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Translating imaginary territories in fantasy short fiction

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Biography: Marie Perrier has studied Irish literature and translation studies at the university of Lille, France. She passed the national competitive exam « Agrégation » in English in 2012 and has worked as a literary translator. She is currently working on a Ph.D. thesis about the translation and transmission of myth in fantasy literature, focusing on the links and influences between two writers, the Irish Lord Dunsany and the American H.P. Lovecraft.

Abstract: Translating a text set in an imaginary world poses specific problems to the translator, since the original often indirectly builds on cultural bearings to create a setting both related to reality and endowed with its own peculiarities and exotic features. The translator will need to find the same thin balance between familiarity and strangeness so as to allow its reader to enter the imaginary world. This paper article will focus on a precursor of the genre of fantasy, the Irish writer Lord Dunsany. Instead of a tapestry whose threads become invisible, his imaginary world is built like a tessellated literary body. Coherence and identity are no to be found in a wealth of details and lengthy descriptions, but in powerful, striking nodes of meaning. A few examples from the various translations of his early tales into French will help us show that this in turn becomes a challenge to the translator, who has to identify these nodes and translate them, finding a new balance in fragmentation which still allows the reader to grasp the ethereal unity of Dunsany's imaginary territory.

Keywords

translation

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Since it was popularized by Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the second half of the twentieth century, the genre of fantasy has been championed by very long narratives which strive to create extremely detailed imaginary settings, both lands of the impossible and credible coherent backgrounds. However, fantasy is not irreconcilable with short fiction. This article will focus on a precursor of the genre, the Irish author Lord Dunsany who began his career by writing collections of short-stories set in mythical lands. Instead of a tapestry whose threads become invisible, his imaginary world is built like a fragmented and tessellated literary body. Coherence and identity are no to be found in a wealth of details and lengthy descriptions, but in powerful, striking nodes of meaning, some of them as obvious as proper names or invented words, some as subtle as recurring rhythms or sound games.

Translating a text set in such an imaginary world poses specific problems to the translator, since the original often indirectly builds on cultural bearings to create a setting both related to reality and endowed with its own peculiarities and exotic features. The translator will need to find the same thin balance between familiarity and strangeness so as to allow its reader to enter the imaginary world. A few examples from the various translations of Dunsany's early tales into French will help us show that this in turn becomes a challenge to the translator, who has to identify these nodes and translate them, finding a new balance in fragmentation which still allows the reader to grasp the ethereal unity of Dunsany's imaginary territory.

I. Fantasy worlds of earth and sea

Lord Dunsany began his literary career in 1905 with the publication of *The Gods of Pegāna*, a collection of short stories describing his own original pantheon of deities. It seemed in keeping with the Irish tendency of the Literary Revival which entailed the collecting and rewriting of Irish myths, legends and folk-tales according to a political agenda of cultural independence. *The Gods of Pegāna*'s title was reminiscent of Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men*, a personal version of the legends of the Tuatha de Danaan, published just one year before in 1904. But the strange diacritic on *Pegāna* reminded one of Greco-Roman metrics, not of specifically Gaelic or Celtic roots, and the name itself evoked either an

indistinct primitive time (by its paronymic proximity to the word ‘pagan’) or a prehistoric remote past of universal myth (if we read it as an anagram of ‘Pangea’).

Dunsany kept elaborating his own fantasy universe in the following collections of tales he published until the First World War, and he is now mostly known as a forefather of modern fantasy and a notable influence on J.R.R Tolkien, who is widely considered as the creator of the genre itself. Tolkien’s success made his work a reference of the characteristics of world-making in fantasy, which he defined in an essay entitled ‘On Fairy-Stories’ where he introduced the notion of the Secondary World, the world of fiction, and its relationship to the Primary World:

Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World. (Tolkien 1947: 8)

Enchantment, which stands for magic, is considered as the essence of the fantasy world, but also needs to be related to our everyday reality. As an historian and linguist, Tolkien achieved this by designing an extremely rich, structured and detailed fictional world, complete with cosmogony, history, religions, languages, and accompanied with a scholarly apparatus of footnotes, maps, glossaries, appendices, tables, etc. In other words, the enchantment of Middle-Earth comes from abundance, from discovering that there is always more to it, and in perfect coherence with what one already knew. Most fantasy novels now are based on this model, frequently extending over trilogies or even more voluminous cycles. By Tolkien’s principles, fantasy is a literature of impossibility where the power of invention may be unleashed, but also needs consistency as it unfolds. In the recent study *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark Wolf states that ‘if a secondary world is to be believable and interesting, it will need to have a high degree of invention, completeness, and consistency.’ But each of these criteria both encourages and limits the use of the other two, which is why ‘all three properties must be considered simultaneously as the world takes shape and develops’ (Wolf 2013: 34).

In Dunsany’s case, there was no lack in invention, as made obvious by the numerous exotic names, be they places, objects or characters, and their colourful descriptions. Though his plots may sound familiar to a modern reader, Dunsany was a pioneer in writing such ‘stories of gods and heroes, magicians, and exotic cities of the “East” or “at the edge of the world”’, stories that ‘have had an immense influence on subsequent fantasy and are the immediate ancestors of much contemporary sword and sorcery or heroic fantasy’ (Schweitzer 2013: 55). However, in terms of completeness and consistency, Dunsany breaks the rules: his

fantasy world is unstable and changing like myths from oral tradition, with various versions, sometimes even redundant or contradictory. No matter how rich the invention, one can never know if his world is becoming more complete, because its boundaries are open, and can therefore never be entirely explored. To Tolkien's solid *Middle-Earth*, a territory with fixed boundaries and a solid timeline, we can therefore oppose Dunsany's *Central Sea*, which is the starting point of *The Gods of Pegāna*'s prologue: 'There be islands in the Central Sea, whose waters are bounded by no shore and where no ships come -- this is the faith of their people.' (Dunsany 2000: 534) Both names are vague and generic, but contrary to Tolkien's, Dunsany's locus is multiple, in the form of an archipelago where each story is like an island, and in-between is a liquid desert, unknown and untraveled, with all the dangers and fears that entail the powerful image of the sea. In short, Tolkien creates territories, whereas Dunsany depicts places, in the sense Patrick Chamoiseau has given to these terms:

A place is open and thrives on this openness; a Territory erects borders. The place can be moved, it acknowledges and activates its multiple sources; the unblinking Territory braces against its unique root. The Place pertains to Diversity; the Territory imposes Universality. The Place can only be perceived as a thousand stories entangled; the Territory gains strength from one History. (Chamoiseau 1997: 205-206. My translation.)

Dunsany relies on the short format to depict not a coherent and stable background but a world that remains loose and changing. The format of the short-story cycle here enhances the theme of isolation and fragmentation, creating a kaleidoscopic effect of refraction. How then does he allow the reader to connect with his unstable imaginary world?

First of all, the titles and prefaces of his collections create a unity based on a unity of place and logic of dreams that prevents the reader from seeing each story as independent but leads him to expect the stories to be connected to a certain degree, creating cycles. It has been pointed out that 'central to the dynamics of the short story cycle is the tension between the one and the many' (Forrest Ingram, quoted in Mann 1989: 18); indeed, multitude is a challenge to the reader of Dunsany's tales, for there is a risk that the tremendous amount of exotic names – gods, kingdoms, cities, mountains, rivers – will represent too much information to process. In a Tolkien-like narrative, one would need a glossary, because each name would fit in the overall narrative. But there would be no point in doing so with Dunsany, since he seldom makes the names recurrent from one tale to the other. He keeps inventing new ones, ephemeral and transient, displaying the joy of naming things with sheer creativity, unbound by previous occurrences of names, and this is where the essence of his world and style lie. The reader therefore has to accept being carried away by the flow of the

narration, from one name to the other like old Irish heroes sailed from one wondrous island to the next in the traditional sea-voyage tales, or *Imrammas*. Dunsany progressively creates a sense of familiarity through other devices than narrative coherence, founded on orality and repetition with variation: the names are different but sound patterns and rhythms create a sense of unity (Assarnees / Poltarnees / Plegathanees, the Yann river / the desert of Azrakhan / Istahn / Zahn / Ozhan / the prophet Syrahn).

It thus appears that the short format is not incompatible with the creation of a powerful Secondary World, albeit one very different from those that the genre of fantasy has made us familiar with today. Most readers turn to Dunsany because they are already infatuated with the genre, and are bound to feel unsettled by the Irish lord's versatility and his multifaceted world. His work is like a mosaic or a tessellated work of art. He has been compared to an impressionist whose tales blur the edges of reality: 'a typical Dunsany story is like a painting which breaks down into dots and globs of paint if one examines it closely' (Schweitzer 1989: 15). This kaleidoscopic effect is one of Dunsany's tool for creating a sense of wonder, which is the essence of fantasy and a challenge for the translator to recreate for a different readership in a different literary field

II. Dunsanian worlds in translation

The preceding considerations take relevance when considered within the context of the survival of the literary work, which depends on its diffusion and availability to new readerships, including in other countries, entailing linguistic translation. What and how to translate are pivotal questions, translation being the most usual mode of reading foreign fiction, and most readers will not turn to the original to draw comparisons. Therefore, the translated text is likely to stand as a strictly faithful representation of the original in their mind.

In the case of short fiction, representation begins with the editorial choice of format, title, and the selection of the texts, which give the stories various frames that whet the reader's appetite for some aspects of the original, on a metonymic mode at the macroscopic level.

Such metonymies are to be found in the way that translation is always a partial process, whereby some but not all of the ST is transposed, and in the way that translations represent STs by highlighting specific segments or parts, or by allowing specific attributes of the STs to dominate and, hence, to represent the entirety of the work. (Tymoczko 1999: 282)

Moreover, the translator has to make microscopic choices as well as he works his way through the source-text, by choosing which aspects of the original will be retained. Each of these individual choices is like an island of meaning within the mosaic of Lord Dunsany's world, considering its fragmented nature, and each translation will therefore present a slightly different facet of this universe, as we shall see thanks to two examples.

1. Sprinkling reality within fantasy

With Dunsany, the Primary and Secondary World's relationship is fluctuating; they can be geographically distinct, and sometimes the otherworld is more of a symbolic dreamland, either personal or shared collectively. This makes it important for the translator to distinguish sprinkled references to real places within the dream world as important nodes of meaning.

My first example comes from the story 'In the Twilight'. The narrator has fallen off a boat and, drowning, sees visions of his past taking him back to the world of childhood. The Secondary world is here metaphorical, built up on a lyrical crescendo of emotions and the slow evocation of Ireland. The title itself is strongly connoted, since the Irish Revival was also known as the Celtic Twilight, after a book by Yeats which ended on a poem called 'Into the Twilight'. Throughout the story, Dunsany sprinkles his text with other words where one can read connotations of Ireland. Here is for instance the first sentence of the story:

The *lock* was quite crowded with boats when we capsized. (Dunsany 2000: 181)

Two of the three existing French translations have the word *lock* translated quite unproblematically as *l'écluse*, but Patrick Reumaux chose to render it as *le loch*. We can assume he favoured the rendering of the Gaelic connotation enclosed in the sound proximity between the English *lock* and the Irish *lough* even at the cost of slightly distorting the denotated meaning. However, the French reader will most likely think of Scotland and its famous *Loch Ness*, and might not be aware of the common etymology that would allow him to relate this term to Ireland.

Later on the narrator has visions of the Bog of Allen, where he reconnects to his childhood and all his senses are gradually overwhelmed with feelings of Ireland, via the colour of the mosses, the smell of the burning turf, and finally the sounds that he ends up associating with his native country. Let us compare the three French translations of this passage:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| <p>And far away there arose and came nearer the weird cry of wild and happy voices, and a flock of geese appeared that was coming from the northward. Then their cries blended into one great voice of exultation, the voice of freedom, the voice of Ireland, the voice of the Waste; and the voice said ‘Goodbye to you. Goodbye!’ and passed away into the distance; and as it passed, the tame geese on the farms cried out to their brothers up above them that they were free. Then the hills went away, and the bog and the sky went with them, and I was alone again, as lost souls are alone. (Dunsany, 2000: 184)</p> | <p>Et au loin s’éleva un cri mystérieux de voix sauvages et heureuses, qui s’approcha lorsqu’une bande d’oies apparut venant du grand Nord. Alors tous ces cris se mêlèrent en un grand concert d’exultations, la voix de la liberté, la voix de la lande sauvage, et toutes ces voix disaient : « Au revoir à toi, au revoir. » Puis cette grande voix passa et s’effaça dans le lointain ; et tandis que la horde s’éloignait, les oies des fermes répondaient à leurs frères sauvages. Alors les collines disparurent, et les marais et le ciel avec eux, et j’étais seul de nouveau, comme les âmes perdues sont seules. (Trans. Julien Green. Dunsany 1991: 212)</p> | <p>Très loin, monta et s’approcha le cri étrange d’heureuses voix gutturales, tandis qu’apparaissait un vol d’oies sauvages venant du nord. Les cris devinrent une seule voix exultante, la voix de la liberté, la voix de l’Irlande, la voix du Désert, et la voix dit « Au revoir. Au revoir ! » et s’éloigna dans la distance. Et, comme elle s’éloignait, les oies domestiques dans les fermes saluèrent d’un cri leurs sœurs là-haut, qui étaient libres. Puis les collines s’en allèrent, et la tourbière et le ciel s’en allèrent avec elles, et je fus de nouveau seul, comme le sont les âmes perdues. (Trans. Patrick Reumaux. Dunsany 2011: 271)</p> | <p>Et dans le lointain s’éleva, puis s’approcha le cri étrange que lançaient des voix sauvages et joyeuses, et une bande d’oies parut qui venait du Nord. Et leurs cris se mêlèrent en une seule, exultante voix, la voix de la liberté, la voix de l’Irlande, la voix de la Solitude ; et la voix disait : « Adieu à toi, adieu ! », et s’en fut dans le lointain ; et sur son passage, les oies domestiques, dans les fermes, crièrent à leurs sœurs, haut dans le ciel, qu’elles étaient libres. Puis les collines s’en furent, et la tourbière et le ciel s’en furent avec elles, et je fus à nouveau seul, comme sont seules les âmes perdues. (Trans. Anne-Sylvie Homassel. Dunsany 2004: 78)</p> |
|---|---|---|---|

In the source-text, several stylistic effects contribute to the powerful lyricism of the passage: the multiplicity of voices merging into unity via the incantatory repetition of the word ‘voice’, no less than six times, and each time having another qualifier (‘of exultation’, ‘of freedom’, ‘of Ireland’, ‘of the Waste’), which makes all these words part of the same web of meaning associated with one reality. There is a final echo of characteristic Irishness at the end, just before the fantasy world fades away; with the word ‘bog’.

The capital letter to ‘the Waste’ is significant, especially since the term is a key-word of Dunsany’s literary idiolect. It thus provides a link between this individual story and others; the careful reader may then realize that in the Dunsanian language, the word ‘Waste’ carries undertones of Ireland, and this may apply even in stories with no reference to the Primary World. This is but one of Dunsany’s ‘pet-words’, a word that ‘finds its way again and again into the work and provides a key to its author’s temperament.’ (Miller 2004) Laura Miller identifies ‘little’ as the most significant of Dunsany’s pet-words but Max Duperray has pointed out a number of other recurrent terms or phrases: ‘exiled’, ‘the fields we know’,

‘shadow’, ‘prophecy’, ‘as they had prophesied’, ‘dream’, ‘stream’, ‘home’, ‘beyond’ (Duperray 1979: 161, 176, 191, 291). Being part of the Dunsanian idiolect, these words represent a challenge to the translator who needs to spot them not only within a story, but also throughout collections, and even from one book to the other. Then he may choose one strict equivalent in French or resort to variation, hence risking losing this incantatory aspect of the original prose.

Julien Green’s translation plays down the Irish connotations of this passage: the *bog* becomes a more generic ‘swamp’ (‘marais’), and, more importantly, Green erases the segment ‘the voice of Ireland’ from his translation, which destroys the building up of a connotation at the macroscopic scale. There is something of the Celtic cliché in the choice of ‘la lande sauvage’ (the moorland) for ‘the Waste’, and it connotes a romantic feeling that minimizes the sense of utter desolation of the source-word. ‘The Waste’ is actually very tricky to translate into French since it connotes both a natural expanse – a desert – and the decay of civilization and industry, garbage, ruins, a fall from grace, etc. The Wasteland is also a strong motif of Celtic literature, referring to a land cursed with barrenness and famine, which is of course of particular resonance with nineteenth-century Irish history (see Nitze, 1945). Both P. Reumaux and A.-S. Homassel tried to find a one-word target equivalent to maintain the dramatic effect of the capital letter. The former chose ‘la voix du Désert’ (*the voice of the Desert*), which reduces the richness of connotations but at the same time, does resonate with Dunsany’s other tales, especially his Arabian Nights-flavoured stories. A.-S. Homassel translates it as ‘la voix de la Solitude’ (*the voice of Loneliness*), favouring a more abstract feeling that sums up the atmosphere of the tale, the narrator being gradually abandoned by all his memories as he is drowning and dying. In French, in a somewhat dated literary language, the word *solitude* can also metonymically refer to a desert place, which may account for this choice.

To conclude, depending on the translation one reads, the fantasy Ireland that is created through stylistic devices and imagery will be more or less in keeping with the lyricism of a Romantic tradition, more or less linked to the rest of the Dunsanian world or to one’s own preconception of Ireland and Irishness.

2. The underlying principles of the mythopoeic fantasy world

My second example stems from the mythopoeic character of Dunsany’s prose itself on the one hand, and from what may be considered an irreducible difference between the languages on the other. In a number of tales, when mimicking the mythic mode of classical literature, Dunsany often personifies the forces of nature to use them as godlike characters. This is

conveyed in the text by the use of a capital letter which turns the phenomenon into a proper name and by using gendered pronouns instead of the impersonal *it*. This may pose two problems in French, where all nouns are assigned a given gender by default. First, even if Dunsany's choice of gender happens to be the right one in French, the visual marker of the personal pronoun where one would expect the impersonal will pass unnoticed. Second, the translator may have to change the character's gender, not to offend the logic of the French.

In all of Dunsany's French translations, no translator has dared to break this grammatical rule. In 'Night and Morning', Dunsany has the masculine Night tell stories to the feminine Morning, which is consistent with an earlier story where the Dawn was a little girl. A.-S. Homassel inverts the two genders: 'our Lord the Night' becomes 'Notre maîtresse la nuit' ('Our Mistress the night'). There is no incidence on the narrative itself, but each occurrence of this stylistic process is a way for Dunsany to consolidate his pseudo-mythological world and breathing life into divinized natural forces. This is a subtle way of creating unity and consistency as well as enchantment, easily lost in translation.

For instance, let us focus on the Sea, since we have seen it is one of the most pregnant motifs of Dunsany's fantasy world. In the story 'Poltarnees, beholder of the Ocean', the young men of a kingdom surrounded by mountains keep leaving their homes, crossing the mountains to behold the sea, and none ever come back. The hero Athelvok has promised his fiancée, the princess, that she is more beautiful than the sea and that he will come back after he has understood why. He eventually gets across the mountain and there discovers the sea:

And there below him was the **old wrinkled Sea**, smiling and murmuring song. And **he nursed** little ships with gleaming sails, and in **his hands** were old regretted wrecks, and mast all studded over with golden nails that **he had rent in anger** out of beautiful galleons. (...)At that moment the Sea sang a dirge at sunset for all **the harm that he had done in anger** and all the ruin wrought on adventurous ships; and there were tears in the voice of **the tyrannous Sea**, for **he** had loved the galleons that **he had overwhelmed**, and **he** called all men to him and all living things that **he** might make amends, because **he** had loved the bones that **he** had strewn afar. And Athelvok turned and set one foot upon the crumbled slope, and then another, and walked a little way to be nearer to **the Sea**, and then a dream came upon him and he felt that men had wronged **the lovely Sea** because **he had been angry** a little, because **he had been sometimes cruel**; he felt that there was trouble among the tides of the Sea because **he had loved the galleons who were dead**. (Dunsany 2000: 241-242)

Throughout this passage, the ambivalence of the Sea as a sublime masculine figure is striking: he is characterized both by his violence, reminiscent of when he was a young conqueror god, and by new emotions such as love and regret. Both Julien Green and A.-S.

Homassel translated this passage using the feminine, making the Sea appear as an old woman. This affects our reading on three levels.

First, it disrupts echoes of significance linked to previous tales from Dunsany's body of work, in which the Sea is almost systematically presented as endowed with masculine features. 'The Coming of the Sea' (*The Gods of Pegāna*) tells of the arrival of the god Slid 'whose Soul is in the Sea' as a foreign conqueror god who comes to brutally invade the first gods' lands. In *Time and the Gods*, he has become fully integrated into the pantheon ('A Story of the Dawn'). And even if he is not named in 'Poltarnees', we can feel the presence of this figure, although older now, at the end of the tale. Such a connexion cannot be made if the reader is unaware of the gender shift that has been operated by the translator.

Second, feminizing the Sea alters the economy of the story itself; as it turns it into a seductive and whimsical siren ('la charmante Mer') and presents the princess and the Sea as rivals for the hero's love. The violence brings to mind the figure of a monstrous Charybdis, and the image of the old woman evokes a witch prone to fits of anger and hysterical destruction, even though she can also prove a benevolent and loving old mother. This distortion unravels the perception of the Sea as a symbol in the passage per se. Beholding the sea is here described as an experience not of physical or emotional love, but of the sublime, entailing both the fear of an overwhelming power and the fascination for a paradoxically frail and evanescent presence.

Finally, feminizing the Sea's violence alters our perception of the novelty of Dunsany's imagery. The Sea's destructive power appears weaker compared to the expressions of feminine love and the desire to atone, which are unexpected from a raging seagod, while it seems rather conventional for an old woman looking back at her life. Where the source-text challenged the traditional vengeful Poseidon figure through the subtle gender orientation, the French presents us with a more conventional figure. According to Maria Tymoczko 'human beings are not very good at hearing new stories: we have a tendency to reinterpret them, to reshape them so that they become versions of stories we already know' (Tymoczko 1999: 48). Even if the ambiguity of extreme violence and love juxtaposed is preserved, the originality of the image may be overlooked by the French reader who will associate this tale to patterns he knows, to representations of the Sea as a mother figure. From the subjectivity of the translator to the subjectivity of the target-reader, a detail such as gendered pronouns may therefore produce a significant change. The French version of the tale creates a different mythology than Dunsany's, hence a different fictional world.

Conclusion

Fantasy as a genre is considered as difficult to translate because of the specific discrepancy between its combined reliance on sheer imagination and realist techniques to ensure the reader's suspension of disbelief. Dunsany's fantasy short fiction takes us one step further into difficulty, since his imaginary worlds are plural and depends on stylistic devices and individual passages whose importance may be overlooked. The representation of the fictional universe will not be the same depending on whether the reader has read only one of Dunsany's tales, either isolated or within an anthology, one full collection or several of them. Only by becoming more and more familiar with his universe may the reader start seeing the meshes of echoes and fluctuant patterns of his prose. Contrary to Tolkien, Dunsany relies on repetition more than expansion; the elements that keep coming back constitute nodes of meaning, keys to the fantasy world. What makes him so special is that you don't need all the keys, or to find them in a specific order.

References to Ireland and mythopoeic personifications are but two examples of such nodes of meaning, and there are much more in Dunsany to which the translator is confronted: archaic language, metaphors, the building up of rhythm, the clues of oral storytelling, are all tessels of this great mosaic. Such a fragmented fictional world is challenging but also admirably fit for translation, and even multiple translations. The metonymic aspect of translation entails that, as one reads more than one version, the chances to identify new elements as key nodes of meaning increase. Reading fantasy short fiction in translation may help us forget about the age-old debate on faithfulness and loss unavoidable in translation and become more aware of the gain and richness that this rewriting act makes possible, giving us keys to open a virtually infinite number of doors on the Central Sea of mankind's imagination.

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