ПРЕВОДАЧЕСКАТА ЕСТЕТИКА НА ИРЛАНДСКИЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕН РЕНЕСАНС

Д-р Пламен Иванов Гаптов
Университет „Проф. Д-р Асен Златаров"

THE AESTHETICS OF TRANSLATION IN THE IRISH LITERARY RENAISSANCE

PhD Plamen Ivanov Gaptov
Burgas Prof. Assen Zlatarov University

ABSTRACT: Starting with Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator", the paper examines the central importance of translation in the Irish Literary Renaissance. Included is an analysis of J.M. Synge's translations of Petrarch's poetry into his „invented" language. The paper charts the historical vicissitudes of translation as a cultural phenomenon in Ireland and looks at Irish historiography of translation and some of its key concepts.
Key words: *translation, Irish Literary Renaissance, equivalence, transparence, J. M. Synge.*

РЕЗЮМЕ: Като започва с есето на Уолтър Бенямин „Задачата на преводача", настоящият труд изследва централната важност на превода за Ирландския литературен ренесанс. Включен е анализ на преводите на Дж. М. Синг (вчастност поемите на Петрарка) на „измисления" от ирландския поет език. Накратко се проследяват историческите перипетии на превода като културен феномен в Ирландия и се разглежда ирландската историография на преводното дело, където понятия като прозрачност, еквивалентност и директна преносимост на келтския субстратум са от ключово значение.

Ключови думи: *превод, Ирландски литературен ренесанс, еквивалентност, прозрачност, Ж. М. Сенж.*

While Synge's plays may leave their readers (if not their original audiences) with a shadow of a doubt as to their attempt to swipe away accepted (fashionable) standards of literariness, his literary translations reverse the arrow so that Hiberno-English is now the target while canonical European texts are the source. What are the strategies available to a modernist who wishes to subvert the standard of literariness of the prestige variety of English? In this section, I will have a brief recourse to the issue as it is theoretically resolved by Irish historiography before I go on to consider Synge's translation work. Since the target language of Synge's translations is itself a translation and since this is the language he used in his plays, one can easily see how this translational aesthetic extends to the discussion of his dramatic output. First and

foremost, however, I want to start with Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' since it talks directly to the main issue at hand: the literalness of translation.[1] 'Translation is a mode' – from this main tenet, Benjamin extracts the concept of translatability. A work of art is translatable to the extent to which it asks to be translated. This is a quality of the literary work which intensifies in its 'afterlife'. Thus, the statement that translatability is 'an essential feature of certain works'[2] applies more strongly to works with a significant after-life, i.e. precisely those masterpieces which were the targets of Synge's (as well as Lady Gregory's) translation efforts. Canonicity seems to be directly proportional to translatability. In all such long-lived works there is a 'hidden significance' which is over and above their meaning. The translation of this significance, which is not equivalent to a transmission of subject matter, is the task of the translator. The significance is not the *meaning* of the work but its participation in a much larger relation: 'a central reciprocal relation between languages'.[3] What does this mean?

Once a literary work is written, it starts its after-life. But since the particular language in which it is written changes and since the language into which it is translated also changes,[4] there is much more to the linguistic make-up of the work than its meaning. It enters into a universal relation as soon as it escapes the narrow confines of the immediate language in which it was written (and due to linguistic change as well the very difference in languages it must of necessity escape). There is a higher realm, Benjamin asserts, where languages tend to supplement each other as they strive towards the state of 'pure language'. While each language is a different mode of intending reality, the fact of intention ('*intensio*') itself is universal.[5] Translation amounts to a rendition of this intention – hence the language of translation is always on the way to the pure language; without managing to fully attain the status of absolute language, it is at least 'an embryonic attempt at making visible'[6] what is an otherwise hidden dynamic: the tending towards the language of purity evident in both the language of the original and the language of the translation. Translatability is then the capacity of a literary work to enter this relation of supplementarity.[7]

---

[1] Benjamin, Walter, 'The Task of the Translator' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books: New York, 1985, pp 69-82.
[2] 'Task of the Translator', in *ibid.*, p. 71.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[4] 'While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.' (*Ibid.*, p. 73)
[5] *Ibid.*, pp 74, 76, 79.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[7] 'In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety. Yet, in a singularly impressive manner, at least it points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages.' (*Ibid.*, p. 75)

Translation is a 'perpetual renewal of language', a 'revelation' that languages are not as remote as their irreconcilably different modes of intending reality seem to suggest. In the higher realm of pure language, there is a deep 'kinship' which 'does not necessarily involve likeness.' By pointing to this universal kinship (this reciprocal relation) among languages, the translation supplements the original by letting it escape into the region of absolute fulfillment. ('While all individual elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, structure – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions.') [8]

What does all this talk of absolute language mean in terms of practice? How does one render the changed 'tenor and significance of the great works of literature' into the 'mother tongue'? First of all, regarding the use of Hiberno-English, it should be noted that it seems almost the ideal example of what Benjamin is talking about. Its very existence *is* change and this makes it an ideal target language into which to translate the change inherent in (the language of) great works of literature.[9] Conversely, employing a language whose very condition of possibility is change is equivalent to a radical change of the original work of literature. When that work is 'great', translation entails nothing less than a revision of its greatness, its canonicity. If in translation 'the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work', how is that to be achieved? How is the target language to be allowed to '[ripen] the seed of pure language' in the translation? [10]

Curiously, Benjamin – who more than once reiterates the idea that translation is not a process of building equivalence of meaning – resorts to the strategy of literal translation. Literalness ends up being the selected mode which would do justice to the spirit of change at work in language. The nineteenth century had laughed at Hölderin's translation of Sophocles, with its direct rendering of syntax, but this is precisely the method Benjamin advocates. One of the virtues of the 'literal rendering of syntax' is that it 'completely demolishes the theory of reciprocation of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility… Thus no case for literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning.'[11]

What is retained in such a mode of translating is the idiom's own power – not its paraphrased meaning. This again suggests a belief in an absolute language[12] but also – crucially for the Irish case – a refusal to let go of the original and a desire to set it free, to let it escape into the realm of the pure. Amorous linguistic attachment to the Gaelic substratum allowed the Irish to fashion a language (Hiberno-English) which is in its very essence a translation. Without theory, they had done in the nineteenth century what the nineteenth century, in its rejection of Hölderin, had thought of as 'monstrous

---

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[9] To quote Benjamin in full: 'For just as the tenor and the significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well.' (*Ibid.*, p. 73)
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[12] The Irish folks whose drive to acquisition had helped them develop a feeling for *language in general* occupy the same space of absolute language.

examples of literalness'. ('[A] translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language…') [13]

This type of literal translation Benjamin calls transparent – he sees that as the only available option whereby *intention* may become linguistic matter in a different language:

> A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. [14]

Literal rendition taps into the original language – which Benjamin sometimes calls dead. This dead language, like one of Kristeva's mothers, lies *crypto-hidden* within the cache of a culture's heritage and is somehow accessible despite having been apparently trampled underfoot. A unique nexus is thus created: the colonized culture (the original/dead language) persists *in* the language of the colonizer and creates its own pocket there. Traversing the new language with the skills inherited from learning the native language, it stakes off for itself its own foreign-own clearing. Luxuriating in the clearing it has created for itself in a foreign land, this dialectal excrescence is a thorn in the flesh of the accepted standard. Little by little, the diseased outgrowth comes to define the common language. First it submits, then it strikes back imperceptibly as the nibbling of a multitude of ants working on a fallen trunk. Indeed, Synge's dramatic work as a whole can be viewd in this light. From the shy formality of *In the Shadow* to the strategic position-taking in *The Tinker's Wedding* to the confident explosion of demotic lyricism in *The Playboy*, Synge's stage language represents an attempt not only to expose the translatability of established dramatic forms (e.g. tragedy, comedy) but also to approach the realm of the absolute. It is from this 'pure' (but also highy hybrid) linguistic position that the dialect of the plays begins to strike back until it becomes a definitive signature both of Synge's style (let us call it Synge-speak) and of the common language more generally.

We see then that Synge works under Benjamin's absolutist premise of the mechanism of literal translation – the assumption that the expression of the substratum will take care of itself provided that language is left to its own devices in a literal-style translation. *Ethos* will out! It will not change with the change of the sounds and the alphabet. Ultimately, this implies that what matters is *language*, not individual languages. Thus, the search for one's own language takes place in a space of absolute language, which is, as it were, before and outside of all particular languages.

---

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

***

Michael Cronin delineates two views of translation in Irish historiography. On the one hand, translation promotes understanding, and in Irish culture (where translation was a necessity) this was of the utmost historical importance. Translation in this view is a 'bridge between cultures' while 'equivalence is difficult but possible'. The other view holds that languages are expressive of national genius, hence it is impossible to translate the Irish spirit in another language. In this view, 'translation is coercive. It is a strategy by the colonizer to assimilate the language of the colonized and deny their right to be different and free.'[15] As Cronin shows, none of these views captures the revolutionary work of translators like Hyde, Synge and Lady Gregory.

At first sight, Hyde, the pioneer of literary Anglo-Irish dialect, seems to indicate a happy compromise between the two views. His preface to the *Love Songs* advertises the virtues of literal translation whereby a cultural bridge is built despite the coercive need to use English:

> This I do not wholly regret [having to translate from the Gaelic original into English]; for the literal translation of these songs will, I hope, be of some advantage to that at present increasing class of Irishmen who take a just pride in their native language, and to those foreigners who great philologists and etymologists as they are, find themselves hampered in their pursuits through unavoidable ignorance of modern Irish idiom which can only be correctly interpreted by the native speakers, who are, alas! becoming fewer and fewer every day. [16]

A closer look at Hyde's achievement, however, changes the meaning of the word 'advantage'. As Cronin notes[17], the decisive difference between Hyde's literalism and that of previous translators (such as Sigerton) is that the target language becomes crucially affected by the translation. Instead of looking for the ideal equivalent, for the transparent word, this direct translation – importing as it does the sound system, syntax and phraseology[18] of the source language into the target language – subverts the latter, changing it, as it were, to reflect the original. The subversive potential of this translational aesthetic did not escape authors like Synge and Lady Gregory who were looking to forge a distinctive language which would not hide the fact that it is a translation but would openly advertise the source language as a substratum. In Cronin's words, 'literalism in translation can be seen to have both a conservative and a subversive function'[19] – the latter function consists in the fact that translation allows 'the target language, the language of the colonizer, to be colonised in its turn by the language of the colonised.'[20]

---

[15] *Translating Ireland*, p. 124.
[16] Cf. *Abhráin Grádh Chúige Connacht (Love Songs of Connacht)*, with an introduction by Mícheál Ó hAodha, Irish University Press: Shannon, Ireland, 1969, 'Preface', n. p.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 136.
[18] Literal translation of phraseology is known as calquing; the resulting phrases are calques.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 136.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Synge was drawn to Hyde's literal method[21] and, as Declan Kiberd explains, on his visits to the Aran Islands, he 'was able to note the similarity between Hyde's prose commentaries and the sort of English spoken by recent learners of that language.' 'What struck him most was …that the people were themselves already consummate self-translators…' The experience of the shock of the hybrid English used by Hyde coupled with the further proof Synge received first-hand allowed his method to crystallize.[22] Unlike previous translators striving for an ideal equivalence (a 'bad premise', according to Kiberd), the Irish renaissance authors allowed the English language to be 'massively remoulded by the source language.' Far from being a representation of 'Paddy the Irishman' who by necessity minces his words and mishandles the language of the master, the language of these translations boldly announces its own hybridity. 'Instead of concealing translation, the process was now foregrounded in the public search for a new literary idiom.'[23] This seems to be the answer to the much controverted issue concerning the possibility of expressing Irish essence in the English language. The direct translation of the Irish (source) substratum manages to keep the thought intact since the target language (the super-stratum) is not allowed to dominate.

The fact that this half-way house was not palatable to purists on both sides (i.e. both English and Irish/Gaelic) points to the revolutionary character of the venture. The Irish renaissance writers shared the strong faith in translation of the Young Irelanders who believed that 'an Irish nation can express its own distinctness in the English language.'[24]

But unlike their predecessors, the translations of Synge and Gregory had an additional crucial function. As Cronin puts it regarding the work of Lady Gregory:

> Translating Molière into 'Kiltartan' is an act of cultural self-confidence. It implies that Hiberno-English is a fit vehicle for one of the greatest playwrights of the European literary tradition… The translation of Molière into 'Kiltartan', rather than British English, is replicating the initial Tudor 'conquest' of the classics through translation that is at the heart of rising linguistic self-confidence in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. [25]

---

[21] In the almost nonchalant last sentence of his preface to his *Poems and Translations*, Synge, like Hyde and Benjamin, invokes literalism as a viable translation mode. 'The translations are sometime free and sometimes almost literal, according as seemed most fitting with the form of language I have used.' See 'Preface' in 'Poems', p. 4 (*The Works of J. M. Synge. Volume Two*, John W. Luce and Company: Boston, 1912)

[22] Kiberd, Declan, *Irish Classics*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001, p. 314. As Kiberd puts it, 'Synge's own translations were based on methods very like Hyde's. Because he was still learning Irish on Aran, he translated with a word-for-word literalism, much as the islanders themselves were doing… Undaunted, he tried to capture the music along with the words without adding anything.'

[23] *Translating Ireland*, p. 144.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

What I want to claim is that by translating great works of literature, authors like Hyde, Synge and Gregory were in a crucial sense modifying the notion of what constituted literary language. The translation work of Synge and Lady Gregory, in particular, manages to deconstruct inherited models of canonical literary value and of literariness. It is significant, in this connection, that Synge and Gregory translated European canonical works in an attempt to trace a hitherto untraced streak in the genealogy of literariness – a sort of parallel literary universe which starts at the very juncture when European vernaculars were only beginning to establish themselves as the accepted prestige variety vis-à-vis Latin. By literally re-discovering some of these celebrated origins of canonical literariness (the works of Petrarch, Molière and Villon for instance), the two Irish authors seemed to imply at least the possibility of a different model of canonicity. In an important sense then, the translation of, say, Petrarch into Hiberno-English amounts to more than just linguistic terrorism. As Declan Kiberd has said:

> These exercises [in translation] were far more successful than many standard English versions of the work of these poets. This genius went far deeper than a conventional flair for turning a piece of Irish poetry or prose into English. It involved a capacity to project a whole Gaelic culture in English.[26]

One could go even further and claim that a whole new culture is projected back onto the original culture. This is quite in line with the philological spirit of Synge's overall work. That spirit relies on comparative linguistic and cultural analysis of the past. In many ways, Synge's translations bring the Italian and Irish traditions closer together by leapfrogging a whole English tradition of literary translations of Petrarch. The diaphanous love poetry of the original Italian is rendered via the earthy materiality of the Anglo-Irish dialect. At first sight, the language of the translations sounds slightly odd, but once the ear gets accustomed to this defamiliarized Pertrach, the dialect begins to expand its limits and reach back in time to a distant sensibility. It is the sincere rendering of Petrarch as defamiliarized that draws him much closer to us than, say, the sentimentalized Petrarch of the Victorian tradition. [27]

Instead of trying to replicate the complex rhyme schemes of the original, Synge reverts to prose in order to translate the urgency of the emotion. The result is a prose-poetry hybrid whose emotional intensity Wordsworth would approve of.[28] Instead of sounding awkward, the Hiberno-English of the lover's lament for the lost Laura begins to redefine the original's translatability [29] by adding a unique sense of rhythm to the

---

[26] Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, p. 626.
[27] In many cases, the *Canzionere* 'was diluted into sentimental effusion as a series of minor poets recreate Petrarch as a cut-price Werther.' (Classe, Olive, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation*. *Vol. 2*, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers: London, 2000, p. 1071)
[28] For a discussion of Wordsworth's association of prose with sincere feeling, see section below.
[29] In Benjamin's sense of the word (see discussion above).

poems. The cadences are clearly Hiberno-English, and this, paradoxically, makes them all the more convincing.

LAURA BEING DEAD, PETRARCH FINDS TROUBLE IN ALL THE THINGS OF THE EARTH

Life is flying from me, not stopping an hour, and Death is making great strides following my track. The days about me and the days passed over me, are bringing me desolation, and the days to come will be the same surely.

All things that I am bearing in mind, and all things I am in dread of, are keeping me in troubles, in this way one time, in that way another time, so that if I wan't taking pity on my own self, it's long ago I'd have given up my life.

If my dark heart has any sweet thing it is turned away from me, and then farther off I see the great winds where I must be sailing. I see my good luck far away in the harbour, but my steersman is tired out, and the masts and the ropes on them are broken, and the beautiful lights where I would be always looking are quenched.[30]

The cadence of 'will be the same surely' renders the fatality of the situation better than any precisionist translation aiming for direct semantic or prosodic correspondence. If read with the pacy tempo typical of a lot of Synge's dramatic dialogs, the lament seems to grow in urgency. The phrasal verbs and the contractions suggest a spontaneous outflow of emotion, and here Synge seems to be following Wordsworth's recipe once more. The sense of reality is perhaps strongest in the phrase: 'If my dark heart has any sweet thing in it, it is turned away from me.' This is clearly no longer the pre-Raphaelite, daintily archaic Petrarch but a voice embodied and naturalized.

HE IS JEALOUS OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH

What a grudge I am bearing the earth that has its arms about her, and is holding that face away from me, where I was finding peace from great sadness.

What a grudge I am bearing the Heavens that are after taking her, and shutting her in with greediness, the Heavens that do push their bolt against so many.

What a grudge I am bearing the blessed saints that have got her sweet company, that I am always seeking; and what a grudge I am bearing against Death, that is standing in her two eyes, and will not call me with a word.[31]

This self-absorbed series of expostulations would threaten to sound really stilted if rendered by anything that looks like a standard poeticism. At the same time, it is hard to imagine a more chilling and immediate representation of the lover's sadness than the one achieved by the simple phrase 'standing in her two eyes' (the same eyes that the lover had praised in numerous poems, e.g. Canzone IX and X, Sonnets LV, CCXXIII).

---

[30] *The Works of John M. Synge, Vol. 2*, *Poems*, p. 31.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Perhaps a comparison of Synge's translation of a sonnet to that of Francis Wrangham (1769 – 1842) would serve best to show the different conception of what constitutes literary language.

Synge:
HE ASKS HIS HEART TO RAISE ITSELF UP TO GOD.
What is it you're thinking, lonesome heart? For what is it you're turning back ever and always to times that are gone away from you? For what is it you're throwing sticks on the fire when it is your own self that is burning? [32]

Wrangham:
HE ENCOURAGES HIS SOUL TO LIFT ITSELF TO GOD, AND TO ABANDON THE VANITIES OF EARTH.

WHAT thou? think'st thou? wherefore bend thine eye
Back on the time that never shall return?
The raging fire, where once 'twas thine to burn,
Why with fresh fuel, wretched soul, supply? [33]

In place of the more neutral 'fuel', Synge has quite simply 'sticks'. The self-searching of the original poem is much more contextualized, and therefore more immediate, than in Wrangham's translation where the fire, although 'raging', never manages to get "translated" with quite the same convincing power that the Hiberno-English conveys. Synge's Petrarch is more convincing because he is given a more earthy voice. The language of the mourner's complaint is rendered as petulant self-deprecation and this creates a sense of reality of the lament. One can almost hear the voice of a distracted keener breaking from his keen to argue with finely chopped logic precisely at the moment of greatest tragedy. This is not the feeling one gets from Wrangham's translation, where the mourning voice is more distanced while its toil is more artificial because more deliberate.

Here is the remaining part of the same poem as it was translated by Synge and Wrangham respectively.

Synge:
The little looks and sweet words you've taken one by one and written down among your songs, are gone up into the Heavens, and it's late, you know well, to go seeking them on the face of the earth.

Let you not be giving new life every day to your own destruction, and following a fool's thoughts for ever. Let you seek Heaven when there is nothing left pleasing on the

---

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[33] Petrarca, Francesco, 1304-1374, *The Sonnets, Triumphs, and Other Poems of Petrarch*, translated into English verse by various hands, with 'A Life of the Poet' by Thomas Campbell, George Bell and Sons: London, 1879, p. 241.

earth, and it a poor thing if a great beauty, the like of her, would be destroying your peace and she living or dead.[34]

Wrangham:

Those thrilling tones, those glances of the sky,
Which one by one thy fond verse strove to adorn,
Are fled; and—well thou knowest, poor forlorn! –
To seek them here were bootless industry.
Then toil not bliss so fleeting to renew;
To chase a thought so fair, so faithless, cease:
Thou rather that unwavering good pursue,
Which guides to heaven; since nought below can please.
Fatal for us that beauty's torturing view,
Living or dead alike which desolates our peace. [35]

The implications of Synge's translation work do not get exhausted with the mere statement that he was trying to test the limits of the Hiberno-English dialect. In many ways, literariness – a quality which Petrarch (possessing as he does a high degree of translatability) almost automatically brings to the table – is reflected back onto the language of the Irish folk. Again, a statement is made in the spirit of comparative philology: that a residue of "literariness" is to be found in the language of the Irish poor. That a parallel tradition, no less distinguished than the literary tradition, had been leading its secluded existence – and to tap into it is, in a sense, to enter a possible world where the literary tradition would have developed differently. Thus, by his translations, Synge does nothing less than interogate the very logic of the accrual of canonical value to literary works.

Литература:

1. Ahmad, D. 2007. *Rotten English. A Literary Anthology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
2. Benjamin, W. 1985. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
3. Classe, O. 2000. *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
4. Cronin, M. 1996. *Translating Ireland. Translation, Languages, Cultures*. Cork: Cork University Press.
5. Hyde, D. 1969. *Abhráin Grádh Chúige Connacht (Love Songs of Connacht)*. Shannon: Irish University Press.
6. Kiberd, D. 2001. *Irish Classics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
7. Lloyd, D. 1987. *Nationalism and Minor Literature. James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
8. Petrarca, F. 1879. *The Sonnets, Triumphs, and Other Poems of Petrarch*, translated into English verse by various hands, with 'A Life of the Poet' by Thomas Campbell. London: George Bell and Sons.
9. Synge, J. M. 1912. *The Works of J. M. Synge*. Boston: John W. Luce and Company

[34] *Op. cit.*, p. 32.
[35] *Op. cit.*, p. 241.