

CRITICA TRADUCERII: POEZIA ÎN TRADUCERE

TRANSLATION CRITICISM: POETRY IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract

This paper is meant to approach poetry in translation in the light of translation criticism. The evaluation in this case has to be undertaken by a translation critic, that is, by a person with a degree of specialization in translation studies, according to some “objective criteria” that lie at the basis of translation criticism. The principles for evaluating literary translation, in general, and translated poetry in particular, raise translation standards, and, consequently, support and promote an increasing interest in better translations.

*The paper is divided into three sections: (a) **translation criticism: an essential link between translation theory and its practice**; (b) **subjective translation judgement(s) versus objective translation criticism**; (c) **case study: “săpânța în primul gând” by Laurian Stănculescu***

Key Words: *translation criticism; evaluation principles; translation procedures; equivalence; adequacy; correspondence; correctness; objective evaluation.*

Cuvinte cheie: *critica traducerii; principii de evaluare; procedee de traducere; echivalență; adecvare; corespondență, corectitudine; evaluare obiectivă.*

As is well known, a diachronic approach to Translation Criticism shows the progress it has made until now but as the scope of this paper is totally different, I will consider necessary to focus on a few scholars deeply preoccupied by the future of translation criticism. In his well-known book *The Science of Translation*, chapter XI: *Translation Criticism*, Wolfram Wilss makes known the fact that Translation Criticism (TC) is in “a less favorable starting position” compared to “Language2 / Language1 error analysis”. What makes him come to this remark is the purpose each of them has: “While error analysis is focussed on classifying, describing, explaining and evaluation transfer phenomena on the basis of the dichotomy “wrong/correct”, it is the task of TC to make quality assessment of a translation as a whole as objectively as possible, thereby taking into account both positive and negative factors”. [1]

Wolfram Wilss rightly underlines “the absence of a systematic, methodologically stringent frame of reference”, which has made TC be “until recently largely anecdotal and spontaneous rather than systematically reflected, relying to a large extent on presumptions which may vary appreciably from one translation critic to another.”(idem) On the other hand George Steiner complains about the literary translations which he considers mere “amateurish (...) attempts”. According to Steiner a ‘bad translation is :

“... one which is inadequate to its source-texte for reasons which can be legion and obvious. The translator has misconstrued the original through ignorance, haste or personal limitation. He lacks the mastery of his own language required for adequate representation. He has made a stylistic or psychological blunder in choosing his text: his own sensibility and that of the author whom he is translating are discordant. Where there is difficulty the bad translator elides or paraphrases. Where there is elevation he inflates. Where his author offends he smoothes. Ninety per cent, no doubt, of all translation since Babel is inadequate and will continue to be so” [2]

This deplorable state of affairs depicted by George Steiner in his remarkable book, *After Babel*, is the very result of the fact that in the mid-20th century there is an obvious demand for SL-oriented translation which dominates the practice of literary translation to the detriment of a critical comparison of the SLT with TLT. TC is, thus, a subdiscipline of applied translation research which “lacks a suitable methodological frame of reference”. [3]

Wilss offers “the outline of a translation-critical framework” in the form of a “tentative matrix” that, as he states, “...provede(s) some suggestion concerning the direction the development of TC might take”, and “must be regarded as an attempt to work out a practicable methodology for empirical studies in a field which by its very nature intermingles descriptive and evaluative aspects of research.”[4] His matrix is based on syntax, semantics and pragmatics that are judged by five values such as: (1) wrong; (2) inappropriate; (3) undecidable cases; (4) correct; (5) appropriate.

In his book *The Theory And Practice of Translation*, Chapter Eight, *Testing The Translation*, subchapter *The Ultimate Basis For Judging A translation*, Eugene Nida defines “a good translation” by contrasting a good translation with bad translations of two kinds.

BAD

Formal corespondence: the form (syntax and classes of words) is preserved; the meaning is lost or distorted.

GOOD

Dynamic equivalence: the form is restructured (different syntax and lexicon) to preserve the same meaning.

BAD

Paraphrase by addition, deletion, or skewing of the message [5]

In Nida’s opinion the ultimate test of a translation must be based upon three factors:

- 1) the correctness with which the receptors understand the message of the original (that is to say, its “faithfulness to the original”)
- 2) the ease of comprehension, and
- 3) the involvement a person experiences as the result of the adequacy of the form of the translation. [6]

Peter Newmark, too, approaches Translation Criticism in his book, *A Textbook of Translation*, Chapter 17 in a detailed way. To him Translation Criticism “is an essential component in a translation course” He motivates his statement in the following way:”

firstly, because it painlessly improves your competence as a translator; secondly, because it expands your knowledge and understanding of your own and the foreign language, as well as perhaps of the topic; thirdly, because, in presenting you with options, it will help you to sort out your ideas about translation. As an academic discipline, translation criticism ought to be the keystone of any course in comparative literature, or literature in translation, and a component of any professional translation course with the appropriate text-types (e.g., legal, engineering etc.) as an exercise for criticism and discussion. [7]

Katharina Reiss, too, pays her entire attention to translation criticism by focusing on its potentials and limits.

a) Translation Criticism: An Essential Link Between Translation Theory and Its Practice

Lawrence Venuti defines translation theory as ‘the formulation of concepts designed to illuminate and to improve the practice of translation’[8] According to Bassnett-McGuire the purpose of translation theory is “to reach an understanding of the processes undertaken in the act of translation and, not, as is so commonly misunderstood, to provide a set of norms for effecting the perfect translation.”[9] She does advise translators to adopt a “descriptive” rather than a “prescriptive” approach when investigating the translation process, which means that the translator’s attention should be focused on the process that creates the translation, that is on ‘the objective specification of the steps and stages through which the translator works as the source text in the original language is transformed into the target text, rather than on the translation itself’,

making subjective and arbitrary judgements on the extent to which one translation is ‘better’ than another and insisting that ‘goodness’ resides in the faithful adherence to an imposed set of commandments”.[10] So at the core of translation theory lie its objectives and methods of translation. In her book *Theories and Practice of Translation* Rodica Dimitriu brings to the fore the ‘main issues’ that have been approached within the framework of translation theory “structured as a series of dichotomies such as ‘possibilities/impossibilities of translating; faithful/unfaithful translations; literal/free translations; source language (and culture)/target language (and culture) oriented translations. As a matter of fact, all the dichotomies above are usually referred to as ‘ways of translating’ and ‘could thus be regarded as methodological classifications of translations.”[11]

Louis Kelly considers that “a ‘complete’ theory of translation ‘has three components: specification of function and goal; description and analysis of operations, and critical comment on relationships between goal and operations” [12]

As Peter Newmark remarks “ up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, many writers favoured some kind of ‘free’ translation: the spirit, not the letter, the sense not the words, the message rather than the form: the matter not the manner. (...) Then at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the study of cultural anthropology suggested that the linguistic barriers were insuperable and that language was entirely the product of culture, the view that translation was impossible gained some currency, and with that, it must be as literal as possible” [13]. The translator, under the pressure of the ‘dynamics of translation’ that is both explained and charted by Peter Newmark, chooses the appropriate translation method of those that exist: word-for-word translation (or interlinear translation); literal translation; faithful translation; semantic translation; adaptation; free translation, idiomatic translation, communicative translation. In their famous book, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English (A methodology for translation)* Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet state that “(g)enerally speaking, translators can choose from two methods of translating, namely direct, or literal translation and *oblique* translation.” [14] The reason of the two kinds of translation is set forth by the two scholars on the basis of two essential elements generated by the two languages involved in translation process: “ In some translation tasks it may be possible to transpose the source language message element by element into the target language because it is based on either (i) parallel categories, in which case we can speak of structural parallelism, or (ii) on parallel concepts, which are the result of metalinguistic parallelism. But translators may also notice gaps, or ‘*lacunae*’, in the TL which must be filled by corresponding elements, so that the overall impression is the same for the two messages. It may, however, also happen that, because of structural or metalinguistic differences, certain stylistic effects cannot be transposed into the TL without upsetting the syntactic order, or even the lexis. In this case it is understood that more complex methods have to be used (...); these procedures are called oblique translation methods. “ [15] There are, therefore, three direct procedures and four oblique ones as shown below:

Direct procedures: *borrowing, calque and literal translation*

Indirect procedures: *transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation.*

b) Subjective Translation Judgement(s) vs. Objective Translation Criticism

Though ‘uncertainty’ and ‘subjectivity’ exists to some extent in any judgement about a translation, it cannot deny objective criteria for the evaluation of the translation. Usually translators, reviewers that do not even “take the time and effort to compare a translation with its original language version, even they are familiar with the language” [16] continue to assess translations, which does not do any good to the quality of translations. Here is what Katharina Reiss thinks about the issue mentioned above:”

(T)ranslation criticism is possible only by persons who are familiar with both the target and source language, and is accordingly in a position to compare the translation directly with its original. In brief, translation criticism requires a comparison of the target and source texts. Setting the translation beside the original and comparing the two together is not enough without ‘existing any objective points of reference or guidelines for evaluating a work of translation. Every translation

project is a balancing process achieved by constructing a target text under the constant restraint of a source text. While trying to find the closest equivalents in the target language, the translator must always have one eye on the source text in order to confirm the adequacy of the equivalents [17] The specific individual translation, the result of the process, should be evaluated by objective and relevant criteria. Only then is it possible for the more or less spontaneous practice of translation criticism to meet the benchmark of an objective translation critique. Objectivity (when refers to objective translation criticism) means to be verifiable as in contrast to arbitrary and inadequate. This means that every criticism of a translation, whether positive or negative, must be defined explicitly and be verified by examples. The critic should also make allowance for other subjective options. In a negative criticism the critic should try to ascertain what led the translator to make the (alleged) error. On the other hand this process opens an opportunity for examining the background of the passage, of placing it in a broader context, and determining possible causes of the error, whether these may be carelessness or a typographical oversight in the source or target language, inexperience in the idiom or technical terminology of a field, inadequate sensitivity to matters of style in the target language, insufficient familiarity with the medium, (radio, television, theatre), etc. which would affect the seriousness of the misjudgement in the light of the entire context. (...) In regard to *constructive* translation criticism there is the challenge of offering counterproposals for rejecting solutions. A comparison with the original offers the critic's reader an opportunity of choosing between different equivalents." [18]

Katharina Reiss advises the critic to keep attention centered on the fact that the kind of text he works with influences the use of appropriate translation standards. The same thing happens to the translator: the type of text influences the translator's choice of a proper translation method. Another aspect that is worth paying attention to is the true understanding and interpretation of the semantics, lexical, grammatical and stylistic elements of a text in order to preserve the meaning of the original in the target language. The critic, therefore, opines Reiss, "must examine the translation with regard to each of these linguistic elements, the semantic elements for equivalence, the lexical elements for adequacy, the grammatical elements for correctness, and the stylistic elements for correspondence. (...) In content-focused texts verbal semantics (the lexical element) and syntactical semantics (the grammatical element) assume priority, while in form-and appeal focused texts the phonetic, syntactic and lexical elements are especially important" [19]

(c) : *case study*

What follows is meant to show what the evaluation of a translated poem looks like in the light of translation criticism featured by scholar Katharina Reiss. Translating poetry is 'the most personal and concentrated' literary form where 'the word is the first unit of meaning' and 'the line, the second one'. Unlike the other types of text poetry translation implies many more other aspects that depend on 'poetic form' such as 'the rhyming scheme', 'figurative meaning', 'concrete images' various techniques of 'sound-effect'. As Peter Newmark states, 'A successfully translated poem is always another poem.' [20] There is a large variety of possibilities a translator has to translate a poem. His choice depends on 'the values of the particular poem' as well as on the translator's theory of poetry---though there is no such a thing as 'general theory of poetic translation'. As to the 'various methods', also called 'strategies' by André Lefevere, which stand, after all, for a 'set of methodological criteria to follow, (...) focusing on some elements at the expense of others and from this failure to consider the poem an organic structure comes a translation that is demonstrably unbalanced' [21] the translator has to become aware of 'one essential thing: the central concern of translation theory is to determine an appropriate method of translation' [22], which means that it is the translator's personal choice to make the appropriate choice. What he has to pay attention to, no matter what his translation method may be, are the three basic translation processes formulated by Paul Newmark: the interpretation and analysis of the SL text; the translation procedures, which may be direct, or on the basis of SL and TG corresponding syntactic structures, or through an underlying

logical ‘interlanguage’; the reformulation of the text in relation to the writer’s intention, the readers’ expectation, the appropriate norms of the TL, etc.

Maybe it is interesting to mention how the deeply romantic nature of poetry influences the ‘phases of the translation process. As Ranka Kuic underlines, “The author of the original lyric had to undergo two phases before he composed his poem: the preparatory phase (that is, the phase filled with feelings and thoughts that brought him to the moment of inspiration), and the creative phase (that is, a longer or shorter phase in which, after having experienced inspiration, he created his poem). It would seem to me, however, that a true translator of poetry who undertakes the extremely serious task of transferring a great lyric poem from a foreign climate into that of his his own tongue should pass through not two but four phases if he is to carry out his responsibility as thoroughly and as successfully as possible. These four phases can be termed: the preparatory or research phase, the phase of identification or the actor’s phase, the doubly creative phase, and the final or critical phase.”[23] During the first phase the translator tries ‘to clarify the feelings and thoughts of the poet that preceded and occasioned the writing of the poem—in doing that the translator resorts to a very careful research into the life of the poet iquestion—During the second phase he comes to identify himself with the poet-creator of the original, whose feelings and thoughts have been his own; during the third phase, which is double creative because it is both creative and recreative, the translator makes the original poem become an intrinsic part of his poetic personality, which makes the translation be ‘a new poetic work, and therefore creative. Durind the final phase, that is the critical one in the process of translatyng lyrrial poetry, the translator will follow, as Ranka Kuic says, “the law of the three kinds of faithfulness”, that is his translation will be true (a) to the meaning of the original, (b) to the music of the original, and (c) to the spirit of his mother tongue.”[24]

The volume of short poems *Moartea nu trece de lumea cealaltă* whose autor is Laurian Stănescu is religious and “as Father P.S.Lucian states,”(is) marked by the sign of the same quest: finding The Almighty through his verse”; it is also “a thoughtful meditation over death as passing into eternity”. [25] Săpânța is a permanent presence in the poet’s mind. Săpânța comes back to the poet’s mind thirty-five times in this volume, in the form of short poems that are 35 in number, entitled ‘thoughts’. Maybe this is the reason why the first element opening the title is ‘Săpânța’. For a better understanding of the graphic and the message of the book I consider it necessary to introduce two cultural notes on the village of Săpânța, Maramureș County, and its unique pearl famous all over the world.

NOTE 1.

The Merry Cemetery (Romanian: Cimitirul Vesel) is a cemetery in the village of Săpânța, Maramures county, Romania, that is famous for its colourful tombstones with the native paintings that represent scenes from the life of the buried persons and even poetry in which those persons are described.

The unusual feature of this cemetery is that it grows apart from most of the European cultures, that consider death something solemn. Sometimes this is put in connection with the Dacian culture, whose philosophy was based on the immortality of the soul and the belief that somebody's death was a joyful moment, as that person was getting to a better life.

The cemetery has its origin in some crosses sculpted by Ioan Stan Patras ,born 1908 - died 1977,his own grave will be seen here ,made by himself before dying. In 1935, Patras sculpted the first epitaph and since the 1960s, the whole cemetery was populated with over 800 such crosses, sculpted from oak wood, and it became an open-air museum and a tourist attraction.His work will be continued by one of his learners,by Dumitru Pop,restaurating now old and creating new tombstones.

text: partly from Wikipedia Lexikon,the free lexikon [26]

NOTE 2

The **Merry Cemetery** (Romanian: *Cimitirul Vesel*) is a cemetery in the village of Săpâța, Maramureș county, Romania. It is famous for its colourful tombstones with naïve paintings describing, in an original and poetic manner, the persons that are buried there as well as scenes from their lives. The Merry Cemetery became an open-air museum and a national tourist attraction.

The unusual feature of this cemetery is that it diverges from the prevalent belief, culturally shared within European societies – a belief that views death as something indelibly solemn. Connections with the local Dacian culture have been made, a culture whose philosophical tenets presumably vouched for the immortality of the soul and the belief that death was a moment filled with joy and anticipation for a better life (see also *Zalmoxianism*). [27]

“Death”, says Father Lucian, the Bishop of Caransebeș, “is a road to resurrection, or, in other words, “ / în fiecare/ om/care a murit/Dumnezeu/pune/un semn viu/ pe care /nici moartea /nu îl cunoaște/ translated in the book “in every man who died, God marks a living sign not even death finds out”(-săpâța în al douăzeci și doilea gând/ săpâța within a twenty second thought)/ [28]. I think the translation into English of the ‘Word of Teaching and Wisdom’ has been done by Father Lucian, too, because the lines of the poem included in this section are different from the version signed by translator Mihai Vieru that reads: *within each/man/gone/ the Lord/a living sign /he marks/that/neither death/can see or comprehend*” [29] In the final section of the book, entitled *For time, time does not exist. Săpâța does!* Laurian Stănescu lets us know about the feelings he experienced while at Săpâța: “*Suddenly I had the terrible feeling of passing away from life into death. On the spot. It is as if you stood before a mirror and do not know what or who it reflects or turns into being. (...) I paused before several places. So did Adam Puslojic. We nearly stopped before all of them. And we did find what lacks us, the living; the wisdom of death. In the Cemetery Not So Cheerful in Săpâța I saw how death gazes at life as we do at our dreams, as our dreams gaze through at us and beyond us or them, until the void inside our being dilates beyond the void of the eternity and even beyond things which are not. We did not find either our tombs or crosses. We either had failed our lives or our deaths. We did speak loud a poem on the cross or cry out for Nichita Stănescu. Within this Săpâța world, me and Adam Puslojic were a mere fiction of an inexistent thought. When we left there I realized all was but an imaginative extension of our death but definitely not its living sense.*”[30] Once known the context of this literary work supported by questions such as ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘to whom’, which gives ‘shape to the translator/reader’s thoughts, register comes to give colour to the language he is to make use of in order to stick to the meaning(s) so as they were intended by the author. The translator is, thus, prepared, to explore and interpret all that lies beyond the surface meaning, that is all those features of language characteristic of the author’s idiom (that form of expression peculiar to the language of a person: tone, innuendo, implication, hidden reference, irony, metaphor, imagery). Aware or unaware of this essential detail the critic/translator has to keep in mind ‘the general principles of translation’ that are based on

- meaning (‘the translation should reflect accurately the meaning of the original text’);
- form (the ordering of words and ideas in translation should match the original as closely as possible’ if the translator does not come upon ‘differences in language structure that often require changes in the form and order of words’);
- register (‘languages often differ greatly in their levels of formality in a given context’);
- source language influence (‘an ever source of criticisms of translation’ because of the strong influence of mother tongue on ‘the translator’s thoughts and choice of words’ that are ‘too strongly moulded by the original text’);
- style and clarity (‘the translator should not change the style of the original’);
- idiom (the golden rule: ‘if the idiom does not work in the target language do not force it into translation’) [31]

It is well-known that languages do not have identical and symmetrical vocabularies and the syntactical rules of languages do not correspond exactly. This is why puns, wordplay, etc. cannot be

rendered in exactly the same way in target languages. Like the translator the critic is equipped with what means ‘overall tone’, ‘free’ vs. ‘literal renderings, and also ‘metre’, ‘form’, ‘rhyme’, ‘diction’ ‘. It is known that the translator should be always ‘alert to language’ because ‘every word has its own properties’, and because, adds Stephen Fry, “ there is the obvious distinction in meaning between a word’s denotation and its connotation: (f)or example, odour, fragrance, aroma, scent, perfume, pong, reek, stink, stench, whiff, nose and bouquet all denote smell, but they by no means connote that meaning in the same way.” [32] He also insists on ‘their physical qualities (that) are as important to a poet as their meaning—their weight, density, euphony, quantity, texture and appearance on the page. Their odour, in fact.’ [33]. The translator has to be alert to the flexibility of the language, the numberless styles, modes, jargons and slangs he recurses to in his translation work. Another important thing Cay insists on is ‘the lack of symmetry (that) applies to rhyme: “Shakespeare, for instance, wrote his drama in blank verse which is the natural rhythm of English. In Germany and in the Scandinavian countries, Shakespeare translations are traditionally rendered in blank verse, although this is not at all the natural rhythm in these languages. The French previously used alexandrines with six feet which is the French traditional pattern in drama (Racine, Corneille), but now prefer to render Shakespeare in prose. As can be seen, “literary translation is strongly tied up with culture.” [34]

Before evaluating the first translated poem that opens up Laurian Stănculescu’s volume, I consider it necessary to comment on the way in which the title of the volume, *Moartea nu trece de lumea cealaltă*, has been translated. In translation the title is *Death fails to pass the world beyond*. I think the translator’s choice has distorted, to a certain extent, the meaning of the original. Instead I would suggest *Death fails to pass beyond the other world*. The first poem of the volume is ”săpâța în primul gând” translated ”săpâța within a first thought”. As can be seen, the title of this opening poem in translation records a little change: ‘a’, the indefinite article, is put in the place of the definite article ‘the’. The translator seems to have operated this replacement in order to announce the great number of thoughts that is to be displayed. I also believe that the preposition ‘within’, which is ‘more formal’ than ‘in’ or ‘inside’ has been used to emphasize the idea of ‘being inside’. Here is the first poem:

Săpâța în primul gând

*prin cimitirul
nu prea vesel
apele trec*

*oasele mele
tot mai însetate
s-au ridicat pe cruce*

*eu stau și râd
ca un miel
fără rai*

*vai mie
vai mie*

mi s-a terminat moartea imediat

Here is, now, the poem in translation:

Săpânța within a first thought

*through the not
so cheerful cemetery
the waters split*

*my ever growing
thirsty bones
rose up against the cross*

*I stand and laugh
a lamb in a want
of heaven*

*woe unto me
woe unto me*

my breath turns soon short of me

In considering **the semantic component**, which is a critical factor in preserving the content and meaning of the original text, we determine the **semantic equivalence** of the linguistic context; it is worth mentioning that attention has to be paid to "what the author has intended by what has been said, that is, „what has been intended by the expression in the statement having been translated”.

The analysis shows that *semantically* the translation above, which is 'an autonomous entity in the target language', adequately renders the meaning of the original.

If **full equivalence** with the source text is the criterion according to which the semantic components of the target text are to be judged, the standard for the **lexical components** is **adequacy**. In other words, it has to be determined whether the components of the original text have been adequately carried over to the target language on the **lexical level**, that is whether the translator has demonstrated competence in dealing with the lexic.

Lexically, the result of the analysis shows that the translation is functional.

The evaluation of translation with regard to **the grammatical components** of a source text must be governed by the criterion of **correctness** in two respects: **morphology** and **syntax** (due to the great differences existing between the grammatical systems of the two languages: Romanian and English)

Grammatically, the translation of the poem above is also functional

In the realm of **stylistics** it is decided whether the text in the target language exhibits **complete correspondence** (whether the differences between the language levels in the two languages are actually comparable; whether the translation takes into account the stylistic components of the source text with regard to standard, individual, or contemporary usage, and whether, in particular, stylistic aspects of the author's creative expressions deviate from normal language usage)

Stylistically, the translation is quite different from the original:

- it lacks the fluent movement of the original lines;

e.g. "apele trec/ prin cimitirul/nu prea vesel" in translation " through the not/so cheerful cemetery/the waters split"

- the comparison in the lines ” *eu stau și rîd/ca un miel/fără rai*” translated ”*I stand and laugh/ a lamb in a want/ of heaven*” has been turned into a metaphor;

- the line in the fourth stanza that has been used twice, ”*vai mie/vai mie*”, in translation ”*woe unto me /woe unto me*” seems to be far-fetched because of its archaic construction— not intended by the poet

- it lacks the simplicity and naturalness of the original.

The version below is meant to offer a new mirror image of the original

Săpînța in the first thought

*the waters pass
through the cemetery
not too merry*

*my bones
more and more thirsty
have risen up to rest against the cross*

*I stand and laugh
like a lamb
without heaven*

*poor of me
poor of me*

my death is coming to an end at once

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