

LOST IN THE WILD(E)RNESS. THE TRANSLATIONS OF *DE PROFUNDIS* INTO SPANISH

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Abstract

This paper explores how the complex history of Wilde's *De Profundis* can affect its many Spanish translations. Consequently, I will begin with its uncommon publishing history, which would lead to the coexistence of more than one text called Wilde's *De Profundis*, all different in content and length. In this paper, I will examine these different versions displaying a panoramic view of their translation into Spanish and considering which version is being used in each one. This will be useful in examining the way in which this text has been translated into Spanish and in analysing the fact that even more than fifty years after the publication of the full letter, the censored edition is still common in modern anthologies and translations, something which leads to a loss of information as I will exemplify using two different recent translations.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, Spanish translation

1. Introduction

De Profundis is the only literary output produced by Oscar Wilde during his stay in prison. This long text in the style of a letter, which was composed a few

months before the author's departure from Reading Gaol in May 1897, is an important piece in understanding Wilde's psychology after being discredited by society and his own family. In fact, it can be seen how the author depicts his stay in prison as a major turn in his life stating that "the two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison" (Wilde 1997, 1074). Considering the importance of this text, it is not unusual that it has been translated into more than forty languages, Spanish being the third with regard to the number of editions according to the OCLC's worldcat.org (WCO) database. Due to this fact, in this paper I will offer a panoramic view of the translating history of this text into Spanish, which will be followed by the analysis of two Spanish translations.

Nevertheless, before dealing with these translations, it is important to note some vital formal aspects, for instance, its complex textual history which would lead to the existence of several different versions of the text, all of them published under the same name: *De Profundis*. This problem is also present in Spanish translations as the analysed texts will support, since despite being almost coetaneous, each one of them stands as a different version of *De Profundis*, one of them being almost three times shorter than the other.

In order to understand the origin of this issue, I will devote the next sections to the textual history of the manuscript and its translating history into Spanish using as the main source the catalogue of the BNE. After this, I will attempt to reach conclusions about the most common version: the full or the shortened one. Then, I will approach the differences in these versions aiming to illustrate the possible loss that it would be implicit in the use of the abridged version instead of the full one in Spanish translations.

2. The complex textual history of the text: More than one *De Profundis*

Regarding its history of publication, we must take into consideration that the text was finished circa January and February 1897, Wilde's final months in prison. Nevertheless, despite the fact that according to his biographer Richard Ellmann, the author was yet allowed to send letters, he was not able to send this manuscript, then called "Epistola in Carcere et Vinculis." For this reason, he had to take the text with him during his departure from Reading Gaol on 19 May of this same year (Ellmann 1988, 451-478).

Since he had been disreputed in his own country, he moved to the continent and joined his literary executor Robert Ross in Dieppe, France. It was there where he would hand him this manuscript, but also a series of instructions where he requested to “have his letter copied, not once but twice” (Small 2003a, 90). Therefore, when Wilde died in 1900 after having lived discredited and bankrupt in France and Italy, Ross began to work on “*Epistola in Carcere et Vinculis*” publishing it in 1905 as *De Profundis*. Nevertheless, this version edited by Ross is almost three times shorter than the original, having just 17.811 words. In 1909, he would republish it again slightly changing the structure and beginning of the previous shortened version.

After having published *De Profundis*, Ross donated his own full original copy of the text to The British Library (TBL) under the condition of keeping it unseen for the next fifty years (Small 2000, 5). It is very important to take into consideration this action because it would be the reason why the original full text was not accessible until the mid-sixties, when it was published by Rupert Hart-Davis.

Apart from its longer extension, this original manuscript does have the epistolary format used by Wilde which is absent in Ross’ versions. Likewise, the existence of further copies published under the same name may also lead to some problems regarding the identification of each text. Needless to say, before approaching this issue, it is important to consider some details about the state and history of the translation of *De Profundis* into Spanish.

3. Compilation of the translations of this text into Spanish

Despite the fact the catalogue of the Biblioteca Nacional de España (CBNE) mentions the existence of a translation of *De Profundis* into Spanish published by José F. Ferreira Martins (1840-1960) in 1925, José Emilio Pacheco first mentions a 1929 translation by Ricardo Baeza (1890-1956) and Julio Gómez de la Serna (1895-1983) published in Madrid by La Nave. In this case, both translators are well-known for translating much of Wilde’s output.

The next translation is the one made by Margarita Nelken (1894-1968). It was published in 1931 in Madrid by Biblioteca Nueva and according to the BNE catalogue, it has been republished eight times by several publishers, being one of the most popular translations of this text. In this translation, there is no

note written by the translator and few footnotes. However, in recent re-editions, such as that in 1982, we can find additional editor's notes, and an introduction by Carmelo S. Castro. Besides, it must be noted that in Nelken's translations we can find some typos, especially in proper names, for instance, "Jhon Keats" [sic] (1982, 89). Another important fact about this translation is that it was made from the German version of Max Meyerfeld instead of using the English original as source text. Nelken's work is also highlighted by scholars like Pacheco since her translation was not published as *De Profundis* but as *La tragedia de mi vida* (1931), a title which would be translated into English and used in some North-American editions as if it were the original title (Pacheco 1977, 19).

After Nelken's translation, *De Profundis* was not published again until 1975, with José Emilio Pacheco's (1939-2014) translation. At this stage, we must take into consideration that the original full text had already been published in English. Therefore, from this point forward, we must contemplate the possibility that any translation published after this date could be based on either Ross' shortened editions or the original full version.

In the case of Pacheco's translation published in Barcelona by Muchnik Editores D. L., we are dealing indeed with this full version. In fact, he expresses his will to remain as close as possible to Wilde's original:

Este libro respeta en lo posible la división irregular de los párrafos, el empleo arbitrario de las mayúsculas y otros rasgos de un original que Oscar Wilde escribió en la cárcel y no tuvo oportunidad de revisar para darlo a la imprenta. Se ha intentado hacer en el español de nuestros días un texto que se aproxime a la prosa de Wilde en 1897 y se halle hasta cierto punto libre de localismos (Pacheco 1977, 8).

Pacheco also provides the reader with explanatory notes at the end of the book which offer more information about the references in the text and the translation and meaning of Wilde's original quotes in foreign languages. As with Nelken's translation, this one has also been re-edited several times and was republished in 1977, 1984 and 1994 by Muchnik Editores D. L.

The next two translators would also follow Pacheco's steps and they would use the original full manuscript as source text. The first one is Marta Pérez (1949-2016), whose version was published in 1986 by Editorial Fontamara in Barcelona, and like the previous translation, it does not provide any footnotes. Pérez decided to keep foreign language quotes untranslated, and nor did she

provide explanatory notes. Therefore, as occurs in Wilde's original text, if the reader does not understand those foreign languages, they cannot access those references. The only comment made by the translator is a brief introductory note of edition at the beginning of the book. The next translation would be that of Enrique Campbell, which was published by Edicomunicación in 1995 and 1999, and by Brontes in 2014, all in Barcelona.

There would be no new translations until the 21st century. Therefore, as a general overview, it can be said that after the publication of the full text, translators used this as source text. Nevertheless, it would be important to observe if this phenomenon is still happening today. Despite the fact that according to the ISBN catalogue the number of editions and translations of this text has increased considerably since 2010, it is surprising to see that even nowadays, Nelken's translation of the shortened version is still being republished and that even some recent anthologies, as in the one used in this paper, continue publishing new translations of this incomplete version. The use of this version does not lead just to the loss of information but also to the absence of other formal aspects of the text, as it will be presented in the following comparison.

3.1. *Textual differences between the abridged and full version*

With regard to the editions used, I will compare two texts taken from *En prisión* (2014) and *La Narrativa de O. Wilde* (2016), which display the original full letter and the shortened and edited version published by Ross in 1909 respectively. During this comparison, I will focus on those elements seen in the full version which are absent in the short one. Since these translations attempt to be faithful to the source texts in English, they try to preserve the structure of each of these versions, and therefore, the absent elements coincide.

The full text, translated by Andrés Arenas and Enrique Girón, is compiled in *En prisión* (2014) and published by Confluencias. It consists of 160 pages which also display footnotes which would extend the information mentioned by Wilde with more biographical details. However, the shortened version taken from *La Narrativa de O. Wilde* (2016) and published by EDAF consists of 51 pages translated by Alfonso Sastre and José Sastre. In this case, footnotes are just used to translate Wilde's quotes from foreign languages, but they do not offer information about the text or Wilde's life.

Besides this difference in the length of these texts, there is also a restructuration of the information. In the long version, the first page is introduced in an epistolary style, displaying the date and place of writing and Wilde's salutation to Bosie. From this page to page 58, which is the point where the shortened version begins, the author addresses his former lover explaining his current situation. This part is the longest omitted fragment and it provides the introduction of what could be understood as Wilde's main aim in this letter: to chide Bosie and at the same time to teach him "something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow and it's beauty" (Wilde 2000, 780).

Nevertheless, despite this part being omitted, some of its lines can be seen reproduced similarly in the short version, since, as Gagnier mentions, he "has established through repetition the contours of his life before prison" (1984, 345). This can be observed in some almost identical parts, such as the following example: "a ti te veo como el niño Samuel de la Biblia; y a mí sentado entre Gilles de Retz y el marqués de Sade, en el inmundo Malebolge" (Wilde 2014, 38). This idea would also be presented again in the section where the short version starts: "Mi lugar estaría entre Gilles de Retz y el marqués de Sade. Aunque me imagino que esto sería lo mejor" (Wilde 2016, 591).

From this point onwards, the structure of both versions coincides but there are some omissions which would imply that Wilde's lesson is not targeted at Bosie but at society in general or even just at himself, as the following quote illustrates: "lo primero que tengo que hacer es liberarme del posible resentimiento contra ti" (104). In the shortened version this last part is changed as "contra el mundo" (2016, 559). Furthermore, this short version describes of the conditions in which prisoners have to live (85), meanwhile in the full text there are omitted pages relating this situation to Bosie's selfishness and lack of commitment during Wilde's trials. As Ross did in his shortened versions, the translator also adds an ellipsis mark, "...", at the end of each sentence which would introduce an omitted part, for instance: "[it] tells me that it is May..." (Wilde 1909, 28). Besides Ross' reasons mentioned by TBL of avoiding being accused of libel, it is important to consider these omissions with regard to Colm Tóibín's comments about the dislike Ross felt for Bosie and how, "as a former lover of Wilde's himself, he was less than happy about the prospect of Wilde and Douglas being together again" (Tóibín 2017).

Despite the fact that the messages about love, art, individualism and Christ are included in both versions, this time Ross seems to reorganize Wilde's ideas instead of omitting them. This is probably an attempt to make the text cohesive, since, without the parts concerning Bosie, the remaining paragraphs look unrelated to each other, and may have needed editing. For instance, in the original text, Wilde talks about the days before of his sentence, the tragedy it implied to his mother, and the behaviour of Bosie's family. However, in the shortened version, all this information is paraphrased in a way in which the references concerning Bosie are ambiguously presented or even omitted, as in the part in which Wilde expresses his desire to see him again and gives him instructions about how he should answer this letter (182).

4. Conclusions

To conclude, it is important to examine the compilation of translations provided, since it stands as proof of the presence of both versions in modern editions. The fact that the abridged version is found in anthologies may be related to its shorter length.

Nevertheless, it is also vital to note the important loss that the use of the short version would imply. First of all, the author's life seems to be manipulated since it is a censored version of Wilde's original letter and most of the details concerning his tragedy has been omitted; for instance, his relationship with Bosie and the judicial process. Moreover, Ross's edition may lead to a misconception of the author's message, since, despite being true that he also addresses society in the original version, the short one indicates that Wilde's lessons are not targeted at Bosie but just at society alone.

Therefore, I am inclined to consider that it would be advisable that future translations consider using the original version of Wilde's letter, in order to avoid a loss and misconception of the actual information and message provided by the author.

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