

Excitements and Pitfalls

TRANSLATING IAN McEWAN'S NOVEL AMSTERDAM

The present article attempts to present a hands-on approach to some problematic issues of literary translation on the basis of two assumptions: first, that literary translation is hardly possible to teach and to learn; each time a new approach to translation is required. Second, literary translation is not only a search for the right linguistic equivalents, but, as contemporary translation theory tells us, it is a creative process and a powerful culture-shaping activity, in which a translator has an important role to play and, naturally, faces a huge responsibility for the end result. According to Andre Lefevere, „translation is responsible to a large extent for the image of a work, a writer, a culture. Together with historiography, anthologizing and criticism it prepares works for inclusion in the canon of world literature“ (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990: 27).

In translation theory the translator is understood to be an active reader first before becoming a writer, s/he is both receiver and sender of the communication. Contemporary translation theory also makes quite an emphatic point (probably due to the impact of post-structuralist theory) that literary translation is a creative work in its own right, a version of the original, which is by no means inferior to it. Susan Bassnet and

Andre Lefevere, well-known translation theorists, in the Preface to their edited collection of essays thus write:

Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation (...) and it can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990 : 1)

Thus a literary translator is not only an active reader and communicator, he also functions as a literary scholar and a critic. A translation is in fact a literary analysis at its core; a translator has to figure out the thematic concerns, the problematic issues embedded in the linguistic structure of the text and to consider all its implications and connotations. The choice of the book for translation is usually determined by various factors: the translator's personal tastes and preferences, the publisher's interests and very often commercial goals, and in many cases the demands of the market.

I was familiar with Ian McEwan's writing before reading his novel *Amsterdam* (1998). But this time I was attracted by the very title of the novel – there was

some enigma there. Why should a British writer choose a foreign location for the setting of his novel? That seemed to me unusual, a fascination in a way. Thus I decided to read this novel and then afterwards I thought it would be a good idea to translate it. The choice was finally decided by the publishers which specialize in contemporary, most recent fiction. They wanted this particular book by Ian McEwan (presumably for commercial reasons) as it was a Booker-prize winning novel.

The shortness of the novel added to the excitement of translation: it was an incentive to start at once, to get to grips with the text. Dauntingly long books always put me off: I start thinking and worrying I might never finish it; and it is easy to get bored in the process.

I found the novel fascinating, at times hilarious, in the way the writer approaches some crucial problems that the contemporary European society faces: corruption in politics and the media; the problem of euthanasia. The underlying issue of moral relativism is raised: how far can the society and each individual go in its play with freedom or, rather, the wrong notion of freedom, the freedom which is misunderstood? Where is the limit which cannot be transgressed? As it turns out, all excesses lead to punishment. These issues are handled in the manner of black comedy, reminiscent of Evelyn Waugh's writing, and solved in a subtle, rather sophisticated, although shocking, way. All the characters turn out to be villains in the end, and the novel is clearly a bleak and black satire on contemporary society. The translator has to bear this in mind, and, consequently, try to find the right key, the adequate tone, the right words to convey the pervasive irony and sarcasm; to retain the dominant ironic mode by choosing the appropriate lexis, which is

another excitement for the translator that can easily turn into a pitfall. The text of *Amsterdam* is rather dense and not easy to translate, especially when you go deeper into it, not only consider the surface structure.

Problems and pitfalls as well as excitements inevitably occur when a translator is operating within the framework of such two absolutely different languages as English and Lithuanian. In this case, a translator comes head-on with the problem of the limits of translatability. According to Catford, „translation fails – or untranslatability occurs – when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into the contextual meaning of the TL (Target Language) text. Broadly speaking, the cases where this happens fall into two categories. Those where the difficulty is *linguistic*, and those where it is *cultural*. (...) Linguistic untranslatability occurs typically in cases where an *ambiguity* peculiar to the SL (Source Language) text is a functionally relevant feature – e.g. in SL puns” (Catford 1965: 94).

Ambiguities also arise from *polysemy* of an SL item with no corresponding TL polysemy. **Polysemy** is a most conspicuous feature of the English language, and this feature can generate lots of difficulties for translators. Excellent knowledge of English is a must so as to be aware of all the implications of a seemingly simple sentence, to be aware of the idiomatic character of English so as not to do damage to the text. Curiously enough, the point is perfectly made by the author himself in the very text of the novel:

- (1) In a language as idiomatically stressed as English, opportunities for misreadings are bound to arise. By a mere backward movement of stress, a verb can become a noun, an act a thing. To refuse – to insist on saying no to what you believe is wrong – becomes at

a stroke, refuse – an insurmountable pile of garbage. As *with words, so with sentences*. (McEwan 1999:148; further quoting from McEwan's novel, only the pages will be indicated after each quotation.)

In this case we are dealing with a pun: to refuse and refuse – the mere change of stress does the trick here, completely altering the meaning. Luckily, this turned out to be one of those rare cases in which it was not difficult to find the right words in Lithuanian so as to retain the pun (*atmesti – atmatos*). Thus the Lithuanian translation reads:

(2) Tokioj idiomų prisodrintoj kalboj kaip anglų neišvengiamai atsiranda neteisingo interpretavimo galimybės. Paprasčiausiai pakeitus kirčio vietą, veiksmožodis gali virsti daiktavardžiu, veiksmas – daiktu. „Atmesti“ – griežtai atsakyti to, kas tavo įsitikinimu neteisinga, vienu kirčio perstūmimu iškart tampa „atmatom“ – *nejveikiama šiukšlių krūva. Kaip žodžiai, lygiai taip ir sakiniai*. (McEwan 2000:

141; quoted from the Lithuanian translation of McEwan's novel; in further quotations from the translation only the pages will be indicated.)

Puns are particularly difficult to handle, and very often cannot be retained and conveyed. The principle rule in translation is to try and make up for it in another place where, naturally, the text allows for the pun. The case in point could be the English sentence „You deserve to be sacked“ (148). In the Lithuanian version the pun occurs quite accidentally and unintentionally in the sentence *You deserve to be sacked*, which is ambiguous in Lithuanian – *Tu nusipelnai atleidimo*: the last word can be interpreted both as to be forgiven or to be sacked (141). Thus a nice pun is produced by the Lithuanian text itself.

The character's name – **Vernon** – at some point in the narrative, in Clive's furious inner lashing against his friend, is turned into the derogatory **Vermin** – just by changing one letter/sound the

writer achieves the effect. In this case, I had to translate the word *vermin*, otherwise it would not „speak“ to the reader, it would be lost on the reader; but at least the word in translation *kirminas* rhymes with *Vernonas*. Thus, I think, the right connotation is conveyed, while the effect of playfulness is also achieved.

Fortunately, there were not too many puns in this novel. However, there were quite a few instances of playing with the language which are equally hard to handle, e.g., in the passage where allusions to Garmony as a hypocritical politician and his carryings-on are made:

(3) The overstated and contemptuous cartoon, for example, and the crowing leader with its childish pun on „drag“, the doomed crowd-pleaser of „knickers in a twist“, and the feebly opposed „dressing up“ and „dressing down“. (141)

The Lithuanian version reads:

(4) Pavyzdžiui, kad ir ta persūdyta žeminanti karikatūra, tas piktdžiugiškas vedamasis su vaikišku kalambūru „kailį mainyti“, su tuo nesenstančiu masalu miniai „liko be kelnaičių“ ir kvailai supriešintais žodžiais „persirengti“ ir „nurengti“. (134)

The Lithuanian translation of the pun on *drag* (*kailį mainyti*) retains an implication to both the Foreign Secretary's political hypocrisy and his cross-dressing.

In the grotesque episode (Chapter VI, Part IV) in which the editorial meeting at the daily paper is reproduced and which borders on black comedy, it was necessary to find Lithuanian equivalents that would sound ironic, comic, and absurd. E.g.:

(5) You know, we hire someone of low to medium intelligence, possibly female, to write about, well, nothing much. (...)

Sort of *navel gazing*, Jeremy Ball suggested. *Not quite. Gazing is too intellectual. More like navel chat*. (129)

In the Lithuanian translation *navel gazing* and *naval chat* corresponds to *savianalizė* ir *savipliurpa* (123).

At times even seemingly simple short sentences, particularly the elliptic ones, can present some difficulties. A case in point could be the abstract, short phrase on the very first page – *rapid onset*:

(6) *She never knew what hit her.*

When she did it was too late.

Rapid onset.

Poor Molly. (3)

In translation I had to be more specific, although, of course, retaining a certain degree of impersonality. Thus I had to resort to a shift replacing the noun by the verbal phrase „*bematant ją suraitė*”(11). This kind of shift is a common practice in translation from English into the Lithuanian. The same is true, for example, of the ellipsis in the dialogue of the original text – *Not even a drink*:

(7) *Terrible funeral.*

Not even a drink.

Poor Molly. (18)

In translation the phrase had to be expanded into a full sentence: *Niekas nė taurelės nepasiūlė* (24).

Very often colloquial phrases can be agonizingly difficult to find the right equivalents for. A couple of instances are provided to support this statement:

(8) *This was more interesting.*

You're wrong. It's a complete turn-off.

Even the TLS wouldn't run (35)

(9) *'Oh God,' Vernon croaked. „It's a spoiler.”*
(124)

In the first instance, going by the context the underlined phrase was translated as *baisi nuobodybė*; the second instance – *it's a spoiler* – was more complicated. There is no exact equivalent for it, the English-Lithuanian dictionary gives a descriptive translation: a rival whose sudden, unexpected appearance undermines one's chances of winning. I had to think of an appropriate colloquial idiom to render this notion into Lithuanian, the more so that this is a kind of

key word, and a recurrent one. Thus, for lack of a better word, I decided on a shift from the noun to the idiomatic Lithuanian expression *viskas šuniui ant uodegos*.

Geographical names and proper nouns can sometimes present problems as well. The common practice in Lithuania is that in translation they are usually transcribed or transliterated (except for the names of the authors which are given in their original form). But in certain cases they have to be translated. And this is, of course, decided by the context, by the very logics and implications of the text itself. An interesting case in this respect is the closure of Chapter 2 (Part I) which ends with Clive's determination to leave for the Lake District as walking there might help him to overcome the composer's block he is experiencing at the moment. He is also flooded by tormenting thoughts after his beloved Molly's funeral. On the point of falling asleep he thinks of those „magical names that are soothing him”, and the text produces a series of geographical names which, naturally, are not translated, except for the penultimate one which has to be translated as it is an important word in that flow of free associations, which forces him to recall Molly again. E.g:

(10) *He had swallowed his hemlock, and there'd be no more tormenting fantasies now. (...) he had drawn his knees towards his chest, and was released.*

Hard Knott, Ill Bell, Cold Pike, Poor Crag, Poor Molly... (26)

The Lithuanian translation reads:

(11) *Jis prarijo savo nuodus, daugiau jo nebekankins fantazijos. (...) jis susisuko į kamuoliuką ir nurimo. Hardnotas, Ilbelas, Koldpikas, Vargšų uola, vargšė Molė... (31)*

Quite a puzzle was the name of the newspaper *The Judge* which features prominently in McEwan's novel: should it

be retained in its original form or translated? I had some doubts at first and made enquiries to find out if such a paper did exist in reality; it turned out it did not, so I assumed it was an invented name, thus I translated it. The more so that the name of this paper is charged with ironic connotations. It was a bit misleading as in the text it ranks alongside with the really existing dailies like *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun*, *The Mirror*. These, of course, are not translated, but given in the original in italics.

Another difficulty which the translator of *Amsterdam* encounters is a peculiar **syntactic structure** that the writer uses as well as the problem of the narrative voice. Very long sentences (at times half a page long) are a distinct feature of McEwan's narrative, which can be sometimes very annoying for the translator. As can be the author's favourite narrative technique of avoidance, delaying the information, which is a tool for creating suspense. The narrative follows a kind of concentric pattern: it keeps coming back to the same facts, releasing a bit more information every time. It means that in certain passages the translator has to retain the same wording. This keeps the translator on the alert and adds to the excitement of translation.

The crucial factor in translation is the **extralinguistic background**, which should by no means be overlooked. Because translation is primarily a crosscultural transfer, crosscultural communication, not only linguistic decoding or transcoding. It is important to make the target text function in the target culture the way the source text functioned in the source culture. Languages express cultures, thus translators should be bicultural, not only bilingual. Features of material culture which differ from one culture to another may lead to transla-

tion difficulties. According to Andre Lefevere, „language is not the problem. Ideology and poetics are, as are cultural elements that are not immediately clear, or seen as completely „misplaced“ in what would be the target culture version of the text to be translated“ (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990: 26). Thus the understanding of the contemporary British society and its way of life is crucial while translating *Amsterdam*. Dealing with this particular text a translator should have a certain amount of knowledge of the functioning of the three realms: politics, media and music, of some technicalities and terminology related to those worlds. I had to seek help of the native speakers to elucidate some specific details pertaining to the newspaper world.

My musical education was really helpful in grappling with the text. Although translating the musical terms in some cases proved particularly challenging, and I had to consult theoreticians of music, to check certain things with experts in the field of musical composition. There were a few particularly difficult passages where the fusion of musical terminology and Clive's anguish makes the task of a translator even more difficult. The case in point could be a long passage from Chapter 1 (Part V):

(12) The ancient stone steps had been climbed, the wisps of sound had melted away like mist, his new melody, darkly scored in its first lonely manifestation for a muted trombone, had gathered around itself rich orchestral textures of sinuous harmony, then dissonance and whirling variations that spun away into space, never to reappear, and had now drawn itself up in a process of consolidation, like an explosion seen in reverse, funnelling inwards to a geometrical point of stillness; then the muted trombone again, and then, with a hushed crescendo, like a giant drawing breath, the final and colossal restatement of the melody (with one intriguing and as yet unsolved difference) which gathered pace, and erupted into a wave, a

racing tsunami of sound reaching an impossible velocity, then rearing up, higher yet, and at last toppling, breaking and crashing vertiginously down to shatter on the hard safe ground of the home key of C minor. What remained were the pedal notes promising resolution and peace in infinite space. Then a diminuendo spanning forty-five seconds, dissolving into four bars of scored silence. The end. (135-136)

The Lithuanian translation thus reads:

(13) *Jis jau užkopė tais senoviniais akmeniniais laipteliais, pabiri garsai ištirpo tarsi migla, jo naujoji melodija, paslaptinai pinta į orkestruotę ir pirmąsyk solo suskambanti dusliu trombonu, apsigaubė sodria orkestrine tekstūra, moduliuota ir harmoninga, paskui perėjo į disonansą ir virto variacijų sūkuriu, kuris švystelėjęs negrįžtamai išsklido erdvėje, o dabar ji ir vėl atgijo, telkėsi ir lyg sprongimas, vykstantis atvirkštine seka, liejosi vidun, kol pasiekė geometrinį tylos tašką; paskui ir vėl duslus trombonas, o tuomet prislopiu crescendo it milžino kvėptelėjimas dar syki pasikartoja finalinė kolosali melodija (intriguojamai skirsis, kol kas dar nesugalvojo kaip), kuri vis labiau šėlsta, išsilieja banga, kylančiu garsų cunamiu, pasiekiančiu neįmanomą greitį, stoja aukšta siena, o kai jau, rodos, visos žmogaus galimybių ribos peržengtos, iškyla dar aukščiau ir galų gale krinata, lūžta, svaiginamai trenkiasi žemyn ir sudūžta atsimušusi į gryniausią kietą emę – gimtąją c-mol tonaciją. Beliko tik pedalo natos, žadančios atomazgą ir ramybę begalinėje erdvėje. Paskui keturiasdešimt penkias sekundes trunkantis diminuendo, išstipstantis per keturis orkestruotos tylos taktus. Ir pabaiga. (129)*

Every country has its translation and publication practices. Our practice is that realia, features of material culture which differ from one culture to another and may lead to translation difficulties, should be explained, abbreviations deciphered for the reader in the footnotes; foreign words (when they occur) should be translated and the translation provided in the footnotes. All in all, there are 14 footnotes with explanations of

some cultural features, abbreviations (AP – *Associated Press*, TLS – *Times Literary Supplement*) and translations of foreign words (Italian and French, related to music and food) in the Lithuanian version of *Amsterdam*.

Lithuanian is rather an archaic language, conservative in the sense that it has preserved lots of archaic, dated words and it is very reluctant to accept, to embrace foreign words, colloquialisms, and slang into its stock and use. Or rather it is our fossilized linguists who are very much adverse to the development of the language and like watchdogs try to protect the purity of the Lithuanian language. Thus a translator meets with difficulties doing contemporary fiction; very often it is necessary to invent, to coin words and expressions which are so far non-existent in our language. We can speak about a case of interaction between the two languages with the Target Language being affected by the Source Language; this interaction often produces quite interesting results when new terms or words are coined in the Lithuanian language. Translation forces a language to expand. In other words, a translator has a duty and a pleasure to play, to experiment with the language which is sometimes pushed to the limits – and that is another excitement of translation.

At this point one could only agree with Walter Benjamin that „it is not the highest praise of a translation (...) to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. (...) The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue“ (Benjamin 1988: 77). I think this should serve as a guiding principle for a translator.

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S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje bandoma aptarti kai kurias literatūrinio vertimo problemas. Keliama hipotezė, kad, pirma, literatūrinio vertimo kažin ar galima išmokti ir išmokyti; antra, literatūrinis vertimas nėra vien tik lingvistinių ekvivalentų paieška. Remiantis šiuolaikine vertimo teorija, galima teigti, jog tai yra kūrybinis procesas ir savo ruožtu kultūrą formuojanti veikla, kurioje vertėjui tenka svarbus vaidmuo ir didžiulė atsakomybė už galutinį rezultatą.

Iliustruojant konkrečiais pavyzdžiais, operuojant dviejų tekstų – angliško originalo ir lietuviško jo vertimo – medžiaga, analizuoja-

mos problemos, su kuriomis susiduriama verčiant žymaus šiuolaikinio anglų rašytojo Iano McEwano romaną *Amsterdams* iš anglų į lietuvių kalbą: kalambūrų, žodžių žaismo, kolokvializmų perteikimas, eksperimentavimas su kalba, geografinių vardų ir tikrinių daiktavardžių, svetimų kalbų žodžių perteikimas. Taip pat aptariamas ekstralingvistinis fonas (angliškame tekste atsiveriantys kultūriniai ypatumai), kuris yra labai svarbus, kadangi vertimas – tai pirmiausia tarpkultūrinė komunikacija, o ne vien tik lingvistinis dekodavimas.