

GAINED IN TRANSLATIONS: JAMES CLARENCE MANGAN

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Abstract

The Irish poet and translator James Clarence Mangan was of the opinion that the translator's role was not simply to mirror the original poem to the best of their abilities in the target language, but rather to improve on the original. In addition to translating the text from one language to another, Mangan would take it upon himself to criticize the work in the same process. Compared to the majority of both Mangan's contemporaries and present day translators, he had a very free and unique approach to translation. So much so that the original poem in some instances is barely recognizable in the finished translation, leading to a discussion about whether his translations are in fact translations or should rather be considered imitations.

James Clarence Mangan was born, lived his whole life and died in the city of Dublin, and one apocryphal trip to Germany aside only ventured beyond its city limits once for a visit to a nearby village. Without travelling outside Ireland, Mangan travelled the world through literature: reading, writing and translating from a wide variety of languages – only some of which he actually spoke. In an essay introducing a collection of Mangan's prose writings, Lionel Johnson describes Mangan's life as "a life of dreams and misery and madness, yet of a self pity that does not disgust us, and of a weakness which is innocent; it seems the haunted, enchanted life of one drifting through his days in a dream of other days and other worlds, golden and immortal" (Johnson 1904, p. xi). Being mostly self-taught about the world and its languages, Mangan could create his own image of foreign places and people based on what he read. When translating a poem he would not just reproduce the poem as best he could from source to target language, but rather attempt to place himself in the position of the poet and let it inspire him to create the best poem he could write, around the original poem's skeleton. Mangan's view on the role of the translator is quite unique: the discussion of a good translation versus a poor translation often revolves around the readability of the translated text and how faithful the finished product is to the original. Mangan, however, believed that the role of the translator is to improve upon the original text and make the best text possible for the reader in the target language – at times with little regards to the source text.

As a general rule, Mangan's contemporaries considered the primary duty of the translator to be "accuracy and fidelity to the original". In Melissa Fegan's words "Mangan was in profound disagreement with this [...] suggesting the translation superseded the original. The translation, he argues, could be a more significant work than the original text" (Fegan 2003, p. 205). Already balancing on a line between confident and arrogant, "Mangan argues that the translator cannot be held responsible for the author's deficiencies" and that "the translator must polish and improve where he can" (Fegan 2003, p. 205). Fegan summarizes the goal of this unorthodox translation method in that "[t]he authenticity of the text is less significant than the pleasure its transformation affords to translator and reader (Fegan 2003, p. 205).

Don Paterson describes the difference between a more traditional translation and what is sometimes referred to as "a version": where the translation attempts "to remain true to the original words and their relations" the versions try "to be poems in their own right; while they have the original to serve as detailed ground plan and elevation, they are trying to build themselves a robust home in a new country, in its vernacular architecture, with local words for its brick and local music for its mortar" (Venuti 2011, p. 233). Instead of attempting to create the same reading experience of the poem in the target language as the reader has in the source

language, translators of this school take it upon themselves to create their own poetry with the source material as an inspiration, background or skeleton to further develop their poem around. Lawrence Venuti writes that “[v]ariously called a ‘translation’ or ‘adaption’, an ‘imitation’ or ‘version’, the resulting text derives from a specified source, but it may depart so widely from that source as to constitute a wholesale revision that answers primarily to the poet-translator’s literary interests, or it may involve a source language of which the poet has limited knowledge or is completely ignorant, therefore requiring the use of a close rendering prepared by a native informant, an academic specialist or a professional translator” (Venuti 2011, p. 230). Both of these arguments fit Mangan’s translations: his primary literary interest was to create quality poetry attracting a local readership of texts often written in times and places remote from 19th century Ireland. Although Mangan had an impressive grasp of several European languages – such as German, French and Italian – he also translated from languages he was not familiar with – such as Arabic and the Nordic languages. He would then have to base his translations on the already existing translations, of the original poems, in a language he mastered.

An issue Venuti argues arrived with the emergence of the “version” is that this form of translation is “ethically questionable” (Venuti 2011, p. 230). In an age where few people would have access to the source and target text in order to compare, the fact that Mangan was not forthright about what he was doing (passing his translations off as faithful to the original poems) and seeing as many of the poems Mangan translated were from another century or continent, it is unlikely the question of how ethical his translations were was brought to light, but our access today to both his original sources and his final products give us a clearer perspective – closer to that of Mangan’s own perspective on the issue. Compared to the more classic translator role, Mangan put a great deal of agency in his own, claiming “I *must* write in a variety of styles [...] When I write as a Persian, I feel as a Persian” (Fegan 2003, p. 199). Instead of trying to reproduce the original poem faithfully, Mangan would place himself in the poet’s shoes and write an improved version of the poem in his own voice. Melissa Fegan comments that “[t]he translator – particularly the translator of Oriental poetry – is a hawker of stolen or counterfeit goods, valuing only what he can sell to an indiscriminating audience” (Fegan 2003, p. 203). Along these lines Mangan hawked the material from the original poems that he believed he could repackage and sell in his own voice to an English speaking, predominantly Irish, readership.

One of the languages Mangan translated from was the native language of his country: Irish. At the point he started translating poetry from Irish, he did not read the language but he did achieve some comprehension of it later in his career. Initially Mangan based his translations

of Irish poetry on already existing translations in English. As he considered the translator's role to write an improved version of the poem – the best poem possible – he would then rewrite the already translated poem with the purpose of creating better poetry without being able to take the original poem into consideration.

A good example of Mangan's translations from Irish is his most famous poem "Dark Rosaleen". This was a nationalistic poem disguised as a love song at a time when nationalistic expression was outlawed in Ireland. In translation the poem signified even more of a rebellion, a nationalistic message cleverly cloaked in their oppressor's tongue. What makes this poem a great example in a discussion about Mangan's controversial translation technique is not the poem itself, but the fact that he made two additional translations based on the Irish original "Roisin Dubh". The three poems show three different approaches, by one translator, to one original poem. Comparing these three poems by Mangan is not an exercise in finding differences, but rather in identifying similarities.

Starting with a title, which Mangan changed for each version, playing with the original and the Anglicized words from the Irish title "roisin dubh": all three titles relate to the general image of a dark rose ("dark" or "black-haired"). Where two of the titles use the diminutive of a rose (the name "Rosaleen" or the phrase "little rose") the third simply uses the word "rose". Where the most famous translation of the poem "Dark Rosaleen" uses the completely Anglicized "Dark Rosaleen" when referring to the addressee of the poem, "Little Black-Haired Rose" uses the half Anglicized "Dark Roisin" and "Black-Haired Fair Rose" uses the original Irish "Roisin Dubh".

When it comes to the form of the poem, the differences are quite apparent between "Dark Rosaleen" on one hand and the two later translations on the other. While "Black-Haired Fair Rose" and "Little Black-Haired Rose" are almost identical in form – 6 stanzas of 4 lines with the rhyme scheme aabc for "Black-Haired Fair Rose" and aabb for "Little Black-Haired Rose" – "Dark Rosaleen" consist of 7 stanzas of 12 lines with the rhyme scheme "ababcdcdcc", also using slant rhymes in some of the stanzas.

Not just the choice of words and the length of the poem differ from one to another, but also the content and plot of the poem.

While "Little Black-Haired Rose" starts off on quite a depressing note with the lines:

"O, bitter woe, that we must not go across the sea!

O, grief of griefs, that Lords and Chiefs their homes must flee!

A tyrant-band o'erruns the land, this land so green,

And, though we grieve, we still must leave our Dark *Roisin!*"

“Black-Haired Fair Rose” sounds more positive with the initial lines:

“Since last night’s star, afar, afar, Heaven saw my speed;
I seem’d to fly o’er mountains high, on magic steed;
I dashed through Erne: - the world may learn the cause from *Love*;
For, light or sun shone on me none, but *Roisin Dubh!*”

Followed by the rather hopeful intro to “Dark Rosaleen”:

“O MY Dark Rosaleen,
Do not sigh, do not weep!
The priests are on the ocean green,
They march along the deep.
There 's wine from the royal Pope,
Upon the ocean green;
And Spanish ale shall give you hope,
My Dark Rosaleen!
My own Rosaleen!
Shall glad your heart, shall give you hope,
Shall give you health, and help, and hope,
My Dark Rosaleen!”

In all three poems, there is repetition of words and phrases, but they appear in different places and with different words. There are phrases that remind of each other, but are not the same, such as “Ere you shall pine, ere you decline” in “Black-Haired Fair Rose” and “Ere you can fade, ere you can die” in “Dark Rosaleen”.

While Mangan in “Dark Rosaleen” suggests that help and support for Ireland will come from both Rome and Spain:

“There’s wine from the royal Pope,
upon the ocean green;
And Spanish ale shall give you hope
My Dark Rosaleen”

he only mentions “the Pope from Rome” in “Black-Haired Fair Rose” and “distant Spain” in “Little Black Haired Rose”. Evidently, Mangan picks and chooses what he passes on from the original text to create the poem he envisions – a good poem rather than one true to the original. How the three poems are so different in content and form when they all stem from the same original gives the reader a good idea of how liberal James Clarence Mangan was in his translation of poetry. The interest in looking at Mangan’s translations, and his translation of

this poem specifically, does not lie in its mysterious origins and the possibility of lost authenticity, but rather its multiple destinations and versionings.

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