

Translation and Alterity: A Study of In this Life, by Michael O'Loughlin

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Abstract: *The current research analyses the relationship between the poets Michael O'Loughlin and Mikelis Norgelis, two individual writers, who are, however, the same person. Norgelis, a Latvian immigrant, is O'Loughlin himself, an Irish poet who, upon his return to Ireland after years abroad, finds a new voice to his writings. The discussion is based on the book In This Life, 2011 in which there are twelve poems under O'Loughlin's authorship, and eight under Mikelis'. This structure ends up raising the question "Who, then, is Norgelis?" Is he a heteronym, a mask of O'Loughlin, or a translation of himself? Both Venuti (2008) and Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) claim that translation can be a political instrument – an instrument expertly used by O'Loughlin when reinventing himself. As Norgelis, he was allowed to play with the English language in ways that, as an Irishman, he could not do. It was through this new identity and culture that he was able to write again in the Ireland he was coming to know once more. The search for his identity made necessary the change of his political being, making him adapt in an emigrant and immigrants country. As a translator of himself, O'Loughlin's transformation is not a faithful one: he becomes the colonized, with the power of choosing which reality to represent. O'Loughlin becomes the author and the translator in his book In This Life, blurring even more the lines between the marks of the translator and the illusion of his invisibility.*

Keywords: *Michael O'Loughlin, poetry, translation, Irish literature*

Born in the sixties in a Latvia that still belonged to USSR, Mikelis Norgelis, a poet and translator, is responsible for presenting various occidental poets to his home country, among them Yeats, Frank O'Hara e Anna Ahkmatova. He immigrated to Dublin and was recognized by being published on "Poetry Ireland Review". The poet and translator Michael O'Loughlin, Irish, acted as a mediator between Norgelis and the people, which raised some suspicions about who, in fact, was Norgelis. O'Loughlin later on decided to come clean and admitted he was indeed the Latvian poet, publishing his own and the Latvian's poems in the book *In This Life*, in 2011.

This composition of both authors in one book signed, on the cover, by only O'Loughlin, raises the question of whom, after all, is the Latvian Norgelis. Would he be a *nom de plume*? Perhaps a heteronym? Alternatively, maybe, simply a translation of the Irish poet's name Michael O'Loughlin to the Latvian Mikelis Norgelis – a mask of the Irish author, or even some kind of orthonym, albeit reluctantly, since the name signed differs from that of the author. Seeing that the relation between the name signed and that of the person itself imposes a separation between them, it is possible to say that an orthonym does not reflect entirely the writer as the real person behind the writing.

In order to answer these and other questions, the author of this article proposed translations to the poems and is currently doing an analytical study concerning each author's language and style, besides the authors themselves – unique in one another, but one single being.

Norgelis' and O'Loughlin's *oeuvre* is different – however, it is possible to see similarities not only in their theme, but also in their style. The constant presence of nationalism – Latvian nationalism by the first, and Irish by the latter, is undeniable, and is the first point that unites them.

Another common thing about both is the presence of death in their poetry. On the other hand, the diverging point in their thematic is that where one seems to write about an actual Ireland, the other appears to be in a personal trip to the past. Norgelis' poems show a strong presence of a depraved Ireland, whereas the memories of living abroad, but always reminiscing of his past and identity permeate O'Loughlin's.

Phillipe Lejeune (2008), in his *Autobiographical Pact*, says that, when reading an autobiography, we assume the author, narrator and protagonist are only one person. This occurs because of the use of linguistic elements. For instance, let us think of Norgelis' translated poems: the book presents a chapter specific for him. All the titles refer to himself (“A Latvian Poet...”), and his realist tone but reinsures the idea that the one from the poem is the one writing the poem. However, as it was presented here before, he is nothing but a fictional being, created to perhaps make up for a void – a void that becomes known in his poems as himself: O'Loughlin. In addition, in here, saying “himself” is just another way of trying to separate him from his translation.

For narrator and main character are mistaken and mixed up, because they are the same person. Moreover, they are, assumingly, the same person that signs their poems. The only author is, for this reason, O'Loughlin. He is the one circumscribed in the text and paratext – on the book cover, for example. Besides, he acts not only as a mediator between the Irish and the Latvian poets, but also as a mediator between the writings and the readers. In addition, once this fact is known, Norgelis no longer fits in the “Autobiography” category, since his name, even being it a proper one, no longer refers to a real person. Without O'Loughlin there is no Norgelis. Nevertheless, without Norgelis, does O'Loughlin keep being the same O'Loughlin?

This question is unanswered at the moment – although Norgelis would be, in this line of thinking, a part of the Irish writer. A non-separable part, unlike Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms. O'Loughlin lives in Norgelis as much as Norgelis lives in O'Loughlin.

By being incapable of representing himself with the sincerity he wished, he simply preferred not to represent himself, or, yet, to represent others. (Vasconcellos 2013.37, my translation)

The search for identification with a current Ireland made necessary for him to change his political being, adapting him to fit in the moment of a country of emigrants and immigrants, of escaping to a better world and from the reflection of a world that can be better for others. As the Irishman says himself in many of his interviews, the United States are to the Irish as Ireland is to the countries of the former USSR. It was this realization that made him want to look to his country through the eyes of an immigrant – perchance because of how he felt. By living abroad for over twenty years and not feeling like his writings were his own, it is possible to say that, as Vasconcellos expressed herself about Pessoa, it was not an annulment of himself that he felt, but rather a displacement of the author.

In addition, it was Oscar Wilde that first discredited the idea of “sincerity”, replacing it with “the darker imperative of authenticity”, for he believed that when being true to a single self, a sincere man might end up being false to his other dozen selves.

The difficulty in representing himself with the “sincerity he wished” was there, although that did not stop from representing himself, or his other self. It was through the Latvian immigrant that he voiced his anguishes, and the representativeness of his twenty years older Ireland. Instead of representing others, he represented himself, but from his experiences in these years away from his origin country. Except Norgelis does not act like a heteronym, like the other selves from Pessoa. He may have his own history, as seen in his poems, which are mostly biographical. But, unlike Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Rei e Alberto Caeiro, his existence was made possible over O’Loughlin’s difficulty in writing to an Ireland in which he is not as comfortable as he once was.

As a translator of himself, O’Loughlin is transformed not in a faithful manner, but by putting himself in the role of colonized, the possessor of knowledge and with the power of choice of what reality to represent. O’Loughlin acts, then, in his book *In This Life*, as both the author and the translator, leaving the line between the marks of the translator and the illusion of his invisibility even more opaque.

When dealing with the relation between creatures and creations it is nearly impossible not mentioning Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet famous for his vast literary work, signed by different names assumed as “lives”, whose biographies are made by “themselves”. The displacement between the author and his works, which allows the writer to be identified no longer as the writer, but as part of the structure of the work, raises questions about this other author, the Irish poet, that not only started writing as another writer, but created this person deliberately, so that his readers believed there really was a translator and a poet writing in Latvian.

However, whilst Pessoa's creations were more connected to his creativity process, it is possible to say O'Loughlin's creation of Norgelis is more a political one. And Ireland, the land of many self-exiles, like Joyce and Beckett (both of whom appear on *In This Life*), is home to innumerable conflicts since before its formation and independence. These conflicts, cited by Tymoczko in her book *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, 1999, and by Venuti in his article "Translation, simulacra, resistance", 2008, are representatives of the use of translation as a political instrument.

During the English dominance, the Irish language was prohibited, being considered for years as an extinct language. However, many translators prevented this extinction of becoming real. Irish mythology in English was translated back to Irish, and many poets refused to write in English, not recognizing the language as their own, denying the power relation in the colonized-colony structure. Such translations/writings, along with the refusal of the English language, were the biggest instrument used by the Irish in their separatist movements.

As Tejaswini Niranjana, author of the book *Siting Translation*, 1992, asserts, translation, as a practice, forms and is formed by asymmetric relations of power that work on colonialism, and depends on notions of western philosophy of "reality", "representation" and "knowledge". Reality is treated as something not problematic, while knowledge is seen as the representation of this reality, along with representation being the path that allows the access to this reality. In addition, translation, in the role of holder of knowledge, but with power of choice of which reality to represent, becomes a powerful instrument. Thinking on the colonization context, translation can reinforce "hegemonic versions of the colonized", like in Western Africa.

What views did the European have those people? How were the Africans, but also the Orientals represented? This kind of contact was only possible through translation. While there are many controversies in the world of translation, perhaps the biggest one is about its authorship. Indeed, considering that the translator produces the translated text, he is the author of the said text. Nonetheless, even when they admit to the authorship (and there are legislations about this type of production), the ideal of being closer to the author of the original is still searched for. In this case, one should ask if it is possible for the translator to give up his "authorship" in order to become neutral. Is it possible to have a faithful translation? Moreover, would it be faithful to the text or to the author?

To Francis Aubert (1989), translation is the expression in the arrival language of a reading made in the language of departure by a particular individual under certain conditions of reception and production. Whether in the choice of words or the omission of certain passages, the translator always modifies and culturalises the written text in some way. The translator does not translate the original text, but the text that he considers the original, according to his interpretation.

Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology* (1967), states that in the play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable, since there is no longer a simple origin. Considering this impossibility of reaching this original, the translator's invisibility

reveals itself as an illusion created in this power relation of original/translation – every translation carries, as hidden as it is, the mark of being a translation, unless the reader does not know that they are reading a translated text.

In spite of all these questions of authorship and authority, the truth is that without translation there is no diffusion of these works. Like a double-edged sword, the translation comes to inform, convey, and conduct a representation, since all translation ends up being, in one way or another, ethnocentric.

Venuti closes his article by stating that translation goes beyond being just a cultural practice. However, for translation to be in fact a political apparatus, it is necessary to teach readers how to read translations as translations. Only in this way can the reader take a critical look when reading what transcribes, transports, and translates from another culture to its own. Besides, as Niranjana points out in the introduction to her book previously quoted here, we are always “living in translation”. Moreover, if we do not change the way we read the world, the relations of power will remain static, unchanging.

Translation is, therefore, a very important political instrument – one recognized by O’Loughlin, as it is possible to see in his use of it to reinvent himself as Norgelis. After all, he says that the Latvian allowed him to play with the English language in ways that, as an Irishman, he would not be able to. And while it is assumable that this relation O’Loughlin-Norgelis is nothing more than another case of pseudotranslation, since the Latvian’s poems are presented as a translation from the Latvian made by Michael O’Loughlin, and apparently there are no manuscripts in that language, it was by assuming a different identity and culture, a different self, that the Irishman felt the freedom to express and represent the aspects of a devastated, depraved and current Ireland, more in accordance with the image of where he lived, but not to the one he had.

Therefore, it is possible to say that, as well as Fernando Pessoa said that he never felt more Portuguese as when he feels different from himself, Wilde’s analysis of the authenticity of the self through the different selves becomes real when one discusses the Irish and the Latvian poets relationship, especially in the book *In This Life*, where voices blend and themes intertwine, defining not only the book but also their relationship. For it is as a translator of himself that O’Loughlin is transformed, not in a faithful manner, but rather placing himself in the role of colonized, possessor of knowledge and with power of choice of what reality to represent. Which makes O’Loughlin, then, the author and the translator of his own book, and Norgelis a translation of himself.

Hence, the main object of this research is to present the author Michael O’Loughlin, a relatively unknown poet in Brazil, and to address the role of Mikelis Norgelis in his life: is the latter a heteronym, an orthonym or a translation of the former?

This discussion is based on the translation of the book *In This Life* (2011), made by the author of the present research throughout the period of study and to be used as the foundation of the research - although only partially available to the public, because of copyright laws.

The lack of studies on this poet presents a challenge, which makes this theme even more interesting. Much has been studied about Fernando Pessoa and his heteronyms, on masks in poetry and on the role of the author in the translation, but the present research proposes to go through these and other questions, and it contributes to the study of translation and the author-translator relationship precisely because it is a source not yet explored, in addition to allowing an analysis of translation as a political and identity process.

The analysis of all the questions presented here will further be proposed based on the reading on the culture and historical moments of Ireland of this period of self-exile and on its return, and the translation into Portuguese of his poems.

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