

TRANSLATING POETRY. CONTEMPORARY THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES

Ovidiu MATIU

“Lucian Blaga” University, Sibiu

1. Introduction

Few writers depend so heavily on the intricacies of a given language as the poet, for whom each word is often essential. We can find examples of fine poetry in all cultures, poetry rich in the demeanour and presence of language, filled with the richness that makes a language unique and interesting. Some would argue that without the variance found in dissimilar languages poetry, would fail us as a comprehensive art; could we have the peculiar grammar of Emily Dickinson beside the lyricism of Baudelaire if both poets were constrained to use the same language?

Great poetry cannot survive the process of translation, namely it cannot preserve *all* its initial qualities after having been translated. Surprisingly enough, this is not due to the difficulty of translating the metrical pattern, but to the nature of poetry itself. The usefulness of the debate on translating is that it compels us to look more critically at the task of the poet and the function of poetry. Poetry is neither just words, nor just metre. Translators and theoreticians characterise it as music of words, as a way of seeing and interpreting the world and our experience of it and of conveying to the listener a heightened awareness of it through an intense concentration of metaphor and words in which the natural flow of speech sounds is moulded to some kind of formal pattern. Such patterns can never be the same after the act of translation. Pattern, obviously, is governed by the rules of syntax and prosody existent in one particular language. Poets may accept or reject these rules, but this is also determined by historical and social tensions.

Jorge Luis Borges maintained in his famous 1967 Harvard lectures, published in Italian as “L'invenzione della poesia,” that German clearly distinguishes between *Umdichtung* (a poem modelled on another), *Nachdichtung* (a free translation) and *Übersetzung* (a translation), but however neat the distinction, any translation is a new poem, modelled, closely or less closely, on the original. What is the difference then between the original and the translation? But what if this difference is not important and the similitude is the most important factor? The two works are both original, even if the *core* is the same. They are interconnected, but the interdependence relationship is only unilateral: the translation is dependent on the original, as one should never forget that a translation *is* a translation (though an original work) and not something else.

2. Poetry and translation — Contemporary theories

Although most studies in the field of translation studies focus on literary translation, very few of them “[...] try to discuss methodological problems from a non-empirical position, and yet it is precisely that type of study that is most valuable and most needed” (Bassnett 81).

One of the best known and interesting catalogues of methods employed by translators of poetry is that made by André Lefevere (Bassnett 81-2):

- *Phonemic translation* (attempts to reproduce the sound of the original in the target language, producing an acceptable paraphrase of the sense);
- *Literal translation* (word-for-word translation distorts the original sense and syntax);
- *Metrical translation* (concentrates on reproducing the metre);
- *Poetry into prose* (distorts the sense, communicative value and syntax of the original);
- *Rhymed translation* (the translator enters into a "double bondage" of metre and rhyme, the product being a "caricature" of the original);
- *Blank verse translation* (restrictions imposed upon the translator, but greater accuracy and higher degree of literalness);
- *Interpretation* (the substance of the original is retained but the form is destroyed).

Therefore, the deficiencies of a translation are attributable to an overemphasis of one or more elements of a poem to the detriment of the whole (Bassnett 81-2). All its elements are part of a system and, if the translator intends to preserve that system at all costs, he/she must equally consider all the elements that make a piece of writing a poem. The translation of poetry can be defined — and not only with reference to a "dead" piece of writing —, to use Pound's words, as the process of bringing a dead man back to life. This "literary resurrection" is one of the most important reasons why translators assume such thorny a task: to bring dead poetry back to life or to give birth to pre-existent poetry into a new culture.

As Edwin Gentzler points out, "Pound's 'theory' was based upon a concept of energy in language; the words on the page, the specific details, were seen not simply as black and white typed marks on a page representing something else, but as sculptured images — words engraved in stone" (Gentzler 19). Pound's approach to translation is a rather metaphysical one. He sees words as "electrified cones", "charged with the power of tradition, of centuries of race consciousness, of agreement, of association" (qtd. in Gentzler 20). According to Gentzler, Pound understood the vortex as "the point of maximum energy", as a "cluster of words, a network of words, brought together in a radiant node" (Gentzler 20). The other concept that deeply influenced Pound's view on translation (the "model for the poetic art: blood brought to ghosts"), the imagism, was defined in his *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*. The image is "not an equation of mathematics, not something about *a*, *b* and *c*, having to do with form, but about *sea*, *cliffs*, *night*, having something to do with mood. [...] The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing" (Gentzler 21).

Pound describes the ways in which language is energised in the section "language" of his essay "HOW TO READ", collected in *Polite Essays* (1937): *melopoeia* (the musical property of language), *phanopoeia* (the visual property of language), and *logopoeia* (the most complex of all, which includes the "direct meaning" and the "play" of the word in its context). Pound (quoted by Gentzler in his *Contemporary Translation Theories*) describes *logopoeia*, which "does not translate", as follows:

LOGOPOEIA, 'the dance of the intellect among words', that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of the habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music. It is the latest come, and perhaps most tricky and undependable mode.

[...] *Logopoeia* does not translate; though the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase. Or one might say, you can *not* translate it 'locally', but having determined the original author's state of mind, you may or may not be able to find a derivative or an equivalent. (Gentzler 23-24)

If *logopoeia* is totally untranslatable, *melopoeia* is difficult to translate except "half a line at a time" and *phanopoeia* can be translated "almost, or wholly, intact". The task of the translator, in order to ensure the success of his/her work, is to understand the *logopoeia* of the original text, that is the text in its context, and then to find a way in which the text can be brought into the present or into the target culture. The translator is then an active *demiourgos* who creates, who uses the pre-existent matter to create new forms, new ways of expression. He/she is supposed to possess an empathetic ability, to be able to live both in the time of the original, understanding the culture of that time, and in his/her present.

3. The translation of poetry — Three hypotheses

Poetry is usually defined as one of the highest expressions of human mind and spirit. Poetry, as defined in most dictionaries of literary terms, is a literary work in metrical form. It is, as distinct from verse, not a matter of form but of substance, a composition expressed in the vivid language of the imagination and emotion and, though most frequently found in verse, is often found in the form of prose. Its three main elements are: sound, sense and suggestion and it appeals to our understanding through our imagination, making us perceive what the poet has experienced. It expresses deep feeling and deep thought, often trying to interpret the hidden meaning of life, of the universal truths about life, about what humankind has experienced (Pavel 29).

One of the most interesting and comprehensive definitions of poetry, which is superior to all sciences, can be found in Sir Philip Sydney's *Apology for Poetry*: "Poesie is [...] an arte of imitation, for so *Aristotle* termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight" (Sydney 158).

Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter XIV), defines the poem as follows:

A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species — (having this object in common with it) — it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.

Moreover, in the last pages of Chapter XIV, Coleridge identifies poetry with the poet himself, stating:

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses,

each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination.

All these definitions, so frequently quoted, help the translator understand the nature of poetry and the significance of his work. Nevertheless, the most valuable of all definitions of any kind is that which takes into account the linguistic elements of poetry. Bantaş defines poetry "from a strictly linguistic point of view" as "an evolved form of synonymy at all levels: lexical, grammatical and collocational" (Bantaş 121). With a view to translation, Bantaş and Croitoru identify three hypotheses.

a) *The first hypothesis*

Viewed as the highest form of synonymy, poetry becomes a set of patterns that compose the "initial code", which must be preserved through translation. The initial code refers to the metaphors, to the lexical register, to the style, to the "prosodic code" that the poet uses in his work. This first hypothesis is governed by the rule "no losses, no gains."

Is then such a translation possible? Hypothetically, yes. The translator, bearing in mind the fact that translation is after all rewriting, re-creation of a certain poem, analyses all the structures and patterns that are to be found in the original and tries to transfer them into the product of his work, the translated poem. Nothing is supposed to be added and nothing is supposed to be lost. An interesting example of analysis is that provided by Roger T. Bell, which includes: the syntactic analysis, the semantic analysis and the pragmatic analysis, all these being performed on a single unit such as a sentence or verse at a time (Bell 81). This phase of analysis is followed by the phase of synthesis in the target language. The synthesis could be followed (or preceded) by a stylistic analysis, which might be deeply influenced by personal taste. Such multilateral analysis is indispensable, as it prevents the translator from leaving out one or more important features of the original poem.

However theoretical this approach might seem, it is rather a practical one due to the fact that all the above-mentioned aspects depend on the translator's choice. Nothing is imposed from the outside upon the translator. He/she can "filter" all patterns through his/her own personal taste, *ars poetica*, skill, and still maintain what Popovič describes as the "invariant core" of the original. Susan Bassnett, referring to three versions of Catullus's *Poem 13*, states, "The invariant [...] comprises both theme and tone, for the forms and approaches employed by the translators are widely different" (Bassnett 26).

b) *The second hypothesis*

One of the most suitable ways of approaching translation is by defining it as communication. Roger T. Bell describes communication in terms of translation, asserting that all those who communicate are translators. In fact, during the process of communication, a person receives a message that is encoded in a communicational system, which is different from his/her own. The person has to first decode the message, and then re-encode it in his/her own code. Well, that is part of the process of translation proper. Translation (as communication) is monolingual and bilingual. The second type is usually termed translation. The difference between a "translator" who communicates by using one language and the one using two languages is the fact that the latter is supposed to re-transmit the message, to re-encode it into another communicational system. Therefore, translation is a tripartite process, which involves three participants: transmitter (the original author) — the

translator (who receives the message of the transmitter, decodes, re-encodes it into another language different from that of the original message, and transmits it to an audience that uses language that is not identical to that of the original message) — the receiver.

Thus, translation is an activity that is almost identical to bilingual communication. This is what Bantaş terms as "bilingual synonymy", i.e. forms of lexical-grammatical synonymy in two languages. "In the synonymic relationship between two languages, two things are important: to find the closest synonym (depending on the context) and to avoid mistakes of lexical or grammatical association" (Levičhi 31). Synonymy is one of the three types of relationship between concepts, mediating the two extremes: hyponymy and antonymy. Hyponymy refers to total inclusion (the hyponym is the subordinate; e.g., *animal* includes *tiger*) and represents no problem for the translator. However, synonymy is quite problematic, as it refers to a partial overlapping of meanings and as there is no absolute synonymy between any two languages (Bell 107-8). The other extreme is antonymy, which refers to exclusion, the relation of opposition between two words or concepts.

Poetry, as a superior form of synonymy, is much more difficult to translate than the usual messages. This difficulty resides in the skill that a translator needs in order to "transfer" all the values of the original, together with its musicality, style, and, why not, its form, rhyme and rhythm. Bantaş defines this skill as linguistic and literary competence, supported by talent. Another element that is indispensable for a translator of poetry is the poetic code. A proficient translator should be aware of the poetic codes of the two languages. He can use similar writings (poems on a similar theme or pattern, etc.) as models for his translation. Well, this looks rather difficult! In fact, the *rule* (we cannot really use this word when it comes to literary, and especially poetry translation) is not so strict, because, if it is difficult, and quite impossible to find a "similar" poem in another language, it is possible and quite easy to find poems belonging to the same period, literary movement, etc.

One of the most important features of poetry is undoubtedly musicality, because "...it should never be assumed that no meaning is conveyed through the sound of a language" (Duff 95). This is what makes a poem live within the minds and souls of the readers, and prevents its dissolution in time. However, musicality is the main element that kept anonymous writings alive through centuries on the lips of minstrels and within the culturally rich communities in the countryside.

Language can imitate sounds and illustrate them, the first forms of communication being, almost undoubtedly, based on sounds. Musicality in poetry is usually achieved through the phonetic effects of some phonemes, and they evoke associations that are similar to certain natural sounds. For instance, the accumulation of the /r/ sound creates an image of toughness or terror. This effect was used by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, whose *Erlkönig* is an excellent example how language, German in this case, can imitate nature. When we close our eyes, we hear the sounds of a storm, thunder and the rustle of willow branches tossed by heavy wind. All that is achieved due to the natural linguistic feature of German, full of /r/ and other tough sounds. However, when it comes to translating into a language where such sounds do not exist, the associations are obviously lost. Such is the case with Chinese, where there are no sounds similar to the rolled /r/. Even if we can find those sounds in Romanian, we can notice the fact that the musicality typical of the German

language is lost almost entirely in most of the existing translations. On the other hand, in Chinese, the meaning of an utterance changes, depending on the pitch of voice. Those associations are inevitably lost when translating into any other language that does not distinguish between different pitches.

Another means of expression that influences the musicality of a poem is of course onomatopoeia. Other procedures of evoking sound associations are alliteration and assonance. However, these elements should be part of a discussion based on examples, because every language has its own inimitable sound. If some of the musicality of the original is captured, the translator can be sure that the other phases of the process are easier to complete, because "once the music goes, the meaning goes as well" (Duff 95).

c) *The third hypothesis*

The main condition for a good translation is a thorough analysis of the source-language text. This is accessible only to a translator who possesses a good knowledge of both the source and target language and literature. The translation-oriented text analysis is one of the most complex and difficult tasks that a translator can assume. If this analysis is correctly done, then errors are excluded from the beginning of the process.

Many translators forget that translation is the process itself of transferring sentences in one language into another, and that any activity of this kind has several initial stages that must be experienced before starting the translation process proper. Bantaş states that a good translation is not only an ideal, but also a duty of every person who calls himself/herself "translator". That person has, at least, two obligations formulated by Bantaş as follows:

- to decipher (decode) the semantic code of the original text (denotation and connotation), and its formal code or system (figures of speech, imagery, prosody, etc.);
- to render the same elements at the same level, without semantic or expressive losses, but as well without gains of any kind, not even in clarity (Bantaş 126).

This complex analysis is absolutely necessary in order to produce a good equivalent of the original, as poetry is the highest level of synonymy at all levels. However, this is not all. The translator must establish an empathetic relationship with the poet, must experience the same states of mind, the same feelings. Is this really possible? Can a translator always have a poet's state of mind; can a translator always find the way to the poet's heart? Not at all. In most cases this is not possible. But, usually, an experienced translator of poetry chooses only those texts that are close to his/her heart, that suit his/her spirit, from the intellectual or/and emotional point of view. This is what theoreticians call "elective affinity".

What if an author is able, say, to completely understand the text of a certain poem, to decode the entire message, to discover all the hidden intentions of the author? He will thus make a too explicit translation, clarifying some of the meaning that the author would have preferred to remain hidden. The limits imposed by the author with respect to the clarity of the text must be maintained.

Therefore, as a general conclusion, translation should not make the poem more difficult to understand by "encrypting" the meanings that were clear in the

original, nor to make its meanings clearer than they really are. In short, the most important principle in translation is "no gains and no losses" of any kind.

4. Conclusions

- Translation should not make the poem more difficult to understand by "encrypting" the meanings that were clear in the original.
- The most important principle in translation is: "no gains and no losses" of any kind.
- The product of translation should be a poem in the same way in which the original poem is a translation of the writer's thoughts and feelings.
- The translator of poetry must become the voice of the original poet and thus he should be able to produce a poem that sounds as if it were written by that particular author directly in the target language.

References

1. Bantaş, A., Croitoru, E., *Didactica traducerii*, Teora, Bucureşti, 1998.
2. Bassnett, Susan, *Translation Studies*, Revised Edition, Routledge London and New York, 1994.
3. Bell, Roger T., *Teoria și practica traducerii*, trad. Cătălina Gazi, ed. Polirom, Bucureşti, 2000.
4. Duff, Alan, *The Third Language*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1981.
5. Gentzler, Edwin, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.
6. Levițchi, Leon, *Manualul traducătorului*, Ed. Teora, Bucureşti, 2001.
7. Pavel, Lucia, *Commented English Literary Terms — Dictionary, Poetry*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1999.
8. Sydney, Sir Philip, *An Apology for Poetry*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

Bibliography

1. Arnold, Matthew, "On Translating Homer", in *Essays by Matthew Arnold*, London: Oxford University Press, 1914.
2. Bantaş, A., Croitoru, E., *Didactica traducerii*, Teora, Bucureşti, 1998.
3. Bassnett, Susan, *Translation Studies*, Revised Edition, Routledge London and New York, 1994.
4. Bell, Roger T., *Teoria și practica traducerii*, trad. Cătălina Gazi, ed. Polirom, Bucureşti, 2000.
5. Connolly, David, "Poetry Translation", [in] *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, ed. Mona Baker Routledge, London and New York, 1998.
6. Duff, Alan, *The Third Language*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1981.
7. Gentzler, Edwin, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.
8. Gross, Alex, "The Language Contest (A parable about all the languages of the world and which one is truly "best")", in *Language Monthly*, Nottingham, 1987.
9. Gross, Alexander, "1536—1546: Ten Years that Changed The Perception of the Translator", *ATA Chronicle*, December, 1995.
[<http://language.home.sprynet.com/trandesx/30years.htm>]
10. Jacobsen, Eric, *Translation, A Traditional Craft*, Copenhagen: Nordisk Forlag, 1958.
11. Levițchi, Leon, *Manualul traducătorului*, Ed. Teora, Bucureşti, 2001.
12. Mounin, Georges, *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*, Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
13. Newmark, P., *A Textbook of Translation*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1988.

14. Nida, E. 1964, "Principles of Correspondence", in Venuti, L. *The Translation Studies Reader*, London: Routledge.
15. Pavel, Lucia, *Commented English Literary Terms — Dictionary, Poetry*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1999
16. Pym, Anthony, *Translation and Text Transfer. An Essay on the Principles of Intercultural Communication*, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang, 1992.
17. Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Curs de lingvistică generală*, trad. de Irina Izverna Tarabac, Ed. Polirom, București, 1998.
18. Shelley, Percy Bysshe, "The Defence of Poesy", in *Complete Works*, V, London: Ernest Benn, 1965.
19. Steiner, George, *After Babel*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975.
20. Steiner, T.R., *English Translation Theory, 1650-1800*, Assen and Amsterdam: Van Goram, 1975.
21. Toury, G. "The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation", in Venuti, L. *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. 1978, revised 1995.
22. Vermeer, H., "Skopos and Commission in Translational Activity", in Venuti, L. *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.