Maria Tymoczko. *Translation in a postcolonial context: Early Irish literature in English translation.* Manchester: St. Jerome, 1999. 336 pp. ISBN 1–900650–16–9. £22.50.

Reviewed by Michael Cronin (Dublin)

William Butler Yeats famously asked whether certain words of his had sent men out to be shot. Writing after the 1916 rebellion in Dublin he wondered out loud about the connection between writing and insurgency. Yeats might have asked a different question. Did certain translated words of his friends (Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory) send men and women out to be shot in the shelled buildings and the prison yards of the city? The answer to this hypothetical question might very well have been yes. As Maria Tymoczko shows in her important new study of the translation of early Irish literature into English, translation in 19th and 20th century Ireland was an essential component of the "literature of combat" (p. 285) in the pre-independence period. In examining, in particular, the translation record of tales from the Ulster Cycle — the oldest extant body of mythological tales in Ireland — Tymoczko demonstrates that the translation of literature from Old Irish rather than being the esoteric concern of unworldly pedants was an area fraught with political tensions. For many Irish nationalists, translating the extensive body of early Irish literature into English was fundamental to affirming the existence of an independent Irish culture in the face of centuries of condescension, the Irish presented as simian outcasts from the Garden of Civilisation in need of the cultural stewardship of the Saxon. If Caliban was going to learn the language of the Prospero, it was to show that his Books were older than those of the new master.

In this enterprise, the nationalists were by and large successful but Tymoczko details the paradoxes of a translation activity which in the name of championing national specificity in fact carefully elided, muted or changed the very elements which made Irish literature different from literature in the English-language tradition. These elements include humour, naming conventions, sexual or scatological subject matter, unseemly behaviour in the case of heroes, belief in an otherworld occupying a different time-space continuum and the concept of the *geis*, a binding injunction which could be expressed positively or negatively depending on circumstances. In a classic anti-colonial manoeuvre,

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the translators found themselves trying to minimise the importance of these elements in an effort to make the literature conform to the horizons of expectation of the English canon, thereby reinforcing the cultural and aesthetic values of the dominant culture. It would in fact be several decades after independence before poet-translators like Austin Clarke and Thomas Kinsella would emerge to promote a genuine decolonizing translation praxis, restoring the cultural and formal integrity of the early Irish texts. Formal questions are important both because of the formal complexity of literature in Old Irish and because the formal dissimilarities of early Irish literature from other European literatures of the early and late medieval period are part of the intrinsic interest and value of the literature. Although prose is often the language of narrative in Irish hero tales — highly elaborate and differentiated poetic inserts reserved for illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts in the texts — the tendency was often for the narrative in translation to be transformed into the blank verse of prestigious European epic or for the poetry inserts to be presented in a formally homogenous fashion, leading in many cases to the omission of the most formally challenging poetry types.

Translation in a postcolonial context brings specialist knowledge to bear on a specialist subject but the book fully justifies the ambition of the title. The questions it raises are too important in a sense to be left to specialists. One chapter is exemplary in this respect, "The accuracy of the philologist", which is a courageous and trenchant critique of the presuppositions and consequences of philological positivism for translations of marginalized literatures. Tymoczko declares that:

> Philological translations are, as a whole, unambiguous, penetrable, familiar: they clear up the ambiguities, the violations, the defamiliarizations, and the difficulties of literary texts, and such features as cannot be cleared up are eliminated and silenced in the form of all-pervasive ellipses. (p. 259)

Philological translation is highly significant because as Tymoczko rightly argues, "to a very high degree philological approaches have remained the norm for translating the native texts of minority and non-Western cultures, including most postcolonial cultures" (p. 269). The exclusive commitment to semantic and referential meaning, a result of the scientist conception of the discipline of philology in the 19th century, means that the sociolinguistic and functional aspects of textual communication are frequently ignored. In an analysis of the philological translations of three different early Irish Texts, Tymoczko describes the recurrent failure of philological translations to deal with alliteration, sound correspondence, imagery and poetic form. These features are on a par with

semantic meaning as *constitutive* elements of the texts. To ignore them is to turn literature into non-literature and as minority literatures do not always have an embarrassment of suitors, the philological translation becomes the only and definitive translation, thus distorting the perception and reception of whole bodies of world literature. Translations that justify themselves in terms of 'close', 'accurate' renditions of texts are in a sense devastatingly inaccurate in failing to represent core features of literature in translation. If philology was to elucidate and archive for Empire the languages of subject peoples, even the detractors of Empire, the native philologists, cannot seem to escape the lure of a reductive clarity which sidelines the difficulty and estrangement lying at the heart of any enduring aesthetic enterprise. This is not to argue for the beatific confusion of indeterminacy. In a withering critique of Quine, Tymoczko details how determinacy can and must be arrived at in translation but this indeed means a greater attention to not a turning away from the non-referential dimensions of texts. A further irony of the philological tradition is that it colonizes the language of translation. In other words, contemporary Irish-language writers who wish to read texts in their own tradition almost invariably have to do so mediated by English-language translations (Modern Irish and Old Irish are too different for mutual intelligibility). Direct translations from Old to Modern Irish are rare, money and prestige dictating that Irish speakers access the riches of their own literary history through another dominant language. And the Irish case is by no means unique as is borne out by the experience of India.

If the notion of linguistic transcoding is largely discredited in Translation Studies if not in science fiction and the popular mind, metaphorical, substitution-based theories of translation still have a certain currency. It is texts and cultures, however, rather than words which are now seen as the units of transfer. Tymoczko opposes this conception of translation to her own metonymic representation of the translation process. As she illustrates throughout *Translation in a postcolonial context* translators select some aspects or elements of the source text to foreground and preserve, certain parts of texts are privileged in translation over others so that, "[b]y definition, therefore, translation is metonymic: it is a form of representation in which parts or aspects of the source text come to stand for the whole" (p. 55). Metaphorical theories tend to engender the digital polarities of good/bad, faithful/unfaithful, free/literal and so on. In metonymic thinking, on the other hand, it is acknowledged that no ready-made substitutes exist for the cultural webs or syntagms of source texts. Instead, Tymoczko claims:

> an entire alternative structure must be created through the process of building new connections, establishing new contiguities, determining new attributes, and forming new contextures; such a process is one of complex choice, of multivariable decision making, and cannot easily be subsumed within rule-governed protocols. (pp. 282–283)

As the author herself acknowledges, it is always easier to formulate prescriptions in the abstract than to suggest concrete translation strategies but one of the singular virtues of this work is to give detailed linguistic and textual examples of how a metonymic translation criticism operates and to show how a metonymic sensitivity in the case of one translator, Thomas Kinsella, results in complex and innovative translation. It is worth adding that if translations are partial and incomplete, skilful translation can trigger the generative potential of the target language. In this way, metonymic chains of association are suggested by the translation bringing elements of the target culture to bear on the text, elements which were not there in the source culture (or not in the same way) leading to an interpretive enrichment whose strength not weakness is partiality.

Theorists are regularly pilloried in Translation Studies for being strong on affirmation and weak on evidence. *Translation in a postcolonial context* is convincing on both counts and the work is an invaluable addition not only to an understanding of Irish translation history at a crucial period of political and cultural development but to our grasp of the particular translation dilemmas of peoples or countries emerging from the hard day's night of empire. Yeats was right, the centre cannot hold and we are all the better for it.