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The question of language: postcolonial translation in the bilingual collections of Nuala

Ní Dhomhnaill and Paul Muldoon

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The Irish-language poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill simultaneously defends Irish as a signifier of cultural authenticity and celebrates its fruitful cross-fertilization with other languages and their cultural cargo. Focusing on Paul Muldoon's translations of Ní Dhomhnaill, I treat the resulting bilingual collections as a case study for the ethical implications of translation in a postcolonial context where Irish is under threat. I consider the case of Irish-English translation in relation to models of postcolonial translation that advocate "foreignizing" Standard English by subjecting it to the structures of source languages. I suggest that Irish-English translators remain alert to the risk of "colonizing" Irish, employing "subversive literalism" to produce bilingual editions that promote a fruitful symbiosis of the colonizing and indigenous languages.

Keywords: Poetry translation, bilingualism, postcolonialism, Irish language, Paul Muldoon, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

One of the *Innti* group of Irish-language poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill insists on the relevance of the Irish language and its literary tradition to a national literature split between the recuperation of Celtic heritage and a modern European identity.¹ Ní Dhomhnaill is the first poet writing in modern Irish to win widespread international acclaim but, like many postcolonial writers, her renown depends on translation into English – the language of the former colonizer and of the Anglo-American cultural and economic hegemony that

superseded European colonialism. Unlike some Irish-language poets, who reject translation as compliance with the colonial dominance of English (Jenkinson 1991, 34), Ní Dhomhnaill allows Anglophone Irish poets to translate her work, as part of what she calls a “vocation to the missions” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005c, 200). The resulting bilingual editions bring modern Irish-language poetry to a wider audience. For Ní Dhomhnaill, her “missionary” work succeeds when these editions encourage Irish Anglophones to “pick up the long-lost threads of the language which is so rightly theirs” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 16). Frustrated by what she perceives as the prevailing “ambivalence and indifference” to Ireland’s indigenous language (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005c, 200), she has “set out clinically to create an atmosphere whereby poetry in Irish gets put on the cultural menu” (Ní Dhomhnaill, cited in Ní Fhrighil 2002, 146).

No Anglophone poet has translated Ní Dhomhnaill more frequently than Paul Muldoon. He is one of thirteen translators in the bilingual collection *Pharaoh’s Daughter* (1990), and the sole translator of two other bilingual collections, *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992) and *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007). Ní Dhomhnaill’s self-confessed “‘*laissez-faire*’ attitude” (Hollo 1998, 106-7) to translation has given Muldoon a mandate to rewrite, reflecting the paradigm shift in translation studies from an emphasis on “fidelity” to a demystification of the source text as a site of “original” meaning, and a rejection of Sisyphean attempts at equivalence (see Gentzler 2001; Snell-Hornby 2006, 47-68). Some critics and reviewers hear in Muldoon’s puckish, postmodern voice an imaginative homage to Ní Dhomhnaill’s Irish (Wheatley 2001; Bushe 2008); others decry what they see as gratuitous concessions to an Anglophone readership (Hollo 1999). This polarized response illuminates the ethical and ideological parameters governing translation from modern Irish into English, parameters drawn by Ireland’s status as a former colony in which the Irish language was pushed to the point of extinction.

Since languages construct and underpin cultures, translation is at once a linguistic and a cultural process. Ní Dhomhnaill’s bilingual editions can be understood as sites of an

asymmetrical linguistic and cultural power dynamic between the language and culture of the former British colonizer, on the one hand, and the indigenous language and culture of the once-colonized Irish on the other. Many critical analyses of postcolonial translation are not easily applicable to the case of Ireland, for they turn on a facile opposition of Europe to Non-European colonies, imagining the mother-tongues of subalterns as distinct from those of their colonizers. Yet although Irish is the official language of Ireland, only a minority of the population are fluent Irish speakers. In postcolonial Ireland, translators have been regarded as agents of colonialism but, as Maria Tymoczko has demonstrated, translation has also been “a site of resistance and nation building” (Tymoczko 1999, 21). In their respective analyses of the specific case of Irish-English translation, Tymoczko and Michael Cronin (1996) move beyond the traditional dichotomies of translation theory (free vs. faithful, fluent vs. literal, etc.) towards an understanding of particular strategies in context. Each concludes that, in Ireland’s struggle for political and cultural self-definition, no single translational strategy emerges as consistently complicit in, or resistant to, the imperial dominance of English.

The fact remains, however, that in the context of contemporary Ireland and its endangered *Gaeltacht* [Irish-speaking areas], Muldoon’s translations have specific implications and consequences. As Tymoczko rightly observes, no translator conforms to a single homogenous strategy (Tymoczko 1999, 55-6), but Muldoon’s approach might be broadly described in postmodernist terms as “multiple coding” (Calinescu 1987, 283-285). This approach is often made manifest in a collage of cultural and literary references from disparate Anglophone contexts, which seem designed to allude to, or reproduce synthetically, Ní Dhomhnaill’s references to Irish-language culture. Such a method of cultural analogy draws attention to the translational character of Muldoon’s text, but it also risks conflating minor forms of English, such as dialect or jargon, with the foreignness of Irish. As we shall see, this is especially the case when it operates in conjunction with the fluency of Muldoon’s English. In several translations, fluency and cultural analogy combine in a translational

strategy that threatens to “colonize” Ní Dhomhnaill’s source text by eliding the vast linguistic and conceptual distance travelled in translation from Irish to English.

The aim of this article is not to condemn Muldoon’s translations, which have considerable merit; rather, it is to analyse the potential effects of his translational strategy and compare it with an alternative strategy of “subversive literalism”. This latter strategy, which is often favoured by postcolonial translators, signals the otherness of the source language by subjecting the colonizing target language to its grammatical and conceptual structures. In the case of translation from Irish to English, literalism that Lawrence Venuti might describe as ‘foreignizing’ (Venuti 2008, 15-20) could be usefully combined with translational paratexts that elucidate the Irish language and its literary forms and culture, where the latter is understood as a conceptual framework and set of practices and values for which there are not necessarily equivalents in the Anglophone world. In postcolonial Ireland, where the ostensible native language is under threat, Muldoon’s practice of multiple coding would be usefully complemented by strategies that combine subversive literalism with paratextual commentary. By giving Anglophone readers some insight into the otherness of the Irish language and its attendant culture, such translational strategies would be important insofar as they would strive to make Irish audible above the clamour of English, promoting a holistic vision of the literature and culture of postcolonial Ireland.²

Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon: translation and the Irish language

Ní Dhomhnaill takes the view that, although poetry comes into being at the “fixed horizon” of a specific language, it alludes to truths beyond that horizon (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005c, 200). This neo-Romantic idea of poetry as a form of revelation sits uncomfortably with Muldoon’s corpus, which evinces a poststructuralist awareness of the self-undoing instability of language and the heterodoxy of textual meaning. Indeed, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith coins the neologism “Muldoonachas” to describe Muldoon’s macaronic linguistic play (Mac Giolla

Léith 2008, 20). For Ní Dhomhnaill, by contrast, the revelatory power of poetry finds its voice in the ethos of a particular place and culture. The language is the repository and perpetuator of that ethos; but it is also evolving in conversation with the modern world. From this perspective, Irish-language culture offers insight into a distinctive pre-colonial worldview with continuing contemporary relevance.

Translators represent cultural alterity to their readerships, but in postcolonial contexts, “alterity” often signifies an indigenous culture made foreign to its own people by colonial oppression or cultural imperialism. Twentieth-century Ireland inherited an indigenous culture that was “arguably archaic in many ways [...] not just in contrast to the industrial cultures of Europe but also in the preservation of lifeways showing filiation with neolithic material culture and with ancient Celtic ritual and religious patterns” (Tymoczko and Ireland 2003, 3). Since most Irish people are Anglophone monoglots, translations from Irish appear to mediate these “true” artefacts of Irish culture for a populace and diaspora that no longer have direct access to them. As Declan Kiberd points out, this is not exclusively a legacy of colonial rule, for Irish has also suffered from its coupling, in the collective Irish consciousness, with parochialism and patriarchal nationalism (Kiberd 1996, 568-70). In combination, these factors have given rise to unfortunate home-and-hearth stereotypes which either consign the language to the kitchen or present it as an arsenal of rituals, shibboleths, and homespun wisdom distinguishing Anglophone Irish people from the “authentic” *cainteoir dúchais* [native speaker].

A standardized written form of Irish, *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* [The Official Standard], has been taught in schools since the 1950s, but it is often rejected as artificial by native speakers of the traditional *Gaeltacht* dialects.³ These dialects, distinct from one another in grammar and pronunciation, are considered, by some native speakers, to retain their authenticity only in the unofficial, oral tradition that preceded the written Standard and continues to develop parallel to it (Hindley 1990, 164; Mac Cóil 2000, 83-87). The dialects

thereby hold a privileged status in Ireland, which makes “authentic” fluency a near-unattainable goal for those Anglophones eager to reach it. The lack of a standard form of Irish in the national literature adds to this sense that Irish-language culture is impenetrable to Anglophone Irish people, because even those who attain a good knowledge of the *Caighdeán* may struggle to understand the Irish spoken and written by native speakers. Hence, as Gearóid Denvir explains, native Irish-speakers have been caricatured as sources of “ancient primal knowledge” (Denvir 1997, 59). The Victorians depicted Irish culture one-dimensionally as an emotional and imaginative “other” to the rationalist mercantilism of British imperialists. Psychologically colonized, the Irish Revivalists made a nationalist theme of the “Anglo-Saxonist theory” that “Celtic spirituality and poetry might repair many gaps in the English personality” (Kiberd 1996, 32). Hence Revivalist scholars tended to reify Irish as a hallowed site of cultural purity; but even before the advent of English imperialists, Irish-language culture was hybridized through contact with numerous linguistic and cultural others.

To some extent, Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry conjures up a traditional rural Ireland and fosters perceptions of Irish as an inimitable signifier of cultural authenticity; but she also challenges Revivalist fantasies of a monolithic, monolingual Celtic Eden from which Irish culture has fallen. To the latter end, she can be gleefully macaronic, bringing Irish into playful conversation with English. The bilingual editions seek to dramatize this interaction. In “An Mhurúch san Ospidéal / The Mermaid in the Hospital”, a mermaid wakes up to find her fishtail gone and two legs in its place. Not realizing that the legs are attached to her, she tries to throw them out of the bed, and naturally falls out after them “cocs-um-bo-head”⁴ – or, as Muldoon puts it, “arse-over-tip” (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 2007, 34-5).⁵ Muldoon renders the sense but is unable to communicate Ní Dhomhnaill’s pun on the English slang for penis. With like-minded humour, however, he translates “Tá leath na foirne as a meabhair / le deoch” [Half the staff are out of their minds / with drink] colloquially as “Half the staff legless / with drink” (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 2007, 34-5).⁶ The English colloquialism

‘legless’, meaning ‘drunk’, alludes ironically to the mermaid’s literal predicament. Muldoon’s choice of word is highlighted by the absence of a precise equivalent in the Irish source text on the opposite side of the double-page spread. Since the joke could not exist outside of the translational context of the bilingual edition, this macaronic play effectively communicates the cultural hybridity of postcolonial Ireland. Ní Dhomhnaill’s approach to modern Irish is thereby characteristic of the *Innti* poets, whose work is written with an awareness of “the cultural deposits of the 1960s, from Zen Buddhism to Dylanesque symbology” (Kiberd 1995, xvii). Her receptiveness to influences outside the *Gaeltacht* is clear in the psychotherapeutic discourse that colours “Teoranna / Boundaries” and in “An Bhean Mhídhílis / The Unfaithful Wife”, which was inspired by Lorca’s “La Casada Infiel”. This approach aligns her with Muldoon, whose poetry brings Irish culture into conversation with an array of cultural others, including Native Americans and Pantisocratic pioneers.

In *Aistriú Éireann* (2008), a collection of essays focussing on literary translation in Ireland, several critics applaud the fruitful cross-fertilization of Irish with linguistic, literary, and cultural “others”. As Eithne O’Connell and John Walsh point out, however, the minority status of Irish puts the onus on *Gaeltacht* communities to function bilingually. Since Irish-speakers regularly draw on Anglophone material, the dominant language threatens to infiltrate and distort its indigenous counterpart (O’Connell and Walsh 2008, 99-100). Offsetting critical enthusiasm for the linguistic and cultural hybridity of *Innti* poetry are darker readings that see this literary gallimaufry “mar samhail do mhearbhall dosheachanta an fhile Gaeilge, a fheidhmíonn de shíor faoi scáth an aistriúcháin” [as an image of the inevitable disorientation of the Irish-language poet, who works constantly in the shadow of translation] (Mac Giolla Léith 2008, 21). The practical challenge for translators is to retain and celebrate the cultural specificity of Irish through translational strategies that also embrace transformative interactions between the source and target languages.

The “other world” of Irish: communicating cultural differences in translation

Ní Dhomhnaill is at pains to emphasize the specific resources of Irish, describing it as “rich in what the French call *polysémie*, words with many different meanings, which get stretched like elastic” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 18). She argues that Irish enables a culturally specific articulation of human experience that English cannot entirely replicate, depicting the language as the source of “a distinct *Weltanschauung* radically different from the Anglo mentality that has since eclipsed it” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 18). Careful to avoid claiming inherent qualities for Irish signifiers, she insists instead that their cultural connotations carve up reality in ways distinct from so-called equivalents in English. She sees in Irish an “alternative Logos” outside the compass of Western ontology, constructed by cultural and historical circumstances which decreed that “the strengths and weaknesses of Irish are different from those of English” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 20).

Much of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry takes inspiration from what is known in Irish as *an saol eile*, the mythical otherworld. As she explains in her essay “Mis and Dubh Ruis”, “a highly elaborate conceptual framework exists in Irish to describe and deal with the ‘otherworld’”, a framework that is “virtually untranslatable” because of “an inbuilt bias in the English language against the validity and tangibility of otherworldly experience” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005b, 86). This is not to ignore the prevalence of myth in the vast body of Anglo-Irish literature; it is instead to acknowledge that Anglophone linguistic and cultural forms are structured by the binaries of Western metaphysics, which tend to conceive of the otherworld as a senseless and inferior counterpoint to the tangible world of reason. Ní Dhomhnaill claims that the connotations pertaining to Irish words and phrases put Irish speakers in touch with a “multi-layered collective psychodrama” to which they have limited access in English (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005a, 163). She regards the supernatural beings populating Irish literature as culturally entrenched personifications of non-rational experiences undervalued and incommunicable in English, an aspect of human experience that “has fallen

through the interstices of mind-body polarities in the dominant discourse so that it has become quite literally unspeakable” (Ní Dhomhnaill 1992, 28).

The importance of the otherworld in the Irish-language worldview is evident in “An Crann” [The Tree],⁷ which describes a mortal woman tormented by a supernatural entity with a comically modern instrument of mischief: “Do tháinig bean an leasa / le Black & Decker, / do ghearr sí anuas mo chrann” [A woman of the fairy fort came / with a Black & Decker, / she cut down my tree] (Ní Dhomhnaill 1990, 36). Translatable literally as “woman of the fairy fort”, the term *bean an leasa* exemplifies the difficulty of translating Irish mythological concepts into English. The word “fairy” is inadequate, for it makes a twee fantasy of a supernatural agent who appears by turns as an enchantress, an abductor, and a *Doppelgänger*. Drawn from traditional oral tales, she signifies “the eruption of the uncanny” into the “fiercely modern” everyday life depicted in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry (Ní Ríordáin 2010, 22). The English word “fairy”, still laden with connotations of Victorian sentimentality, is therefore out of keeping with “An Crann”, which undercuts sentimental portrayals of women in Revivalist versions of Irish lore. In Muldoon’s version, Ní Dhomhnaill’s matter-of-fact references to the *sídh*e are suppressed.⁸ The *bean an leasa* is described as “this bright young thing”, conjuring up images of carefree privilege in the Roaring Twenties. In a later stanza, she is ironically dubbed “her ladyship” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 36-7). Nonetheless, the subversive tone of “An Crann” is retained in Muldoon’s title, “As for the Quince”, which puns on the Anglo-Irish slang for vagina.

A similar strategy is evident in “The Heist”, Muldoon’s version of “Comhairle ón mBean Leasa” [Advice from the Woman of the Fairy Fort]. Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem translates Irish legends of mortals abducted by the *sídh*e into a contemporary setting, in which journeys into a supernatural underworld are conflated with moonlighting in the underworld of crime. The poet refers casually to the overlap, in Irish mythology, between the worlds of mortals and fairy-folk: “nuair a théim ar mo chuairt oíchiúil / isteach sa lios” [when I go on my nightly

visit / into the fairy fort]. Muldoon's translation confines these lines to the material world, while simultaneously alluding to their source in fairy lore: "I make my way / into the *Otherworld Club* or the *Faerie Queen*" (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 144-5). Suppression of the supernatural is not a uniform pattern in Muldoon's translations, but its relative frequency does illustrate the difficulty of transferring what Tymoczko calls "the information load" of a text from a minority culture (Tymoczko 1999, 47). Accepting that a complete transfer is impossible, she conceptualizes translation as a "metonymic" process, in the sense that it "constructs a source text, a literary tradition, a culture, and a people, by picking parts, aspects, and attributes that will stand for wholes" (Tymoczko 1999, 58). The estrangement of Irish-language culture from its Anglophone counterpart has created complex reception problems for translators, for "neither the cultural content nor the literary framework" of Irish texts "is familiar to the receiving audience" (Tymoczko 1999, 47). Tymoczko is referring to Old Irish texts, which pose even more acute translational challenges, but her analysis is applicable to any case of Irish-English translation, insofar as it emphasizes the "human tendency to assimilate the unknown to the closest known pattern" and concludes that a translation is necessarily "shaped by the contours of the receiving culture" (Tymoczko 1999, 50). Since Irish "fell out of history" while outlawed by the British (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 18), translators are faced with the task of communicating the peculiar character of Irish-language literature and culture without subjecting their readership to "information overload" (Tymoczko 1999, 56).

Muldoon responds to this challenge by drawing analogies between Irish-language and English-language cultural referents. In "As for the Quince", he replaces references to fairy-folk with tongue-in-cheek allusions to a different "other world", the class system of a bygone era. To some extent, such cultural analogies seem a natural outgrowth of the eclectic frame of cultural reference in *Innti* poetry. But because Ní Dhomhnaill already works to bring the Irish language out of its linguistic and cultural *pardah*, the addition of Muldoon's analogies can

create a disorientating patchwork of linguistic and cultural forms in which the specificities of Irish-language culture become unintelligible. In Ireland, at least, the translator can rely on a degree of overlap between Anglophone and modern Irish-language culture, so that calculated risks can be taken when it comes to injecting a dose of foreignness into the Anglophone cultural framework. By contrast, cultural analogies, if used to excess, risk proffering “compensation” for the death of Irish in the form of rough approximations of its features derived from minor variants of English. In her brilliant critique of the “foreignizing” strategy advocated by Venuti, Kathryn Batchelor argues persuasively that such strategies can be “violently ethnocentric”, in that they are “unequivocally target-culture oriented and formulated in isolation from source text considerations or even from specific intercultural source-target dynamics” (Batchelor 2009, 235). Thus Muldoon’s strategy might “silence” Irish-language culture by substituting Anglophone citations and allusions that could be taken as accessible equivalents. The “*Faerie Queen*” nightclub irreverently recalls the *magnum opus* of Edmund Spenser, the Tudor poet and colonist who advocated a genocidal imperial policy in Ireland (Spenser 1997, 96-105). But the irony is double-edged, for although the bilingual editions embody the survival of Irish-language culture, the partial success of the British imperial enterprise is clear in the subdual of supernatural elements for an Anglophone readership. Cultural analogy, then, treads a fine line between self-consciously ghosting the source culture, and diluting and distorting it.

Irish and English: translational interactions

In “Ceist na Teangan” [The Question of Language], Ní Dhomhnaill takes the Biblical story of Moses in the bulrushes as a metaphor for the precarious future of Irish. The poet, occupying the position of anxious mother, places her “dóchas” [hope] on the waters of the Nile, afloat in what she calls “báidín teangan” [a little boat of the language] (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 154). “Ceist na Teangan” combines Biblical and Celtic mythology, for the image of the boat

also appears in an Irish fairytale used by Ní Dhomhnaill as an allegory for the imperative but marginalized presence of Irish in the national literature and culture. A boy is given a cloak of invisibility from the otherworld so that he can join a princess in a magic boat. The princess cannot see him under his cloak of invisibility, but he is nonetheless present in what Ní Dhomhnaill calls “the ‘cultural’ boat”, and ultimately saves the princess from an ogre (Ní Dhomhnaill 1994, 316). Irish poetry emerges from this tale as a means of removing the cloak of invisibility from the language (Ní Dhomhnaill 1994, 316) and defeating the “ogre”, who, in this case, represents the homogeneity of Anglo-American pop culture. For Ní Dhomhnaill, Irish is an essential presence in Ireland’s “cultural boat”, benefiting the cultural life of the nation in ways that Anglophone monoglots might not initially perceive. Muldoon translates “Ceist na Teangan” into “The Language Issue”. His version represents the paradox of dual-language editions, in that they set out to illuminate, in the language of the colonizer, Ní Dhomhnaill’s politically-charged decision to write in a language endangered by colonization.

For Ní Dhomhnaill, being cut off from one’s native language is akin to being out of one’s element – a fish, or a mermaid, out of water. In *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, she imagines a race of merfolk who, at some distant point in history, left the water and made their lives on land. Fitting in requires the repression of any memory of *Tír-fó-Thoinn* [Land-Under-Wave], including the Mermish language. In “Teoranna”, the poet explains that the language of the merfolk is grammatically and conceptually unique, “go ritheann gach uile rud isteach ina chéile ann, / is nach bhfuil teoranna dochta i gceist idir rud ar bith” [that everything in the language runs into everything else, / that there are no strict boundaries between one thing and another] (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 2007, 128-9; Muldoon’s translation). Verbal nouns – a common feature, incidentally, of the Irish language – take the place of nouns: “‘sé an tslí a déarfá / ‘d’éirigh an ghealach os cionn na habhann’ / ná ‘aníos laisteas den umshruthlú do ghealaigh sé’” [the way you would say/ ‘the moon rose above the river’ / would be ‘up over the upstreaming it mooned’] (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 2007, 128-9; Muldoon’s

translation). The poet draws a link between Mermish grammar and what she calls “the particular difficulties of our own mermaid”, summed up with an ironic sound-bite from pop psychology, which lends itself to Muldoon’s technique of pastiche in translation: “Bhí trioblóidí speisialta aici i gcónaí i dtaobh teoranna” [She always had a real difficulty with boundaries] (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 2007, 130-1).

Through her descriptions of the Mermish language, Ní Dhomhnaill points to the potential value of the marginalized *Weltanschauung* constructed and contained by Irish. The Mermish dissolution of perceived boundaries stands as a metaphor for the potential cross-fertilization of Irish with other linguistic and cultural systems. For Ní Dhomhnaill, this would amount to a translational cure for the binary logic of “the Anglo mentality”, which sees to it that particular routes to knowledge are sanctioned and others discounted (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 18). Her poems do not seek simply to preserve Irish as the relic of a pre-colonial culture; they also give it textual space to develop in conversation with other languages. In “Ceist na Teangan”, the contemporary debate about the future of Irish joins hands with the Hebrew legend of the baby Moses. The “ogre” of the Irish fairytale becomes an Egyptian Pharaoh and, in Ní Dhomhnaill’s reading, he enslaves by force of cultural homogeneity. The mother’s hopes for the survival of her little boat of language lie with “iníon Fhorainn” [a Pharaoh’s daughter] – an unexpected saviour in the Irish context, for she appears to represent the enslaving imperial culture (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 154). Yet in practice, she enables the colonized culture to survive, flourish, and attain independence. She occupies a site of contact between despot and slave or, in the case of English and Irish, colonizer and colonized. In “Ceist na Teangan”, then, the potential for “commanding change” in the status of Irish rests with a figure willing to nurture a language at once unknown and vulnerable, despite her inevitable complicity with colonial power.

As both Tymoczko and Cronin demonstrate (Tymoczko 1999, 134-8; Cronin 1996, 135-43), Irish can interact fruitfully with English, for its speakers share important cultural

ground with Anglophone Irish monoglots, for whom Hiberno-English expresses national and cultural identity. Similarly, Kiberd argues persuasively that Hiberno-English is “traceable to the Gaelic *substratum*, those elements of syntax and imagery carried over from the native tradition by a people who continue to think in Irish even as they speak in English” (Kiberd 1996, 173). For many Irish authors writing in English, such as J.M. Synge, Augusta Gregory, and Flann O’Brien, the restructuring of English in conversation with Irish has led to a playful but subversive engagement with the colonizing language. This activity can be extended to translation practice by drawing on lexical, syntactical, or idiomatic features of Hiberno-English to translate analogous features of Irish. For Tymoczko, this strategy is a way of developing “distinctive Irish discourses within the framework of the English language” (Tymoczko 1999, 138).

In certain translations, Muldoon elaborates on Ní Dhomhnaill’s source text to insert Hiberno-English colloquialisms, although his use of the idiom does not extend to the distortion of English grammatical structures. One such translation is “The Island”, Muldoon’s version of “An tOileán”, in which the mythical island of Hy-Breasil materializes off the coast of modern Ireland and attracts droves of curious onlookers. The homespun vernacular resonates with Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetic voice, which is familiar and colloquial, as if recounting an anecdote in genial conversation:

Do lion an domhan móra is a mháthair
isteach i gcairteacha
is mar a dúirt an fear i dtaobh an chaca mhóir
a dhéanfá i lár an bhóthair
gan ach é a chur amach ar Raidió na Gaeltachta –
do thángthadair anoir is aneas is aniar is aduaigh
ag féachaint air. (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 80)⁹

In Muldoon's translation, "do thángadar anoir is aneas is aniar is aduaigh / ag féachaint air" [they came from east and west and north and south / to look at it] becomes "they came from all arts and parts / to take a gander" (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 80-1). A similar strategy emerges from his version of "An Bhean Mhídhílis", in which the Irish word "deoch" [drink] becomes "a glass of porter"; in a later line, "Chuamair ó dheoch go deoch" [We went from drink to drink] becomes "A quick succession of snorts and sniffers" (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 104-5). The simple lines "is do shuíomair síos / ag comhrá" [and we sat down / to conversation] are transformed into "and in no time at all we were talking / the hind leg off a donkey" (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 104-5).

To some extent, Muldoon in these translations reproduces a Hiberno-English idiom with its roots in the Irish language. In any reproduction of a local vernacular, though, authenticity can degenerate into caricature. To some extent, this is a matter of opinion: what one reader may reject as patronage, another may welcome as an affectionate tribute to local life and language. In this case, though, Muldoon's translations read not simply as sound-bites from Ireland, but also as period pieces. In "An tOileán", "Raidió na Gaeltachta" is translated as "wireless" (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 80-1). This dated terminology turns a vital media resource for modern Irish-speakers into an obsolete curio, which undercuts Ní Dhomhnaill's determination to promote the relevance of Irish in the modern world. Similarly, in Muldoon's translation of "An Bhean Mhídhílis", a simple reference to the lover's "carr" [car] is transformed into the unfaithful wife's gleeful description of "his famous motoring-car" (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 104-5). This alteration presents the car as a novelty in a community unaccustomed to modern technology. To some extent, the outmoded language might harmlessly situate the events of the poem in Ireland's rural past, but it is also juxtaposed with a rather wordy mock formality, which casts an ironic light on the quaint local scene. For instance, "is tar éis beagáinín cainte" [after a little bit of chat] becomes "after a

preliminary spot of banter” and “nár eitíos uaidh” [I did not refuse him] becomes “I wasn’t one to demur” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 104-5). “An Bhean Mhídhílis” is a woman’s unrepentant account of adultery, which gave her a sense of “pabhair is tuisceana” [power and insight] lacking in her marriage (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 106). But the shifting registers in “The Unfaithful Wife” lend traces of pastiche to her confession, traces often detectable in Muldoon’s postmodern tendencies towards cross-cultural analogy and multiple coding.

Idiomatic fluency versus subversive literalism

David Wheatley claims that Muldoon’s shifting registers identify his versions as “site[s] of linguistic disturbance”, which in turn reflect the translated lives of native Irish-speakers, colonized peoples, or land-locked merfolk (Wheatley 2001, 127). Even the titles of the bilingual editions signify the translational character of his versions. An “Astrakhan Cloak” is a cloak made from the pelt of a newborn karakul sheep, but the title also puns on the Irish word for translation, *aistriúchán*, in a possible allusion to Walter Benjamin’s famous image of translation “envelop[ing] its content like a royal robe with ample folds” (Benjamin 1996, 258). *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* alludes to a fifty-minute session of psychoanalysis, in which the analyst seeks to translate unarticulated trauma into therapeutic language.

In the first stanza of “The Heist”, Muldoon renders Ní Dhomhnaill’s simple “suandrugá” [sleeping pills] with the Americanisms “Mickey Finn” and “knock-out pill” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 144-5). “Mickey Finn” denotes a drink drugged with a strong sedative and derives from the name of a Chicago saloon-keeper who allegedly drugged and robbed his customers. In keeping with Muldoon’s postmodern resistance to stable meaning, the term sounds Irish but is not; the OED records the earliest usage in the US in the early twentieth century. Throughout the poem, jaunty American slang jostles with other forms of language. These include Hiberno-English expressions, Stage Irish terms such as “Glory Be!”, and a decidedly British reference to “Her Majesty’s Customs” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990,

146-7).¹⁰ In the final stanza, “is d’fhág bean dhorcha an slua” [and a dark lady left the crowd] is translated as “In any case, one shady lady left the fairy-host” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 146-7). Here the whimsical term “shady lady” sits incongruously with the ensuing reference to Irish mythology, emphasizing the ersatz character of the translation.

Certain registers, such as Stage Irish, carry significant ideological loads in the context of the bilingual editions. Stage Irishmen were popular caricatures in eighteenth-century English theatre: amorous, lyrical, and typically prone to idiomatic speech. As Cronin observes, this latter characteristic makes “Paddy the Irishman” an “archetype of mistranslation” (Cronin 1996, 144). The caricature depends, for its comic element, on the difficulties many Irish-speakers faced in learning the language of their colonizer. In English theatre, these verbal symptoms of the colonial environment “were presented as the undisguised hallmarks of stupidity” (Cronin 1996, 144). In the case of “The Heist”, Muldoon’s appropriation of Stage Irish is citational and subversive, for it introduces a triumphant account of hoodwinking British officials: “and Glory Be! / if I didn’t smuggle a case and a half / of a superlative Pinot Noir / right past the noses of Her Majesty’s Customs” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 147). The parodic character of Stage Irish is given new life in Muldoon’s translational pastiche, for the joke is now on the colonizers who constructed this faux-Irish idiom.

It seems clear that, for readers conversant with the bilingual frame of reference, Muldoon’s translations flaunt their inauthenticity. They also gesture to the fact that Ireland is what Tymoczko calls “a translational island” in which cultural traditions have become “blended and hybridized” (Tymoczko 1999, 20). Muldoon’s versions nonetheless read fluently in English, and tend to conform to generic and formal conventions familiar to an Anglophone reader. This means that uninitiated readers are less likely to perceive the subversive potential of his textual patchworks. Drawing on Venuti, Cronin suggests that such fluent translations might “obliterate the linguistic and cultural otherness” of the source text,

subordinating its grammatical and conceptual structures to those of the target language (Cronin 1996, 177). For instance, in “Feis”, Ní Dhomhnaill repeats the word “brat” in a kind of erotic liturgy: “Leagaim síos trí bhrat id fhianaise: / brat deora, / brat allais, / brat fola” [I lay down three cloaks before you: / a cloak of tears, / a cloak of sweat, / a cloak of blood] (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 14). In his translation, “Carnival”, Muldoon opts for synonymic variation: “I lay down three robes before you: a mantle of tears, / a coat of sweat, / a gown of blood” (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 15). “Brat” has multiple meanings, but commonly denotes a “cover” in the sense either of a blanket or garment. In “Feis”, Ní Dhomhnaill’s repetition of the word is not dictated by paucity in the Irish language; it contributes to the ethos of rite and ritual dignifying what is otherwise illicit love. Yet because it is presented in parallel, Muldoon’s version could suggest to Anglophone readers that the translation has benefited from linguistic resources unavailable in Irish.

It is a commonplace of translation studies that, historically, translators have been subservient to the spurious authority of source texts. For Venuti, fluent translation plays a part in the translator’s effacement by “producing an illusory effect of transparency” (Venuti 2008, 5). But, as Cronin suggests in his commentary on translations of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems, in cases of fluent translation from minority languages such as Irish “it is the original poet rather than the translator who becomes invisible” (Cronin 1996, 177). The effects of this invisibility can be seen in critical responses to the bilingual editions, which have at times relegated Ní Dhomhnaill to the status of a “Muse” to her Anglophone translators – an epithet she has firmly rejected. Reviewing *The Astrakhan Cloak*, Barra Ó Séaghdha claims that Muldoon’s translations are sometimes more effective than his source texts, enthusing that, in “Titim i nGrá” / “I Fall in Love”, “Muldoon’s lines take off into a more transcendental lyricism than is to be found in the original” (Ó Séaghdha 1993, 145). “Transcendental lyricism” does seem accurately to describe Muldoon’s register in lines such as, “how readily I am beguiled / by a sunny smile, how he offers me a wing” (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 23). But why

assume that Ní Dhomhnaill's line, "meallta ag straois na gréine is an teas" [beguiled by the grin of the sun and the heat], is reaching for a transcendence it fails to attain (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 22; Ó Séaghdha's translation)? Laden with images of natural decay, the poem is alert to the threat posed by the poet's desire: "Titim i ngrá, beagáinín, leis an mbás" [I fall in love, just a tiny bit, with death] (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 22). The potentially sinister yet beguiling grin of Ní Dhomhnaill's sun – a far cry from the blithe image of a "sunny smile" – and the heady eroticism suggested by the dual meaning of "teas" ("heat" and "passion") keep us locked into the tense intimacy between sex and death felt throughout the poem. In Muldoon's version, we are given an escape route, "a wing".

This example of a critic privileging Muldoon's translation over its source text goes some way to illustrating the impact that fluent translation might have on Anglophone Irish understandings of literature in the Irish language. As Tymoczko acknowledges, the metonymics of translation establish "a symbolic order within which a people is construed or even construes itself" (Tymoczko 1999, 57). Even so, she indicates no particular convictions about which metonymies should be preserved in translation from Irish to English (Tymoczko 1999, 50). Her neutrality vis-à-vis a range of translational strategies makes sense in the context of her analysis of translations from Old Irish, already a dead language. In light of Ní Dhomhnaill's attempt to promote modern Irish, however, it seems appropriate for the cultural impact of Muldoon's multiple coding to be counterbalanced by translational strategies aimed at highlighting the linguistic peculiarities of the Irish language and heightening the reader's understanding of its cultural freight and the distinctive formal qualities of its literature.

In practice, this would necessitate bilingual editions with translational introductions or footnotes that shed light on postcolonial Irish culture and the factors impinging on the survival and development of the language. The absence of such paratextual apparatus in Muldoon's translations reflects common practice in modern Irish-English translations and bilingual editions. Typically, "for the monoglot Anglophone reader, nothing in the prefaces

indicates the extent of the transformations that must be effected to arrive at a provisional rendering of the radically dissimilar syntactic, lexical and phonological structures of Irish in addition to complex questions of resonance and allusion” (Cronin 1996, 178). By contrast, a comprehensive paratextual apparatus would give Anglophone monoglots some insight into the linguistic and cultural otherness of Irish.

A translator committed to a postcolonial ethics of translation might also practice subversive literalism. This strategy would involve importing the grammatical and lexical norms of Irish into English and, with them, a conceptual apparatus offering glimpses into a collective cultural psyche largely set apart from “the Anglo mentality” (Ní Dhomhnaill 2005d, 18). In idiomatic translations, the content of a given indigenous source text is presented as congruent with the colonizing language of the target text, potentially promoting the imperialist illusion that any “truth” can be represented in the language of the colonizer. Literal translation, by contrast, is subversive insofar as it makes the English language alien to Anglophone readers. This emphasizes that the colonizing linguistic system has an arbitrary relationship to lived reality, which has been conceptualized differently in the indigenous linguistic system. In practice, literal translational strategies put Standard English under pressure in various ways, such as disrupting familiar syntax or colouring existing words and phrases with new and unexpected connotations. Thus the colonizing target language is itself translated by the once-outlawed source language, which becomes partially audible in the distorted structures of an overtly “translational” form of English.

Comparing two English versions of a Gaelic poem by Somhairle MacGill-Eain, Mac Giolla Léith implicitly advocates this literal approach, suggesting that it is “gnó an aistritheora athruithe áirithe, bídis dásachtach nó caolchúiseach, a chur i bhfeidhm ar a theanga féin, athruithe a thabharfaidh chun solais sa sprioctheanga sin *éagsúlacht* na bunteanga”[the task of the translator to effect certain changes in his own language, be they audacious or subtle, changes that will bring to light in the target language the *difference* of the source language]

(Mac Giolla Léith 2008, 22). For instance, the Irish phrase “Tá brón orm” could be translated idiomatically either as “I am sorry” or “I am sad”. A translator aiming for a more literal, but nonetheless comprehensible, translation might opt for “Sorrow is on me”. This strategy not only draws attention to the conceptual blurring of regret and sadness, it also emphasizes the tendency, in Irish, to employ nouns rather than adjectives in the description of emotional states, so that emotional experience is figured in terms of external entities coming upon the feeling subject. If such a literal strategy were applied to Ní Dhomhnaill’s “An tOileán”, the line “do dhein muintir na háite iontas is scéal nua de”, which Muldoon translates whimsically as “the locals were all agog” (Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon 1993, 80-1), might be translated as “the local people did wonder at the news of it”. In “Ceist na Teangan”, the opening line “Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh” is rendered by Muldoon as “I place my hope on the water” (Ní Dhomhnaill et al. 1990, 154-5). A more literal translation, which coincidentally recalls Flann O’Brien’s celebrated novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), would be “I set my hope at swim”.¹¹

Tymoczko argues that this kind of strategy, in which the translation functions as “a window into a new language”, inevitably necessitates metonymic trade-offs, such as the downplaying of unfamiliar poetic forms or literary and cultural allusions (Tymoczko 1999, 50). This is undoubtedly true; but literalism need not simply foreground the Irish language *qua* language. By making the colonizing language foreign to itself, it also disrupts the Anglophone hegemony with glimpses of an alternative *Weltanschauung* perceptible in the cultural cargo of the Irish lexis. This can be illustrated with a literal translation of a simple greeting: “Dia’s Muire dhuit” translates literally as “God and Mary to you”, thus illustrating the Catholicism of Irish culture. The disrupted syntax and lexis of a literal English translation dramatizes the interaction of Ireland’s two languages. At the same time, this very disruption emphasizes the linguistic and conceptual gulf between them.

Without militating against literalism in translation, Tymoczko rightly points out that it is inaccessible when taken to the most radical extremes, commenting that it “makes many scholarly translations extremely difficult to read save in conjunction with the Irish source texts” (Tymoczko 1999, 137). As we have seen, her response to translators’ use of Anglo-Irish idioms is more favourable, for they shadow the structures of Irish without straying from English grammar and lexis to the extent that they resist comprehension. It is worth remembering, however, that if Hiberno-English forms are capable of subverting the language of the colonizer, the idiom also contains vernacular expressions that are increasingly outmoded, linked to negative parochial stereotypes, or vulnerable to the kind of parody found in Stage Irish. This is where subversive literalism is a useful translational tool, for it can be used in conjunction with more familiar Hiberno-English idioms.

If Irish is to survive and develop in conversation with contemporary linguistic and cultural systems, then Hiberno-English can derive similar dynamism by continuing to interact with Irish. Translations are ideal sites for the creation of Anglo-Irish forms which, as Tymoczko puts it, “suggest at once the distinctiveness of Irish as a language as well as the qualities of dialects of English spoken in Ireland, idioms reifying a challenge to English colonialism and signalling the hybridity of Irish culture” (Tymoczko 1999, 138). Such translational interaction loses its creative potential, however, if either language or culture concedes too much ground to the other. Strategies of subversive literalism have the advantage of emphasizing that the cultural importance of Irish lies in its foreignness even to Anglo-Irish variants of Standard English.

Translation from Irish into English has two principal advantages: first, it heightens awareness of Irish-language poetry in Anglophone communities; secondly, particular strategies of postcolonial translation can challenge the Anglophone linguistic and cultural hegemony. It seems clear, however, that in the context of postcolonial Ireland, certain translational

strategies, such as multiple coding, excessive cultural analogy, or unchecked fluency, can verge on “colonization” of the already marginalized Irish language. Muldoon’s translations demonstrate that such strategies can be effective and valuable in many respects, for instance by attracting a broader audience to poetry in Irish, but they also highlight Anglophone translators’ comparatively easy access to a cultural authority often denied to their Irish-language counterparts and the capacity of Irish-English translation to muffle poets writing from a culture still recovering from the effects of colonialism. It is therefore important that Muldoon’s strategies coexist with strategies of subversive literalism and paratextual explanation that promote the Irish language and its attendant culture. Thus Irish might continue to survive as a modern language receptive to the cultural pluralism of modernity and crucial to the revitalization of Anglo-Irish idioms – a visible presence in Ireland’s “cultural boat”.

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¹ The *Innti* poets take their name from a literary journal begun in the 1970s as a student broadside at University College Cork. The journal became a platform for Irish-language poets seeking to move away from the nationalist politics associated with Irish-language culture and to draw, instead, on modern themes and a cosmopolitan range of influences. Apart from Ní Dhomhnaill, the most celebrated *Innti* poets are Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock and Liam Ó Muirthile.

² Lucy Cogan of University College Dublin brought the invaluable perspective of a native speaker of Irish to my analysis of the translations and their cultural context.

³ Broadly speaking, the three major dialects are those from the provinces of Munster (*Cúige Mumhan*), Connaught (*Cúige Chonnacht*) and Ulster (*Cúige Uladh*). Ní Dhomhnaill uses the Munster dialect.

⁴ The joke of this macaronic construction lies in the similarity of ‘cocs’ to the English word ‘cock’. ‘Cocs’ is not an Irish word but may allude to the coccyx or tailbone. ‘Um-bo’ connotes ‘over’. ‘Head’ is the English word.

⁵ © The Gallery Press, 2007. I gratefully acknowledge the kind permission of The Gallery Press (www.gallerypress.com) to quote from *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990), *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1993), and *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007).

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all gloss translations are mine.

⁷ Please note that the glossed English titles of poems by Ní Dhomhnaill provided in this article may not be the same as the titles in the published English translations.

⁸ The closest (but still inadequate) English translation for *sídhe* is “fairies”.

⁹ The wide world and his mother piled
into their cars
and as the man said about the big crap
done in the middle of the road
just to have it put out on the Gaeltacht Radio –
they came from east and west and north and south
to look at it. [My translation]

¹⁰ “Glory Be!” translates *aililiú* [Hallelujah] and “Her Majesty’s Customs” translates *fir chustaim* [customs men].

¹¹ As we have seen, a “translated” form of English already exists in Anglophone Irish literature, for instance in Gregory’s Kiltartan. Strategies of subversive literalism may result, perhaps fruitfully, in language that intersects

with these existing forms. As we have also seen with the example of Stage Irish, however, some forms of Hiberno-English have also acquired associations with cliché and caricature. Through strategies of subversive literalism, translators might pay homage to the Hiberno-English often found in Anglophone Irish literature by reinvigorating the practice of subjecting English to the grammatical and idiomatic features of Irish.