arguments, in search for a motif or inspiration, or for multiple other possible reasons. Sometimes translators establish a similar dialogue with the authors they're working on. (One is tempted to call the authors their victims, but of course, when you translate books on management, new-age topics like *the power of stones* or *healing through tomatoes*, or the astrological discoveries by the mother of Sylvester Stallone, the role of the victim instantly changes.)

My *real* experience is the imaginary dialogue I hold with writers that I like. My position as a privileged spectator. The dozens and dozens of questions I make, the help I invoke. The constant fear of becoming myself an intruder, a pathetic foreigner naïvely imagining himself to get the picture, glad to enjoy a jig or a reel pretty much like a Japanese dances a tango. The need to fathom constantly the reason of my connection with a country so distant from my birthplace. A link that started many years ago —through music actually— when I was hardly able to read or speak a word of English. The finding of answers always dubious, insufficient; something not simply explainable by history, by a shared colonial or post-colonial condition –and white-washed, mutated new forms of occupation–, or by having in common some customs and behaviours, nor is it explainable by our fickle, amorphous identity in a place built up by waves and waves of immigrants, by so many backgrounds, by plural parishes.

All this makes up my experience. And the dominant point, as a continuum, the pleasure of reading, for a long time now, pictures of the greatness and the abjectness of human soul and flesh, traversed by a joyful or painful form of undestanding.

Whenever fine writers are concerned, language is not so foreign, after all.