

## The Backdrop of Translating *Ulysses*

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*Abstract*

This article dwells on the possibilities and limits of any translation. Francisco García Tortosa describes and exemplifies what he calls “the act of transculturation” with his own experience as translator of James Joyce’s “Anna Livia Plurabelle” and *Ulysses* into Spanish. This process of transculturation, according to García Tortosa, made him aware of his own condition as a linguistic and cultural exile.

Translating James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is not a task that one takes on out of boredom or because one has nothing better at hand to do with one’s time. Neither is it a task that lets one lighten a load of frustrations, or gather enduring hopes. In Spanish, one is not even awarded the prize for being the first to do so, and as occurs with other translations, there are always experts who, without rolling up their sleeves, would have translated one or another thorny word or expression better than we have. If all this were not enough, when we reach the final *Yes* of the novel, having endured the *tour de force* of more than six hundred pages, each more complex than the one before, rather than feel the solace and satisfaction of work brought to a close, we face the deceitful ambush of publishers and, when at long last the translation has reached the bookstores, the thunderous voice of the Joyce heir orders that the entire printing be destroyed. It ought not to surprise, then, that behind or parallel to the task of translating there is always a story, one that, though humble and tedious, as the daily struggle with words and ideas is, reveals the conviction and tenacity responsible for a large part of what we do.

As a philologist, by training and vocation, I almost instinctively distrust any type of translation. The more broad the perspective with which we see words, the greater the suspicion is that the translation deforms or forges the reality of a language. Exact equivalences of lexical units, let alone of texts, do not exist between languages: the changes activated by the evolution of a word are never identical in two tongues; the word's placement in the larger phrase entails an unrepeatable struggle; the expansion and concentration of meaning, the influences and assimilations of contact, reveal specific circumstances. All this is manifest with greatest clarity in colloquial expressions, in terms denoting objects of frequent use and daily acts, given that in all languages the expression of the quotidian draws closest to their origins, when the distance between them was likely larger. A word as habitual as *walk* not only refers to differing actions for the speakers of different languages, but also for those of the same one: the meaning cannot be identical for a city dweller and for an inhabitant of a desert, and even less so for those who lived in the Middle Ages and for the users of high-speed transport. In absolute terms, translation is not possible.

With good reason, a good number of literary critics have claimed as part of their function the preservation of the integrity and purity of verbal art, just as it issued from the pens of great authors, and argued that translation derails, debases, disfigures, deteriorates, and demolishes the original. It has to be said in their favour that they do not lack arguments, which can be found under any stone or word they lift. The ill will they bear against translation leads them to take examples from here and from there, from one language or another: from Croatian to Romanian, stopping along the way to cite mishaps in Russian, Portuguese, and Danish. Their gift for languages knows no limits, and the skilful irony with which they stigmatise translation is incalculable.

Over time, however, we become more tolerant of imperfection, or perhaps we discover that flexibility constitutes an essential part of wisdom, and thus we abandon the world of absolute truths and unblemished perfection. As a result, among other things, we accept translation, an activity that, other considerations aside, must have existed ever since the first babbling of *homo sapiens*. Nevertheless, to admit that translation is inevitable in any culture and that it forms a part of the foundations of our civilisation is not to say that the philologist lessens his distrust, the distrust being the reason why, if a translation is undertaken, the translator will ensure that a

number of circumstances coincide. The most important and decisive of them consists in a deep knowledge of the work to be translated, along with a special empathy for its meaning and literary significance. A second circumstance, no less advantageous, proceeds from the fact that when we study, admire, and identify with a work of art, we seek to appropriate it: when the work is a poem, we memorise it; when it is a novel, we translate it. That is, we move the work into our own verbal abode, shaped by the mother tongue into which we were born, where we learned to think and see life.

Amid the repertoire, assembled over decades, of my own literary preferences, Shakespeare and Joyce stand out. As regards the first, I will say nothing, since his magic with words has been an insuperable wall, and I have limited myself to reading his work tens of times, amazed by the unrepeatable language. As regards Joyce, my entire experience as a translator has been reduced to him.

For those who have loved reading almost from the start, Joyce is not among the writers we discover at a young age; we do not reach him through fantasy or sentiment, but rather through reason and reflection. Joyce is an author exclusively for adults; he does not share that rare gift other fortunate writers possess, namely of attracting the young and old alike. That is, when we come to appreciate *Dubliners*, for instance, it is because we have left behind the dreams of adventure and ecstasy and, on the contrary, have reached the age of mature plans, those entailing obligation, perhaps altruistic commitment, plans infused with instinctive ambition. If, in addition, one lives by writing and teaching literature, to read Joyce is not enough, and as his work, among the initiated and uninitiated alike, is viewed as obscure and at times unintelligible, it is not surprising that the work becomes a challenge, a goal, and even a refuge. Joyce's artistic creation represents, first and foremost, a world of ideas embodied in words, and as the latter are unstable and slippery, to understand his work can take an entire lifetime, and if one chooses Joyce, this means one has to toss overboard all that is useless to the endeavour. And one cannot forget that to translate is to rewrite the text from the start, without deviation or distraction, a task requiring a considerable degree of renunciation, if the chosen objective is *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*.

If I were asked to say what I understand by the term *translator*, I would not know how to respond, because for me the term is indissolubly tied to my work as a professor, philologist, and critic. That is, when translating I have sought to share an admiration

for the author, my knowledge or doubts in two languages, an analytic appreciation of the author's work, and above all, the task of trapping in the nets of Spanish the original message. This is likely the reason why in my two translations of Joyce, part I, chapter VIII, of *Finnegans Wake*, "Anna Livia Plurabelle," and *Ulysses*, I have been accompanied by colleagues who were previously my students. To translate is to collaborate and to share; it is an initiation in the knowledge that aesthetic delight also means devotion and effort.

The idea, for instance, of translating "Anna Livia Plurabelle" arose in a graduate course, while I was trying to explain the compositional techniques that produced *Finnegans Wake*. I suggested that the students, six or seven in number, and I together compose a paragraph in Spanish that would reflect the most outstanding features of the work. This exercise in literary mimesis illustrated the malleable nature of the original; that is, if the secret of *Finnegans Wake* lies in reaching a universal language by destroying the particularity of languages, the way to translation in part opens, since the problem of lexical equivalences is freed of historical and cultural ties. The task of translation then consists in applying in the target language the techniques of the original, in our case, in submitting Spanish to the same pressures that Joyce applied to English. Seen from this angle, translation depends on determining the coordinates that provoke a burst of multiple references similar to those in *Finnegans Wake*. Any univocal reading of the work produces an unjustified and restrictive reduction of the semantic richness of the text, this notion being lost on some translators, and thus the number and diversity of the elements incorporated into the translation condition the profusion of planes that will intersect and be superimposed in it. With a profusion of meanings in mind, and as in practice has been demonstrated, it is evident that reading in groups is for many the ideal way of drawing near the book, and consequently, that from a group the best translation may also arise.

Work that is shared by several people is subject to what is typically known as "group dynamics." It is natural that the allure of a new project, one as risky and difficult as translating *Finnegans Wake*, would attract the interest of many young students initiated in the work of Joyce, and that is what occurred with the Spanish version of "Anna Livia Plurabelle": in the early stages, the possible translators exceeded half a dozen. Quite soon, however, losses began to decimate the group, reducing it to three: José María Tejedor, Ricardo Navarrete, and myself. The reasons for the desertions were

various: first, as might be expected, the impossibility of the task, according to some; other reasons had to do with the difficulty of an endeavour deemed useless or insignificant in comparison with other projects of greater promise. Once the group to complete the task had been established, we proposed to imitate in part the method used in the French and Italian translations with which Joyce collaborated. Our procedure consisted in the following: each member of the group translated alone a maximum of eight lines per week, to be compared and explicated in two sessions of two to three hours. During these sessions, sparks frequently flew, and the arguments for or against one or another version were often heated (on more than one occasion, we neared breakup), but we always reached an agreement, and drawing on the three versions, we created a new one or opted for accepting a version in particular, with modifications. The act of compromise implied a considerable degree of humility on the part of each member of the group, since behind each version alone there stood hours of work, along with tens of dictionaries of standard languages, dialects, and various jargons. Above all, each of us had recourse to hundreds of tangential readings, always useful to wander about in *Finnegans Wake*.

The translation of “Anna Livia Plurabelle” preceded that of *Ulysses*, a fact that likely conditioned and influenced the second. From the first, several lessons were learned: the importance of sonority; the freedom that an exhaustive understanding of the original bestows and that awards a greater degree of creativity; the conviction that the determining factor in a translation lies in reproducing in the target language the resonances and echoes of its own culture, infusing them with its own idiosyncrasies, all of which leads to a lessened concern for exact equivalences, which in any case are almost never possible; and the belief that translation by a group, though its procedures are more complex than those of an individual working alone, improves the final result.

While *Finnegans Wake*, prior to our attempt, was virgin land in Spanish, *Ulysses*, on the contrary, had been translated twice. The two translations, as I have repeatedly indicated, were entirely praiseworthy, even though for someone who had studied the work for more than twenty years, as was my case, disagreements in specific respects and in theoretical approach were a stimulus to begin a new one. However, these motives alone would never have led me to start work that presumably would be arduous. Two causes were finally decisive in accepting the challenge of translation: the first

relates to the connection between language and culture in the novel; and the second, of a personal nature, arose in the conviction that a work admired and assimilated intellectually, as *Ulysses* was for me, would produce a hypothetical satisfaction when transferred into a Spanish that was the product of the translator or translators, inevitably peculiar and idiosyncratic, since the stamp of the translator always leaves its mark in the target text.

The linguistic and cultural aspects of *Ulysses*, from whatever angle one sees them, are at once revealing and surprising. Reading the novel involves a sort of formative and cathartic voyage: a passage through words of Anglo-Saxon extraction at times, and at other times, of foreign origin; colloquial and worn out expressions, alongside fresh and unusual ones. In its cultural aspect, the novel, though rooted in the reality of early twentieth-century Dublin, projects a social milieu whose focus is odd and disquieting, and this leads us to explore the origins of such unease. I imagine that all readers of *Ulysses* reach their own conclusions, and along the gamut separating extravagance, on the one hand, from genius, on the other, there is a broad range of nuanced options from which to choose. I believe the key lies in the word *exile*, a weapon Stephen Dedalus conceives to defend himself throughout his life. Those who have sought to absorb and assimilate a foreign language and culture know the condition of exile; on a daily basis we share the surprise and disquiet that Stephen feels when comparing *funnel* and *tundish*. We have no choice but to admit that we are on the other side, that the words of others are not our own, and we even run the risk of feeling ourselves foreign in our own native tongue. Joyce created in response to this his own language, as perhaps we all do, taking the English into which he was born as his starting point, but at once overwhelming and evading it. With few exceptions, and adapting himself to the particulars of the narrative (a memorable example being the conversation about rhetoric among the Dubliners gathered in the offices of the *Freeman's Journal* in "Aeolus"), Joyce opts for terms of clear Anglo-Saxon precedence, in detriment to loanwords from Latin and French, a fact that to my eye is a symptom, and not the only one, of his eagerness to transcend the bounds of English domination in Ireland. The point of convergence, that is, the place where exile disappears, goes back to the origins, as much those of the English as of the Irish, where migrations from the Mediterranean began, as medieval chronicles attest, and these origins extend up to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. (Seamus Heaney, probably the

writer who with greatest clairvoyance has perceived the problem for himself and for Joyce, has proposed in several of his essays the hypothesis I have just outlined; Heaney materialises the hypothesis in his translation of *Beowulf* and follows practices identical to those of his mentor in the choice of vocabulary in his poetry.)

Not only the vocabulary of *Ulysses*, and above all of *Finnegans Wake*, constitutes a paradigm for the language of exile; rather, the cultural backdrop of the novel also reveals part of the imbalance and dissatisfaction of those who are uprooted. The protagonists of *Ulysses*, Bloom and Molly, frequently think about their origins: Central Europe, Hungary, Austria, Israel, and Gibraltar. Stephen meanwhile suffers from estrangement in Ireland, and almost all the characters in the novel feel displaced and dissatisfied with the lot that life has assigned them. A consequence of the instability that comes from exile is reflected in the novel's parallax vision of reality, where the everyday nature of the setting, events, and landscape acquires shifting and unusual tones. The larger question, whether one agrees or not with the argument put forth here, concerns the mode and manner in which we infuse the translation with the resonances that result from cultural and linguistic exile. This question generates distinct ramifications that I will now try to explain.

I have made it clear that one of the reasons why I decided to take on the translation of *Ulysses* was my fascination for the theme of interior and exterior exile —my colleague and co-translator María Luisa Venegas will naturally have her own reasons. Interior exile, the sort that matters most in art, arises in different forms, at times difficult to recognise and distinguish. There are, however, several generic lines of recognition that repeat themselves in almost all writers. The first concerns ties to a place of origin: the spatial or sentimental distancing from originary roots provokes, paradoxically, their becoming all-embracing, insistent, and obsessive, while the expression of exilic feeling, in addition, seeks out the separation in an attempt to shape a personal and original identification. I will not cite examples here, but they abound in the literature of all periods and languages. What is patently clear is that Joyce followed the pattern, and thus the translator will always have in the target language prototypes from which to learn formulas of adaptation.

Neither will I insist here that *Ulysses*, from the vantage point of the average reader, is an eccentric novel, one removed from the sort of books to which he is accustomed. Following the argument

above, this fact might point to the intellectual exile of the author, without lapsing into critical ingenuousness by implying that this provides an explanation for the novel as a whole. On the contrary, such exile, if indeed it inspired the composition of the text, is a mere epigraph that only tangentially relates to the work as a whole, although it is always in the background. Put in more simple and colloquial terms, this does imply that, to begin with, the translator would have to reproduce in his own language a novel that, above all, sounds strange. A way of doing so, found in the original, consists in incorporating intact into the translation all the fragments in languages other than English in Joyce's text: German, French, Italian, Latin, Greek, Irish Gaelic, and so on. It is true that during the years in which Joyce wrote, or if one prefers, in Modernism, the presence in literary prose and also in poetry of quotations from differing languages is more frequent than in other periods or literary movements, but perhaps no other writer has so decisively integrated them into the discursive and referential structure of a novel. In any case, the quotations in foreign languages, leaving aside their clear mythic function, do not pose a large problem for translation. There are other questions revealing with greater clarity the choice of solutions that ultimately defines the approach of the translator.

Let us take, for instance, the translation of the numerous popular songs to which *Ulysses* alludes. Two options exist: to respect the original text and limit ourselves to a more or less literal rendering, even if the result means nothing in the target culture, or to search in the store of popular songs in the target language for those that evoke similar sentiments. Despite the fact that the second alternative is not preferred by translators of *Ulysses*, it would be worth adopting, under the condition that one follows the principle of cultural analogy, whereby equivalences evade the specificity of form, while conserving similar meaning. With the ballad "Sir Hugh; or the Jew's Daughter" in episode 17, we find proof that it would be preferable in certain cases to substitute an equivalent song in the target language for another in the original text. Although Joyce's version of the ballad differs slightly from all of the 18 versions that Francis James Child compiled in his monumental work *The English and Scottish Ballads* (1882-89), and also differs from others that the erudite American scholar did not compile, there is no doubt that the legend of ritual murder spread throughout the Anglo-Saxon world and Continental popular literature. In the specific case of Castilian, various versions of the same legend exist in *Romancero General*



(1945), compiled by Agustín Durán, and in Martín Nucio's edition of *Romancero Castellano [Cancionero de Romances, Amberes: 1550]*. With slight alterations, one of these ballads could be adapted to the musical score in episode 17, and as a result the entire passage would exude resonances of exile, since several of the compositions in Castilian date to the final years of the fifteenth century, quite near the edict ordering the expulsion of the Jews from Spain on 31 March 1492.

If indeed the substitution of popular songs and ballads in many cases would be only a preferred alternative, nursery rhymes, lullabies, and children's songs, however, necessarily need to be adapted to the target culture, given their deep significance in the emotional and intellectual lives of its speakers. Allusions to childhood arise in *Ulysses* above all in relation to Milly, when Bloom recalls his daughter's childhood and yearns for the years when he was "happy," that is, when he seeks a lost past. The sentimental evocation of innocence takes the form of children's sayings, songs, and games, which are crucial to a culture's heritage and are difficult to transpose into another language without disfigurement. In exile, not only the memory of a lost land grows immense, but also and more specifically the time that one lived there, seen as a whole: land, childhood, and youth become the materials with which to construct an alternative world of fiction. Translation, then, must locate itself on an equidistant plane and lift with native elements an alternative framework for the lost paradise.

*Ulysses*, and it is needless to rehearse the argument, represents the microcosms of a city, of an epoch, and of its author's worldview, in part shared by other contemporaries. The translator, with a wide range of options from which to choose, must face complex tasks of transculturation of this order and calibre. Let us say, since there is no universally accepted definition, that culture envelops the knowledge, beliefs, and customs of individuals or peoples throughout history, or at a specific point in time, and if this is so, it is evident that no fixed method allows us to transpose the thought of one culture directly into another. All is reduced to interpretations and adaptations that are more or less faithful. The transfer and interchange of cultural notions have limits that no translator would dream of overcoming, and these notions are precisely those on which the narrative and ideological structure of *Ulysses* stands, and in which all other elements of the work find their distinguishing particularity. That is, it would be inconceivable for a translator to alter the literary references in

*Ulysses*, replacing them with more familiar ones in the target culture, or to convert systems of measure, weight, and currency, the latter under the auspices of alleged anachronism. Since culture is not a static concept, but rather evolves like all else in life, translation has to strike a subtle and risky balance between the epoch in which the novel develops or was written and the moment in which it is translated. Does this mean that Shakespeare, for instance, should be translated into the Spanish of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Naturally it does not, unless one aims for erudite amusement, though even that would not be advisable. I know this is a highly controversial question, whether or not to use turns of phrase and vocabulary of sparkling contemporaneity. Perhaps the ideal response is the middle road, so that without lapsing into archaisms, neither do we make Falstaff speak in the language of the discotheque.

Episode 14 of *Ulysses*, “Oxen of the Sun,” is the exception to the argument above, and in addition the episode poses very specific problems. The history of the English language traced in its literary texts has no equivalent in any other language, since the tempo and rhythm of evolution across languages are never parallel. Neither are the authors that Joyce presumably imitates or parodies equivalent to those in any other tradition. It is thus necessary to draw up a list of authors in the target language that follows the same chronological order as episode 14, and then to imitate them in ways similar to those that Joyce adopted. What most matters in this episode is to adhere rigorously to the rhythm of linguistic mutation in the target language, conserving the peculiarities of its change. For example, the second and third paragraphs of “Oxen of the Sun” might serve to parody the syntax of Classical Latin, but in Castilian, directly derived from Latin, it is hardly necessary to resort to any imitation at all; it is enough to use texts in Vulgar Latin, abundant in the medieval monasteries in the north of the Peninsula. From the third to sixth paragraphs of the episode (approximately), on the contrary, Joyce likely takes as his models King Alfred, Aefric, and Wulfstan, but Joyce modernises the prose of these writers with the aim of making it intelligible, since the brusque change that Anglo-Saxon experienced after the Norman Conquest left the former a language that only scholars of the period understand. However, the language of Alfonso X el Sabio, who would be the equivalent of the authors in Old English mentioned, does not differ from contemporary Spanish to the extent of making it incomprehensible to the learned present-day

reader, and thus in translation it is not advisable either to parody or to imitate, since all the terms in the original find their correlates in Medieval Spanish, and ninety percent of the latter are understood today. It should be said that finding the correlate terms is an arduous and slow process, though also a gratifying one.

In the transit of transculturation, there is another zone no less delicate and uncertain that is almost always overlooked. I refer to the transfer of registers, which here have nothing to do with modulations of the voice, but rather with the use of specific expressions and vocabulary in light of personal idiosyncrasies, social situation, and the interlocutor. These registers are used to signal degrees of education, emotive states, to persuade and to satirise, and so on. Traditional rhetoric catalogues a vast collection of samples, but what matters in translation is, first, to identify the registers, and second, to find adequate equivalences, since each language holds its own resources. If the translator is not skilful in rendering register, he will lose fundamental nuances and distort not only fine humour and emotive expression, but also the variety of characters, their social provenance, and so on, transforming the possible complexity and subtlety of the original into a tedious and flat object.

One last aspect that I would like to mention briefly has to do with sonority and rhythm, which are often neglected in translation. *Ulysses* in particular is arguably the novel in which with greatest efficacy the effects of sounds and cadences are handled, not only in episode 11, "Sirens," but everywhere in the narrative, particularly in episode 15, "Circe," and in passages of episodes 17 and 18. The musicality and rhythm derive, as could only be the case, from the sequencing of phonic elements in the sentence, along with the history of their evolution. This means that the sounds of one language do not lend themselves to automatic transfer to another and that they must be adapted to the musicality and rhythm of the target language. The best examples, though not the only ones, arise in poetry, whose formal aspect always echoes the spoken language. That is, poetry issues from the core of a language, whose spoken features best define and distinguish it. Joyce makes use of the resources that poetry of all sorts in English offers, and adds other resources of his own making, to season his prose and to leave on it the stamp of his personality and creative genius. It ought not to surprise, then, that in the episodes and passages mentioned above, rhythmic feet of two syllables predominate, iambs, trochees, and spondees, as corresponds to the nature of spoken English and its poetry. This presents a significant

difficulty for translation, above all in the Romance languages, whose frequency of monosyllables and disyllables is notably lower. The translation of sound requires that the translator be well versed in the phonic nature of his own language and intimately familiar with its poetry, not to mention its prosody.

These are some of the reflections that underlie the translation of *Ulysses*. Though it is true that they draw on the gathering of not a few thoughts and readings prior to the translation, it is also true that to translate is to speculate on new concepts and ideas, to such a degree that in the end, after years of effort, one senses that something has changed, at least in our vision of the act of transculturation, so deep and dear to those of us who have devoted our lives to the study of a foreign language. Translation reveals to us our condition as exiles: we never reach perfection, either in assimilating a foreign culture, or in translation.