

## Observations on Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* in Translation

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At the Zaragoza *AEDEAN* Conference (1986), it was a surprise to more than one to hear the spontaneous and so unconditional encomium on Flann O'Brien pronounced by Fowles:

If I could just say, there is an Irishman — we talked a lot about Joyce and Beckett yesterday, but there is a third Irish novelist who I would put very near their level — I do not know if he is known here, his name is Flann O'Brien . . . Flann O'Brien was, I think, a genius at really absurd humour and that book was behind *Mantissa*. If I went in for dedicating books to other writers, I would have dedicated it to Flann O'Brien.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, it has taken half a century to see a book of Flann O'Brien's translated into Spanish. If it is a challenging task in itself to translate any work of creative literature, it is all the more so in the case of Flann O'Brien, whose writing abounds in register switches, syntactic overflow from Irish texts, his own peculiar exploitation of syntax, the use of ephemeral references to the thirties, the colloquial language and of course the mainstream of humour permeating a work which so effortlessly skips back and forth over the frontier between sheer realistic portrayal and the utterly absurd. John Fowles went on to comment at Zaragoza: "I suspect his humour is very difficult indeed if you are not Irish. Even the English have a little trouble with it."<sup>2</sup>

In the face of such difficulties, the edition by Edhasa of O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* as *En Nadar-Dos-Pájaros* is to be hailed and the handling of so demanding a task by the translator, José Manuel Álvarez Flórez, to be commended.<sup>3</sup> My endeavour here, however, is to make a critical approach to the translation, drawing attention to a number of concrete details of specific interest to the scholar of translation and exemplifying such things as, for instance, the inherent difficulty of translating humour, cases where one might be tempted to disagree with the translator's choice, as well as some examples of the occasional errors that inevitably slip into translation.

An important component of humour rests on linguistic ingenuity and the precise effects produced in one language are very often impossible to carry over to another. For example, as the protagonists have their drink in a pub, we find the following pun:

- 1) "The conclusion of your syllogism, I said lightly, is fallacious, being based on licensed premises" 21.<sup>4</sup>

What does a translator do when faced with such material? He can't leave something unintelligible in translation so he is forced to explain. In this case what we get is:

- 1) "La conclusión de tu silogismo, dije alegremente, es falsa, por ser sus premisas licenciosas, pues se basan en un establecimiento con licencia" 35.

The question is that puns and wit exploit the gap between two poles, the "kick" deriving from the mental jump performed by the listener. So when the gap has been or has to be filled in, the joke falls flat, the pun loses its sparkle.

There is another angle to this question of filling in or making explicit in translation what is expressed in a more tenuous way in the original. For example, we find scared cyclists fleeing

- 2) "with nothing showing but the whites of their eyes" = "muertos de miedo" 55/81.

This translation seems to me a fine succinct capturing of the conceptual import of the original. Nevertheless, "fear," the concept in question, is avoided as a word by the author. One may recall the "Cyclops" chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* taking place in a pub and permeated by references to alcoholic drinks yet without any use of the explicit denotatory vocabulary for such drinks.

Speaking of drinks, the translator here too runs into obstacles posed by pub language:

- 3) "porter" 22/37, "stout," "ale" 46/68, "pint of plain" 22/37 all end up as "cerveza."

I would beg to differ with these further examples:

- 4) "You can't beat a good pint" = "no hay nada mejor que una cerveza" 22/37.

Here obviously it is not beer in itself that is at issue but rather that there are *good* pints and *bad* pints.<sup>5</sup>

- 5) "Unpleasant buff-coloured puke" = "vómito repugnante de color amarillento" 39/59.

I would argue that the neutral or unmarked term "unpleasant" has been given a positively marked rendering. The point I am getting at with this last example is that the role of understatement, so fundamental to the use of English though not so much to Spanish, should by no means be overlooked by the translator of English to Spanish.

Let us examine two further cases which, though slightly different, will serve my aim of pointing out that nuances that may be quite central to a particular author's style, purpose

or cultural background may be totally lost if due regard is not had to the question of understatement:

6) “I frowned and drank unheedingly, savouring the dull oaten after-taste of the stout as it lingered against my palate” = “Fruncí el ceño, y bebí despectivo, saboreando el insípido regusto a avena de la cerveza que persistía en el paladar” 47/69.

Surely an otherwise excellent translation is marred by the inappropriate marked adjective “despectivo”; a more neutral expression would, I feel, be more *à propos*.

For the second example I need to quote at length to make my point, italicizing the extract I wish to comment on in translation. The scene is that the narrator and friends have just left the pub, having had a pint too many:

7) “Afterwards, near Lad Lane Police Station a small man in black fell in with us and tapping me often about the chest, talked to me earnestly on the subject of Rousseau, a member of the French nation. He was animated, his pale features striking in the starlight and voice going up and falling in the lilt of his argumentum. I did not understand his talk and was personally unacquainted with him. But Kelly was taking in all he said, for he stood near him, his taller head inclined in an attitude of close attention. Kelly then made a low noise and opened his mouth and covered the small man from shoulder to knee with a coating of unpleasant buff-coloured puke. Many other things happened on that night now imperfectly recorded in my memory but that incident is still very clear to me in my mind. Afterwards the small man was some distance from us in the lane, shaking his divested coat and rubbing it along the wall. *He is a little man that the name of Rousseau will always recall to me*” 39.

7) “He is a little man that the name of Rousseau will always recall to me” = “El nombre de Rousseau me recordará siempre a un hombre bajito” 39/59.

Apart from the unfortunate mistake in the use of the indefinite article (it is precisely *the* little man of the mishap who is recalled by the author on hearing of Rousseau), my interest here is other. The author’s syntax is certainly not very conventional English, while the translator’s is conventional Spanish. But in translation, the initial syntactic focus on Rousseau and the power of such a historical reference tends to dominate what follows. Let us look at the original once more:

7) He is a little man that the name of Rousseau will always recall to me.”

Unquestionably the syntactic structure gives pride of place to the little man.

I would venture to say that there is a purpose behind this manner of presentation, where the value implications involved fit in with a certain aspect of Irish literary sensibility and humour. Going back over the whole passage quoted, we find a series of contrasts which significantly contribute to the irony of the whole scene. In the first place, simply that between the stature of the little man and the apparent grandeur of his discourse on Rousseau. Secondly, the narrating persona’s admission of total incomprehension, while

Kelly seems deeply in tune with the depth of the conversation: the unsavoury outcome immediately following dramatically turns the tables on these appearances. Finally, we come to the closing sentence I have just commented on above. All contribute towards the coexistence of what we might call the meanly aspects of life with the loftier but the underlying irony calls their relative value: the former are by no means obliterated by the latter; a question of hierarchy really does not arise; both are simply there, juxtaposed, side by side on an equal footing.<sup>6</sup>

I consider, then, that understatement, a low-key manner of expression, should have been more scrupulously followed by the translator. Take, for instance this further example:

8) "Can you jump?"

"I can not, says the sergeant, but I'm no worse than the next man" = "Saber no sé, dijo el sargento, pero si hay que saltar, lo haré como el que más" 86.

To be "no worse than the next man" is elusive and, may I say, delightfully ambiguous. It may just be false modesty on the part of the policeman, but at face value we cannot but agree that it doesn't make much of a claim to prominence. After all "the next man" could be pretty poor at the task, whereas "como el que más" commits itself to a straightforward denotative interpretation, overtly claiming considerable competence for the sergeant in the task at issue.

With the qualifications of the kind I am making, the translation in general is highly commendable. There is no question of the translator giving us what we often find, namely, a form of Spanish noticeably influenced both syntactically and lexically by the original. Let me just quote a few striking instances as concrete examples. The following equivalences seem to me to be excellent:

9) "good luck" = "buen provecho" 22/37.

10) "There's a hum off yourself too" = "También tú cantas un poquillo" 46/68.

11) "we had a great feed of wine" = "nos pusimos morados de vino" 46/69

12) "we had the right time of it" = "lo pasamos en grande" 53/78.

13 "beat them at their own game" = "darles sopa con honda en su propio terreno" 72/103

14) "saved by the bell" = "se salvaron por los pelos" 102/142.

The very occasional flaw nevertheless crops up. Obviously one must distinguish radically between the readymade expression, lexicalized, as it were, in the language, and turns of phrase creatively devised by the author. The former call for a semantically equivalent Spanish phrase, which may have little or no lexical similarities with the original. The latter I think call for an effort to respect lexical correspondence in a measure compatible with equivalent meaning. In this sense the examples quoted above stand the test whereas the following is fine in its first leg but fails in the second:

15) "the big man, the head bottle-washer" = "el mandamás, el lavabotellas jefe" 85/121.

It is also clear that the translator is very wary of transgressing that elementary maxim of construction, namely the avoidance of repetition of the same word in close proximity. Let us examine the following example, however:

16) “Show me a man that is always fussing and rushing about and I will show you a man that never did a day’s work in his life” = “Muéstrame un hombre que anda siempre trajinando y afanándose de un lado para otro y le demostraré que es un hombre que no hizo jamás en su vida una buena jornada de trabajo.” 93/130.

Here I would consider the stylistic repetition of “show” as highly effective in tightly knitting together the apparently contradictory assertions and making the resulting paradox all the more striking. In such a case it is obvious that the repetition, stylistically exploited by the author, should have been retained in translation.<sup>7</sup>

One could also point out that almost inevitable phenomenon in translation where the translator tends to swell out the original — a translator almost always seems to need more words than an author. This swelling out may at times be justified as helping to create a colloquial background in keeping with the original. Nevertheless, accretions like the following are hardly justifiable:

17) “I was down in Parnell Street” = “Verás, deja que te cuente; estábamos en Parnell Street” 23/38.

18) “I thought my stomach was on the floor” = “Creí que se me había salido el estómago del cuerpo y que estaba allí en el suelo” 23/39.

Happily, however, in the present case, this process occurs in moderation and in fact we could quote as an example of the contrary the following fine succinct rendering of the original:

19) “My uncle drained away the remainder of his tea” = “Mi tío apuró el té que le quedaba” 11/22.

Equally laudable, I feel, is the translator’s recourse to syntactic devices, where the original syntax is rather unorthodox:

20) “And why wouldn’t he be proud, says he, and him with two sons in the Jesuits!” = “¡Ya puede estar orgulloso, ya, teniendo como tiene dos hijos en los jesuitas!” 137/188-9.

Nevertheless, I would disagree with the tense used in translating the following typical example of the syntax of Irish speakers of English:

21) “You’re after reminding me of something” = “con eso está recordándome algo” 72/103.

“Me ha recordado” would be technically more appropriate.<sup>8</sup>

The financial constraints under which the protagonists live are a fundamental aspect of the setting of the novel. Yet O’Brien slips these in so deftly that it is important to do likewise in translation. In this respect there is a significant *faux-pas* in the following:

22) “*Quality of rasher in use in household: Inferior, one and two the pound*” = “*Calidad del tocino utilizado en la casa: Inferior, del de a una libra y dos chelines los cuatrocientos gramos.*” 10/21.

Rashers at such a price would be entirely out of proportion for the income and customs of the household in question and jar in the face of the thrift or penury of the time and place being portrayed by O’Brien. Moreover, having confused *shilling* and *pound* on this occasion, the translator probably felt obliged to give the ensuing cumbersome approximation for a pound weight. Even nuances like the following need careful treatment:

23) “deal wardrobe” = “armario ropero” 31/49.

What could be significant here is not what the wardrobe is for, but what it is made of, the fact that it is not a *mahogany* wardrobe, for instance. I also find the following inappropriate:

24) “the ultimate emptors” = “los paganos finales” 47/69.

The former, pertaining to the objective descriptive headings O’Brien uses as a change of narrative tone, exploits learned terms for which the latter is altogether too colloquial.

I should like to conclude by recalling the gulf that exists between the task of critically examining a translation and of translating itself. The latter, I would claim, is a task which is *sometimes* possible. Otherwise we have to make do with an approximation. This translation captures the basic tone of the original and reads well in Spanish. The qualifications I have made, as is plain to be seen, are on points of detail which are of special interest to the contrastive study of English and Spanish, which has here been my object. Furthermore, the difficulties *per se* posed by O’Brien’s English make its contrastive study with the corresponding Spanish version an interesting and indeed rewarding task for the scholar of translation and of contrastive linguistics.

### Notes

1. “Fowles on Fowles: John Fowles interviewed by Susana Onega,” *Actas del X Congreso Aedeon* (Univ. de Zaragoza, 1988), p. 72.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Flann O’Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986). (First published by Longman Green, 1939.) Translated by José Manuel Álvarez Flórez as *En Nadardos-Pájaros* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 1989).

4. In all references to Flann O'Brien's text, numbers preceding a slant line refer to the English original while numbers following a slant line refer to the Spanish translation.

5. It is of course standard practice to attribute the after-effects of excessive drink, not to quantity but to quality, especially the *bête noire*, namely the *bad* pint.

6. Cf. for instance, Joyce's dog on Sandymount Strand: "Along by the edge of the mole he lolloped, dawdled, smelt a rock and from under a cocked hindleg pissed against it. He trotted forward and, lifting his hindleg pissed quick short at an unsmelt rock. The simple pleasures of the poor. . ." (*Ulysses* [London: Penguin Books, 1972], p. 52).

7. A glance through Shakespeare's sonnets will instantly convince one of the rhetorical potential of this device of repetition. On the other hand, as most translators know, this is the kind of "improvement" gleefully indulged in by the editorial "corrector de estilo."

8. This syntactic structure, attributable to the absence of a correspondent to the auxiliary verb "have" in the Irish language, is quite prevalent in colloquial speech in Ireland. It obviously corresponds to or substitutes a present perfect tense. Notice for example how the humorous effect of the following exchange rests on the ambiguity provided by the fact that in an Irish context "to be after" could mean "to have done/had, etc." or "to pursue." Hence:

A. "Are you going to your dinner?"

B. "No, I'm after it."

A. "Well, I hope you catch up on it!"