

# *Interview with a Dubliners Translator: Benoît Tadié*

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**Abstract:** *This interview with Benoît Tadié, one of the French translators of James Joyce's Dubliners (1914), took place via e-mail. It is embedded in a rich exchange of messages that began in 2011 and continues to the present day. The original aim of the interviewer was only to acquire information for his doctoral work on retranslations of Dubliners, finished in 2013. However, it became clear that Tadié's answers deserved to be published.*

**Keywords:** *Benoît Tadié; James Joyce; Dubliners; Gens de Dublin; Translation; Retranslation.*

We are celebrating 100 year of *Dubliners* (1914-2014). It could have been a hundred and a few more had Joyce not struggled so hard with publishers and at least one printer before he saw his book published... but it would not be the *Dubliners* we know. "A Curious History" (1913) is Joyce's own account of his misfortunes in trying to get *Dubliners* printed. From it, we learn that even the King of England should be bothered when it came to defending the book. The interval between December 3, 1905 – when Joyce delivered *Dubliners* for publication for the first time, with only twelve stories – and June 15, 1914 – when the book was finally published in England by Grant Richards – gave Joyce time to make revisions and add three narratives to the collection: "Two Gallants", "A Little Cloud", and what would become his most famous short story, "The Dead".

Benoît Tadié is one of the several translators who has accepted the challenge of rendering Joyce's fifteen short stories (as if more were needed to make of him one of the greatest short-story writers ever) into another language. It is worthy to note that Marie Tadié, his grandmother, had translated the three volumes of Joyce's *Letters* (1961, 1973, 1981) and his *Selected Letters* (1986). Published in 1994 by GF-Flammarion under the title *Gens de Dublin*, Tadié's is the third full translation of *Dubliners* in French, following Yva Fernandez, Hélène du Pasquier and Jacques-Paul Reynaud's (1926) and Jacques Aubert's (1974). The present interview helps to understand Tadié's translation process and views about literary translation.

Originally in French, the questions were sent to Tadié by e-mail on February 6, 2012, and the answers arrived on March 12, except for questions 7 (answered in a

message exchanged on July 9, 2011) and 12 (added to the interview on March 14 and answered on April 15). Square brackets indicate additions made by the interviewer.

**Vitor Alevato do Amaral:** How did translation enter your life?

**Benoît Tadié:** I had a grandmother who was a translator (from the English), Marie Tadié, and who, by the way, had translated Joyce's texts (mainly part of his letters), but also Henry James, and other major – and not so much so – Anglophone writers. At the end of her life, when I was an adolescent, I had helped her with the notes for Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce, whose second edition she translated for Gallimard. My second experience, some years later, was translating *Dubliners*, commissioned by the publisher of GF [Garnier-Flammarion] at the time (see question 3). But I have not translated much since then. Instead, I prefer to teach or to study literature.

**VAA:** In today's France (or in the francophone world), what is the importance of *Dubliners* in relation to other Joyce's works?

**BT:** *Dubliners* is still considered by the majority of the readers as a youthful work, minor when compared to *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* or even *A Portrait*. However, more and more specialists on Joyce have regarded it (and they are right) as a major work, very accomplished and very "mature", without the flaws that one often associates to a "youthful work".

**VAA:** Why did you translate *Dubliners*?

**BT:** I translated it when I was still a student, fairly young, commissioned by the publisher of GF, whom I knew and who wanted to publish a book by Joyce at a certain time (1992) when he was about to pass into public domain and when its rival, Gallimard, would lose the exclusive rights on the French translations. After that, Joyce went out of public domain again until 2011, due to a change in copyright law. As I was simultaneously writing a thesis about Anglo-American modernism, it was an opportunity to work very close on *Dubliners*, and it consequently found its space in my thesis.

**VAA:** What were your major difficulties?

**BT:** I found difficulty in vocabulary, related to the context and Irish uses of the time as well as to the different language registers and word rhythms; there was a certain number of typically Joycean enigmatic turns of phrase that, after twenty years, I do not think I have quite understood. For instance, the formulation "awakened one of my consciences" (from "Araby", I think). There is also the narrator's way of reproducing, nearly invisibly, the clichés that correspond to the way of thinking or speaking of the

character whose point of view is presented to the readers (what Hugh Kenner calls “the Uncle Charles principle” [see *Joyce’s Voices*]). It is important to try to make the irony emerge again, but in a way that it does not sound too obvious. In short, the main difficulty was to find the nuances and reproduce the ambiguities and the polysemy of a very ambiguous and polysemous text.

**VAA:** Did you read or consult other translations of *Dubliners*? Which ones?

**BT:** I happened to take a look at Jacques Aubert’s (Pléiade) to see how he had translated certain passages. But I would do it after translating the stories myself, to avoid being influenced.

**VAA:** In what aspects is your translation different from those of 1926 and 1974?

**BT:** I have not read the 1926 translation. As for Aubert’s, I have not but looked at certain passages. It seems to me that, concerning my own translation, my *parti pris* was to achieve the highest possible level of fidelity to the text in English, mainly in terms of punctuation, for instance, even when the result was some strange formulation in French. But I was more interested in producing utterances that sounded a little bizarre in French than “normalizing” the text. I think that the utterances of *Dubliners* are a little strange even in English, a little distant from the average English found in the realistic texts of that time.

**VAA:** Why did you chose the same title used in 1926 (*Gens de Dublin*) instead of *Dublinois*, used by Jacques Aubert in 1974?

**BT:** I have chosen *Gens de Dublin* for different reasons: (1) phonetically, it “passes” better than “Dublinois”, correct but rare in French; (2) it was the title under which the stories had been known in France since the 20s, so I accommodated to an old use. However, I think Aubert is also right in choosing “Dublinois”, unarguably more faithful. As his translation came not so long before mine, my choice was also a way of differentiating one work from the other and offering the readers the two possibilities.

**VAA:** What does it mean to retranslate?

**BT:** To me, there is no difference between translate and retranslate, inasmuch as I avoid consulting previous translations in order to avoid becoming dependent on them.

**VAA:** From your perspective, what are the differences and similarities between translating and creating?

**BT:** A translation is an interpretation of an existing work, thus a kind of secondary creation, similar to that of a musical interpreter in relation to the work of a composer. I think that some translations are real creations (those by Ezra Pound, for example), but they are rare. A translation can be a creation if it aims not only at faithfully transposing a given text into another language but also at changing the way one writes in that “other language”, which was the case of some of Ezra Pound’s translations such as “The Seafarer” – translated from Anglo-Saxon to Modern English – or “Homage to Sextus Propertius”, translated from Latin with so much liberty taken in relation to the original that it made the critics of those days howl!

**VAA:** Edith Grossman, translator of *Don Quijote* in English, asks the following question: “what exactly am I writing when I write a translation”? How would you answer this question?

**BT:** I could practically repeat my last answer. I try to faithfully transpose the text into another language, but (and there is where the work of the translator as a writer can be expressed in a nearly subliminal way). I also try to shake a little the way one writes in French. That said, it is a work that generally passes unnoticed by the reader, that exists most of all to satisfy the translator...

**VAA:** If you had the opportunity to revise your translation of *Dubliners*, what would you modify?

**BT:** I don’t know, honestly, for I have hardly ever opened it (even though I continued to work a lot on the text in English for my courses and articles).

**VAA:** May I ask you a complementary question? You answered that to translate and to retranslate are the same, so I ask you if you think like Antoine Berman, an author to whom “it is enough that [the translators] know – even when they only hear about it – that the source text has already been translated somewhere for the nature of their work to change. They are not the ‘first’”?

**BT:** Absolutely, the fact of knowing that a previous translation exists modifies the translator’s work, not so much from a technical perspective, but in the frame of the project itself. I think that a first translation, concerned about introducing a new author or text to the target language, will be naturally more “conservative”, whereas a second translator can be freer to experiment in the target language. I proceeded that way. Knowing that a good translation of *Dubliners* by Jacques Aubert already existed allowed me to take many risks in mine; in the end it was more liberating than restrictive.