

MUSIQUE DE CHAMBRE

I am not a Joyce scholar. I have not read *Ulysses*, nor *Finnegan's Wake*. I only poked at *Dubliners*

I did actually read *Portrait of the Artist* but that was ages ago and the only thing I remember from it is the sermon which scared the shit out of me.

Nevertheless, last year I gave a talk in a Martello Tower (this one) entitled *Embedding Joyce* which drew extensively on *Ulysses*.

This year, but on a more modest scale, I decided to chance my arm again. So I needed a subject I could hold forth on but one connected in some way with Joyce.

I knew that Joyce's set of love poems *Chamber Music* had been translated into French. I had been at the Irish launch in the Alliance Française and found it quite entertaining. I had done a modest amount of translating myself in my day, and even composed three songs in French.

So I know some of the problems facing the translator and thought I might just check out the translation of *Chamber Music* and see what made it tick. Then I found that there was also a slightly earlier translation and thought it might be worth comparing the two.

The first is by Philippe Blonchon (2012) and the second by Olivier Litvine (2016). Blonchon had a collaborator, another established female translator, Toby Gemperl Gilbert.

There are a few other French translations about and I'm sure there is probably a good potential thesis in writing up a comprehensive comparison between them. But that is not what I am about here. Consider this a teaser and if it catches your interest, you know what to do.

The translator has to make a call and particularly in literary translation this can be very tricky. And as for poetry? The translator can just mirror the words, or keep the rhyme, or convey the music/cadence, or even try to give the reader a similar experience drawing on the reader's own culture as much as on the poem itself.

So how did these two works measure up?

Were they the same, and if so what was the point of the second translation? Were they very different, in which case did they do anything to deepen our understanding of Joyce? Or were they just a mixed bag?

So let's have a look.

As time is short I will take two simple & typical examples of divergence. You can take my word for it that they are typical as I have read through the lot.

XI [16]

snood

This is certainly an interesting word. I'd never heard it before. So lets see what the guys have made of it.

The poem

Bid adieu, adieu, adieu,
Bid adieu to girlish days,
Happy Love is come to woo
Thee and woo thy girlish ways —
The zone that doth become thee fair,
The snood upon thy yellow hair,
When thou hast heard his name upon
The bugles of the cherubim
Begin thou softly to unzone
Thy girlish bosom unto him
And softly to undo the snood
That is the sign of maidenhood.

Discussion

The line is:

And softly to undo the **snood**
That is the sign of maidenhood.

Blonchon:

Et défait doucement le **filet**

Symbole de ta virginité

Litvine:

Avant de doucement défaire cette **résille**

Symbole de ta virginité

Blonchon has chosen the word **filet**. This has a reasonably wide meaning = net, hairnet, fishing net , safety net [connotations also entrap, snare].

Litvine has chosen **résille** which simply means a hairnet and nothing else.

I think Blonchon wins this one, particularly in the context of maidenhood with the bosom already unzoned. And he keeps the rhyme and metre.

The fact that the two guys ended up with terms covering a hairnet intrigued me.

I had assumed initially that this was one of Joyce's made up words. I was surprised to find that it is actually a real word.

In the most common form, the headgear resembles a close-fitting hood worn over the back of the head. It is similar to a hairnet, but snoods typically have a looser fit, a much coarser mesh, and noticeably thicker yarn. [Wikipedia]

XX [14]

enaisled

This **is** actually a word made up by Joyce. So let's see what the translators make of it. There are clearly two components embedded here: aisle as in a church, and isle – simply an island.

The poem

In the dark pine-wood
I would we lay,
In deep cool shadow
At noon of day.
How sweet to lie there,
Sweet to kiss,
Where the great pine-forest
Enaisled is!
Thy kiss descending
Sweeter were
With a soft tumult
Of thy hair.
O unto the pine-wood
At noon of day
Come with me now,
Sweet love, away.

Discussion

The line is:

Where the great pine-forest
Enaisled is!

Blonchon

Où la grande forêt de pins
propose sa **nef**

Litvine

La où la grande forêt de pins
fait un **lit clos**

Blonchon's choice, **nef** appears to be purely in a church context, an aisle or the nave. But in its antique or literary meaning it means a ship, craft or vessel, even connoting a blood vessel for example (a chuisle 's a stór).

Litvine has gone off in a different direction, more along the lines of the island, with his **lit clos**, an enclosed bed. Is he thinking of a secret bower, or even a four poster bed.

I detected a resonance with the term **huis clos**. This was the name of a 1944 existentialist French play by Jean-Paul Sartre. The title is the French equivalent of the legal term *in camera*, referring to a private discussion behind closed doors.

So this **is** a made up word, and the translators have gone in slightly different directions, one picking up the religious connotation and the other giving the couple a free hand, or even encouragement.

These are only two examples of difference. You might find them interesting, and there are many more. But, of the just over 400 lines in the poems, about [90%] of the translations are the same.

Might Joyce have preferred one over the other?

Let's look at how Joyce himself set about translating a poem from English to French.

There is one known published example of this, James Stephens's poem, included in *The Adventures of Seamas Beg – The Rocky Road to Dublin*. It is called *Stephen's Green*. The poet there, appropriately enough, is on a tour of Dublin, describing various locations, and here it's St. Stephen's Green.

| STEPHEN'S GREEN | LES VERTS DE JACQUES |
|--|--|
| The wind stood up and gave a shout. He whistled on his fingers and | Le vent d'un saut lance son cri. Se siffle sur les doigts et puis |
| Kicked the withered leaves about And thumped the branches with his hand | Trépigne les feuilles d'automne. Craque les branches qu'il assomme. |
| And said he'd kill and kill. And so he will and so he will | Je tuerai, crie-t-il, holâ ! Et vous verrez s'il le fera ! |

[Read both versions]

Joyce doesn't get beyond the title before he's up to his tricks.

He also avoids picking up the full name of the Green but capitalising on his shared given name with the poet, comes up with James's greens. With his greens in the plural, they can have one each.

But if you add in the oral dimension, **les verts** (greens) sounds the same as **les vers** (verses). So he's having fun.

The more normal literal translation would probably be **La Place** or **Le Parc (de) St Stéphane**

And so to the wind. Stephens has it kicking the withered leaves and thumping the branches. Joyce has it stamping on the leaves and snapping and felling the branches.

So Joyce has opted for a stronger version of the wind.

Stephens has the wind threatening to kill. I wondered if that had anything to do with Stephens having seen a man shot in the head at Stephen's Green during the Rising. But no, Stephen's poem was published by 1915.

But Joyce may well have known of Stephens's experience because Stephens wrote about it. Might this explain the nuance in Joyce's last couplet, which translated back gives:

I'll kill, he cried, hey!
And you'll see if he does. [versus: *And so he will and so he will*]

And see, Stephens did, even if, in 1916, it wasn't the wind.

Full of fun and tweaks.

Now there's a limit to how much fun you can have with a series of love poems like Chamber Music, which are not necessarily the best examples of Joyce's writings.

Nevertheless, I'd wager that if Joyce had seen these two, relatively pedestrian, translations above he'd have preferred to have done the job himself.

=====o0o=====

[Online text of all the poems
<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/joyce01.html>]