

On Translating English Sonnets and Limericks

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Abstract: In this article we have envisaged certain aspects regarding the translation from English into Romanian of two types of poetry with fixed verse form (some Shakespearean sonnets and a few limericks). On this occasion, we have (re)evaluated some (old and new) Romanian translations, suggesting, where necessary, other more appropriate versions. Thus, we have been mostly interested in the excessive use of neologisms, of euphemisms and of metaphors in the Romanian versions investigated by us.

Key-words: Romanian literary translation, fixed verse form, Shakespeare, sonnets, limericks.

Translating a literary text from a source language into a target language raises a lot of issues which do not occur when translating strictly informative texts (such as technical or scientific texts). On the other hand, even within artistic literature, a poem is more difficult to translate than a short story. Besides the *sui generis* semantic characteristics (specific to historical languages), there are also formal restrictions and, thus, the act of translation becomes a very challenging one. In what follows, we will look at the Romanian translation of some English poems with fixed verse form, namely Shakespeare's sonnets and some limericks. However, even in these respective cases, we will only be interested in some aspects which we consider relevant in a certain context.

1. Shakespearian sonnets

We will first refer to an (integral) translation of William Shakespeare's sonnets, which belongs to Gabriela Constandaⁱ, an English teacher from Brăila, but we will also point to some examples from two other versions, that of Ion Frunzetti (a selection of 81 sonnets)ⁱⁱ and that of Gheorghe Tomozei (an integral translation)ⁱⁱⁱ. Even if it would be interesting to examine all the partial or integral versions of Great Will's sonnets, we do not aim to do this at this point. We will only make some observations on the above mentioned translations, as well as offer some suggestions for a further, more adequate Romanian translation.

1.1. There are two types of translations: the poetical one, which transmits the general meaning of the original text and which constitutes, in its turn, a new act of creation in the language in which it is translated, and the philological (or exegetical) one, which is more accurate and aims, by means of comments or explanatory notes, to be as close as possible to the original. Until now, we only have in our culture one truly philological translation of Shakespeare's sonnets, which is only partial. It belongs to Andrei Ion Deleanu, who only translated the last 28 sonnets (CXXVII – CLIV), dedicated to the Dark Lady (see Deleanu 1978). Nevertheless, there are more integral or partial versions translated by some famous anglicists or writers (even poets), such as Leon Levițchi, Dan Grigorescu, Mihail Sebastian, Petre Solomon, Ion Frunzetti, Gheorghe Tomozei, etc. Their focus is on obeying the formal rigours of sonnets (poems with fixed verse form), as well as rendering the global content of these poems. The solution we suggest here aims at satisfying both types of translation. We think that both Shakespeare and our culture would thus benefit from it. The result can be a faithful and beautiful translation, even if the absolute cannot be reached^{iv}. For such a demarche we should consider more aspects and we will mention them in what follows.

1.2. It is usually claimed that a poetical translation represents an act of creation in the language in which the text is brought *up-to-date* (linguistically speaking). Does *to bring up-to-date* mean to render in the present language? In an article written by Mioara

Avram we could see that the present language (i.e., Rom. *limba actuală*) has two senses: broadly speaking, it is similar to the contemporary language (which, in Romanian's case, starts from 1918) and, strictly speaking, it would only be one of its subdivisions, limited to the last decade. She also mentioned that, in its latter sense, "the respective period is too short to record significant changes, but rather tendencies" [„perioada în cauză este prea scurtă pentru a se putea înregistra modificări semnificative; mai curând se observă tendințe”] (in Sala 2001: 19). Such a tendency would also be the massive use of neologisms. Is it appropriate to use the present Romanian language when poetically translating Shakespeare, for example his sonnets? We would not think so, and we believe that the following examples, from Gabriela Constanda's version, are illustrative.

1.3. The excerpt “How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use/ If thou couldst answer «This fair child of mine/ Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse»,/ Proving his beauty by succession thine.” (Sonnet II) is rendered by Gabriela Constanda as: „Cu cât mai multă laud-ar avea/ Farmecul tău, dac-ai putea să spui:/ Copilul e bilanțul, scuza mea/ Și-ar demonstra-o frumusețea lui”^v. Neologisms such as *bilanț*, *scuză*, *a demonstra* are not appropriate for such a translation; it is known that neologisms diminish the lyrical “warmth”, which needs “intimate” terms in order to be rendered.

There is no need for someone to be a specialist to feel these things; all one needs is aesthetic sense. Let us examine other examples, signed by the same translator, in which neologisms sound disturbing^{vi}: “Lo, in the orient when the gracious light/ Lifts up his burning head, each under eye/ Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,/ Serving with looks his sacred majesty” (VII) – „Te uită-n răsărit lumina când/ Înaltă arzătoru-i cap, priviri/ *Omagiază* soarele-apărând/ În *sacră majestate*, străluciri”; “She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby/ Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.” (XI) – „Sigiliul ei ești tu și ești menit/ *Copia-i s-o multiplici, infinit.*”; you may wonder, in the latter example, why the term *a printa* (a recent Anglicism in Romanian) itself was not used, since the verb *to print* is used in the original version.

Let us observe that, in general, the translator preserved the English terms (or their derivatives, even if the lexico-grammatical category is changed), on the grounds that they also exist in the Romanian language (*excuse* – *scuza*; *homage* (subst.) – *a omagia* (vb.);

sacred majesty – *sacră majestate*; *copy* – *copie*), ignoring the fact that the respective terms were not felt as recent in the English language used in Shakespeare's times. Further examples can be offered, but our aim was only to present a sample, not an exhaustive inventory of mistakes/inadequacies.

However, we will also add the most serious (in our opinion) mistake we have found: "When I consider every thing that grows/ Holds in perfection but a little moment,/ That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows/ Whereon the stars in secret influence comment" (XV) – „Când văd că tot ce crește-n jurul meu/ și e perfect, o clipă doar durează,/ Că viața noastră nu-i decât un *show* [sic!]/ Ce stelele-n secret îl regizează". The use of the barbarism *show* (probably following the same principle: the English original uses the verb *to show*!) is inexcusable in the Romanian translation.

1.4. According to Eugenio Coseriu, the full functionality of language is manifested in the poetic language (and by *poetry* Coseriu means *literature in general, as art*); all the other so-called "functional styles" are, in fact, reductions of this functional plenitude of language. Similarly, the common language (seen as "normal" language) is a deviation from the completeness of language. However, the literature of the great writers coincides, in fact, with the historical (national) language, as fulfilment of the possibilities/virtualities already given/existing (Coșeriu 2009: 161-166). Judging from this perspective, we will not be wrong in identifying (not necessarily from a quantitative point of view) the Romanian language with Eminescu's language. Nor will we be wrong in stating that the vocabulary (or the inventory of words) used by Eminescu in his poems is not only sufficient, but also adequate when rendering the Shakespearian sonnets into Romanian. In the 2,155 verses of *Sonnets*, counting 17,520 words, there are 3,239 terms (cf. Deleanu 1978: 9)^{vii}, fewer than the ones recorded (even if in a larger corpus of poetical texts) at Eminescu (almost 5,000 lexical units). We thus answer the question regarding the use of the best Romanian language which would be really useful for rendering the expression of these poems. What is more, we could add the fact that, relating to the evolution of the two languages, English and Romanian, notice must be made that the two poets are "contemporary", both placed at the beginning of the modern period of each of the two languages^{viii}. Nevertheless, perfect equivalence cannot be made

between the two inventories of terms owned by the two great writers, but it is possible (and recommended) to do it, at least broadly.

1.5. Another aspect we want to focus on refers to the inadvertences found in the Romanian versions as compared to Shakespeare's original. Here are only some examples:

(i) **The use of euphemisms.** Sometimes, the Romanian translators show prudishness, and thus diminish the force of the original verse. For instance, let us compare the following translations of the excerpt "*For where is she so fair whose unearned womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry? / Or who is he so fond will be the tomb / Of his self-love to stop posterity?*" (Sonnet III), where we observe a lively metaphor of the act of procreation: „Căci unde-i zâna, *pântecul fecior*/ Al căreia nu-ți cere volnic brazdă?" (I. Frunzetti); „Unde-i frumoasa *stea neprihănită*/ ce nu s-ar vrea de plugul tău arată?" (Gh. Tomozei); „Căci unde-i ea, cu *pântec nenuntit*/ Ce-o să refuze plugăritul tău?" (Gabriela Constanda)^{ix}.

(ii) **The use of metaphors, even if there are not any in the original.** Let us compare the excerpt "*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee*" (XVIII) with Gh. Tomozei's translation: „Cât oamenii privesc și cât respiră/ Trăiești și tu *în cântu-nchis în liră*". In fact, Tomozei is unequalled in this respect.

(iii) **The transformation of similes into metaphors.** Starting with Quintilian, it is stated that a simile is a shortened metaphor. Modern research (following Aristotle's opinion) claims the opposite: in fact, a simile is a developed metaphor. Thus, Shakespeare's images are usually more explicit: "*How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame / Which, like a canker in the fragrant rose*" (XCV) – „Ce dulce știi să-ți faci nerușinarea!/ (*vierme mișcându-se în crisalizi*)" (Tomozei). In the cases where Shakespeare's expressivity is not the fruit of the specific of the English language (see idioms, for instance), it is recommended that the images be translated word for word, since they can also confer originality, thanks to their novelty.

Further inadequacies can also be signaled (synonymic variation, for example, when that is not the case in the original, even if it is true that one of the rules regarding the form of sonnets – probably the Italian one, not the English one – is that no word with

a full lexical meaning should be repeated); however, everything will be ascribed to prosodic constraints.

1.6. Nevertheless, the above mentioned inadequacies result from the sacrifice the Romanian translators have to make, since there is a significant quantitative difference between the words used by Shakespeare and those from the Romanian translations. Shakespeare's language contains many monosyllabic terms, which cannot be rendered through monosyllabic equivalents, since they do not exist in Romanian. The word *love* (one syllable) will be translated by *dragoste* or *iubire* (3 syllables); *shame* (one syllable) will be rendered by *rușine* (3 syllables) and many more. A simple statistics would prove the fact that a great number of categorial significations^x are lost in the process of translating from English into Romanian, even for a single sonnet. Some of Tudor Arghezi's verses (such as „În câmp, în dâmb, în râpi și-n pisc,/ Vîu când mă urc, și trist când iar mă isc.” [*Psalm*]; where all the words are monosyllabic) were considered a proof of mastery for the Romanian poetry, whereas this is a common thing in Shakespeare's sonnets, since the words from the main lexical inventory (most of them of a Germanic origin) are usually very short. The solution may come from Vasile Voiculescu's technique who, in *Ultimele sonete închipuite ale lui Shakespeare în traducere imaginară de V.V.*, lengthens the verse to 13-14 syllables, by using the alexandrine^{xi}, even if in the Romanian translation of the sonnet the (iambic) hendecasyllable is preferred. The latter is a more generous variant for the Shakespearean sonnets, which is closer to the length of the free verses (most frequently of 15-16 syllables) found in A.I. Deleanu's translation.

1.7. The arguments we exposed in this paper, regarding the vocabulary which should be used (taking Eminescu as a starting point), as well as the length of the verse (starting from Vasile Voiculescu's remarkable intuition), aimed at projecting a personal option, as well as suggestions for translating Shakespeare's sonnets. Beyond these guidelines, the criticism concerning the blind use of neologisms in a certain translation should not be overlooked^{xii}.

2. Limericks

The limerick is an occasional, fixed verse form poem, usually consisting of five lines rhyming *aabbc* or *aabba*. It is said to have appeared in the 18th century in the Irish town of Limerick, but it seems that this type of poetry is much older. It was popularized in the 19th century, mainly by the humorist poet Edward Lear in his *Book of Nonsense* (1846) (see Cuddon 1999: 458-462).

We will present, in what follows, some limericks translated by us, with a view to emphasizing some specific features concerning the translation of a text from English into Romanian. A series of compromises are, obviously, necessary/involved. A beautiful translation is not necessarily a faithful one, while the other way round is also valid. In order to render the play upon words, the translator has to find other solutions valid for the Romanian reader. That is the case of alliterations or puns which also have to be preserved; following a certain fixed prosody is not enough.

(i) *“There was an Old Man of Nepaul, / From his horse had a terrible fall; / But, though split quite in two, by some very strong glue, / They mended that man of Nepaul.”* (Edward Lear)^{xiii}. „Odat-un bătrân din Nepal/ Căzuse cumplit de pe cal./ Deși spart ca un ou, l-au făcut iarăși nou,/ L-au lipit pe-acel om din Nepal”. Variants: „~ Dar, deși rupt în trei, cu un foarte bun clei,/ Ei l-au dres pe-acel om din Nepal”. „~ Dar, deși despicat, l-au și reparat/ C-un clei zdravăn pe-ăl om din Nepal”. „~ C-un clei bun pe-acel om din Nepal.” (Cr.M.).

(ii) *“There was a young fellow named Hall, / Who fell in the spring in the fall. / ’T would have been a sad thing / Had he died in the spring. / But he didn’t – he died in the fall.”* (W.S. Gilbert). „Era un flăcău numit Hall/ Ce căzu primăvara-ntr-un ghiol./ Ar fi fost un mare păcat/ În pârau să se fi înecat./ Însă nu – a murit într-un ghiol.” (Cr.M.).

This version, even if closer to the original meaning, does not render the ambiguity of the superposed polysemy in the case of the words *spring* and *fall*. Thus, the following variant is more successful, since it preserves the polysemy of the Romanian words *cuptor* and *frunzar* (which are also used for months of the year in vernacular Romanian): „Era un flăcău, Coridor,/ Ce căzu în frunzar în cuptor./ Ar fi fost vai și-amar/ De murea în frunzar./ Însă nu – el muri în cuptor.” (Cr.M.).

(iii) *“There was an Old Man of Dundee, / Who frequented the top of a tree; / When disturbed by the crows, he abruptly arose. / And exclaimed, «I’ll return to Dundee»”* (E.

Lear)^{xiv}. „Stătea un bătrân din Dundee/ Cocoțat într-un pom zi de zi,/ Când, de ciori deranjat, s-a sculat imediat/ Exclamând: «Mă-ntorc în Dundee!»”.

(iv) “*There was an Old Man of Bohemia,/ Whose daughter was christened Euphemia;/ Till one day, to his grief, she married a thief;/ Which grieved that Old Man of Bohemia*” (E. Lear). „Era un bătrân din Boemia/ C-o fiică botezată Eufemia/ Din păcate, ca soț, ea-și alege un hoț,/ Mâhnind pe-acel om din Boemia” (Cr.M.)^{xv}. Our translation also renders the internal rhyme from the third verse.

(v) “*A fly and a flea in a flue/ Were imprisoned, so what could they do?/ Said the fly, «Let us flee!»/ «Let us fly!» said the flea./ So they flew through a flaw in the flue.*” (Carolyn Wells). „Un purec plăpând și-o ploșniță-n plasă / Fură închiși, deci pe unde să iasă? / Purecul spuse: «Hai să sărim!» / Ploșnița spuse: «Hai s-o roim!» / Și-o roiră prin ruptura din plasă.” (Cr.M.).

Faithfully rendering alliterations (using the same sounds!) into Romanian from the English original is an impossible thing to do. However, there are means which can reduce some imperfections, even if certain terms do not preserve their original meaning or are sometimes replaced.

3. By way of conclusion

The difficulty in formulating some clear principles as regards the translation of literary texts (especially in the case of fixed verse form poetry) derives from the paradoxical status (or from “the double status”) of the literary translation in general, since it is linked to both *science* (as *traductology*) and *art* (cf. the Old Greek *téchne*, which meant both ‘art’ and ‘unjustified knowledge’)^{xvi}. Science requires absolute objectivity, that is allowing the object to be revealed in its own light: “to say things as they are” (Plato, *The Sophist*). In art, however, the creative subject (the artist) generalizes himself, considering that art is made (or should be made) only the way he does it.

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Biodata

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ⁱ The translation was published in a serial (10 sonnets an issue) in two cultural journals from Brăila, „Dunărea” (starting with issue no. 2/1999) and „Florile Dunării” (starting with issue no. 1/2001, ending with issue no. 10/ 2004).

ⁱⁱ [W.] Shakespeare (1964). *Sonete*, în românește de Ion Frunzetti. București: Editura Tineretului.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Shakespeare (1996). *Sonnets – Sonete*, versiune românească de Gheorghe Tomozei. Târgoviște: Editura Pandora-M; in fact, Tomozei’s version was published, in a first edition, two decades before. We consulted the original [W.S.] (1996). *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

^{iv} In general, the law of compensation is also applied here, meaning that some passages are very well rendered, while others are less successful.

^v Here and elsewhere the emphasis is ours.

^{vi} We will not refer here at the numerous instances of clumsiness concerning prosody, where the verses from the versions of Mrs. Constanda are wrongly constructed. In this sense, we only offer an example: „Ca dragul meu să n-ajungă cum sunt,/ Zdrobit și zdrențuit de timp hain,/ Secat de sânge, cu părul cărunț/ Și riduri mii, când cerul lui senin/ În noaptea senectuții-i prăvălit/ Și frumuseți cărora rege e/ Pălesc, sau dispărut-au la zenit,/ Comoara-i toată risipindu-se,/ Pentru așa un timp mă oțlesc,/ C-a vârstei blestemată rea plăsea,/ Cât timp oameni trăiesc și-și amintesc,/ Viața, nu frumusețea să i-o ia./ În negru-mi vers de-a pururi încrustat,/ Frumos și tânăr fi-va ne-ncetat.” (LXIII).

^{vii} The statistics belongs to Marvin Spewack, who published in 1970 a massive work (in 6 volumes!) on the concordances in Shakespeare’s works.

^{viii} The beginning of the Modern English is situated in the 1500s, while that of the Modern Romanian language, in the 1850s.

^{ix} Cristinel Munteanu’s variant was: „Căci unde-i cea cu pântec nearat/ Disprețuindu-ți plugăritul blând?/ Și-ndrăgostit de sine ce bărbat/ Și-ar lua cu el urmași în mormânt?” (Munteanu 2010: 71).

^x In Coseriu’s terminology, the categorial significations are the four parts of speech existing in all the languages of the Earth: the noun, the adjective, the verb and the adverb.

^{xi} In fact, the French sonnet uses the alexandrine of 12 syllables, specific to the French language. The Romanian alexandrine has 13-14 syllables.

^{xii} Not only in Gabriela Constanda’s case. Other translators also commit this “sin”, even if not as often as her.

^{xiii} „Era un moș în Nepal/ Ce crunt căzu de pe cal./ Deși-n două despăcat,/ Se văzu iar reparat/ Cu lipici viu din Nepal” (Lear 1973: 55).

^{xiv} „Era un ins în vârstă din Karnak/ Ce frecventa vârful unui copac./ Fiind deranjat de ciori/ Se sălta de subțiori/ Strigând: «Mă voi întoarce în Karnak!»” (Lear 1973: 64).

^{xv} „Avea un moșulică din Boemia/ O fată botezată Euphemia./ Dar spre-a lui mahnire/ Luă un hoț drept mire,/ Măhnindu-l rău pe moșul din Boemia” (Lear 1973: 58).

^{xvi} That is why good translators do not need a lot of theory, intuiting how a good translation should be done.