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## Let sleeping doggerel lie?: James Joyce's «The Death of Parnell» and the challenges of addressing 'bad' verse in translation

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Joyce's reputation as arguably the twentieth century's outstanding innovator in the use and manipulation of the English language is not one based, to be quite candid, on his talents as a poet. Slight, occasional and markedly derivative, Joyce's poetry, despite his own enthusiastic advocacy of its merits, is not of that substance or true delicacy of feeling on which a genuine reputation as a lyricist can be founded. Although early in his artistic career he had a strong inclination towards poetry, attested to by the fact that his first published work, *Chamber Music* (1907), was a collection of short lyric poems, Joyce never adequately solved the important metrical issues raised by verse, and soon realised, fortunately for posterity, that outlets for his talents as a writer lay elsewhere.

In this article, however, I address one particular example of Joyce's genuine talent for versification, if not strictly for verse, which I find genuinely remarkable in its ability to fuse rhetorical excess and the thematic commonplaces of Irish Nationalist aspirations in an artistic format in which such commonplaces were traditionally articulated in Ireland. I refer to the patriotic ode, which was often drafted for public recitation and frequently composed both to exalt the figures of Nationalist champions in the struggle for political independence and to fix their memory in the popular imagination.

I take as my illustration *The Death of Parnell*, the verse ode recited by Mr Hynes in the company of the assembled party political canvassers at the conclusion to Joyce's superbly-crafted short story *Ivy Day in the Committee Room*, included in the short story collection *Dubliners*<sup>1</sup>. In its remarkable fusion of threadbare poeticisms, pretentious sentimentality and empty rhetoric, this par-

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<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Text, Criticism and Notes, (eds.) Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz, New York, The Viking Press, 1969.

ticular ode bears all the characteristics of a 'school' of versification that played to the worst excesses of a debased poetic tradition, although it remained one that was still very much alive in Ireland at the time of its composition.

This is dreadful verse by any standards, yet the remarkable fact is that it is still superbly written in order to prove «deliberately» bad. Joyce the artist could no more have condoned «careless» writing than careless symbolism, and the fact remains that as a *pastiche* on the poetic excesses of Nationalist-inspired art this particular poem is a brilliant illustration of Joyce's creative powers – a genuinely inspired piece of writing masquerading as exactly the opposite, as unvarnished doggerel. Damned at its conclusion with the worst possible of understated critical reactions from the assembled listeners – that of faint praise – there is nevertheless little doubt in my mind that Joyce himself, but for entirely different reasons, shared Mr Crofton's expressed view at the story's conclusion that: ... *it was a very fine piece of writing*.

The challenge here for the translator of Joyce is thus a formidable one. Already faced with the challenge, in *Dubliners* as a whole, of adequately rendering Joyce's flat prose, the bane of all translators, this dreadful verse interlude raises a further challenge to translator ingenuity, for it still has to be «well» translated, even though it must still read in translation for what it remains in essence – a dreadful *mélange* of sentimentality and pretentiousness. Before addressing possible translation strategies for overcoming the problems raised by verse that deliberately sets out to draw attention to itself, though deliberately lacking in value and inspiration, I should like, first of all, to subject Joyce's original to some detailed scrutiny in order to emphasise those essential reading strategies without which, as literary translators, we will ultimately make only a limited response to texts such as this one, which are operating on several levels at the same time. It is my belief that only by bringing such reading strategies to bear on the target text, and by adjusting our translation practice to fit the demands that such strategies place upon us, will we provide a TL translation that fully engages translator ingenuity, while respecting target readership expectations.

The second thrust of the article will be to examine briefly those published translations of Joyce's original in Peninsular languages in order to show how certain translators have already addressed the issues raised by the ode to Parnell's memory. My purpose in illustrating from their responses aims at drawing conclusions that may leave us all with some greater expectation of success in the same endeavour, rather than with hopes frustrated by our own possible inability to capture the tantalisingly «elusive» register of the original text. But not only this. The comparison of different translations with the original, and with each other, is a stimulating exercise in itself as well as a powerful pedagogical tool for translators, to say nothing of readers. Both the successes of such translations and, by contrast, even their inevitable shortcomings, can

increase our awareness of what actually goes into the fabric of the original text and, who knows, illustrate in what ways translation can be a 'new' reading that sheds further light, in this instance, on Joyce's genius.

'Doggerel' verse, which in its original definition was any verse of a loose and irregular measure, may best be defined in this instance as that kind of verse which expresses trivial sentiment in the context of a weak subject matter, or any rough, badly made verse that is notably monotonous in its metrical pulse, and clumsy in its rhyme scheme. *The Death of Parnell* is a particularly good (or bad) example of the worst excesses of this lamentable versification. Let me illustrate briefly, as follows, with verse and line references indicated:

- 1) The poetic metre, with its regular iambic 2-syllable foot, battles manfully against frequent and often violent disruption of the unstressed /stressed syllabic pattern, such as in 1.i, with its clamorous straining after dramatic effect, the jarring enjambment of 10.ii-iii, or even the final line of the poem (11.iv), with the issue of the variable stress on the syllables in Parnell's own name (pronounced by Parnell himself as a trochee).
- 2) The rhyme scheme, with some exceptions (as in 5), has a strongly accentuated, but ponderous ABCB format leaning heavily on vowels and diphthongs for its effects.
- 3) The poetic diction has a transparently false formality all its own-lexical elements in combinations such as: *grief and woe* (1.ii), *fell gang* (1.iii), *bards and warriors* (4.iii), *coward caitiff* (6.i), *fawning priests* (6.iv), *befoul and smear* (7.iii), *nobly undaunted* (8.ii), *peaks of glory* (9.iv), *pledge in the cup* (11.iii), the pyrotechnical wealth of lexical elements involving sibilants: *slain* (2.i), *strove* (5.ii), *sundered* (5.iv), *smote* (6.ii), *spurned* (7.iv), *strife* (9.i), *spurs* (9.iii), or isolated lexical elements striving after exalted diction: *wrought her destiny* (3.iv), *gloriously unfurled* (4.ii), *clutch that idol* (5.iii), *Erin, list* (10.ii), and *pledge in the cup* (11.iii).
- 4) The notable syntactical irregularities: *for he is gone who...* (3.iii-iv), *He fell as fall the mighty ones ...* (8.i), *Calmly he rests ...* (9.ii), *The peaks of glory to attain ...* (9.iv), *When breaks the dawning of the day ...* (10.iv), *Pledge in the cup she lifts to Joy One grief ...* (11.iii-iv).
- 5) The use of rhetorical apostrophe and imperatives in direct address: *O, Erin, mourn ...* (1.ii), *But Erin, list ...* (10.ii).
- 6) The use of syncope or elision, depending on the syllabic structure, such as *where'er it be* (3.ii), *alas, 'twas but a dream* (5.i), *th'exalted name* (7.iii), was a hallmark of such poetics, all echoing Stephen Dedalus's comments on similar «lines of excited patriotism» in Joyce's *Stephen Hero*. Even the capitalisation of certain abstract nouns adds to this

effect: notice *Uncrowned King* (1.i), *Liberty* (5.ii), *Freedom* (11.i), *Joy* (11.iii), and even *the nations of the World* (4.iv).

- 7) The device of using two alliterative synonyms as an intensifier, a *sine qua non* of this dreadful verse, as witnessed by *coward, caitiff hands* (6.i), when *caitiff* already means 'cowardly'.
- 8) Rhetorical parallelism and repetition, such as: *He dreamed (alas, 'twas but a dream)* (5.i), *When breaks the dawning of the day, The day that brings us Freedom's reign. And on that day ...* (10.iv-11.ii), and *No sound of strife ... no human pain* (9.i, ii).
- 9) To turn from the language to the imagery, the cumulative effect of the latter is to drown out the patriotic call to resurrection and the «dawn» of a «new day» of political independence for Ireland in a welter of cloying, archaic and clichéd images. Thus: the constant references to Ireland (seven in all) as the «Erin» of bardic tradition, the reference to Parnell's unfurling the «green flag» of liberty, when Ireland has never had a green flag (and the notoriously superstitious Parnell actually disliked the colour!), the bizarre personification of Parnell as both the Christ of history and the Phoenix of legend, or the «Celtic Twilight» literary school's obsession with the *palace, cabin or in cot* (3.i) articulation of the genuine Irish ethos, right through to the clichéd climax of *the dawning of the day* (10.iv).

If an analysis as brief as this can lay bare the false sentiment and impoverished rhetoric of the original, this not only does Joyce's poetics proper justice but reinforces the translator's primary role as a critical reader of texts, and not only via close readings. As he cannot afford to make mistakes, the translator is in the uniquely challenging position of having to make the closest of all possible readings. I have thus deliberately isolated the particular issues raised by Joyce's poetics in order to emphasise, first and foremost, that as translators of literary texts we fulfil a second function –as critics of those texts– and that we cannot make an adequate response to a poetics of deliberate ambiguity unless we first believe in the justness of our readings as critics and secondly, follow through on this conviction by delivering a TT that in this particular case convincingly plays up to our unbiased critical perceptions.

Something of the dangers inherent in not adopting a critical stance supported by all the evidence of the ST can already be seen in the different translations of this story available to a Peninsular readership. With the possible exception of Joaquim Mallafrè's first class translation into Catalan<sup>2</sup>, a model for aspiring practitioners of this art, which offers a rare combination of scrupu-

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<sup>2</sup> Joaquim Mallafrè, *Dublínesos*, Edhasa, Barcelona, 1989.

lous critical reading and a genuine poetic facility that fuse into a translation that brings out the «worst» of Joyce's original by playing up to its excesses, the remaining translations of *Dubliners* (four into Castilian and one into Galician) appear, to my mind at least, to fail overall by resorting to almost prosaic renderings of a model that they would appear to take at face value, as being the expression of genuine poetic sentiment. I shall try to illustrate briefly.

The fifty years that elapsed between the first translation of *Dubliners* into Spanish by Abelló in 1942<sup>3</sup> and the latest, and many would claim definitive, translation by Eduardo Chamorro in 1993<sup>4</sup>, may have brought us enormous advances in Joyce scholarship, enabling us to read his texts with insights unknown to his pioneering critics, but I am less sure that the advance has been so marked in translation response. While the Abelló version is remarkably weak in basic reading response, where that of Chamorro is demonstrably state-of-the-art critical scholarship and a most sensitive translation, the opposite may actually be the case with their translations of this particular extract. Abelló is most suitably responsive in his grasp of the empty poeticisms: notice his particularly effective use of verbs: *yacer*, *mancillar*, *perecer*, *alentar*, *forjar*, *envilecer*, *turbar*, *abatir*, *resurgir* and *empañar*, his lexical combinations in *turba abyecta ...*, *chusma vocinglera ...*, and *jauria infame ...*, his suitably overblown *Fulgor le diera al estro de su Erin ...* and *Baldón sobre el traidor ...*, as well as a particularly effective ABCB rhyme scheme and a genuine attempt to address the syntactical issues, with *Murío nuestro rey sin corona ...*, *perecen del monarca sobre el féretro ...*, or *con tus héroes, Erin, del pasado ...*

Chamorro, on the other hand, by dispensing with any attempt to reproduce a rhyme scheme, immediately mitigates against his own response to the poetics present. This is bad verse, but not because it is blank verse. To resort to blank verse in translation is immediately to run the risk of a descent into a certain banality where we may have the impression of reading something akin to a press report on Parnell's death rather than an inflated eulogy of his life and miracles. The many felicities of the Chamorro translation only serve to highlight the overall prosaic quality of the register employed: *Ha muerto. Nuestro rey sin corona ha muerto* has all the immediacy of a press release but precious little of the drama. *Consiguieron lo que querían: acabaron con él* may suggest a proper settling of political accounts but at the expense of any sense of the gross injustice of Parnell's fall. *Sin amigos* can hardly bridge the chasm separating Parnellite Nationalism and the Church intransigence that brought about his political ruin, and even the momentary respite of *Calmly he rests* can surely not be the blandly dismissive *Descanse en paz*.

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<sup>3</sup> Ignacio Abelló, *Gente de Dublín*, Editorial Tartessos, Barcelona, 1942

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Chamorro, *Dublinese*, Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid, 1993.

Two further translations of the work appeared during this period of fifty years, the first in an Argentinian translation of 1961 by Oscar Muslera<sup>5</sup>, the second, and for many years the translation considered the definitive version, by Guillermo Cabrera-Infante in 1974<sup>6</sup>. The former again decisively burdens itself by resorting to blank verse, the few occasions on which any rhyme is in fact respected being thus apparently by accident rather than design, and Muslera rather prepares us for the worst by actually including the English text along with the translation, a sure sign that he may well distrust his own ability to get the job done by himself. Among the more unfortunate intrusions on our patience we may catalogue the following, which respect neither form nor feeling: *la cruel pandilla de modernos hipócritas, Yace asesinado ... Quien se elevó*, which actually contradicts the original text, and the unfortunate juxtaposition of *villanas manos* or *Noblemente indomable*, yet, taken as a whole, this particular version affords an acceptable «middle way» approach that we might wish to emulate as a first reading or as a first draft.

Cabrera-Infante appears to me to combine something of the best and the worst of approaches. Not only can he produce one rhyme scheme, he actually produces two, and manages to intercalate an ABAB scheme into an otherwise prevalent AABB, although dispensing with any attempt to reproduce Joyce's insistent metrics. His is perhaps the translation that comes closest to being a «free» version, and the evidence of a «looser» approach is everywhere evident. This is not to suggest that the evidence reflects a retreat from the challenge –in actual fact, Cabrera-Infante's talents as, elsewhere, a poet in prose serve him well, yet the result is strangely unsatisfying, prosaic to a degree and noticeably «uninspired» at times. Take the mixing of metaphors in *ahogaron al Señor*, the jarring «musicality» of *el nombre del que fue entre los hombres, hombre*, the descent in register to *Lo rebajaron: se salieron con la suya*, and the meaningless repetition of *Pero, oye, Erín –o mejor sí: escucha:–*

Sentiment, albeit at the expense of sense, is justly rewarded in the Galician version of *Dubliners*<sup>7</sup>, which is no bad thing, and a pointed reminder to the translator that an engagement with the text can go beyond mere understanding of the sense of the words on the page. Like the Catalan translation, the Galician version shares patriotic sentiments present in the Irish nationalist dimension of Joyce's text, which it articulated itself in verse of a similar nature. The success of the Galician translation is to adhere throughout to a measured, if somewhat

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<sup>5</sup> Oscar Muslera, *Gente de Dublín*, Compañía General Fabril Editora, Buenos Aires, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> Guillermo Cabrera-Infante, *Dublinese*, Editorial Lumen, Barcelona, 1972

<sup>7</sup> Débora Ramonde, Rafael Ferradáns and Xela Arias, *Dublinese*, Edicións Xerais de Galicia, Vigo, 1990.



ponderous, AABB rhyme scheme, even if the end result is over-dependent on vocalic rather than consonantal rhyme. Yet the sound of the *galego* version has a resonance missing in the Castilian counterparts. Take: *Anceios de Erín, sonhos, esperanzas na pira do seu monarca finadas ...*, or the declamatory power of: *Mais, Erín, escoita, e mira a raia do espírito: coma o Fénix das chamas, ben erguerse pode cando o día abra ...*

Lastly, a brief word on the lessons to be learned from Mallafré's Catalan translation, to my mind certainly the finest of the competing versions and an object lesson for translators addressing the multitude of issues raised by Joyce's poetics. Here not only do we have an ABCB rhyme scheme of an insistent and unredeemed beauty, but also a genuine iambic pattern in the four syllabic feet in each line –proof that such a feat is more than an aspiration, but a real possibility. Not only are the metaphors justly realized, but Mallafré can even work the more laboured ones into a new form without losing their rhetorical import. Take: *Muira el covard que amb bes de Judes o amb mans iniquies el colpí i lliurà inerme a la caterva d'enemics seus del Sanedrí ...* or the force of the emotive climax, easily the translation best guaranteed to produce the immediate result in the assembled listeners –the burst of spontaneous and enthusiastic applause: *El sol d'un jorn que ens alliberi. I tindrà Irlanda el desconhort, mentre exultant alci la copa, dún pensament: Parnell és mort.* Add to all this a sensitive use of lexis reinforcing the declamatory thrust of what was, after all, verse written for public recitation, and the total effect is one that fully satisfies trite sentimentality masquerading as patriotic apotheosis.

The object lessons to be gained from this analysis may give us confidence not only to avoid the pitfalls but also to address the challenges of apparently 'bad' verse. In conclusion, I should like to summarise possible strategies for literary translators forced, as here, to solve perhaps only the apparently insoluble. First, there can be no substitute for a close and critical reading of the ST. One could go further and state that the translator should know and understand the original, which is not always to state the obvious, as some of the translations herein palpably demonstrate –and reviewers of translations often gleefully point out. Unlike the critic, the translator is at a disadvantage, for he is not granted any kind of selectivity. At the risk of failure and malicious exposure, he has to brave every single difficulty. No word or phrase can be omitted, so the translator has to muddle along, hesitantly committing various sins in the process, barking up wrong trees and sometimes the only way out is into non-committal vagueness. To lean too heavily on Joyce scholarship may incline us towards divergence and contradiction, interpretations having a cruel way of leaning towards the fanciful and the irrelevant. We must therefore trust our own readings and act accordingly as translators in the light of our own convictions.

With Joyce, of course, there may be a further danger. Not the danger of not understanding a Joyce passage, but the danger, paradoxically, of understanding

it. To understand it completely, I mean, always assuming there is such a thing. As readers of Joyce we may make the pilgrimage from initial puzzlement to a perception of some unusual proliferation of meaning, a sense that not only is superfluous verbiage absent, but that Joyce has at his disposal an uncanny economy of means. Not simply that every word has its function and is in its place, but that the function of words, phrases, metaphors and all the rest are multiple and complex. We usually talk of the text operating on «several levels» and Joyce's style is characterised by an «overdetermination» that translators have an almost herculean task to try to emulate.

Yet the challenge has to be addressed. Translating Joyce (at least the not too late Joyce) does not differ fundamentally from translating any other writer worth preserving in another language. We should therefore resist any inclination to imagine ourselves in some world apart from «ordinary literature» but the translator can certainly consider himself grappling with difficulties that he never experienced before and must work to a reading strategy that he fundamentally believes in and delivers on.

The specifics of this particular case can be summarised more briefly: a lively awareness of what this kind of verse aspires to and the ways, rhetorical, lexical and metrical, in which it falls short of its own terms of reference; a proper awareness of the extremes of diction present and a resolve to play up to them, –even if the translated result is merely bad verse, and not a brilliant pastiche, the overall effect loses nothing in the process, even though as readers we remain in Joyce's debt. If translators have merely «let Joyce's particular sleeping doggerel lie», the resulting translation loss only goes to illustrate what a *very fine piece of writing* they have addressed, for they too have thereby added their contribution to the fundamental integrity, and the complex subtlety, of Joyce's genius.