

Portrait of a Translator as an adventurer: discoveries of Irish literature and culture

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Abstract: *What follows is a briefly expanded version derived from a short talk given at XIV ABEI and II AEIS Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, held at USP on August 14, 2019. I reflect on my experience both as a professor of translation and literature of English-speaking countries and – in this specific case – as a translator of texts by Irish authors and by different scholars and professionals who discuss Irish life, culture and society.*

Keywords: *Translation; Literature; Ireland; Challenges; Choices.*

Resumo: *O que se segue é uma versão brevemente expandida de uma palestra proferida no XIV ABEI e II AEIS Simpósio de Estudos Irlandeses na América do Sul, realizado na USP em 14 de agosto de 2019. Reflito sobre minha experiência como professora de tradução e literatura de países de língua inglesa e - neste caso específico - como tradutora de textos de autores irlandeses e de diferentes estudiosos e profissionais que discutem a vida, a cultura e a sociedade irlandesas.*

Palavras-chave: *Tradução; Literatura; Irlanda; Desafios; Ecolhas.*

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I was invited by Professors Laura Izarra and Munira Mutran to talk about my experience of translating texts written either in English or in Portuguese, by Irish authors, Brazilian, American and Irish scholars, and journalists, for the W.B. Yeats Chair of Irish Studies publication *Lectures*, a task which I have been doing with the greatest pleasure for some years now.

In this short article – an extended and adjusted version of a talk presented at the *XIV ABEI and II AEIS Symposium of Irish Studies in South America*, held at Universidade de São Paulo on August 14, 2019 – I want to share my experience with the reader and also reflect on some aspects of translation in general, especially literary, academic and journalistic translation, the predominant topics of the texts I have dealt with.

You must be wondering about the title of this paper: “Portrait of a translator as an adventurer: discoveries of Irish literature and culture”. Yes, I am playing on the title of James Joyce’s novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for when it comes to discussing Irish studies, Irish literature and Irish culture, Joyce inevitably attains prominence for his stature as a writer, his innovative and revolutionary techniques in form and structure, thus reshaping the modern novel. And it was thinking of him that I decided to give my talk that title; I wanted to tell you about my growth – culturally, aesthetically, socially, and politically speaking – while

translating different texts broaching many different fields; in the present case, texts which have to do Irish literature, society and life. I felt more or less like Stephen Dedalus facing so many challenges – and surviving them all.

When we talk about Irish literature, however, it is difficult, or rather, impossible, not to think of other great authors besides James Joyce; I mean a long list of such writers as Yeats, Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, Frank O'Connor, Liam O'Flaherty, Cólín Tóibín, John Banville, Brian Friel, besides the female voices of Elizabeth Bowen, Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Maeve Binchy – the list is endless. Great writers of the past and of the present.

The pleasure and the enormous challenge of translating articles and essays written by Irish writers, artists, journalists and other scholars of Irish literature has raised even more my interest in Ireland and Irish studies. I have learned a lot about the Irish people, Irish Arts, Irish politics and Irish society. I have learned considerably about the Irish language, its thought-provoking differences between spelling and sound, with its unusual (for us, Portuguese speakers) mingling of capital and small letters in the same word (!), unexpected consonant clusters, vowel combinations; more than that, I have learned a lot about the profound respect the Irish show for their own language, which they have striven to preserve; I have learned a lot about their struggle to preserve their identity, about their culture and arts, about their difficulties concerning such political and social issues as borders, Brexit, relations with the European Union and England. All this, and much more, is what I have learned from the translations I have done. I have gained invaluable insights about Irish culture and society.

Being both a translator and a professor of literature of English-speaking countries impels me to tell you that my interest in Ireland and its literature has accompanied me since 'ancient times' – since the twentieth century – when I, as a young student at USP, found out how interesting, how deep, how complex, how revealing are the novels, stories and poems the Irish have written, either for their rich cultural heritage or for their history of hardships – and victories. And, as a translator, I found out how intertwined literature and translation are.

Now, let me turn to some brief reflections on translation, the basic subject of this talk.

It seems to be an acknowledged fact that the views about translation and about what translation means and involves are plenty – probably as many as translation scholars and translators themselves. Big issues are always haunting us: how faithful are we to be to the original? What does being faithful mean here? And faithful to what? To whom – to the original work, to ourselves, to the author? How much risk do we run moving away from the original either by adding what is not there or by omitting what is indeed there? How much loss does translation imply? How are we supposed to deal with the original text? As a sacred one? As a text we can appropriate, adapt and change as we please? What about register, style, lexical choices, rhetorical devices, and other translation strategies and procedures? How much of ourselves do we reveal in our translated work? So many questions and equally so much uncertainty about the right answer! Good food for thought. I discuss some of these queries below.

Indeed, with so many contingencies, translating is a most challenging – albeit undoubtedly rewarding – activity that urges us, translators, to go further and further in search of that one word, that one expression that might – in the best and closest way possible – replace that one word, that one expression which in the original conveys the author's likely views, his/her ethical, aesthetic and stylistic choices. However, we should not overestimate ourselves and think that we can always find the perfect equivalence. There is no such thing in translation. The French philosopher and thinker Paul Ricoeur (2011) advises us to forget the "dream of the

perfect translation”. Somewhat along the same lines, in an interview, the respected Chilean writer Isabel Allende (Iftekharruddin, 1997:12), commenting on how she feels about the translations of her stories into other languages, said,

In English, French, and German, the translations I know are very good. Now, every time that I read aloud in English my own stories, I feel very uncomfortable. I think the translation is great; sometimes it sounds much better than in Spanish, but it’s another story. I can only be myself in my own language. It’s like making love, you know; I would feel ridiculous panting in English. I really need to express it in my own language [...]

Ricoeur invites us to accept the unsurmountable differences between languages and cultures – indeed, an indisputable notion. Let us now consider some notions drawn by other theorists; and among them, Simon S. C. Chau, who claims that translators, among other aspects, “become more humble, as they are fully aware of their existential limitation in relation to translation”, and that they “become more responsible, as they realize the active role of the interpreter in shaping the meaning of a text”(qtd. in Pym, 2010:111).

In the act of translating all we have are the words; they are the only tools a translator works with, and as the great American short story writer Raymond Carver (May, 1994:275) says, the words we use “had better be the right ones”. This is also valid, I believe, for us, translators. And here comes our dilemma in the whole process: knowing that languages and cultures differ, we are supposed to endeavour to find the right word/words so as to combine maximum fidelity with maximum accuracy and clarity when we are shaping the original text into a new language to a reader who will read it as if he/she is reading the original. Yes, for the reader, the translated text is the original. And here stands out the ethical element of our job: responsibility towards the original text, towards the author, towards the words he/she uses, towards the meanings he/she is likely to convey. That is one of the crucial aspects of our job, one which must be kept in mind – how to “reconcile” honestly the source language text and the target language text.

Besides the linguistic issue, the cultural gap that naturally exists between the foreign text and its “naturalization” into the target language is another relevant feature to be considered in translation.

Antoine Berman, the French translator and theorist, is – and invites us to be – always aware of the difficulties translation involves. According to Anthony Pym (2010, p.104), in his *Exploring Translation Theories*, Berman argues that the ethical translator, “should not adapt the foreign text to the target culture but should respect and maintain the specificity of its foreignness.” Indeed, for the French theorist (1999:74), “the ethical act consists in recognizing and receiving the Other as Other”. It is this “receiving the Other as Other” that enriches and enlightens another language and another culture. It is by receiving the Other that cultures and people interact and learn with each other. That is one of the wonders of translation: the “otherness” of the same.

Translation is a labour of love – love for words, love for language; it is a labour of patience – patience to search for the best option; a labour of endurance – endurance to face challenges and respond to them, however insoluble and unsurmountable they may seem. All of these have been my companions in my translational enterprises related to Ireland, its people, its culture, its literature.

And translating is also a leap in the dark; it is quite an adventure; an adventure from which we will surely return with more valuable luggage. In fact, I do not think any other

occupation provides the professional with more scope for expanding knowledge, experience, gaining insight, intellectual and cultural growth than that of a translator. Translation is undoubtedly an endless process of personal improvement and discoveries.

In my career both as a translator and a professor of literature I ended up noticing similarities between the writer – especially of short stories and poetry – and the translator. In his essay “Some Aspects of the Short Story” (May, 1994:250), the great Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar (May, 1994:250) says that the “story writer stands before his subject, before that embryo which already is life, but which has not yet taken on its final form.” Is it not this what we, translators, usually do? We stand before the text to be translated and do our best to give it a meaningful and understandable form in the target language. And in this sense, Cortázar has one more relevant contribution to offer to translators: in his essay “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores”, talking about translation he says

Cada vez que me ha tocado revisar la traducción de uno de mis relatos [...] he sentido hasta qué punto la eficacia y el sentido del cuento dependían de esos valores que dan su carácter específico al poema y también al jazz: la tensión, el ritmo, la pulsación interna, lo imprevisto dentro de parámetros pre-vistos, esa *libertad fatal* que no admite alteración sin una pérdida irrestañable.¹

From this fragment I detach one phrase the meaning of which, in my opinion, applies beautifully to the act of translating: “libertad fatal”. The “fatal freedom” we exercise in our choice of words may irreparably affect the original work, again an issue that involves the ethical aspect of our work. We are supposed to make what I would call “meaningful meaning” of what we translate.

Back to Paul Ricoeur and his discarding the possibility of the ‘perfect’ translation: indeed, there is no such thing as the “absolute” translation. Therefore, we must be prepared for the inevitable losses in the translated text. Our finished text is always a combination of triumphs and defeats, of gains and losses in the game of words, in the “music” each language carries within itself (Isabel Allende springs to mind again!). Not always is it possible to rescue everything from the original. That is the way translation works. But for all its imperfections, what would have become of us if we had not read and learned so much about the world, humankind, culture, sciences, if it were not for translations? If it were not for translations, how else could we have ‘met’ – and still meet – all the great writers, philosophers, artists, scientists of the past and the present? Let us celebrate translation as a priceless source of knowledge and enlightenment.

We can only agree with Ricoeur (2011: 34, my translation) once more, when he says that translation exists “because men speak different languages”; and further: “it is always possible to say the same thing in a different way” (50, my translation, emphasis in the original). This seems to be what we usually do by choosing from what languages make available to us in their different aspects. Or would we be a bit more realistic if we agreed with Umberto Eco (2007:17)² who, when faced with some translational dilemmas and “interpretative potentialities” offers the notion that “an apparent infidelity (not translating to the letter) turns out to be an act of fidelity [...] or that the text being translated, when “submitted to some discretion, can produce analogous effects on the reader. By “*submitted to some discretion*”, Eco means that “every translation presents margins of infidelity with regard to a nucleus of a supposed fidelity” (p. 18, my translation, emphasis in the original). A reflection on Eco’s view about translation fully justifies the title of his book: *Dire quase la stessa cosa – esperienze di traduzione* (2003). In his

introduction, he ponders:

[...] translation rests on some negotiation processes where such negotiation is precisely a process based on which one surrenders something to get something else – and in the end the parties at play should experience the feeling of a reasonable and mutual satisfaction in the light of the golden rule that one cannot have everything.

And – most important of all – translations will always be needed: literature, philosophy, sciences, summit talks, Oscar presentations, Nobel prizes, Olympic games, arts, advances in sciences, law, and even wars – and in this very forum as well, for which I had to try to translate myself into English to better get my message across to you.

In these extended reflections I have tried to share with you some of my views about translation in general. As I said at the beginning, being both a translator and a professor of literature, I could not help getting carried away by my love for literature; both literature and translation contemplate language and words, the basic tools we and writers work with; both translation and literature are rooted in the workings of language: how words “talk and walk” in any language, what meanings – and feelings – they convey or conceal; how to translate culture; history, arts; in short, how to convey messages in a different language; (would words mean the same or nearly the same?), how to make what is ‘foreign’ become familiar and domestic (should we always do it?). Is it necessary and reasonable to turn what is ‘foreign’ to familiar? Translation is indeed a challenging, but surely a rewarding occupation.

I close my talk, not with further discussions about translation proper, but with literature, Irish literature more specifically. To be more attuned to this event, I would like to share with you a poem by one of my favourite Irish poets, Seamus Heaney. I have made this choice for two reasons: first because of my love for literature, I repeat; second because Heaney, with all his talent and sensibility, shows us what words can do when they land in the hands of a great poet; what they can reveal and conceal; what happens when they are given a personal touch, a personal feeling, a deeper insight which lends the poet the (divine) chance to redress them and endow them with new significance; sometimes – as in Heaney’s case – the most unexpected and seemingly ‘unfit’ words show up in a poem and invite us, readers, to go deeper in search of a new significance. I would say that more or less the same thing happens to a translator in his/her choice of words. As a privileged first reader of the translated text, he has the chance of reading both the surface text and the text which lies between the lines so as to make informed choices and rescue – or recreate – the original text, which will be imparted to the reader, showing not only to what extent his/her choice of words, register, rhythm, tone (literature comes in again!) reflect (and respect) the original, but also to what extent he/she is also an author – also a (re) creator.

To be more clear, I am referring to Heaney’s poem “Scaffolding” – a poem filled with so many technical terms that we get amazed at how resourceful, how sensitive, how insightful, how skilful Heaney was by using those words – and combining them – to build a great love poem.!

Here is Heaney’s poem:

Scaffolding

Masons, when they start upon a building,

Are careful to test out the scaffolding;

Make sure that planks won't slip at busy points,
Secure all ladders, tighten bolted joints.

And yet all this comes down when the job's done,
Showing off walls of sure and solid stone.

So if, my dear, there sometimes seem to be
Old bridges breaking between you and me

Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall
Confident that we have built our wall.

How come that such words as *scaffolding, masons, building, planks, ladders, tighten, bolted joints, walls, stone, bridges* are so beautifully transmuted into a love poem? That is a job for poets. And no doubt quite a job for a translator, a task that I will not attempt here, because – fortunately – the poem is already in English, the language I am supposed to use here today. In view of the fact that my task has been facilitated, all I can do now is invite you to feel with me what is concealed behind all those technical, dry, arid words: genuine love. The reader is “kidnapped” by the intensity and tension of the style and choices made by Heaney. According to the American short story writer Raymond Carver, in his essay “On Writing” (May, 1994:277), the definition given by the British writer and literary critic V.S. Pritchett about short stories may be illuminating and fit for a poem as well; in this case, for Heaney's poem, Carver says:

V.S. Pritchett's definition of short story is “something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing”. Notice the ‘glimpse’ part of this. First the glimpse. Then the glimpse given life, turned into something that illuminates the moment and may, if we're lucky [...] have even further-ranging consequences and meaning. The short story writer's task is to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power. He'll bring his intelligence and literary skill to bear (his talent), his sense of proportion and sense of the fitness of things: of how things out there really are and how he sees those things – like no one else sees them. And this is done through the use of clear and specific language, language used so as to bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader. For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely given. The words can be so precise they may *even sound flat*, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes (emphasis added).

Heaney's short poem may “even sound flat” – easy reading on the surface. As we can notice, the lexical field abounds with “flat” words; but we can grasp Heaney's “glimpse” and see and feel with him all those technical terms become stepping stones towards “building” a solid love relationship.

Carver (May, 1994:275) also reminds us that “it's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power”. And from Cortázar (May, 1994:249), we learn: “In sum, we can say that there are no subjects which are absolutely insignificant. There is a mysterious and

complex alliance between a certain writer and a certain subject in a given moment . . .”. Likewise, a translator has his/her own repertoire and knows intimately which words to choose as stepping stones, not to build but to ‘rebuild’ a solid and honest work in another ‘location’, another language.

Repeating: translation is a labor of love. And since this forum was supposed to be all in English, I feel free, fortunate, and comfortable, not to need translate Heaney’s poem into Portuguese. If I did it, I fear the result might be rather precarious; I feel that translating poems is hard work – a job better done by poets – and I am not one. I invite you, instead, just to savour Heaney’s poem, transmute its apparent technicalities into something deeper; try your hand at a personal translation; I am sure you will go beyond the surface; you will be translating life; that is what words do for us. Words help us translate life.

Back to my main focus in this forum: translation is the art of striving for possible perfection in inevitable imperfection. This is what I have tried to do with regard to the Irish texts I have translated so far, and I can assure you that I have become more knowledgeable, more resourceful, more insightful about Irish life and people. The hardest part of my job, however, has to do with the inevitable losses that a text may inflict on us. How shall we deal with them? How far can they affect us especially when we think of an author who has striven to shape the original into form? How much freedom can we have? Julio Cortázar (1974;235) springs to mind again with his wonderful phrase “libertad fatal” to talk about the traps inherent to translation, meaning that there is no change without an irreparable loss. However, despite this “fatal freedom”, I am still an optimistic person; even with the “irreparable losses” I hope I am contributing to bringing to Portuguese readers a bit of the rich life the Irish have to share with us, Brazilians. In this globalized world with so many conflicting views, the more we learn about each other, the more chances we will have of building a more civilized, egalitarian, peaceful and humane society, a society where “otherness” may come close to ‘sameness’.

This is more or less the portrait I imagined I would share with you in this event. I end my adventure. After this experience of translating myself into English to talk to you (I wish I could translate myself into Irish!), I feel I am richer and ready for the next challenge, for the next adventure; I am even thinking of flying with Stephen Dedalus to make new discoveries – and translate them.

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