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Translating the translated, mistranslated and untranslatable.

Several remarks upon the Polish editions of

*At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien.

[71] The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before - usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature.\(^1\)

This "conclusion" drawn from a discussion of two Dublin students, Mr Brinsley, an intellectual from county Meath, and the anonymous hero of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is not only a Flann O'Brien's *tour de force*. It puts in a nutshell the assumptions that were the starting point for writing the novel. At the same time, this quotation presents how difficult is the challenge that prospective translators must face. Their fate is especially

difficult as the very task of a translator is precisely to say something that has been said before - usually much better.

Naturally, it is fully beyond my control to decide whether my efforts in translating *At Swim-Two-Birds* should be considered the work of a mountebank, an upstart, a thimblerigger or they just prove that yours truly belongs to persons of inferior education. Maciej Świerkocki evaluated my translation of *At Swim-Two-Birds* rather cursorily "could have been worse". Given an opportunity, I would like to be able to say a few words in my defence.

There are some especially difficult elements in the process of translation of *At Swim-Two-Birds* on which I would like to concentrate. The first group of them, which I called “the translated”, encompasses those elements which are taken and quoted or alluded to in the novel from other works which had already been translated into Polish. This category includes also the quotations or passages which were translated from other languages (mainly Irish) and included in the novel. The second category – “the mistranslated” - was coined to label those elements which though seemingly or actually taken from various sources, were changed. Such "mistranslations" vary from short quotations taken out of their context to the use of specific literary styles. This category required most keen attention as sometimes the changes are very slight though still meaningful. The third category which shall be discussed here – “the untranslatable” – encompasses all these instances where the text belongs so much to Irish language and culture that they cannot be literally rendered and have to be somehow replaced.

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This ranges from alphabetical lists\(^3\) to multi-layer puns which do not exist in any other language but Irish English. Quite obviously, this is the handy label which any translator can use to explain all his or her failures.

The boundaries of the three categories cannot be clearly defined. Usually it is so that a seemingly translated fragment turns out to be mistranslated and only to be discovered as untranslatable. But if we bear in mind that we are discussing book whose plot operates simultaneously on at least five intertwined levels, we should not be surprised that also the categories of problems its translator has to face tend to merge.

This rather lengthy introduction should lead to the title of the book, the first example of a serious obstacle. Jarosław Anders, who translated extensive excerpts of *At Swim-Two-Birds* published in the 1970s in the monthly *Literatura na Świecie*, solved the problem quite ingeniously by not translating the title at all. As the excerpts were published within a periodical, this seemed quite a reasonable solution. When the book was to be published as a whole, something more "market-friendly" had to be devised. I must say that from the very beginning I fully agreed with Flann O'Brien, who, in 1939, when the book was being prepared for publication by Longmans, called the title "defective from commercial point of view" and suitable only "for a slim volume of poetry"\(^4\).

[73] Initially, I intended to render the original title as *W Swim-Two-Birds* but in Polish this may make a perfect tongue-

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\(^3\) Such as that quoted in O'Brien, 1992 p. 171 and O'Brien, 1997, p. 188.

twister, not a title anyone would remember long enough so as not to forget it before reaching the nearest bookshop. The title is in itself an example of mistranslation, as the puzzling name is a direct translation of the Irish Snamh-da-en, one of many Irish geographical names translated or anglicized during the 19th century. Therefore, it would be quite justifiable to translate the title as W Pływają-Dwa-Ptaki if only this could make an acceptable geographical name in Polish and would not oppose the general rule of leaving proper names untranslated.

Not quite knowing what to do I resorted to O'Brien's own solution and chose to translate the final version of the title rejected by Longmans - Sweeney in the Trees. Some reviewers, as Andrzej Tuziak,5 were offended but at least a sensible Polish title – Sweeny wśród drzew – could be made. However, the final version which can be found on the cover, that includes both the old English title and the new Polish one, resulted, actually, from the graphic designer's error - the original English title was to serve as a subtitle only on the first page and not on the cover.

The category of “the translated” includes all the bits and pieces taken from James Joyce. Even the very construction, combined of fragments, reflects Work in Progress, the first editions of Finnegans Wake "under construction" which appeared during the 1930s. The opening paragraph of the book is taken from the final chapter of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Various allusions to Joyce's works abound in the whole volume - characters, situations and quotations are taken into the book. Even Joyce's own biography is used as Jesuit

priests in the anecdote quoted by Mr Connors are graduates of the Clongowes College just as the author of *Ulysses*.

A more complete list of allusions to Joyce and his works would take much more space but I will comply with the wish of Flann O’Brien who wrote in 1960 "If I hear that word 'Joyce' again, I will surely froth at the gob." Anne Clissmann explains this attitude by the unequivocal reaction of critics after the first reprint (and the first American edition) of *At Swim-Two-Birds* done by Pantheon in 1951: “The critics were often confused [...] but they were unanimous in noticing the influence of Joyce on it.”

It is not that O’Brien intended to hide or diminish Joyce’s influence on his work. In 1939, he sent through his friend Niall Sheridan an inscribed copy of the book to Joyce, whose comment was “emphatic and brief: ‘That’s a real writer, with a true comic spirit. A really funny book.” Joyce tried to popularise the book; even after the outbreak of the war he would write about it to his friends from Vichy. After Joyce’s death his books were catalogued and “the entry relating to *At Swim-Two-Birds* is followed by a notice in italics which reads *Livre tres aime de Joyce*...”

Joyce’s interest in Flann O’Brien’s book stemmed from his dissatisfaction with critics’ reaction to *Ulysses*, especially with the pomposity and solemnity of many of them. It was in the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* that he found a kindred spirit,

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7 Clissmann, Anne, op. cit. p. 81.
8 Clissmann, Anne, op.cit. p. 81.
9 Clissmann, Anne, op. Cit. p. 79.
10 Clissmann, Anne, op.cit. p. 80.
somebody who understood that Ulysses “was essentially a funny book.”\textsuperscript{11} Twenty years later, however, O’Brien seemed to demand more recognition for his own achievement that for a crafty reworking of Joycean motives. He found it only after the second edition of the book in Great Britain in 1960. O’Brien himself kept treating the book, “juvenile scrivenry” as he called it, with certain irony and detachment. Four months before his death, in December 1965, he told Tim O’Keefe: “If I get sufficiently drunk over Christmas I’m going to read that damned book for the first time. Those birds must have some unsuspected stuffing in them.”\textsuperscript{12}

The link with Joyce’s work is therefore certain. Nevertheless, I decided not to introduce passages from the existing Polish translations of Joyce into my work. The reason is very simple - regardless of the importance of Maciej Słomczyński’s achievement, his translations never became a part of the Polish culture to such an extent which would enforce their usage for a translation of O’Brien. It is well known that \textsuperscript{75} after the first Polish edition of Ulysses in 1969, the book enjoyed a great popularity which did not, however, result in a general knowledge of the text. A copy of Ulysses was for a time a trademark of a real intellectual, though the text was famous rather for its obscurity and impenetrability than widely read and discussed. Even the complete Polish edition of Joyce’s works published in Maciej Słomczyński’s translation by the publishing house Zielona Sowa does not seem to change the

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{11} Clissmann, Anne, op.cit. p. 78.
\textsuperscript{12} Clissmann, Anne, op. Cit. 82.
\end{verbatim}
situation. O’Brien follows Joyce in this respect: none of his works published in Poland enjoyed any popularity.

The reader is therefore welcome to seek allusions to the works of the greatest twentieth century Irish novelist, but must be guided by his or her knowledge of their plots and characters and not of specific phrasing known from Slomczyński’s translations. The other and a more general reason for not seeking appropriate quotations (apart from the fact that the process of translation which lasted for nine months would take several years if the opposite decision had been made) was that they usually did not fit the new context as the next example will clearly show. A short paragraph entitled *Nature of Interrogation* ends with the following quotation:

> What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whence we may rise to hear the lute well touched or artful voice warble immortal notes or Tuscan air? What mad pursuit? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?¹³

This paragraph which starts with John Milton ends with a quotation from lines 9 and 10 of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by John Keats¹⁴. The poem has, quite naturally, been translated into Polish. However, the translation included by Stanisław Barańczak in his collection *Od Chaucera do Larkina* cannot be used in this context as it runs:

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¹³ O’Brien, Flann, op. cit. p. 22.
Kto się w tę pogoń puszcza? kto się umknąć stara?

Czyim ekstazom grają fletnie, tamburyny?

(Who does pursue? Who does try to escape?
Whose ecstasies are accompanied by pipes and timbrels?)\(^\text{15}\)

\[\text{[76]}\] In O'Brien's text the question "who" is not asked as it is not relevant, the answer (at least in the situation described) is known - Kelly and the anonymous hero. Similarly, the use of the present tense is also inappropriate - the hero asks the questions as he wants to know the future. Therefore the solution, somewhat defective as it does not retain the rhythm of the Keats' original, was found in the following passage:

Jaki pościg szalony? Jakieś piszczalki i tamburyny? Jakąż dzika ekstaza?\(^\text{16}\)

The category of "the translated" is not limited to works which were translated into Polish and are present within \textit{At Swim-Two-Birds} through quotations and allusions. There is a whole group of works which O’Brien himself translated and used for his novel, among them many Irish medieval poems, the most famous of them being \textit{Tain Bo Cuailnge}. The most important of them, within the novel, is \textit{Buile Shuibhne}, which is quoted in long passages mainly as poems of Finn. The poems


are direct translations from the Old Irish epic.\textsuperscript{17} They in turn become another challenge for prospective translators. Again, on the one hand Polish translations of the Old Irish poetry (recently prepared by Ernest Bryll) are not popular enough to serve as a model for a translator, while on the hand the departure from the original text (as in the story of Dermott and Grania) is such that there is no possibility of any "inserting" of the existing translations into the Polish text.

The very title of the book \textit{At Swim-Two-Birds} alludes to the old Irish epic \textit{Buile Shuibhne}, which O'Brien translated or rather paraphrased for his novel. It also reflects the vagueness and irony of O'Brien's approach to his Old Irish material.\textsuperscript{18} One might suggest that such a title means that it is precisely there where the most important part of the action shall take place\textsuperscript{19} as it happens in the Old Irish original. It is at Swim-Two-Birds that the hero of the medieval poem, mad king Sweeny, recites his most famous lay. King Sweeny’s visit does take place in the novel but - the lay is not included.

\textbf{[77]} The application of the second category – "the mistranslated” - is much less specific. The allusions are sometimes so minute that it is difficult to state with certainty that we deal with a problem belonging to the class. To use Joyce's terms, very often it is difficult for a translator to differentiate between mistranslations and missed translations. A certain example of the former can be found in a

\textsuperscript{17} It seems necessary to remark here that Flann O'Brien wrote one of his novels \textit{An Beal Bocht} in Irish.

\textsuperscript{18} A comparison between O'Brien's and a more classical translation of \textit{Buile Shuibhne} done by G. O'Keefe can be found in Clissmann, Anne, op.cit., p. 129.

\textsuperscript{19} Tuziak, Andrzej, op. cit. p. 51.
bibliographical address - the three savant or wise men of the East quote, among others, "Kant's Kritik der reinischen Vernunft"\(^{20}\) replacing German word *reine* (pure) with similar *reinisch* which, misspelt, means *Rhenish*, also *Vernunft* (reason) is replaced with the non-existent *Vernunft*. All that to stress that the apparent wisdom of the heroes is actually ignorance. These mistranslations should not be treated as born of misunderstanding, however. If we were to give an example of usage of the word "mistranslation" in this particular context for a dictionary the best sentence would be "James Joyce mistranslated *Odyssey* and created *Ulysses*." It should be noted that the whole text of the novel can be treated as one big mistranslation. Anne Clissmann writes

O’Brien's intention was to include as many different styles of speaking and writing as was possible within the scope of the book's 316 pages, and to juxtapose one style against another for comic and artistic effect. By the time the book ends it has presented some thirty-six different styles and forty-two extracts.\(^{21}\)

To add to this confusion or maybe to use it fully O’Brien goes to explain or to translate into another style events that have already been described in the novel as, for example, they are retold in the Synopses for the benefit of new readers.\(^{22}\) The habit of summarising leads the author to include his heroes into

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\(^{20}\) O’Brien, Flann, op. cit. p. 192.
\(^{21}\) Clissmann, Anne, op. cit. p. 86.
the game. The plot of *Buile Shuibhne* is, for instance, retold as follows:

The story is about that fellow Sweeny that argued the toss with the clergy and came off second best at the wind-up. There was a curse - a malediction - put down in the book against him. The upshot is that your man becomes a bloody bird.23

[78] All this confusion has naturally one aim in mind - to prove that the Modernist experiment propagated and practised by James Joyce has reached its limits and its elevated assumptions can only be used for the creation of a self-parody. This parody relies also on elements which cannot be translated or found in other sources. One such problematic element was the sex (or more precisely the lack of it) of Good Fairy. When asked directly by modest Pooka, Fairy replied "my sex is a secret that I cannot reveal".24 Consequently, Good Fairy is always referred to in the novel as Good Fairy, never by a pronoun, which is a perfect way not to disclose the sex of the hero/heroine in the language that does not differentiate gender by grammatical forms.

Good Fairy is therefore to a Slavonic translator as Lady Macbeth crying "Unsex me!" There were several possibilities to render this into Polish. The first was to leave the name of Good Fairy untranslated - perfectly sexless for a Polish reader though just as perfectly meaningless. The other was to use the similarity between Good Fairy to one of the characters of James

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23 O'Brien, Flann, op. cit. p. 85.
24 O’Brien, Flann, op. cit. p. 110.
Barrie's *Peter Pan* and to call it/him/her Twinkle Bell, (Dzwoneczek), and to use feminine verb forms. This possibility was rejected as it would equal introduction of a too far fetched reading (and, as any reader would agree, a false one to that) into the translated text.

Therefore, there was one more possibility - to find a Polish equivalent of Good Fairy and use verb forms appropriate for the opposite gender. The choice was between Dobry Duszek (he) and Dobra Wróżka (she), and I decided on the latter as I wanted the masculine verb forms to stress the strong character of Good Fairy. Only too late did I realise that by associating a feminine noun with masculine verbs I introduced an element of camp aesthetics into the translation. I can be only excused by the fact that the very English word "fairy" does have an additional meaning.

The limits of the article force me to mention only several other obstacles I had to face - one of them is the unbelievable richness of O'Brien’s vocabulary. It is so varied and huge that Polish dictionaries very often failed to provide any help - a lot of specialist assistance, especially as far as the names of birds, plants and trees were concerned, [79] was required. All too often did it turn out that Polish equivalents provided by English-Polish had little if anything to do with the English words.

Maciej Świerkocki wrote in his review that "a proper evaluation of the translation can be provided only after a penetrating analysis under a microscope."25 A similar analysis would be necessary to put together a complete list of translation

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25 Świerkocki, Maciej, op. cit. p. 119.
obstacles presented by *At Swim-Two-Birds*. I can only hope that I managed to defend several of my choices. If I provoked somebody here to suspend the all English literature specialists' habit to never read a translation and thus invited them to check how these choices fit the task I had undertaken I would think this time not wasted. What is more, if some of the suggestions presented here can help fellow-translators in their work, I should think my time truly well spent.

**Bibliography**


