

## Interior Monologues of a *Ulysses* Translator

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### *Abstract*

This paper tends to recapitulate a translator's experience working on Joyce's *Ulysses* for several years. It is presented mostly as a condensed diary of sensations and personal strategies to accomplish the very difficult translation. The paper presents several moments of professional responsibility but also of human pleasure about and provoked by *Ulysses*. Far from being orthodox in translation theory, the paper here holds to real feelings and honest account of a translator's day.

James Joyce was, artistically, an international hero, and, in literary terms, an international "nightmare," as well. One is generally doomed to accept the repeated compromises in the literary production, imposed more and more in the present world, as being relatively normal, but one cannot neglect the admiration towards an author who, in just three books, questioned the authority and the function of the medium itself with regards to the representation of real life.

Translating Joyce is, of course, living off-course for a whole set of preconceived ideas about literature, character, sense and effect, among other things.

I remember that it was more than necessary for me to think over and over about whether I should immerse myself into this adventure of translating *Ulysses* into Albanian or not. Then, it was a question of really warming up for the "job," and chasing off many pretentious attitudes. I do sense intensively today a certain

derangement of the so-called literary taste in me: the mere result of working line by line, word by word, and sometimes, sign by sign with and on a text that aimed to condense in nine hundred pages, not just the history of literature, but an evidence of mythic repetitions that we generally agree to call life. The “fact” that a family melodrama (that of Bloom) could be a vehicle towards a radical linguistic revolution was quite new to me then. What is constant in me now is the feeling that *Ulysses* guards its unique position in letters due to an inverting of the ancient values: the endeavour of a man emanating plural voices versus Homer’s hypothetical faces among a collective input of storytellers.

I remember very well a dear girlfriend at the time insisting that I should not try to start on this Joycean route. It was very, very much later when I understood what she meant exactly. The translation was over, the book was published, I had just gained a national prize for literary translation, two years later, but then I found out that this relation (mine) with *Ulysses* was supposed to be “dangerous” in a certain sense.

This danger was, naturally, literary, but it was at the same time conceptual too. Working with *Ulysses* brought forth an amount of scepticism toward literature in general, and to prior ideas on craftsmanship in particular. One feels that Joyce has done so much in that domain. Another danger remaining was the constant feeling that whatever one does as a translator of *Ulysses* is wrong, unattainable, with a doomed and dubious result. But I think, as I thought later on, that these confrontations were soothed, could be soothed after one, especially a translator comes to know what *Ulysses* essentially is.

That is, what *Ulysses* is now, beyond its superstructure, beyond its symphonic organization, beyond its pretentious verbosity, beyond its phenomenal egoism, beyond its eccentric punctuation and its many allusions incorporated.

I figured that a key to my work as a *Ulysses* translator was to convince myself now, as a reader, that a reader’s difficulties are not those of translator. That I should strive to appropriate all the Joycean allusive machine in order to render the text in its complexity; but also, this allusiveness, with Irish references in most its parts, should not impede an Albanian reader to have his/her enjoyment from the text. I believe today, as many do, that a reader equipped with a vast philological knowledge, would definitely enjoy *Ulysses* better. But I do believe too that *Ulysses* is nowadays a text where names, events, the cut in and the fold ins of others’ texts into it have a more ultimate

function than just a mere show off of memory and of the author's philological background. That *Ulysses* aims mostly to come to a reader as a sophisticated work of art but also as a natural joy of life. That Joyce had found a way not to write about life but to write life itself. And in such a case a writer has his own sources, his own origins and anecdotes; it seems to me that Joyce just did not neglect any detail that would help constitute an organic textual body. Because it is the Cartesian duality that Joyce seems to have undermined; and my idea after that is that a reader should rather read *Ulysses* with the body and the mind together, since the whole concept of the book itself is revised here.

But to go onto simpler positions: I might add that my work on translating *Ulysses* became a "better token" as I realized, in time, that the flow is the central theme in the work. That my work should be the translation of transformed, continuous transformed things and words, and that that is what renders this translation difficult. But that also helped me to discover that for Joyce the world, and the word (he has a quibble on this with Martha's letter to Bloom) were organic living matters. It is then a translation of energy. And a fun business, as well. And not just because we know already what a comic book *Ulysses* is –as Joyce himself insisted that so it had to be. It is the very idea of a natural *jouissance*, of not being afraid. I realized, rightly or wrongly, that not to be afraid, in Joycean terms, means: dare to test your native language and try to force it to demonstrate hidden sources which Joyce's writing renders possible. Beyond the personal drama of *traduttore-traditore*, I guessed that what was at play was a natural endeavour to be both a critic and a common reader of *Ulysses*.

All the above constituted (for me) a democratic approach to *Ulysses*. A sort of democracy, which comes, I think, largely as a part of emancipation that Joyce's writing transports with it. And it is the transport –a metaphor of translation– and not the psychological transfer, that has configured my interest in Joyce ever since. The very "fact" that whatever the allusions used, it is the very voice of the reader, both actual and future, that Joyce injected into his words. I thought this was a grand lesson, the greatest of all Joycean lessons. Besides, rereading biographies on Joyce, I found a quotation: Joyce expressing his faith that nothing is untranslatable. A "verdict" that is a great relief.

I think there are miscellaneous details in a translator's work. Some of them are surely lost among the general theories of literary

translation, i.e. marginalised by the necessary “academic” process of literary translation. I sensed that, apart from gathering scholarship in books about and on Joyce, all necessary in order to translate *Ulysses*, the idea of acting out the text (fragments of it, of course) was necessary. Here and there I launched words and phrases from the translation, in gatherings with different people, friends, trying to pick up reactions, effects, affinities, natural feedback. Then, pathetically perhaps, in plain vanity maybe, I tried to get inside Joyce’s skin. I observed pictures of him, mostly those taken between 1915 and 1922, trying to study moods, or features, that could have been surfaces of inner mental processes in him. There were times when, in cafes with other friends, while relaxing from a long day’s work, I *felt* I was imitating Joyce’s moods, his poses. I remember once in Rome buying a ring that looked almost the same as the one Joyce wore in most of the photos. It is hard to assert the aid, if any, such an act brought to the translation. I am far from offering this as a “method” or approach. But I recall today a friend saying then –while I was finishing the first draft after four years work– in a restaurant: “He’s become very, very silent.” Now I appreciate this as a best compliment to a *Ulysses* translator; I do believe that silence is, probably, what *Ulysses* reintegrates in man, after one consumes its great matrix of words.

Another feeling I began to live with was that *Ulysses* is, above all, a political book. And a great example of political and social critique. Joyce has placed an Irish Jew, a marginal in a nationalistic environment, as a central character. He launched Bloom as both a caricature and replacement of a Greek epic hero. I realized that *Ulysses* became, in time, a “coat of arms” of the margins. That beyond its complex structure and linguistic innovations, *Ulysses* speaks, expresses minorities, because to doubt and even detest generalities (and their racial and political consequences) appears to me to be a most solemn lesson we learn from *Ulysses* –along with its hilarious humour. It is enough to scan the moulds of, the consequences of the generalized, stereotyped discourses of political majorities in our present reality, to appreciate –not without some sadness– the “real” stance of *Ulysses*.

I guess I follow the opinion of many Joyce translators if I state that thumbing through books on Joycean scholarship offers valuable hints to the translation. Apart from “major” documents on his work and life, I must admit that I picked up helpful details, random but enlightening details elsewhere, most helpful for this

translation. Reading somewhere a conversation between Beckett and Cioran revealed a great “secret”: Beckett (a person close to Joyce then) affirmed that Joyce had no preference for the satire, although the contrary seemed to reign as a general opinion among critics. It was a detail that helped review the whole approach to episode 14 in particular where thirty two major styles of the English prose writing are imitated deliberately, only to reveal the “empty shells” (Stephen thinks of it in episode 2, facing Mr Deasy) of a dead medium (on the contrary, it was not to fix Joyce as a hater of England, an idea that some of his contemporaries tried to advance).

Above all we face his quite new craft of modelling and presenting a central character. The construction of Mr Bloom fascinates me to this day; the way he is given and revealed in bits, in parts, in fragments, in memories, through other characters’ memories, due to accidents, due to insignificant texts, due to public orthographical defaults (Bloom’s name deformed by the evening paper in episode 16), as an “all round man,” a term so hard to translate, in any language, I suppose.

What adds to the joy and the strangeness this joy evokes and invokes during translation is when one comes to think of a fundamental fissure *Ulysses* happens to be the incarnation of. It is a story of an absence. Reading with Jean-Luc Nancy we might as well smile to find out that *Ulysses* is the title of a book where there is no Ulysses as a character. It is though a smile which is different from the one of Heines while confronted with Stephen’s theory on Shakespeare. But a smile that is –at least it was for me– a quiet counterattack to the burden and “responsibility” of all translators of *Ulysses*.

I believe it is also hard for me as a *Ulysses* translator to single out moments of translation, parts of the text translated that I was most proud of or enjoyed mostly. *Ulysses* is a book where each episode –outlined under a different style– poses its own difficulty, its own *charme*, but also its own particular demands on the translator. I believe a *Ulysses* translator does not feel the same flavour of joy after resolving stylistic difficulties of a poetic symbolist text such as episode 3 and of the lexical density of episode 12. I do remember particular ephemeral moments of *real* happiness during this translation. I believe they are such moments when the translator is involved and fused with the whole frame of the text and its atmosphere. Such a moment was found while translating Bloom’s interior monologue in episode 8, with him recalling Molly singing

once in an arena, the voice echoing “Qui es homo?” A man’s sensibility, a woman’s voice into his sub-vocal speech, her voice posing a “fictional” question here, in short, such moment and images where words probably fail to prevail in description.

There are, of course, many details of work a *Ulysses* translator regrets when the translation is done, even when the recognition comes. I believe that a Joyce translator (and, I guess, the ones working on Valéry or Mallarmé) cannot ensure themselves hibernation with their work completed. Doubts, regrets, things that one cannot guess, things you guess but can do nothing about, and things one (translator) wishes to forget. After several years working on the *Ulysses* translation I was still unable to render into Albanian a “fair” version of Heines’ question: “Have you your bill?” His question to the milk woman in episode 1 while he first hears Stephen’s daring demarche on William –Bill– Shakespeare. It is difficult and uncertain to me to this day whether the fact that *Ulysses* begins with an S (*Stately...*) and ends with an S (*yes.*) is just a coincidence or another of Joyce’s tricks. Still today I pose myself the question: What effect does the unfinished phrase of Bloom’s in episode 13 have on the translator: “*I am a ...*” Is it really there to have meant, in some other times maybe: “I am a Jew” (as Danis Rose offered me his version in Dublin years ago)? Here though I had other satisfying elusive references, such as W. S. Burroughs’ attempts to attribute the use of the indefinite article to defy the Western categorisation of the subject.

I believe that the rapport of a *Ulysses* translator with Joyce better be a first hand *encounter*. It is better that way. My feeling today as to what this experience is, or might have been (translating James Joyce’s *Ulysses* that is) is: The personal challenge counts more than the literary canonization of being a *Ulysses translator*. Such a translator has surely something left for him/her-self. For me, the encounter of a *Ulysses* translator with Joyce comes in the end as a tangible, brief but strangely significant encounter, just like when Bloom, among a crowd, bends to pick up and hand over Parnell’s fallen hat.