BLOTTY WORDS FOR DUBLIN: AN EXCURSUS AROUND THE TRANSLATION OF FINNEGANS WAKE BY LUIGI SCHENONI

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In his introduction to the Italian translation of Finnegans Wake by Luigi Schenoni, Giorgio Melchiori writes: "The translatability, and even the usefulness of translating a work like Finnegans Wake, has been repeatedly contested" (Joyce 1982: L; translation mine). He goes on to quote the opinion of Stephen Heath, who considers the work untranslatable because it is impossible to establish a precise series of equivalences between languages in the case of a text that eludes exact meanings; in Heath's view, the only possible translation would be a complete reworking of the original in another language, a new Finnegans Wake in a sense; but this, he says, would be an "ambiviolence" to Joyce's text (Joyce 1982: L).

Melchiori comments succinctly on this: "If this is true, it is also true of the translation of any other text" (Joyce 1982: L; translation mine). Unfortunately, Melchiori does not explain his position in any detail, although his statement is worth consideration from the standpoint of translation theory.

Heath seems to commit the common error of assuming that the work of translation is always that of transferring meanings, and only meanings, from one language to another. In fact, the transferral of meaning from one code to another is only part of the translator's task, though it tends to be the predominant part in many of the types of translation we are familiar with, in particular in the translation of technical and scientific texts, of legal and diplomatic documents, of newspaper articles and scholarly papers. But it is certainly not the translator's whole concern in rendering such varied texts as poetry, cinema subtitles, advertising, comic strips, jokes, opera lyrics, songs, plays, holy texts and magic formulas. In all these cases, not to mention others (such as poetic prose and even, perhaps, ordinary novels) the form of the text is at least as important as its content, and in some cases may be even more important. Where constraints of time of utterance, euphony, cultural reference, etc., are operative, one content may have to be replaced by another, as sometimes happens in the dubbing of films. The same thing may happen in translating the Bible, as Nida has shown 1. Jokes and puns are generally

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untranslatable except by a process of re-creation in the other language, while a song lyric that cannot be sung is of no use to anyone. A magic formula ceases to exist as such unless it retains its magical music. Even proverbs lose their force if paraphrased.

These are all examples of translated texts intended to be used, and not simply studied. As such, they have to have a life of their own, as if they had not been translated at all. One can, of course, imagine a translation (even a very literal one) of a song lyric that is not meant to be sung, but is simply intended to help a student decipher the original text in the foreign language; such a translation is really a form of gloss, and has no independent existence. It is an ungainly parasite on the body of the original text.

One must therefore make a distinction between a semantic translation, one, that is, exclusively concerned with the transferral of meanings, and a pragmatic translation, i.e. one which attempts to re-create the overall effect of the original in another language, and to produce a usable text that has a certain degree of autonomy with respect to the original. In this sense, a translation of a poem is only successful if the new version is also a poem; and the translation of a joke is a good one only if it makes native speakers of the target language (who are ignorant of the source language) laugh when they hear it.

It will readily be acknowledged that Joyce's *FW* shares many features in common with some of the above-mentioned types of texts: jokes, puns, songs, poetry, perhaps even magic formulas. If that is true, a merely semantic theory of translation is inadequate to deal with it. The translation of *FW* must be conceived in pragmatic terms, as a task of re-creation.

In any text, even in scientific and technical texts, the exact music of the words, the precise sentence structure and order of elements cannot be rendered in another language, but this does not bother us because we arbitrarily decide that in these types of texts it is not important to reproduce the form, as it is only the meaning we are interested in. Whenever we decide that the form is important, we must either admit that translation is impossible or concede that there is something like an *equivalent form* (in addition to equivalent meaning) in another language. Such an equivalent form may be hard to find, and partly subjective in nature, although it will also be culturally determined. For example, those in a position to judge say that Ezra Pound's translations from the Chinese give a

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good idea of the form and style of the original, though it is difficult to imagine any task more daunting than that of transferring Chinese ideograms into English free verse. Pound's translations are definitely subjective (one can see the hand of Pound in every line), but they are also culturally determined (Pound could not have done them in heroic couplets).

We can thus conclude that Melchiori is right. The translation of *FW* is, in theory, the same as the translation of any other text in which attention must be paid to the form as well as to the content. *FW* simply presents us with the problem in a heightened degree, owing to the density of the text and the very complex system of interrelations it establishes between its various elements, and with other texts. If poetry and puns can be translated, then so can *FW*. Conversely, if a translation of *FW* is impossible, then so is every other translation. As usual, Joyce presents us with an extreme case, which becomes a touchstone for all others.

Joyce himself seems to have rejected a merely semantic approach to *FW*, as when he said that the reader should "let the linguistic phenomenon affect one as such" (Hart 1966: 145), apparently implying, in the words of Clive Hart "that communication of some sort will take place even when the meanings of words, in the normal sense of 'meaning', are not consciously apprehended" (Hart 1966: 145-6). In this respect, *FW* to some extent resembles a musical score.

Obviously all this must be borne in mind by the translator of *FW*, as well as much, much more. It is a commonplace of translation practice that a translation requires a much more thorough and precise analysis of the original text than a mere reading normally achieves; but since no one yet has, or very likely ever will claim to have understood *FW* completely, no reading of it can ever be final, nor can any translation be definitive.

Let us now turn to take a look at Luigi Schenoni's stated criteria, used in his Italian rendering of *FW*. He writes:

The criteria I have followed...are essentially three. First of all, I have tried to render in the translation what I call the "basic level of meaning": all the words of *Finnegans Wake*, even multivalent ones, have a primary meaning, which is nothing else but that which conveys the "plot" of the book... Then I have tried to maintain, in the greatest possible number of cases, the rhythm, even at the cost of sacrificing some secondary meanings, since it (the rhythm) is a very important element in the structure of the work, indeed so important that some people consider *Finnegans Wake* to be a poem in prose. Lastly, of all the meanings that underlie the basic
one and the innumerable allusions of every type,... I have selected (always with a criterion of personal choice) the most important ones with reference to the plot and to those main motifs that run throughout the book like veritable leitmotifs, creating a dense series of anticipations and cross-references." (Joyce 1982: LXXVI; translation mine).

To these three basic criteria, Schenoni adds three further principles.

1) I have translated the words in "ordinary" English with words in "ordinary" Italian, without excluding obsolete, dialectal, or slang terms, but using mainly modern Italian.
2) To translate those words that Joyce modified in his work of "intra verbal research," I have "created" some new Italian words, following the same criteria as the author or at least trying to do so.
3) I have not translated some words... (I have kept) unaltered not only... the foreign names for which there is no clear and known equivalent in Italian, but also those names created by Joyce with allusive meanings, such as "Thoper's Thorp"... "(Joyce 1982: LXXVI-LXXVII; translation and numbering mine).

It is clear from this that Schenoni's criteria are, first of all, semantic; he wishes to render the "basic" and "main secondary" meanings of the text in order to explain the "plot" of this so untypical novel. But he does not exclude pragmatic criteria, either, as when he tries to reproduce the rhythm of the original or to create neologisms using Joyce's own criteria. It is less clear why he has chosen not to translate certain terms, which are in English in the translation, and have the effect of making the Italian text even less accessible for an Italian reader than the English is for an English reader. Probably this was done because Schenoni expects his typical Italian reader to know English and to read the translation alongside the original text, almost as if it were a "pony" or a running commentary. (In fact, the original text is printed on the facing page.) But if this is the case, then the translation does not have full autonomy as a text, and cannot be called a fully realized "pragmatic" translation, as that would have required the invention of Italian equivalents for the English names.

Schenoni's other criteria are, in the main, unexceptionable, although one notes an inevitable subjective bias (in the choice of the "main motifs" as well as of the "basic meanings"), but it is in the invention of new Italian words that the most serious problems are likely to arise. Schenoni states that he has followed Joyce's criteria, without specifying what they are; since Schenoni is not Joyce, one must take this statement as an ideal to be approximated - it is clear that Schenoni's version is not the one Joyce would have produced had he attempted it (in any case, no two people ever come up with identical translations of any text).
In practice, Schenoni must have followed a somewhat more practical and less metaphysical principle of composition, since communion with the dead is unlikely to produce a viable text. This principle can only be a strategy of exegesis, i.e. a way of analyzing Joyce's words so as to pry their secrets from them. Clive Hart (1966: 150) lists four such strategies, which he calls "working assumptions".

1) We may retain the agreement where the black marks on the page are... identical with the conventional signs for English words and phrases. Approximations to such signs may be interpreted in the same way as one interprets, for example, the everyday pun.

2) We may assume that *Finnegans Wake* is an amalgam of typographical bits and pieces drawn from various agreed systems, each bit to be interpreted in terms of the system from which it appears to have been drawn....

3) We may expand number 2) and assume that any sign or symbol in *Finnegans Wake* may be interpreted according to any agreed linguistic or other system with one of whose signs or symbols it is identical, or to which it approximates.

4) It may be assumed that *Finnegans Wake* is based on no agreed system or systems, but that its words should be thought of as having an irrational, mysterious, incantatory, or magical effect on the psyche... (Hart 1966: 150-151)

Obviously, the type of meaning one derives from the text will depend on which strategy one adopts in decoding it. Hart provides some amusing examples of the different types of interpretations that can be made of the same small passage by applying the four different assumptions or strategies listed above.

In coining equivalent "portmanteau" words in Italian, one must choose to be more or less radical or conservative in one's interpretative strategy, or perhaps different strategies may be adopted for different passages or problems, even though this seems to involve a certain inconsistency. But any translation is, of course, an interpretation, and it would be interesting to know which strategy Schenoni prefers. It is, apparently, not known which of them Joyce himself would have espoused.

Further clarification of the problems comes from Anthony Burgess who, in discussing the charge that *FW* is "unintelligible", gives several reasons why a writer may be unintelligible. Assuming that Joyce was neither mad nor incompetent, he goes on to say:

A writer may be unintelligible when he is seeking a verbal equivalent for a state of mind not yet fully understood or a complex psychological experience that will not yield to ordinary language. He will be unintelligible when he is essaying extreme naturalism, trying, for example, to capture the quality of real-life language which is
blurred through distance, drink, sleep, or madness. He will be unintelligible when he is deliberately separating language from its referents... in order to create a quasi-musical pattern. Finally, he may be unintelligible when he is so loading words with referents (usually a number of secondary associations that cluster round the denotation...) that the reader becomes bewildered and does not see what the primary referent is. (Burgess 1965: 265-266)

Burgess concludes (1965: 266):

"Joyce, if he is unintelligible at all, is unintelligible in all these non-pathological ways, and they seem, on analysis, to be all artistically legitimate..."

Two of these ways are of particular relevance to the translator, for he must distinguish between cases when Joyce is "separating language from its referents" (creating pure music with words) and when the secondary meanings are so important as to obscure the primary one (extreme polysemy). In some cases, that is, he will emphasize the sound and rhythm of the words, whereas in others he must attempt to re-create in another language the multiple embedded meanings of a word or phrase. Of course, the radical application of Hart's third assumption would derive a meaning even from those words that, in Burgess' analysis, have an exclusively musical function; on the contrary, the rigorous application of his fourth assumption would tend to exclude all rational meaning from the text, making cases of polysemy impossible.

It should by now be clear what the theoretical issues are, and what practical translation problems they entail. It is also clear that a translation should be evaluated in accordance with its stated criteria, as well as on the basis of some general principles of translation theory and practice. At the present stage, any type of overall evaluation of Schenoni's translation at the level of macrotext seems premature. Such an evaluation would presuppose the existence of an ideal reader who is a perfect bilingual (and who is perfectly bicultural as well) and has a thorough knowledge of FW, so as to be able to answer the following question:

"Does the translation produce the same effect on an Italian reader that the English text produces on an English reader?"

Joyce himself is reported to have said of FW, "It's meant to make you laugh" (Hart 1966: 165), so presumably the Italian reader should chuckle just as often as the English one (though perhaps not in the same places). Or is he supposed to explode into laughter only at the end?

Abandoning, then, any hope of undertaking an overall analysis and evaluation of the translation, we can only take a look at a small, random selection of some specific problems and how they have been solved. Limitations
of space do not make it possible to include more than a handful of examples, out of the almost infinite array of problematical expressions. Since it is clear that Joyce's "ordinary language" (but is it after all so ordinary?) does not pose very great problems (indeed, Schenoni has translated it more or less literally), most of our attention will be focused on the newly invented words that occur in the text.

Occasionally, however, there seem to be instances of misunderstanding and mistranslation even of the "ordinary language". One of these comes on page (11) (all references are to Joyce 1982), where Joyce writes: "Here, and it goes on to appear now, she comes,...", which Schenoni translates as follows: "Ecco, e continua ad apparire adesso, lei viene,..." (11 bis), whereas (grammatically) the English should mean: "Ecco, e prosegue a comparire ora, lei viene,..." Schenoni has translated the phrase as if it were "it goes on appearing", making an apparent mistake in interpreting English grammar. This brings up another point: one assumes that, even in Finnegans Wake, the normal rules of English grammar are operative, but is this always true? (Certainly it is sometimes true.)

An example of Schenoni's attempt to render the "basic level of meaning" of Joyce's text is his semantic translation of "gnarlybird" (page 10) as "uccello grinzoso" (10bis). The English word "gnarly" means "nodoso" when used of trees or hands, "ruvido" or "rozzo" when applied to persons, and "grinzoso" when said of a person's face 4. Schenoni has therefore chosen to emphasize the facial aspect of the word, although one might also hypothesize an analogy between the bird and a tree. But what is perhaps more worrisome is his translation by semantic analysis, which separates Joyce's compound invention into two elements and translates each one individually (as if Joyce had written "gnarly bird"). It would perhaps have been better, also in this instance, to coin a similar compound in Italian, something like "grinzuccello" or even "grinzosello".

Schenoni's rhythmic preoccupations are apparent throughout the text. A simple and relatively successful example is his translation of "Then we'll know if the feast is a flyday" (page 5), which he renders: "Allora sapremo se la vacanza è un volonerdì (5 bis)." The invention of "volonerdì" has euphony and rhythm, and also nicely combines the ideas of "flying" and "Friday". (An exegete of Joyce might also see secondary references to the insect "fly" - "mosca" in Italian - or to the expression "fly by night", turned into "fly by day"; but clearly, if such references are there, they are not all translatable.) Presumably the word "vacanza" has been chosen to provide alliteration with "volonerdì", although one

might object that it misses the idea of "festa" or "banchetto." Obviously, any translation is arbitrary, subjective and partial, but on the whole this example seems to be successful.

Schenoni has stated his reason for not translating certain words, though this may sometimes make the Italian text less illuminating and less rhytmical than the English. A particularly inexplicable case of non-translation is the following (page 10):

"Our pigeons pair are flown for north-cliffs"

which is rendered as:

"La nostra coppia di colombe ha volato verso northcliff" (10 bis).

The English expression would not seem to have much meaning here for an Italian reader (unless he knows English, in which case why is he not reading the original?), and might have been replaced by an equivalent invention, such as "nordrupi". En passant, it can be noted that the translation might also have retained the alliteration with the letter "p" (instead of "c"), by rendering "pigeons pair" as "paio di piccioni".

A similar example of non-translation occurs in the following passage (page 7): "His clay feet, swared in verdigrass, stick up starck where he last fellonem, by the mund of the magazine wall..." Here "mund" is left unaltered in Italian (7bis); but whereas in English it calls to mind "mound", in Italian it means nothing. That the word in Joyce's passage is important is proved by the use of "our mounding's mass" six lines later (page 8) (translated as "massa della nostra montagnola" (8bis) and "museomound" four more lines on (this time translated by "museomucchio"). The variety and inconsistency of Schenoni's translations does not convey the system of textual cross-references in Joyce.

Much the same can be said of the translation of the adverbs "sternely" and "swiftly" (page 4), which Schenoni renders as "sterneamente" and "swiftamente", thus maintaining the important references to Sterne and Swift, but of course losing the literal meaning of the words, which is also appropriate in this context. This is probably one example of the objective limits of translatability. It is very difficult to think of any way of rendering the pun in Italian, and Schenoni has probably chosen wisely, in this case, in preferring to emphasize the secondary meanings at the expense of the primary ones.

One example where secondary meanings seem to have been lost in the translation is the following passage (page 16). Joyce writes:
"One eyegonblack. Bisons is bison. Let me fore all your hasitancy cross your qualm with trink gilt. Here have sylvan coyne, a piece of oak. Ghinees hies good for you."

This, in Italian, becomes:

"Un occhioblicco. Bison è bison. Fammi innanzi a tutta la tua ositazione cancellare i tuoi rimorsi mettendoti in mano un trinco geldo. Qua tieni una coyneta silvestre, un pezzo di quercia. Una ghinnea ti fretterà bene (16bis)."

Whereas the English text contains three references to money ("gilt", suggesting German "Geld", but also itself alluding to gold; "coyne", i.e. "coin"; and "ghinees", i.e. "guineas"), the Italian text reproduces only the last of these, replacing the other two with expressions that seem to be nonsense. Likewise, "Bison è bison" seems pure nonsense in Italian, losing the underlying English meaning of "Byegones are byegones." There is also an untranslated ambiguity in the English word "fore", which might also be read as "for" in the sense of "despite" ("nonostante"). "Cross your qualm" has been translated twice, first as "cancellare i tuoi rimorsi" (="crossing out your qualms" (dubbi)), and secondly as "mettendoti in mano" (="crossing your palm"). The possible meaning of "cross" as "contrariare" is missing here; moreover, the translation seems excessively explanatory, based as it is on a semantic analysis of the text. May one suggest a radical, pragmatic translation: "contraridarti i tuoi mandubbi"?

Joyce wrote Finnegans Wake as "Blotty words for Dublin" (page 14). Schenoni has translated this phrase as "Guerfavelle sanguibrille per Dublino (14bis)." The semantic content of "words" is given as "favelle" (a word belonging to a more formal register and meaning "speech", "discourse" or "tongue"), while "blotty" is translated by three elements: "guer" (suggesting war), "sangui" (meaning blood), and "brille" (with the double meaning of "shining" and "tipsy" - i.e. "blotto"). The original clearly recalls "bloody", but also "blot" ("macchia" in Italian) or even "blotch" ("scarabocchio"), which are missing from the translation; the introduction of references to war, brilliance and perhaps even tipsiness all seem arbitrary in this context. A less inventive but perhaps more faithful rendering might be: "Parole sanguisporche per Dublino."

One could go on forever, multiplying the examples. This much, however, seems sufficient to give an idea of the kinds of problems encountered and the types of solutions that Schenoni has proposed. His translation appears to suffer from a certain confusion of two different translation strategies, one semantic and

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5 Compare this paraphrase in Campbell & Robinson 1977 (48): "Jute attempts to calm him with a bit of wooden money, a tip. 'Ein Augenblick! Let bygones be bygones! Business is business. Take this bit of Trinkgeld and go buy yourself a drink."
the other pragmatic; but on the hole it is a brillblotty atrrial to renexplicate Joyce's "curios of signs" in a meandertale whereinas the death that bitches birth entails the ensuance of existentiality. Finnegan wakes again in Italy.

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