

# *Translating James Joyce's Dubliners: Confronting Literalness and Revision*

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**Abstract:** *This short paper addresses the issues of literalness and revisión in literary translation. The case in point is my own translation of James Joyce's Dubliners into Brazilian Portuguese, published in Brazil in the early 1990s.*

The notion of literal translation is a long-standing controversy in Translation Studies, having been either defended in the name of accuracy or attacked, dare I say, in the name of freedom. The phrase "literal translation" has been deployed in different ways. Sometimes, "literal translation" is understood as "word-for-word translation". Drawing on the notion of "unit of translation", J. C. Catford, for one, argues that literal translation takes word-for-word translation as its starting point, although because of the necessity of conforming with target-language grammar, the final target text may display group-for-group or clause-for-clause, striving for communicative equivalence (25).

As a translation strategy, no doubt, literary translation has its uses and its champions. A literal approach is, for example, generally useful for translating technical texts and legal documents, and the technique can also provide language learners with useful insights into target-language structures. And in literary translation, too, the approach has its champions. Vladimir Nabokov defines literary translation as "rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original". He also claims that only this strategy can be considered "true translation" (viii). Walter Benjamin, in turn, submits that the kinship of languages is more clearly highlighted in a literalist approach to translation.

But literal translation has also had detractors. Eugene Nida argues that "since no two languages are identical [...] it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence [...]. Hence there can be no fully exact translations" (156). Moreover, Ernst-August Gutt points out the near impossibility of reproducing in the target text meanings that are only implicitly present in the source text. And George Steiner comments that "far from being the most obvious, rudimentary mode of translation, "literalism" or as Dryden called it, *metaphrase*, is in fact the least attainable (324).

Moving quickly beyond this name dropping, I wish to suggest that all of us, as inescapable readers of translations, and some of us, as practitioners of translations, have experienced instances in which a literal translation has been problematic, at least, often grossly distorting or reducing the meaning of the original.

As a literary translator, I would argue that literalness and freedom, or for that matter, foreignization and domestication, are not mutually exclusive notions and that they are to be resorted to *ad hoc*, as need be. And however difficult it is to theorize one's own practice, as a case in point, I would like to offer here some thoughts as regards my own translation of *Dubliners* into Brazilian Portuguese (São Paulo; Siciliano, 1993, 1994). Due to space restrictions, I have limited my comments to the translation of the titles of three of those fifteen enduring stories – “Two Gallants”, “Counterparts”, and “A Painful Case” – which I, taking into account the reception of these stories by the Brazilian reader, have deliberately and freely rendered as “Dois Galãs”, “Cópias”, and “Um Caso Trágico”.

Various English-language dictionaries define the noun “gallant” as “chivalrous man, man who is extremely gentlemanly; lover; paramour”. In my translation, I have freely opted for “galãs”, as opposed to the literal “galantes”. The word “galã” is defined by Houaiss and by Hollanda (of course, here in back translation and in paraphrase) as a romantic character or actor who represents the handsome and righteous hero who plays a decisive role in the labors of love. Evidently, the title of this story, “Two Gallants,” is ironic because Corley and Lenehan are anything but fine, chivalrous, gentlemanly men. Instead, as we know, they make an unpleasant practice of duping maids into stealing from their employers. The meanderings of the story, we recall, ultimately lead to the gold coin, suggesting that for both of these men, the coin is their ultimate reward and desire. Both men lead dissolute lives and have few prospects, and nothing but easy money gives them hope. As I understand it, for the Brazilian reader, such irony is better stressed by the non-literal “galã”, particularly with its connotations of the soap opera, charming ham – a figure who is nightly present from Monday through Saturday, year in year out, on the highly popular *novelas* aired through Brazilian national television networks.

In a busy law firm, we can also recall, one of the partners, Mr. Alleyne, angrily orders the secretary to send Farrington to his office. Farrington is a copy clerk in the firm, responsible for making copies of legal documents by hand, and he has failed to produce an important document on time. The title of the story, “Counterparts,” refers to a copy or duplicate of a legal paper – the stuff of Farrington's career – but also to things that are similar, circular, repetitive. The tedium of work irritates Farrington, and the root of his violent and explosive behavior can be seen to ensue from the circular experience of routine and repetition that defines his life. Once again, I have veered away from literalness, that is, not translating “Counterparts” as the literal “Contrapartidas”, which to the Brazilian reader does not mean “copies” at all, but “compensation” or “counterweight”. The option for the less literal “Cópias”, after all, a

crucial thematic notion in the narrative, attempts to validate my concern about the story's more efficient reception among Brazilians.

No doubt, "A Painful Case" narrates a tragedy. As we recall, four years after dumping Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy reads a newspaper article that surprises him enough to halt his eating his usual dinner at the usual time at the usual restaurant, and hurry home. There, he rereads the article entitled "A Painful Case". The article recounts the death of Mrs. Sinico, who was hit by a train at a station in Dublin the previous evening. The news of Mrs. Sinico's death at first angers but later saddens Mr. Duffy. Perhaps suspecting suicide or weakness in character, he feels disgusted by her death and by his connection to her life. Disturbed, he leaves his home to visit a local pub, where he drinks and remembers his relationship with her. However, Mrs. Sinico's tragic demise points to a depth of feeling she possessed that Mr. Duffy will never understand or share, and it provides Mr. Duffy with an epiphany as he walks home that night. His anger begins to subside, and he feels deep remorse, mainly for ending the relationship and losing the potential for companionship it offered. Upon seeing a pair of lovers in the park near his home, Mr. Duffy realizes, of course, that he gave up the only love he had experienced in life.

The tragedy of this story is so intense as to be threefold. First, Mr. Duffy must face the dramatic death of a former friend before he can rethink his lifestyle and outlook. Second, acknowledging the problems in his lifestyle makes him realize his culpability: Mrs. Sinico died of a broken heart that *he* caused. Third, and perhaps most tragic, Mr. Duffy will not change the life he has created for himself. He is paralyzed, despite his revelations and his guilt. In light of such tragedy, one that involves a catastrophic end, I have felt that the Brazilian reader is better served by the title, in back translation: "A Tragic Case".

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Turning to revision in translation, an issue that to my mind has not been duly explored by translation scholars, I would like to stress the importance of the procedure in the translation process in general and to explain the work I have developed with my "official readers".

Surely, three kinds of revision – and I don't mean just proofreading – are involved in translation. First, there is the intense revision of the original itself, which the translator has to put into practice, before each word, each sign of punctuation can be transferred onto the target culture and rewritten as the target text. Second, there is the revision the translators themselves – however blinded by their own translation, their own textualization – carry out. And there is the third kind, or should I say, step, of revision, when a third, interested, empathetic, party reads the translator's writing.

It is this third kind of revision that interests me the most. When I receive the typescript of my translations back from my three readers – colleagues from three Brazilian

universities – I invariably undergo an intense intellectual and artistic experience. One of three things happens: I either accept their objections (my readers are usually generous and helpful enough to object *and* offer possible solutions); or I refute the objection (and, of course, accept full responsibility for my decision); or – which is ever more fascinating – a sort of a dialectics takes place: in face of a problem of which I wasn't at all aware before my readers spotted it to me, and taking into account my reader's suggestion, I often find myself coming up with a totally new solution, as it were, an epiphanic synthesis.

However, more than detailing or illustrating processes of translation revision here, my aim is really to raise an issue, which, as I have said, I think has been overlooked in Translation Theory. But I can at least say that, as regards my non-literal translation of the three titles of Joyce's stories that are the focus of this brief essay, an intense dialectical process of revision – fortunately always constructive, besides being friendly and congenial – was *and still is* the case.

## Works Cited

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