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The "Tryst with the Untranslatable: Nevzat Erkmen’s Translation of Joyce’s Ulysses"

Abstract: This paper is an analysis of Nevzat Erkmen’s Turkish translation of Joyce’s Ulysses along the lines of Lawrence Venuti’s and Douglas Robinson’s arguments which challenge the evaluative norms of traditional translation theories with their claim that fluency in translation is ideological and assimilative and “strangeness” should be sought for as an end in itself. The paper bases its argument particularly on Philip E. Lewis’ claims that “abusive” translation strategies produce strange and foreignizing texts which are the “strongest” kinds of translation. Three extracts from Joyce’s text, from Chapters II, XII and XIV have been chosen to demonstrate the points made by Venuti, Robinson, Lewis and others and by their standards, Erkmen’s translation belongs to the “strongest” kind.

Key Words: Untranslatability; fluency, assimilativeness; counter-hegemonic, “abusiveness”, foreignism, hybridity, negotiation.

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The Trusty with the Untranslatable:  
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Is there such a thing as an untranslatable text? Nonsense rhymes, or concrete poetry are untranslatable because they are lexically non communicative. On the whole, untranslatability points to the problematic nature of the translation act. All texts are at once translatable and untranslatable, for texts may be re-written in another language in a manner similar to the source text, but never in exactly the same manner, for there really are no two languages that are linguistically equivalent and no two same translations in any target language can exit, for translation is a kind of interpretation and interpretation varies from translator to translator. Then, how is one to decide what is or is not a good translation?

Evaluate norms of good and bad translation change with the changing times and are not absolute but relative, that is they are historically and culturally specific and involve power relations. Cultures make demands on translators to manipulate the source text to serve various ends in the target culture, the nature of these demands are also time bound. Contemporary evaluative norms such as faithfulness based on linguistic equivalence, or the superiority of the source text to the target text, have been challenged by the concept of free translation in the 80s. This in turn has been challenged by what Lefevere and Bassnett have termed as “the cultural turn” in translation studies (10-11) which has meant looking into the function of a text in both source and target cultures, and looking into a text from a cultural and not just linguistic perspective, has enlarged translation to include various kinds of rewriting such as imitation, adaptation, pastiche and parody which are all re-writings, that is recontextualizations of the source text.

Recently, translation theories based on fluency where the translation reads as if it were written in the target language have been challenged by different theorist on the grounds of being assimilative and ideological. Lawrence Venuti, in his book The Translator’s Invisibility (1986) challenges the word for word, sense for sense and free translation theory traditions, and claims that translation regimes of fluency are assimilative and ideological, the opposite of which is the translator’s resistance to assimilative capitalist culture through a foreignizing stance. To Venuti the new debate in translation theory is now between “assimilative” or “hegemonic” and “foreignizing” or “counter-hegemonic” translations and he defines “foreignism”, as indicating literalness, in the narrow sense and in the broad sense as a
strategy which makes the reader face the alienness and difficulty of a translation with the purpose of thwarting assimilative attempts. Susan Bassnett one of the initiators of the concept of a “cultural turn” in translation studies (in Lefevere and Bassnett, 1998) has admitted that, because of the many textual and extra-textual constraints upon the translators, manipulatory processes in the transfer of texts have become “the primary focus in translation studies” (123-124). Thus post-modernist, feminist and post-colonial theorist have favoured Venuti’s views greatly, for translation studies now shared with them their counter hegemonic views.

Douglas Robinson in his study What is Translation (1997) refers to Philip E. Lewis’ essay entitled “The Measure of Translation Effects” where Lewis proposes a three step hierarchical theory of translation achievement. The weakest kind of translation to Lewis is one which conforms to standard target language usage, a stronger sort is one which seeks to reproduce in the target language the author’s abuses of the source language, producing a strange and foreignizing text, the strongest kind of translation he claims, is one which introduces its own target language abuses into the abusive source language text and creates a text that abuses both the source and target linguistic systems. (134,135). Lewis, takes the term “abusive” from Derrida who has meant “difficult” or “going against common usage” by the term. What Lewis is proposing is a translation which balances both texts’ cultural and linguistics systems. Homi Babha sees translation as a kind of cultural communication, as a “dynamic sliding between strangeness and familiarity” and as “a field of contestation and flux” (266). He proposes “negotiation” between the two cultures, as a strategy which he defines as the “act of living on the borderlines” (266). Salman Rushdi calls translation an “empowering condition of hybridity”, the focus he says is “on making linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life, […] rather than arrive at ready made names”. (227)

These scholars are questioning linguist, cultural and other kinds of equivalence in translation and are reminding the audience that translation texts are not originally written by the translator in the target language but are translations, that is interpretations of the original and that translations are in George Steiner’s words “dialogic”, that is the translator is in a powerful dialogue with the author and the text and the resulting text may very well carry a quality of “hybridity”, meaning a combinations of both cultures’ linguistic systems.

Joyce’s modernist, experimentalist text resists fluency even without the translator’s intervention. Ulysses is lexically non communicative and deliberately difficult and is subversive both in the use of formal elements and in subject matters, which may very well be related to an ideological stance, that of the will to break down the bourgeois culture, its literary conventions and value structure in the early 20th century. Any translator of Joyce will have problems with fluency for Joyce’s elitist modernist text can not be transformed into a mass-cultural reading, therefore the translator is bound to give the target language reader some feel of the strangeness of the original; for in Beckett’s words “Joyce “is a superb manipulator of material” (3)

Nevzat Erkmen, Turkish translator of Joyce’s Ulysses and Finnegans Wake which indeed seems to be his work in progress at the moment; is a manipulator of material in his own right for he is the captain of the Turkish Intelligence Games Team. In his translation of Ulysses he keeps sliding between “strangeness” and “familiarity” as he “negotiates” in Homi Babha’s words between the two cultures and languages. He never lets the reader forget that his text is a translation, he seeks to reproduce in the target language text, the difficulties of the source language text; as well as introduce his own target language difficulties in his target language text. Thus, he breaks with familiarity and fluency, with his “foreignizing” attitude in both the narrow and the broad senses and the resulting text has linguistic and cultural “hybridity” and lives on the borderlines of both cultures.
The first passage from Chapter II of *Ulysses* relies on a poetic understanding for meaning; its visual aspect, sounds and their patterns, stylistic arrangements determine the meaning and should be turned into meaningful alternatives in the target language, thus a concern for formal and or poetic re-writing should dominate; The original reads:

Bronze by gold heard the hoofrons, steelyrining
Imperthnln thntrhnhn
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.
Horrid! And gold flushed more.
A husky fifenote blew.
Blew. Blue bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair.
A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of
Castille.(328-9)

likewise, the Turkish too reads like poetry:

Altın ile Bronz atnallarının çelik tingirtisini işittiler.
Küstahtah tahtahtah.
Taşkesmiş başparmakırnağından çentik çentik kopararak çentikler.
İğrenç! İşte altının kırkıımı kesildi daha da.
Güçlü bir düdük sesi öttü.
Öttü. Göktü akan çiçeklerin rengi.
Altıntepeli saçı.
Saten göğsünde bir gül hoplandı, Castile Gülü.
Terennüm et, terennüm et:Idolores. (298)

The translator uses imaginative interpretation, to newly forge in the target language those coined onomatopoeic terms in the source text, such as “steelyrining” “imperthhua thuththuth” as well as to turn alliterations, assonance and other, rhythm creating sound patterns as “chips, picking chips” “blue bloom” “Trilling trilling” into Turkish and the result is “çeliktangirtisi” “Küstahtah tahtahtah” “çentik çentik kopararak çentikler” and “terennüm et, terennüm et” which involve linguistic creativity and poetic imagination. Other poetic interpretations such as “Altıntepeli saçı” “Taşkesmiş başparmakırnağından” “Saten göğsünde bir gül hoplandı” demonstrate how the target language is forged by the source language tools, into meaning, keeping its foreignness at the same time.

The second extract is from the “Cyclops” chapter, chapter XII of the original text which begins with the recording of the monologue of a Dublin character who is speaking in local dialect filled with slang, the passage reads:

I was just passing the time of day with old Troy of the
D.M.P at the corner of Arbour hill there and be damned
but a bloody sweep came along and he near drove his
gear into my eye. I turned around to let him have the
weight of my tongue when who should I see dodging
along Stony Batter only Joe Hynes.
- Lo, Joe, says I. How are you blowing? Did you see
that bloody chimneysweep near shove my eye out with
his brush?
- Soot’s luck, says Joe. Who’s the old ballocks you
were talking to?
- Old Troy, says I, was in the force. I’m on two minds
not to give that fellow in charge for obstructing the
thoroughfare with his brooms and ladders.
- What are you doing round those parts? says Joe.
- Devil a much, says I. There is a bloody big foxy thief beyond by the garrison church at the corner of chicken Lane- old Troy was just giving me wrinkle about him lifted any God’s quantity of tea and sugar to pay three bob a week said he had a farm in the county Down off a hop of my thumb by the name of Moses Herzog over there near Heytesbury street. (376)

and the Turkish text reads:

ARBOUR HILL’IN KÖŞESİNDEN D.M.P’DEN BABA Troy’la laflayıp vakit geçiriyorumdum kin, hay Allah manyak bi baca temizleyicisi geldi de süpürgesinin sopasını az daha gözümün içinde sokayızdı. Şöyle bi dönüvirdiyim kin Stony Batter’ın ordan kızının kızını tırayan Joe Hynes’i görmek miyim?
- Ula, Joe diyiverdim. Burde ne poh yiyon? O pezevenk baca temizleyicisinin sopasını az da håli gözümü soğuğunu gördün müydi, la?
- Süpürge sopası uğur getirir, dimesin mi Joe? Tebinçek konuştuğun o yaşlı dümbelek de kim?
- Baba Troy, diyiverdim, polisti eskiden. Süpürgerlerin merdivenleriyan caddeyi tıkayan o herifi mahkemeye virsem mi, virmesem mi deyşi düşünüyorum.
- Buralarda ne işin var? Diyiverdi Joe.
- Hemi de pek çok işlem va, dediydim. Chicken Lane köşesindeki Kışla Kilisesi’nin ötesinde bi pezevenk köpüglü hırsız türemiş- baba Troy onun hakkında tuyo vırdıdı bana az önce- haftada üç şilin sayıp Heytesbury Street’in orde Moses Herzog adında boy fukarı bir heriften kıyamet kadayi çayı şekeri yürütüyormuş dediydi de County Down da bi çiftliği varmış da. (337)

The Turkish translation demonstrates how the translator negotiates between the two cultures to achieve meaning in the target text yet still be true to the original. The translator uses an Anatolian dialect, its grammatical and phonetic distortions of standart Turkish to render the ignorant and vulgar speech of the speaker, which is also scattered with slang of a most vulgar kind. Though seemingly assimilative the combination of the two is the slang and the dialect in Turkish as in “Tebinçek konuştuğun o yaşlı dümbelek de kim?” where “tebincek” is dialect and “dümbelek” slang and as in “tuyo vırdıdı” where tuyo is slang and “vırdıdı” dialect form of the word, create a strangeness, but successfully define the character type of the speaker. Cultural equivalence is sought for in translations of slang words; for example “How are you blowing” is translated as “Burda ne poh yiyon”, “dodging along” as “kışın kışın tırayan” “the old ballocks” as “o yaşlı dümbelek”. Erkmen translates a word like “bloody” in a number of different ways, the first “bloody” is “manyak” and the second is “pezevenk” in the dialect spelling of the word. This combination of Anatolian dialect with city slang further clashes with Dublin character names such as Joe Hymes or Stony Batter and Dublin place and street names in which the word street is kept in English its Heytesbury street not Heytesbury sokağı. Though in Turkish, the text prevents the reader from reading it with complacency and comfort jarring him to an awareness of its many levels and an awarenes of the source language and culture.

But it should also be noticed that, the bringing together of a dialect of the target language with a slangy target language register in the target text, could not possibly have been written by the original author. Thus, in this case, the strangeness works both ways.
The 3rd extract is from chapter XIV, known as the “Oxen of the Sun” episode:
Jennifer Levin in her essay “Ulysses” (qtd. in ed. Attridge, 1990) reads the episode as a chapter in which Joyce is playing at writing by imitating the styles of great English writers and claims that the reader needs to recognize “that the styles keep changing, and that they follow each other in chronological order” (149). The extract from the original is as follows:

Universally that person’s acumen is esteemed very little perceptive concerning whatsoever matters are being held as most profitably by mortals with sapience endowed to be studied who is ignorant of that which the most in doctrine erudite and certainly by reason of that in them high mind’s ornament deserving of veneration constantly maintain when by general consent they affirm that other circumstances being equal by no exterior splendour is the prosperity of a nation more efficaciously asserted than by the measure of how far forward may have progressed the tribute of its solictude for that proliferent continuance which of evils the original if it be absent when fortunately present constitutes the certain sign of omnipollent nature’s incorrupted benefaction. For who is there who anything of some significance has apprehe nded but is conscious that exterior splendour may be the surface of a downward tending lutulent reality or… (500)

And the Turkish text reads:

Kendilerine akıl ihsan olunmuş faniler için en menfaat bahş farz edilen mevzuların kaffesine müteallik ol allameler bu doktrinler arasında insan zihninde en muteber mevkii işgal etmesi ıktiza etmesi hasebiyle biteviye serdederler ve ittifakı umumiyeyle beyan eylerler kim diğer şerait müsavi oldukça bir milletin ikbali eksikliği azım bir şer bereket kim mevcudiyeti velut tabiatın en nafız bir nimet olan tenasülün idamesine verdiği ehemmiyetin tekamülü nisbetinden gayri hiçbir harici ihtısalma tesiiri bir şekilde beyan edilemez ve alemsümul olarak bunad bıha ber olarak ol şahsın hassei selimesi ile idrak kabiliyeti pek çözü addolunur. Ve evvela bu mevzuun derununa biraz nüfuz etmiş bulunan bir kimse idrak etmiş olmayacak mıdır kim ol zahrı ihtişam insanın inkırasına sebebiyet veren kompleks bir realitenin sathi olmasın veya bu (431)

The prosaic and formal quality and the textuality of the original poses serious challenges to the translator. The English styles that follow one another in the chapter are not really fully recognizable, especially so since they are both imitation and parody and since the episode itself is a metaphor for the development and the breakdown of language.

Erkmen solves the problem by imitating the styles and manner of Ottoman Turkish, which is seeped in archaisms, and is under the influence of Arabic and Persian languages, their certain structures and vocabulary; for example such words as alemsümul, şerait, velut, mevzu, kaffe, allame, müteallik, iktiza, etc. and such structure as “hassei selimesi” and such phrases as “muteber mevkii işgal etmesi iktiza etmesi” “mevcudiyeti velut tabiatın en nafız bir nimeti” are a combination of Arabic with Turkish which comprises the Ottoman Turkish. In this particular extract he is using the decorous, elaborate style of the Ottoman state and
courtly discourse and the elevated style of the Ottoman intelligentsia, which often favors the elaborate at the expense of the meaningful.

The drunken speeches or streams of thought of Stephen and his friends as rendered in the original episode are sophisticated, loaded with a variety of information of a bookish kind, artificial and show-offish and continue at some length without a full stop. Both the Turkish and English styles meet on these points, though the two discourses are culturally widely different from one another, the translator’s choice of Ottoman Turkish is justified since the continual putting off of meaning and comprehensibility is the ultimate aim in the extract.

The styles of Ottoman discourses as used in the text, too are imitations, and parody the original. This choice of style paradoxically both familiarizes and defamiliarizes the text to the modern Turkish reader, though part of the Turkish cultural heritage, the Ottoman discourse makes reference to a totally different historical and cultural context than that of the modern reader and that of the source text too. Strangeness is created both ways, the reader is prevented from reading the text in complacency and a cultural hybridity is created.

Now we can go back to Philip E. Lewis’s words mentioned in the introduction in which he claims that “the strongest kind of translation is one which introduces its own target language abuses into the abusive source language text” (134-5) and say, that by these standards, Erkmen’s translation is the strongest kind of translation, since he does not conform to standard target language usage, he has created in Salman Rushdie’s words “an empowering condition of hybridity” by living on the borderlines of both cultures and his text has “strangeness” as opposed to familiarity, which is considered counter- hegemonic, a quality which Joyce’s own text possesses.

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