

TRANSLATING PATRICK KAVANAGH *

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The following concerns the translation I did of a selection of the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh into Spanish, the first translation of this important Irish poet into the Spanish language. It recounts the motives which impelled me to try this daunting task as well as the guidelines I followed, the help I received and the pitfalls I encountered and, hopefully, survived. It looks at some of the images and expressions used by the author and which need to be explained to students and it essays a comparison with the poetry of Antonio Machado, another much loved poet.

For many long years of my life, or, as the “man himself” would have said, “For many a good-looking year”, Patrick Kavanagh was an absolute unknown to me, as he was to hundreds of thousands of Irishmen like myself who were not very up-to-date with the poetry scene. There was no mention of him in the school-books (which provided the intellectual fodder for generations of young Irishmen) the same school-books which he so much extolled. This, perhaps, is not so surprising: there was no mention in them of Joyce, or Flann O'Brien or Beckett or many others. Yeats just got in with "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "Down by the Sally Gardens" and, later, at a more advanced level, "The Ballad of Father Gilligan", of which a pious, respectful teacher always changed the first line when she read it, from "The old priest Peter Gilligan" to "The old priest *father* Gilligan" and explained that the message of the poem was that, though Yeats was a Protestant, he had "great faith".

When Kavanagh's name began to be bandied about fairly frequently on the poetry scene, it was the middle of the 1960s and by then it competed with that of a promising newcomer, called Heaney. It was, however, practically impossible to lay hands on a book of Kavanagh, though Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* and later *Door into the Dark* were readily available, being published, as they were, by Faber. Try, as one might, in the poetry shelves of the major bookshops, the only Kavanagh to appear was P.J. Kavanagh. The man from Monaghan was the great "missing link".

It wasn't until the beginning of the 1970s that I was able to get a book of Kavanagh's poetry. It was the *Collected Poems*, the Martin Brian & O'Keefe edition.¹ Well, the *Collected Poems* was (or rather were) a revelation to me. Here, for the first time, was a poet who wrote at first hand of experiences which were familiar to me and who obviously loved and understood what he was writing about. Here, there was no symbolism of birds, badgers, foxes and weasels or the engaging pathos of rabbits trapped in snares or goats nibbling at shoots of heather, as there was in the poetry of Yeats or that of James Stephens. Here, on the contrary, was Kerr's big ass with the trappings I knew so well: the straddle filled with straw, the breeching held together with bull wire, the ill made blinkers. Here, also, was the barrel of potato-spray with the dead wasp on the briar leaf, high-stepping turkeys with anxious looks, dogs lying on waistcoats like any sensible dog would, farmers carting out "topdressing" and all the scenes of farming life, and a microscopic view of plants and flowers. Above all, there was expressed the gut feeling of what it meant to be tied to the land, by ties of love or bondage, and having to leave in the first case (like "Temptation in Harvest") and not being able to in the second (like *The Great Hunger*). The experience of reading this for the first time was like a new though familiar world being opened up to me and the shock waves that it sent through me have still not completely subsided.

Living then in Castile and loving it and loving Spanish poetry, it was only natural that I should put Antonio Machado at the top of my list of Spanish poets. (And, here, let me say that there is no great nature poetry in modern Spanish literature as there is in English). If we except Rosalía de Castro, Antonio Machado was the nearest thing to a nature poet, and I tried to tie him in as far as I could with Patrick Kavanagh. The parallels were there but they couldn't be stretched too far. Machado in his *Campos de Castilla*² does write of the countryside but not in the same intimate way as Kavanagh. Machado, the school teacher, is more erudite in his approach. He knew the countryside of Castile and its inhabitants better than, say, Yeats understood the Irish countryside and its peasants. He slightly idealized the former but he never idealized the people. He observed the countryside and the work done thereon by the peasants always from a distance, either along a dusty road or from the top of a hill which he had climbed. He didn't dirty his hands "hoking" out potatoes or carting out loads of dung, like Kavanagh, but he is fairly accurate in his scholarly, clinical, observant way. As one reads him, one feels the strain, the heat, the dust and the monotony which accompanies the peasant's work, but there are none of those sudden, intimate, revealing details which flash so suddenly and frequently through all of Kavanagh's poems.

¹ *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*; Martin Brian & O'Keefe, London, (1972). All mentions of Kavanagh's poems refer to this edition.

² All references to the poems of Machado refer to *Poesías Completas*, Austral edition, published by Espasa Calpe, Madrid, (1966).

Machado understood the people better than he did the land. When he was living in Soria, which is as Castilian a place as you can get, he married a local girl less than half his age, Leonor Izquierdo, and lived an intensely happy life until her death shortly after their marriage. He understood the ways of the peasants as Kavanagh did: their greed, their envy, their meanness, their essential loneliness. In one poem, “Por tierras de España”, he portrayed them in some memorable lines:

Abunda el hombre malo del campo y de la aldea,
capaz de insanos vicios y crímenes bestiales,
que bajo el pardo sayo esconde un alma fea,
esclava de los siete pecados capitales.

Los ojos siempre turbios de envidia o de tristeza,
guarda su presa y llora la que el vecino alcanza;
ni para su infortunio no goza su riqueza;
le hieren y acongojan fortuna y malandanza.

Which translated means:

Wicked people abound in the country and village,
capable of the most insane vices and bestial crimes,
under whose brown peasant smocks an ugly soul is hidden
slave to the seven deadly sins at a time.

Their gaze is always clouded with envy or sadness;
they clutch their prey and grudge what their neighbour achieves;
they can neither avoid misfortune or enjoy their riches;
afflicted equally by the mark that good or ill-luck leaves.”

One can think of Kavanagh as one reads this; parts of *The Great Hunger*, his poem “Epic”, with the squabble between the Duffys and MacCabe, but even more of his novels, *Tarry Flynn* and *The Green Fool*,³ with their portraits of the greedy pettifogging, rancorous farmers. Another short parallel could be drawn between Machado and Kavanagh; both wrote long poems which deal with the tragic saga of a peasant family: Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*, about the Maguires, Patrick, his sister and his mother, and Machado’s *La Tierra de Alvargonzález*, about old Alvargonzález and his three sons.

I have gone on a bit about Antonio Machado and I perhaps over-emphasize the points of reference to Kavanagh, but it was Machado who led me on to translating Kavanagh. I translated practically all of Machado’s *Campos de Castilla*, some of which was published in the review of the English Department of the University of Valladolid and which received enough favourable comments to encourage me to go on translating. After that I translated some poems of the poet from Bilbao, Blas de Otero, who has many points in common with Machado, but who is a much more

³ Both these novels are published by Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

“political” poet, like Pablo Nerudo, whom I also translated, and also some poems of Dámaso Alonso, who has little in common with any of the former. All of these except the Nerudo translations were published in various literary reviews. Thus, I developed an interest in translation.

In the meantime, I had started imparting a post-graduate course in Irish Literature at the University where I work. This was really top of my list of interests but translating came a bit further down the list. It was only natural that sooner or later the two interests should be combined, But I was timorous of trying. In the Irish Literature course Patrick Kavanagh was one of the authors whom I most enjoyed discussing (I had done my thesis on him⁴) and whom I most wished to explain, because up until recently he was a completely unknown quantity to Spanish students – just as he had been to me up until 1964 or thereabouts. Things have changed a bit now and the name Kavanagh is becoming a bit more familiar in Spain. I hope I may have had some small part in bringing about this greater familiarity.

When I say that I “wished” to explain Kavanagh to the students, I really mean that it was *necessary* to explain him. Paradoxically, it is less necessary to explain Joyce or Yeats or Austin Clarke, for example: a Jesuit education and its fruits such as that undergone by Joyce is a readily understandable experience in the country where the Jesuits were initiated. Likewise, the poetry of Austin Clarke strikes a chord with the religious anguish of Unamuno’s poetry, and Yeats is such a part of recent Irish history that students who study history follow him quite easily. But Patrick Kavanagh, apart from some of the parallels I mentioned with Machado, needs further explication for Spanish students, as he would; I imagine, for American or English or, maybe, even for present-day Irish students. This is because of the particular social conditions which prevailed in the Ireland he was writing about; the rites and rhythms of the peasants’ life and work; the customs and taboos; the naming of things and places of which he was so fond and the fact that however timeless his best poetry is, it is about an age that vanished with the horse plough and the knapsack sprayer, or the besom.

I feel that my early experience on a small farm is similar enough to Kavanagh’s to make me able to explain these things correctly, even though the explication may kill the marvellous poetry in the lines. To take just one poem as an example: In “A Christmas Childhood” there are several images immediately comprehensible to me (or to anyone else with a similar upbringing) but which to present-day Spanish students are devoid of their full significance. At the beginning of the poem we have:

⁴ *La Poesía Contemporánea en Irlanda a través de Patrick Kavanagh, John Montague y Seamus Heaney*, publicada por Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valladolid, (19 97).

One side of the potato pits was white with frost-
How wonderful that was, how wonderful!

Now, students may be forgiven for asking what's so wonderful about that, until one explains how the potato-pits, or "potato-heaps", as we used to call them, were constructed in the form of a pyramidal prism in the potato field after the digging. They were then covered with mould after being protected with rushes, and in the first cold nights of autumn the side facing the prevailing wind would be whitened by the hoar frost. What one saw in the morning before the frost was thawed by the sun was a fairly perfect white rectangle set amidst the uniform irregular blackness of the potato-field. Not something, perhaps, which would set the heart racing in one used to the technological marvels of the contemporary age, but wonderful enough for a child in deValera's age or before, and doubly so if he were a budding poet.

In the same poem we have a multitude of other images which require elucidation. The second verse, with its:

The light between the ricks of hay and straw
Was a hole in heaven's gable. An apple tree
With its December-glinting fruit we saw –

has a series of images which to understand fully you would have to put yourself into the shoes and mind of a child of preferably ninety years ago. Further on there are references to the "bellows wheel", of the "wafer-ice on the pot-holes" and the "tracks of cattle to a drinking place", things whose significance is completely lost on the contemporary southern-European in this age of central heating, well-surfaced roads and efficient dairy farming. There are many more things in the same poem and, indeed, throughout all of Kavanagh's poetry which require elucidation, though the poetry may suffer as a result. Other images and objects which *are* familiar to my students but whose full significance they don't grasp are: the importance of the potato as the staple dietary item in Irish subsistence farming (this, paradoxically, in the country which introduced the potato to Europe) and of its double importance to Kavanagh: as a source of food and of inspiration. Also, his evocation of plants and flowers, like coltsfoot, poplars and dandelions, familiar enough in Spain to be treated with contempt, and which people find hard to imagine how they could inspire anyone. Needless to say, all the rituals of farming, of hay-saving, turf-cutting and potato-digging have to be explained.

However much one explains things to a class of students, one only explains to a limited number of persons and the explanations are soon forgotten; lesson-notes are lost and the process has to begin over again. This brings me back to the subject of translation, and, particularly, to the translation of Patrick Kavanagh's poetry. As I said, up until recently this very important Irish poet has been practically unknown, edged out by the massive figure of Yeats and the growing importance of Heaney,

both of whom have been translated into Spanish, as have other Irish poets of considerably lesser importance, like Pearse Hutchinson.

I expected that a translation of Kavanagh was bound to appear on the market but, none appearing, three or four years ago I decided in a small way to try my hand at translating some of Kavanagh's sonnets. As I said, it was my experience translating Machado that emboldened me to take this step. (I must say here, though, that translating into a target language which *is* your own is a far easier and very different process from translating into one which is *not* your own, but I will come back to this point in a moment). I consequently translated five of Kavanagh's sonnets: "Epic", "The Hospital", "October", "Canal Bank Walk" and "Lines Written on a Seat On The Grand Canal Dublin: Erected To The Memory of Mrs. Dermot O'Brien". They were published subsequently in *ES*,⁵ the review of the English department of the University of Valladolid. The fact that the translations were not openly scoffed at and were, even, met with favourable comment made me decide to go ahead with what had always been my main objective, translate what is perhaps the best long poem by an Irish poet since Brian Merriman.

And, here, I come back to the question of translation. There are some requisites which must be met and a few guiding principles to be kept in mind by any translator. The requisites are: i) a good knowledge of the source language, ii) preferably, a perfect knowledge of the target language, and iii) a good knowledge of the subject dealt with. I think I met requisites i) and iii), but I am far short of having a perfect knowledge of the target language. The guiding principles to be kept in mind are: that a translation is not an original work; it must add nothing to the original; it must subtract nothing from the original, and it must endeavour to elicit the same response in its readers that the original had on its readers. These requisites can be summarized in one sentence: The translator's task is essentially a humble one; he, or she, must not try to shine, but to be faithful.

These requisites and principles are mentioned by Eugene Nida in his *Towards A Science Of Translating*,⁶ published several decades ago, and also by practically every theoretician of translating since then. It seems a lot to ask for but then Nida goes on to say that the translator's task is essentially a thankless one and that successful translating is one of the most difficult intellectual exercises known to mankind. Some decades before Nida's book, the Russian Vladimir Nabokov wrote an essay entitled "The Art of Translation", in which he mentioned three different types of translators: the "well-meaning hack", the "scholar", and the "professional writer". Of the latter he says that they may tend to dress up the original writer to look like themselves.

⁵ *ES*, review of the Department of English, University of Valladolid, (1995), pp. 95-102.

⁶ Eugene Nida: *Towards a Science of Translating*, Brill, Leiden, (1964).

One finds several examples of the work of type number three – the professional writer as translator – whose work is unsatisfactory and it is the fault of publishing houses which ask poets on their list to translate other poets. To give just one example: Penguin brought out a translation of a Selection of Antonio Machado's poetry over twenty years ago⁷. This selection, which includes some poems from *Campos de Castilla* and *Soledades*, is in my opinion badly done for a number of reasons but the main one is that the translators are poets themselves – Henry Gifford and Charles Tomlinson – and they tend to dress up Machado to look like themselves. Now, Machado, like Kavanagh, is a very tranquil, serene kind of poet, some people would call him “unexciting”. He doesn't use contorted syntax or strange imagery. He uses rhyme a lot and his references are more classical than experimental. The first verse of his poem “Retrato” (“Portrait”) is an example:

Mi infancia son recuerdos de un patio en Sevilla
y un claro huerto donde maduró el limonero;
mi juventud – veinte años en tierras de castilla;
mi historia – algunos casos que recordar no quiero.

Now, this is pretty straightforward, with just one case of inversion of syntax in the last line: “... que recordar no quiero”. But Henry Gifford obviously found it unexciting and put in several inversions of subject/verb, which are anyway less common in English than in Spanish, and a rhetorical question which does not occur in the original as well as some strange word equivalences:

Recollections of a patio in Seville
a lucid lemon-ripening garden – my infancy
The years of my youth? Twenty on soil of Castile;
A plotlessness I shall not recall, my history.

I am not saying that this kind of thing inevitably occurs when one poet translates another, but it does frequently enough. Pope's translation of Homer is more like Pope than Homer; Yeats's translation of Ronsard's sonnet has a lot of Yeats in it, and Frank O'Connor's translations from the Gaelic read too good and make one wonder how faithful they are. I don't know enough Gaelic myself to say, just as I can't say whether Heaney's translations of *Sweeney Astray* and his translations from Dante's *Purgatorio* are faithful or “dressed up”.

As I said, the main stumbling block on my way was requisite number two – a perfect knowledge of the target language, but, paradoxically, this helped me with the guiding principles which I've enumerated. It is much easier to hide your light when you have to labour over a translation as I laboured over this. I think I've added nothing, I've subtracted nothing and have been humbly faithful, but I'm

⁷ Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado: *Selected Poems*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, (1974).

afraid the translation will not elicit the same response in its readers as the original had done on its readers. But, perhaps, that would have been too much to expect.

A few gifted people can write colloquially and in a stylistically pleasing way in an acquired language: Beckett is a case in point. Linguistically, Kavanagh is not a difficult writer to translate, if we compare him with Hopkins, Dylan Thomas or Austin Clarke, for example. His vocabulary is not extensive and his expression is generally clear and non-elliptical, something also which makes it easier to translate him. But his imagery is *very* particular, as referring both to himself and the things he describes. I think, here, my knowledge of the subject, (requisite number three), my lived youthful experience – so similar to what he describes – a good dictionary and a bit of intuition helped me over the stumbling block. I also decided, and I think I was correct in doing so, to include a lot of elucidating footnotes with the translation to bring out the significance of the images he presents and which would otherwise be meaningless to most Spanish readers in a translation without them.

In this way I went to work on *The Great Hunger*, more for the personal satisfaction it provided than with any real idea of getting it published. In spare moments I worked my way through the fourteen different sections of the poem, from the first line “Clay is the word” to the last line, “In every corner of this land.” I crossed our numerous times and re-wrote and consulted colleagues, particularly those from the “pueblos” who have knowledge of farming work, especially with regards the correct expressions for certain accoutrements associated with farming work but, frankly, this proved of limited usefulness because the ethos and methods of Spanish farming are completely different from Irish farming.

In the first place, potatoes, corn and turnips, which appear so frequently in Kavanagh, are far less common in Spain than maize, wheat, runner beans and artichokes, for example. In the second case, mules and oxen were used much more as labouring animals before the advent of the tractor than was the plough horse and farmers used the mattock instead of the spade and the loy. Even the simple concept of ridges, furrows and ditches have a different signification. Kavanagh says in “Ploughman”:

I turn the lea green down
Gaily now,
And paint the meadow brown
With my plough.

This image would be completely alien to a Spaniard living south of a line running from the bottom of the Galician coast across to the middle of the Catalan coast (and that means the majority of Spaniards) as there is an absence of green fields and meadows and the ploughing is done in land which is already brown and grassless.

Also, the seasonal phenomena of sun, rain, cloud and wind have a completely different pattern between the two countries. Even Machado wasn't much help in this respect. Where my colleagues were more helpful was in the lexicological aspect, often suggesting suitable synonyms and alternative forms of expression and so preventing me sometimes from making "howlers".

Other questions which now arose were: whether to translate "freely" or more literally; whether to try to match rhyme for rhyme, and whether to present the finished translation in a single-language or dual-language format. I decided to translate more literally than freely for fear of straying from the path of meaning – something which would not have occurred if the target language were my own. For the same motives, I could not hope to match rhyme with rhyme, as I was able to do when translating Machado and Blas de Otero, but, happily, Kavanagh, at any rate in his early period, is not a slavish user of rhyme. In the third question, of whether a single-language or parallel text, I, perhaps foolhardily, opted for the second alternative. I say "foolhardily" because a reader with even a minimal knowledge of both source and target languages can easily find things with which he, or she, does not agree. They may not always be right, but a translator who so presents his work leaves himself, or herself, open to critical flak.

By this time my translation of the five Kavanagh sonnets had appeared in the review of the Department of English of Valladolid University and shortly afterwards the Publications Department of the same university approached me with a view to translating a representative selection of the same poet's work to be included in a series of literary translations which they were about to launch. In this proposed selection I was to include *The Great Hunger*, the sonnets just mentioned and fifteen other poems (to make twenty-one in all), taken from different periods in the author's productive life. I think the poems included *are* representative, though they may not include *all* of Kavanagh's best-known poetry. For example, *Lough Derg* and *Why Sorrow?* Are not there, because I think *The Great Hunger* is a better, and better-known, example of his long poems, but the selection does include poems from *Ploughman*, from *A Soul for Sale* and from *Come Dance With Kitty Stobling*. All the poems have their explanatory notes, *The Great Hunger* obviously containing the most with over 120. The book contains also a Contents Index, a Chronology of Kavanagh's life a Bibliography and a Prologue written by Jose M^a Ruiz head of the English Department at Valladolid University. **

As well as this, the book contains illustrations done by Juan Manuel Báez Mezquita. Some of these are very apposite and some are somewhat less so. For example, some drawings illustrating village scenes or buildings owe more to a Castilian influence than to an Innishkeen one, but others capture well enough the essence of the poems they are meant to illustrate. The same illustrator, together with Santiago Bellido Blanco, is responsible for the cover design, which has a pleasing effect.

As the book was being finished there now presented itself another possible stumbling block of perhaps much greater significance than the stumbling block of linguistic competence in the target language, namely, to get the necessary permission of the author's brother, Dr. Peter Kavanagh, to publish the translated poems. I must confess that it was with some trepidation that I made the initial approach, but I must also confess that my fears were groundless and that he gave me his immediate consent. He also offered me many helpful suggestions and, when I forwarded him a copy of the published poems, he replied with a courteous and on the whole favourable appraisal.

This has not quenched all my apprehensions with regards the reception of the published work. The book came out earlier this year, just before the Easter recess, and it is too soon to say how well it will be received. So far I have not received any unfavourable criticism, which may be because not many people have read it yet or because the Spanish are proverbially polite to foreigners. I know it could be considered a temerity on my part to undertake the task of translating into what is for me a foreign language, but I've expressed the reasons which made me decide to try it, and on the whole I am filled more with satisfaction than regret. I am not, however, under the illusion that the book is devoid of faults; they must be there in plenty. But, if it serves to further the acquaintance, or bring to the knowledge of Spanish readers the work of this very important contemporary Irish poet, my small efforts will not have been made in vain.

* This article contains the gist of a talk given at the Clifden Arts Week, Co. Galway, Ireland, in September, 2000.

** The translation, entitled: *Patrick Kavanagh: La Gran Hambre y otros poemas*, has been published by the University of Valladolid Press, Spain, 2000. The late Jose M^a Ruiz has since passed away. (R.I.P.)

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