

# ORALITY IN *GRANDE SERTÃO*: *VEREDAS* AND ULYSSES

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## ABSTRACT

The regional element of both masterpieces has as an important element the use of the spoken language of the time, incorporating colloquialisms, local proverbs and images and ways of expression in conflict with the standard speech of the period. The result of this element makes the books decidedly regional while lifting them into universality because of the theme and the dramatic conflicts.

**Keywords:** Guimarães Rosa; James Joyce; Colloquial language.

## RESUMO

O elemento regional das obras primas de James Joyce e de Guimarães Rosa tem como fator importante a utilização da linguagem oral da época, incorporando expressões coloquiais, provérbios regionais e imagens e meios de expressão em conflito com a língua padrão do período. O resultado deste elemento torna as obras primas claramente regionais, enquanto leva-as à universalidade por causa da temática e dos conflitos dramáticos.

**Palavras-chave:** Guimarães Rosa; James Joyce; Linguagem oral.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this essay is to discuss a characteristic of both these great novels of the 20th Century. Both books break away from the traditional written text to incorporate the spoken language of communities that were in fact marginalized by their contemporary culture. While Guimarães Rosa brought in the regional dialect out of sheer admiration for its colorfulness and its richness, Joyce used the Dublin dialect because it was the subversive way the colonized Irish used English as an unconscious form of protest.

## 2 ORALITY IN “GRANDE SERTÃO: VEREDAS”



According to Bosi, it was through the interior of Minas Gerais in 1952 that Guimarães Rosa explored deeply the universe of stories that he had heard since he was a boy. During ten days, mounted on the back of a poor quality horse, with a small notebook hanging around his neck, Rosa note, with the small handwriting observations on the fauna, flora, the customs and the speech as well as the stories, the songs and the dances of those men and woman who lived in the backlands of Minas.

He had become accustomed from his infancy to hear the stories of Juca Bananeira, the employee of the family telling the stories of the cattle ranches and the jagunços and this form of story telling had gradually formed the art of narration of Guimarães Rosa. He himself tells us:

Quando menino, no sertão de Minas, onde nasci e me criei, meus pais costumavam pagar a velhas contadeiras de estórias. Elas iam à minha casa só para contar casos. E as velhas, nas puras misturas, me contavam estórias de fadas e de vacas, de bois e reis. Adorava escutá-las (DANTAS, 1968, p.1).

Later, it was the doctor who traveled over the backlands of Minas, taking care of the sick and listening to the stories of the inhabitants and it was the diplomat later who traveled the world storing away in his mind in distant lands these forms of oral tales.. the contact and the sharing of evenings with these oral story tellers left important traces in the formation of Rosa, the erudite story teller. Just as his life had been marked by the universe of these story tells, his novels also are full of these old masters in the art of narration.

For Dantas, Rosa translates this world of orality, recuperating the old fashioned speech in his written narratives and repeats the procedure which is a characteristic of his work, the intervention of the narrator in the body of his text, which has the function of opening the doors for the revelation of the significance of that which is narrated.

The narratives, within the narrative present extra information for there are carries of a secret or an enigma which, in the telling, offers the possibility of deciphering the meaning of life or destiny of the characters as in the quotation.

Mire e veja: se me digo, tem um sujeito Pedro Pindó, vizinho vizinho



daqui mais de seis léguas, homem de bem por tudo em tudo, ele e a mulher... (p.13)

From this point of the confrontation of the world of orality and the world of writing or the world of literature, Guimarães Rosa weaves his stories, which are born one out of the other, creating out of the universe of oral narratives the great fountain of what can still be associated with the literary. This archaic order, closer to the mythical sphere is recovered in a fragmentary way.

...Ah, tem uma repetição, que sempre outras vezes em minha vida acontece. Eu atravesso as coisas - e no meio da travessia não vejo! - só estava era entretido na idéia dos lugares de saída e de chegada... (p.30)

By the use of this oral narrative, the author provokes an awareness in the protagonist and places him face to face with the question of his own identity, on a plane where the answers are still possible. The imaginary of the stories can offer some answers, through a process of mirroring and the individual experience of the character finds an echo in the oral narratives in the measure that there he finds reflected some fundamental questions.

In the work Grande sertão: veredas of João Guimarães Rosa, one can perceive the continual presence of orality right from the start. The author begins the novel with inverted comments, which is characteristic of direct dialogue:

No nada. Tiros que o senhor ouviu foram de briga de homem não, Deus esteja. Alvejei mira em árvores no quintal, no baixo córrego. (p.1)

It is the voice of the retired jagunço Riobaldo who takes control of the narrative His long slow speech as narrator suggests repeatedly the presence of a listener. The author uses the narrator as a possibility of the fictionalization of the empirical reader, and it is a form of the approximation of the narrator and the reader. He pretends the dialogue since the characters possess no voice. The dialogue does not take place because the narrator is turned back on his past. Riobaldo is heard only in an implicit way, through the orality, as he comments and asks

questions.

Eric Havelock in his essay “ the equation of orality: written culture- the formula for the modern mind” comments that the natural human being is not a writer nor a speaker but is a listener. Or in other words, Riobaldo is a natural being because he tells his story in a simple form in simple language, in order to put down his memories. Havelock also states that the secrets of orality are not in the behavior of the language used in the conversation but in the use of speech in order to store away the information in the memory.

The universe of the short story of Guimarães Rosa preserves the old oral narratives, which according to Walter Benjamin become increasingly rare in the modern world of capitalism, which are being substituted by new forms of narrative such as the novel and the written short story, which are more adequate for the new forms of production. Again, according to Benjamin, the craftsman like activity typical of the pre-capitalist organization of labor makes it possible for the craftsman to write his voice and his style into the act of narration and so bring about leisure based on the desire to listen and to narrate. In this sense, the narrator is one who knows how to give advice because his narrative transmits something that can be accepted, a moral, a suggestion or a lesson.

For Benjamin, the art of narrative is threatened by extinction because there is a process of the degradation of experience and it is not longer possible to give or receive advice, increasingly lost as we are in the universe of solitary individual experience which debates and seeks the meaning of life.

By the process of the construction of images, Rosa articulates the real and the symbolic. The narrative absorbs the data of reality but in the interpretation, covers them with meaning. And it exactly this imprinting of this more regional and more documentary facet to the symbolic signification that one finds that he touches on the fundamental questions of human existence such as love, desire, suffering, lose, life and death. In the crossroads of the particular and the universal, the real backlands are transformed in the magic space: “ the backlands of the world” as Antonio Candido states in this seminal essay on Grande sertão: veredas.

Guimarães Rosa discovers one of the most

extraordinary definitions for the word backlands.

"Lugar sertão se divulga: é onde os pastos carecem de fechos; onde um pode torar dez, quinze léguas, sem topar com casa de morador, e onde criminoso vive seu Cristo-Jesus, arredado do arrocho de autoridade. O Urucúia vem dos montões oestes. Mas, hoje, que na beira dele, tudo dá - fazendões de fazendas, almargem de vargens de bom render, as vazantes; culturas que vão de mata em mata, madeiras de grossura, até ainda virgens dessas lá há. O gerais corre em volta. Esses gerais são sem tamanho. Enfim, cada um o que quer aprova, o senhor sabe: pão ou pães, é questão de opiniões. O sertão está em toda parte".(G. S. VEREDAS, p.1)

Bosi in **História concisa da Literatura Brasileira** states that **Grande sertão: veredas** includes and revitalizes the recourses of language such as poetic expression, rhymthical cells, alliteration, onomatopoeia, internal rhyme, morphic audacities, eclipses, cutting and displacement of sytax, unusual vocabulary, archaic words, rare association, metaphors, anaphora, metonymy and the fusion of styles.

**Grande sertão: veredas** presents the speech of the backlands in the oral tradition of the laborer of the region.

Mire veja o que a gente é: mal dali, a um átomo, eu selando meu cavalo e arrumando meus dobros, e já me muito entristecia. Diadorim me espreitava de longe, afetando a espécie duma vagueza. No me despedir, tive precisão de dizer a ele, baixinho:- "Por teu pai vou amigo, mano-oh-mano. Vingar Joça Ramiro..." A fraqueza minha adulatória. Mas ele respondeu: - "Viagem boa, Riobaldo. E boa-sorto..." Despedir dá febre (G. S. VEREDAS, p.52).

One perceives the creation of neologisms such as "desendoidecer" e "desdoidar". Guimarães uses new combinations of words and Rosa even recreate language reconditioning it inventively, moving away from such common expressions in order to give a more amble grandeur to the discourse.. "Nu da cintura para os queixos" (instead of nu da cintura para cima) and again "Não sabiam de nada coisíssima" (instead of não sabiam de coisa nenhuma) are good examples of the reinvention of language of Rosa.

A linear sequence is impossible, since recollecting flows according to the sentiments, the strong impressions, the resentments and the series of tumultuous facts that trouble the

character. His memories come at times with the movement of a volcano, now exploding like bombs, now flowing like quiet streams, now overturning the backs like rapid mountain streams, now meandering along the planes in the shadows of the vistas of the Gerais. Because of this, many times the listener is asked to put inside in the plot.

The narrator is modified, grows with each new situation and is transformed by each real moment of living. This process has profound links with the telling. The character who narrates becomes a different person with each experience.

To build the plot or the use the language confronts the thorny difference between the cultural register of the listener and the supposed uneducated speech of the character narrator. While browsing the text, the reader does not perceive the struggle between the two principally in the details of the linguist register which subtly hides itself. However it is really difficult to adequate the verosemilarity of the plot built with the linguistic register is is special to it. On various occasions, Riobaldo refers to the level of instruction of his listener emphasizing the difference, which exists between them.

While telling his story, Riobaldo reveals his vision of the world and accentuates the peculiarities existing between them:

O senhor espere o meu contado. Não convém a gente levantar escândalo de começo, só aos poucos é que o escuro fica claro (G. S. VEREDAS, p.147).

In this way, the author invests in the mixing of fiction and reality bringing about in the reader the perception of the same difficulties that exist mind of the narrator. In this form, Guimarães Rosa in his fictional story narrates facts from his own and others own lives. Grande sertão: veredas is a masterpiece that presents in the regional speech of the backlands an image of man as universal who speaking of his sentiments of love, of respect for the lane, of his origins makes the reader reflect and discover in the end that “Viver é muito perigoso.” (p.16).

## 2 James Joyce

The most vital findings with linguistic foreignness in James Joyce are to be seen, not in 'foreign languages' often misquoted by the writer in the text but in English language itself.





Joyce said as much in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), during Stephen Dedalus's encounter with an English Jesuit:

- The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (JOYCE. 1992,p.1205)

The political point is that the English language is in fact a foreign imposition on the tongue of an Irish speaker and the background is the decline of the Irish language after 300 years of British domination. But if the political point is clear, the empirical claim is strange. For an inhabitant of Dublin around 1900, English was surely less foreign a language than Irish Gaelic. Indeed, the influence of Gaelic on the speech of Dublin is most evident in the syntax of drama and in the survival of such picturesque expressions as "We are after finishing," "It's sorry you will be," and "James do be cutting corn every day, which are direct translation of the Gaelic expressions into English, subverting the grammar of the language.

There is here and elsewhere a certain unknown quantity which is Irish, whose legacy allows a writer to inhabit English yet stand apart from it, a resident foreigner whose ambiguous relation to the language echoes the ambiguity of Ireland's historic relations with the Britain.. But one answer to the mystery is a plain fact: the Irish had indeed transformed English, into that hybrid tongue we might call Hiberno-English and which is the language used by the author of *Ulysses*.

Joyce's dialogue was of great interest to his Irish readers during his own lifetime. That was partly because some characters were based on people they knew, or even people they happened to be. It is said that the first question people asked in Dublin in 1922, of anyone who possessed a copy, was 'Am I in it?' One Dubliner mentioned in an anecdote in a book sued the BBC for libel when they adapted it for radio because he was the character; another character, captured as a young man in the novel, spent the rest of his life insisting 'I am not a character in

fiction, I am a living being'. Dialogue was one place in the book where Dublin voices spoke, however far away Joyce was from Dublin when he wrote his text : the woman asked how her husband is, replying

- O, don't be talking!... He's a caution to rattlesnakes. He's in there now with his lawbooks finding out the law of libel. He has me heartscalded. Wait till I show you .(JOYCE, 1986 p.129)

- The drinker exclaims of his 'alemates' in perfect Dublin foreignness:

- Lord love a duck... Look at what I'm standing drinks to! Cold water and gingerpop! Two fellows that would suck whisky off a sore leg (JOYCE, 1986, p.146).

One of the many linguistic beauties of the book is a registering of tones past, a fond archiving of that fund of wit, dialectal idiosyncrasy and, sometimes, verbal malice that Joyce had left behind – as much the speech of his father's generation as of his own.

Dialogue in *Ulysses*, though, is framed by other uses of language: notably, third person narration, which moves characters around, describes objects and events. This element of the book is functional, but it is also a highly-wrought idiom, an instrument of rare precision. Take this description of Leopold Bloom's cat:

Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes (JOYCE, 1986, p. 45).

Colons habitually make Joyce's prose itself clean to see, possessed of neatness, an aura of exactitude, of the weighing and balancing activity that this punctuation mark implies. Impressive is the tidiness, the cleanliness even, of the sentence, which contains 22 words of which only three have more than one syllable. We are almost in a world of pure one syllable words as brief autonomous sounds like the notes of a piano. They may be worth reciting in a different order – eyes, gloss, hide, of, white, her, the, see, sleek, clean, the, to, butt, her, of, tail, the, green just to bring out something of what words seem to have possessed for Joyce: a kind of autonomy from each other, a





portability around the sentence and across the page. As we move forward in the book, we will find words, and syllabic parts of words, more and more acquiring and flaunting such autonomy.

The Joycean signature here is not the one that the world often thinks it recognizes, extravagant and overflowing, whether that be Molly Bloom's river of reverie, yes I said yes I will Yes (Joyce, 1945 p.644), or the ingenious inventions of Finnegans Wake, 'the hoarder hidden propagating his plutopopular progeniem of pots and pans and pokers and puns from biddenland to boughtenland, the spearway fore the spoorway'(Joyce, 1975, p.75) . No, it is something much simpler and starker. And in contrasting it with those snatches of dialogue, we see another important feature: it is not obviously Irish. A careful distance is maintained between the local color of Joyce's dialogue and the delocalized detachment of the descriptive discourse that frames it. Joyce wrote in a period of both political and cultural nationalism, in which the recovery or reinvention of indigenous Irish creative forms was encouraged.

In describing his first collection of stories, Dubliners (1914), Joyce had proposed the phrase 'scrupulous meanness'(Ellman, 1975, p.83). The text of Ulysses is not mean, but it is scrupulous, still more so than that of his previous books: and in its canny, painstaking restraint it shows an Irishman writing English without needing to prove his Irish credentials at the level of style. If Dublin-English was a semi-foreign relation of Standard English, then to Joyce it was also the language of home: and that homely language is not the dominant idiom of his book.

Samuel Beckett would flee to French to escape the tongue's over-ready domination: less dramatically, Joyce's narration also keeps its distance from the indigenous speech he lovingly records.

Nor is Joyce's prose like that produced in London. Arguably no-one writing English prose before Joyce would have written that sentence about the cat quite as he did. Or these:

She blinked up out of her avid shameclosing eyes, mewing plaintively and long, showing him her milkwhite teeth (JOYCE, 1975, p.45)

- where one key element in Joyce's writing, the compound word



without a hyphen, makes two appearances, as again in the butcher's shop down the road:

The ferretheaded porkbutcher folded the sausages he had snipped off with blotchy fingers, sausagepink (Joyce, 1975, p.48).

Here is what happens to coins handed over at the counter:

They lay, were read quickly and quickly slid, disc by disc, into the till (Joyce, 1975, p.49).

One of the simplest acts imaginable, habitual and unthinking, is broken down to its stages in time, recited one by one, with quiet rhyme – 'quickly slid, disc by disc, into the till'. The vowel sound repeated six times in eight words – and that central crossed repetition, 'read quickly and quickly slid', which is the giveaway that something just slightly strange is going on with style, that some trace of the poetic inheres in this prose, whose odd patterns, unlike the act of payment, are not habitual.

What Joyce describes in such passages is deeply ordinary: looking at a cat; watching butcher wrap sausages; buying a kidney. Joyce was not the first to write about this mundane matter: this is one of the great aims of realist fiction, a vocation Joyce does not disdain. But he renders it in a distinctive idiom, which seems both to stick to the act described and to pull away from its predictability: to be remarkably faithful to everyday actions, while at the same time somehow making them strange. 'Clean to see' indeed describes Joyce in this mode: the phrase is after all one way of expressing what Victor Shklovsky had classically said literature ought to do with seeing. Many times as this style proceeds through the first eight chapters or so, we may remark small, telling signature moments. Leopold Bloom tears up an envelope:

The shreds fluttered away, sank in the dank air: a white flutter, then all sank (JOYCE, 1975, p.65).

Someone tosses away a match:

At their feet its red speck died: and mouldy air closed round them (JOYCE, 1975, p.189).

Bloom looks in to a restaurant:



Hot mockturtle vapour and steam of newbaked jumpuffs rolypoly poured out from Harrison's. The heavy noonreek tickled the top of Mr. Bloom's gullet (JOYCE, 1975, p.129).

'Newbaked' and 'noonreek' are happy conjoinings, but this writing is as distinguished as much by its dedication to economy as by extravagance. Joyce is loading units of compound nouns of prose with what might take a looser writer twice as many words. One result is a challenging strangeness of syntax, unusual sequences of words, as in Bloom's experience at a shop window:

Perfume of embraces all him assailed. With hungered flesh obscurely, he mutely craved to adore (JOYCE, 1975, p.138).

These are the two sentences whose ordering Joyce claimed had cost him a day's labour.<sup>15</sup> In such a remark Joyce was cultivating an image as – what Wyndham Lewis later called him – the craftsman<sup>16</sup>: but he was generating the sentences to justify it.

All these lines show cunning – which, along with a John Cagey silence, we recall was one of the values that Stephen Dedalus promised to use at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. One of Joyce's main but more undervalued contributions to writing in English has been a certain minimalism, quite stangely at odds with the overflow that we know we'll find elsewhere in his work; and with other writers who were likewise aiming for fidelity to the real.

Henry James, on the contrary, uses a completely different type of English. For instance: we find in *The Golden Bowl*, a book published the year *Ulysses* is set this:

It may be mentioned also that he always figured other persons – such was the law of his nature – as a numerous array, and that, though conscious of but a single near tie, one affection, one duty deepest-rooted in his life, it had never for many minutes together been his portion not to feel himself surrounded and committed, never quite been his refreshment to make out where the many-coloured human appeal, represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity, of importunity, really faded to the impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached.(JAMES, 1985, p..129)

A sentence like those 94 words is literally unthinkable in *Ulysses*, except as a parody: indeed there are parodies near the end of the book that look a little like it.<sup>18</sup> Both James and Joyce are seeking to describe, to give some object or experience its due in English prose, but in these masterpieces those impulses pull them in utterly opposite directions. For James, at this stage, the bid to nail something in writing asks increasingly for more words, one more clause, one more qualifying explanation which would offer the last note of clarification: so the sentence runs on as long as such new qualifications arise. For Joyce in the first half of *Ulysses*, concision is a sign of fidelity: the snapshot of Bloomsday 1904 is achieved less by adding more and more words than by subtracting them and moving them around until they form the sudden striking order they do on the pages we have. For all that the book looks big and teeming, it is driven for a long time by the opposite: a quietness, an economy, even an ecology of language in which words are not to be wasted. And for all the exuberance of the book's second half, it may be those descriptions of cats and sausages that have cleared the most space for writers in the last 80 years.

But we might not fully recognize their novelty without the greater novelties that follow them and made Joyce's status as a re-inventor of language less easy to miss. Chapter ten is known as 'Sirens', the episode of music: here those elements of prose which have been so carefully arranged in the first 200 pages are set waltzing. 'Sirens' shows continuities from the language that we've come to know, yet also something strangely different. Here are two barmaids, idling and awaiting custom:

She poured in a teacup tea, then back in the teapot tea. They covered under their reef of counter, waiting on footstools, crates upturned, waiting for their teas to draw. They pawed their blouses, both of black satin, two and nine a yard, waiting for their teas to draw, and two and seven (JOYCE, 1986, p.212).

No word here is inherently difficult, erudite or invented by the author: all are everyday words. But the paragraph develops its own strangeness. That first sentence, with its disconcerting work of description, is divided in two by a comma: on either side six words, only the fifth of each set over one syllable. Similar to the one about the cat: but strange, too, the

symmetry of this sentence – as though its form is taking over from its meaning, or assuming an equal right in its formation. Through the rest of the paragraph we can see, or rather hear, auditory factors shaping the words: 'covered' half-rhyming with 'counter', 'draw' with 'pawed'. And what a queer final sentence:

They pawed their blouses, both of black satin, two and nine a yard, waiting for their teas to draw, and two and seven.

Queer for two reasons. One, its pedantry: do we need to know the exact costs of the blouses? A similar effect is achieved later when Joyce solemnly recites one of the barmaid's addresses (Joyce, 1986, p.221): information we are disconcerted to receive, that feels excessive in a work of fiction. Two, the way that this already peculiar sentence is broken by that phrase 'waiting for their teas to draw', which is a hangover from the end of the previous line.

Perhaps it's mimetic: the repetition says that they're still waiting, and thus, as Samuel Beckett will do thirty years later, voices the monotony of waiting. At the same time it's a repetition of a motif, a reiterated sound: it's thus part of the auditory bias of 'Sirens', which sets out to be founded on sound. Sound, for these thirty pages or so, bids to be the dominant motivation of language, the prime mover, taking precedence over sense but also taking sense with it, in a dance where meaning follows music's lead.

Shrill, with deep laughter, after, gold after bronze, they urged each other to peal after peal, ringing in changes, bronzegold, goldbronze, shrilldeep, to laughter after laughter. And then laughed more (JOYCE, 1986, p.214).

From here, there are many more styles. But perhaps one factor unites the idioms that follow: insincerity. Style after style is piled on the pile, essayed, enlarged, exaggerated, exhausted and discarded, exuding irony by their proximity. Take just one sentence from the chapter, late in the book, where Joyce collects clichés and lines them up like seashells:

It was a subject of regret and absurd as well on the face of it and no small blame to our vaunted society that the man on the street,

when the system really needed toning up, for the matter of a couple of paltry pounds was debarred from seeing more of the world they lived in instead of being always and ever cooped up since my old stick-in-the-mud took me for a wife (JOYCE, 1986, p.513).

When T.S. Eliot said that Joyce had shown up 'the futility of all the English styles' (Woolf, 1978, p.75), he was pointing to this radical relativization of English styles by an Irishman in Europe; and it becomes clearer how much that stylistic whirligig encodes political as well as purely formal mockery.<sup>20</sup>

Joyce's achievement in *Ulysses* was thus to bring language to a perfect pitch, and veer off-key; to carve sentences like gems, then dig for fool's gold; to write English prose better than anyone had before, then show that if he wanted to he could write it worse than anyone had before, and make us reflect that the two abilities were intimately connected, in an extended exhibition of virtuosity and travesty.

If Joyce left later writers one overriding bequest, it may be an attitude to language: a state of estrangement, in which the word, let alone the sentence, is a piece of matter to be surveyed from different angles, taken apart and reconstructed, letter by letter if necessary. The writer as technician; the sentence as unique machine, or as a foreign field of force in which each colon's location becomes a matter of life and dead calm. The image of the aesthete thus becomes not languorous but rigorous.

If Synge and O'Casey made from their 'unknown quantity' a flagrantly Irish idiom, Joyce's took him in a different direction, towards this brand of foreignness: the gaze of the stranger, cannily cautious around words and their risky freights of meaning.

That version of the stylist was not only Joyce's: the vision seems to enter English prose by the view of Flaubert propagated by Pound and others, and to that extent is a cross-cultural, Franco-Anglo-Irish-American translation in itself. But Joyce offers its most intense twentieth-century embodiment, and his pages may be utilized as a school for stylists, where the playground echoes with unleashed voices. If his work has stood as a unique challenge to translators, it has also represented their own customary and exemplary condition, alternately or



simultaneously immersed in a language and productively,  
quizzically stranded outside it.

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