

## The concept of 'Trinity' in Dante's *Paradise* as reflected in Romanian translations

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### Abstract

The translator of Dante's *Paradise* is faced with a double difficulty. The first results from the limitation—inherent in the human condition—to express the ineffable, which the author experiences; the second stems from the difficulty of language that Dante himself builds in order to overcome the first difficulty. The success or the failure of a translation is measured in terms of how much of the original message the translator manages to make available to the reader in a foreign language, and this percentage can only be revealed by comparative analysis. Therefore, this paper starts from a comparative analysis between the original text of the *Paradise* and its Romanian translations, with a focus on the contexts that foster the concept of 'Trinity'; the analysis carried out on the Romanian versions revealed both successful equivalences, semantically and formally faithful to the original, and cases of "betrayal" of the original text.

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## 1. Introduction

A translator has to take into account not only the strictly linguistic rules, but also the cultural elements that are inherent in the text. It is necessary to link the concept of translation to the variety of modes of thinking and speaking which, throughout history, have taken the form of the various languages, cultures, literatures and societies. A translation does not only reflect events and elements from a certain era into a different culture, but it can equally contribute to disseminating and spreading new models and styles that are established in the linguistic and cultural structures of the milieu it penetrates, and can thus influence the transformation, even the evolution of another culture. There is a rather balanced ratio between the literary tradition of a culture and the translations present within it. The translation process goes beyond the status of a mere mechanical process or a simple interlinguistic transfer; it bears comparisons not only between two different linguistic systems, but also between two different cultures. Thus, understanding a text constitutes the main objective of translation. However, reaching this goal goes beyond the data pertaining to the source culture; it moves towards the integration of this data into the cultural context it reaches, preventing the readers from experiencing the feeling that a completely foreign culture is imposed upon them.

Dante the pilgrim is aware, from the beginning of the last canto of the *Divine Comedy*, of his condition of *homo viator*, who sets for an unheard journey that disregards the laws of nature. In order to express this unusual condition, he uses the verb *trasumanar*, a neologism coined by Dante himself, which means overcoming the human condition, marking the singularity of the action undertaken. This is not, however, enough. The poet has to descend among the mortals to partake of the experience, even if he lacks the expressive instrument, as he himself states: "e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là sú discende" (*Par.*, I, v. 5–6). Although the inability of human language to express the divinity confines the poet, he does not hesitate to define, name and make use of a series of concepts in order to express the divine world.

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Furthermore, the translator is faced with a double challenge: first, to perceive the world for which Dante himself invented means of expression; then, to find the right vehicles to transmit to the reader Dante's world, in its double realisation—meaning and form (or, more precisely, as form at the service of meaning).

In what follows, we will focus on the concept of 'Trinity', analysing its lexicalisation in the original, and then the choices made by the translators in their Romanian renditions. We will only discuss the translations carried out by George Coşbuc and Eta Boeriu, considered to be the most important unabridged translations of the *Divine Comedy*<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Designating the Trinity in Dante's text and in the translations

First of all, it should be pointed out that in the text of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante never uses the phrase "Holy Trinity" as such (*Santissima Trinità*). We can identify two main ways of designating it: one is related to the numerical aspect of the Trinity—the use of the number three, and the other consists in a metaphorical enumeration, which involves mentioning the three persons of the Trinity within the same context. Since the number of occurrences is rather small, we will analyse all the contexts in which the concept is present, following the order of their occurrence in the source text.

### 2.1. The numerical aspect of the Trinity

The most usual way of designating this concept in the text of the *Paradise* consists in the reference made to its numerical aspect, by uttering the number three, followed or not by a noun determiner (which names directly or metaphorically the constituents of this collective entity).

The Holy Trinity, the dominant subject in the 13<sup>th</sup> canto, is designated by uttering the constitutive figure (*tre*) followed by the noun that designates—in a very direct and general manner—the constituents: *tre persone in divina natura*, (*Par.*, XIII, v. 27). In fact, the context contains a description of the Trinitarian mystery, immediately followed by a description of the dual nature of the Son: *ma tre persone in divina natura, / e in una persona essa e l'umana*. G. Coşbuc follows closely the structure of the original verse. The translator replaces the adjective *divin* [*divine*] (*divina natura*) with *veşnic* [*eternal*] (*trei persoane în veşnica natură*) an equivalence which, although failing to render exactly the meaning of the Italian original, does not influence the reception of the idea of Trinity; however, at context level, which refers to the mystery of the incarnation, the translation does not clarify the idea that a single person of the divinity becomes human: *ci trei persoane-n veşnică natură / unind divinu-n trupul firii-umane* (in Dante's text, this distinction is very clear: of the three persons composing the Trinity, one alone also bears the human

<sup>1</sup>We should mention here the most important Romanian translations—in verse—of the *Divine Comedy*: Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie. Infernul*, translated by G. Coşbuc, edited and comments by Ramiro Ortiz, Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucureşti, f. a. [1924], cf. also G. Coşbuc, *Opere, VII. Traduceri, Dante, Divina Comedie, 1. Infernul*, critical edition by Gh. Chivu, foreword and comments by Alexandru Duşu, Minerva Publishing House, Bucureşti, 1985; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie. Purgatoriul*, translated by G. Coşbuc, edited and comments by Ramiro Ortiz, Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucureşti, f. a. [1927]; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie. Paradisul*, translated by G. Coşbuc, edited and comments by Ramiro Ortiz, Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucureşti, f. a. [1932]; cf. also George Coşbuc, *Opere. III. Traduceri. Divina Comedie, Comentariu la Divina Comedie*, Introduction, edition, notes, comments, glossary and critical references by Gh. Chivu, Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Literatură și Artă, Bucureşti, 2013; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie*, translated in Romanian by Eta Boeriu, notes and comments by Alexandru Duşu and Titus Pîrvulescu, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, Bucureşti, 1965 (several re-editions); Dante, *Infernul*, Romanian interpretation, notes and foreword by George Buznea, Univers Publishing House, Bucureşti, 1975; Dante, *Purgatoriul*, Romanian interpretation and notes by George Buznea, Univers Publishing House, Bucureşti, 1978; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie*, in Romanian by Giuseppe Cifarelli, edition prepared by Titus Pîrvulescu and foreword by Alexandru Ciorănescu, Editura Europa, Craiova, 1993, illustrations by Marcel Chirnoagă (re-edited in 1998, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca); Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie. Infernul*, bilingual edition, Romanian version, notes, comments, afterword and bibliographic references by Răzvan Codrescu, Christiana Publishing House, Bucureşti, 2006; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie. Infernul*, translation from the Italian and comments by Marian Papahagi, foreword by Irina Papahagi, edited, introduction and comments by Mira Mocan, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucureşti, 2012.

nature: *e in una persona essa e l'umana*). Eta Boeriu ignores the explanations in Dante's text and provides an equivalent to the concept through the divine name of the Trinity, considered as such: *ci Treimii i se cîntă / și sfintei taine-a întrupării-osana*.

In *Par.*, XIV, v. 28–29, by referring to the Trinity (symbol of the circular unity), and relying on the musicality of poetry, Dante expresses a mystery that is impossible to formulate in rational terms; it is the mystery of the unity and, at the same time, the distinctiveness of the divine entities: *Quell'uno e due e tre che sempre vive / e regna sempre in tre e'n due e'n uno*. G. Coșbuc preserves the beautiful chiasmus of the double enumeration in the original (*unu-doi-trei – trei-doi-unu* [one-two-three – three-two-one]), succeeding in transmitting the circular musicality of the verses which refer to a mystery that words cannot decipher: *Căci Unu, Doi și Trei ce-n veci unit/ și-n Trei și-n Doi și-n Unul e deodată*. The idea of circularity is lost in Eta Boeriu's translation; the translator decides to approach more briefly what Dante had intended to transmit by means of the algebraic game of his poetry: *Cel pururi viu în trei făpturi pe-o treaptă/ și care-n trei e domn nețărmutit*.

The numerical designation of the Trinity is also carried out by the paradoxical joining of the two numerals, *three* (expression of the constituency) and *one* (expression of the unity): *trino e uno* (*Par.*, XV, v. 47). There is, here again, the concept of a God that is unique and threefold at the same time: "*Benedetto sia tu, (...), trino e uno / che nel mio seme se' tanto cortese*"; the one who utters this hymn of praise is Cacciaguida<sup>2</sup>, who expresses gratitude to a benevolent (*cortese*) God, generous with his family (*mio seme*). In both translations analysed, the mere adjectival enumeration in Dante's original is rendered by the inclusion formula *trei în unul*. Otherwise, G. Coșbuc renders the starting formula of the praising hymn by a calque of expression, although the usual correspondent of the term *benedetto* in Romanian is *binecuvîntat*: "*Binevorbit să fii tu, trei în unul, / c-așa de bun te-arăți seminței mele*". Eta Boeriu replaces the blessing formula by another hymnographic incipit and the adjective *cortese*<sup>3</sup> by *blînd*, which is, undoubtedly, an attribute of divinity, although not the one Dante actualises in the present context: "*Mărire ție, ce ești trei într-unul, / că blînd te-arăți cu seminția mea*".

In another triplet (*Par.*, XXIV, v. 139–141), Dante talks about the dogma of Trinity<sup>4</sup>, inherent in the Christian belief: God comprises three persons, who are, at the same time, one and three, so that, states the author of the *Divine Comedy*, we can use the verb *a fi* (to be), both in the third person plural (*sînt*), and in the third person singular (*este*): *E credo in tre persone etterne, e queste / credo una essenza sì una e sì trina, / che sofferà congiunto "sono" ed "este"*.

G. Coșbuc succeeds in faithfully rendering the original triplet, both at the level of meaning and at the level of expression: *și-n trei persoane-eterne cred, și-aceste / atari sînt Un și-n trei atari se-mbină / că suferă să-i zici și sînt și este*. Eta Boeriu introduces the term *făpturi*, inappropriate with the essence of divinity, as it means '(ființe) create' (created beings): *Și cred în trei făpturi ce-n Paradis / sînt una-n fapt și întreite-atare, / că se-mpreună-n "sînt" și-n "este" (...)*.

Designating the Trinity involves not only the cardinal numeral, but also the multiplicative numeral acquiring the value of an adjective: *Oh trina luce che'n unica stella / scintillando a lor vista, sì li appaga! / guarda qua giuso a la nostra porcella* (*Par.*, XXXI, v. 28). The phrase refers to the Trinity; Dante invokes the divinity to turn its eyes towards the earth in order to see the chaos and the violence of mankind<sup>5</sup>. G. Coșbuc provides a direct equivalent to the expression that designates the Trinity and the invocation in the

<sup>2</sup>Cacciaguida is an ancestor of Dante's dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, presumably the only one the poet himself was aware of.

<sup>3</sup>*Cortése*: 'di corte, gentile, garbato'; (in Dante) 'generoso, prodigo', cf. **DELLI**.

<sup>4</sup>"Così definito dal concilio Lateranense IV del 1215: «unus solus est verus Deus, æternus et immensus... Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus, tres quidem personæ sed una essentia, substantia seu natura»", Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, in Dante Alighieri, *La Divina commedia. Paradiso*, p. 675, note to verses 139–141.

<sup>5</sup>As it also happens in other sections of the *Paradise*, the poet resorts to the voice of Boethius, who accompanies him to the Kingdom of Heaven, just as Vergilius accompanied him to the Purgatory. In *Mîngîierile filosofiei* he states: "Privește acum pămîntul plin de jale/ Oricine ai fi cel ce diriguie toate/ Noi, bună parte a lucrării tale,/ Plutim pe marea vieții la întimplare" (Boethius, *Mîngîierile filosofiei*, I, V, v. 42–45).

original, preserving both the metaphor of light and its numerical determination: *Lumină triplă, ce desfeți din una / de-a pururi stea, pe-atîția fericiți, / privește-n jos să vezi la noi furtuna*. Eta Boeriu replaces the metaphor of light with the metaphor of fire, keeping the denomination by means of the numeral acquiring the value of an adjective: *O, faclă întreită care-alini / c-un singur foc alai de fericiți! / Privește jos ce vijelii ne-așin*. In rendering the adjective *trino*, which designates the Trinity, G. Coșbuc chooses the neologism *triplu*, while Eta Boeriu resorts to the well established *întreit* (obtained by prefixation and change in the grammatical category).

The Holy Trinity is designated, in Dante's text, by the metaphor of the stars, obviously accompanied by the cardinal numeral: The three spheres refer to the Holy Trinity and they represent the classical definition of this theological concept: three equal and, at the same time, different entities: *Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza / de l'alto lume parvemi tre giri / di tre colori e d'una contenenza* (*Par.*, XXXIII, v. 116–117). Of the profound and luminous existence of God (*profonda e chiara sussistenza*) emerge three circles of three colours, having the same content. The image created by Dante refers to the Trinity, defined in theology as the unity of the three distinct divine entities: The Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. The adjective *chiaro* originates from the Latin *clārus*, *-a*, *-um* ('1. Loud, sonorous; 2. Bright, shining; 3 Seeing clearly, clear', **OLD**, s.v.), and it means 'puro, limpido, terso, trasparente'; or, as a noun, it means 'luce, luminosità' (**DELI**, s.v.); within this context, it acquires the meaning 'luminos'[bright]. To express the meaning 'esență, substanță eternă' [essence, eternal substance], Dante creates the noun *sussistenza*<sup>6</sup>.

G. Coșbuc's translation remains, to a considerable extent, faithful to the original text: *și-n clara ei și-adînca-i subzistență / văzui trei cercuri în lumina vie, / de trei colori și-aceeași continență*.

The translator chooses Romanian equivalents with the same etymology as the original: *clar* [clear] 'care dă o lumină neîntunecată de nimic, fără umbre, luminos cu multă lumină' [which gives a light that nothing darkens, without shadows, bright and with a lot of light']; *subzistență* [subsistence] is used here with the obsolete meaning of ' existență, prezență' [existence, presence] (cf. **DLR**). In exchange, the noun *continență* [temperance] is the result of a semantic calque of the Italian original: Rom. *continență* comes from Fr. *continence* and it means 'reținere, oprire (de la plăceri) înfrînare, cumpătare' (**DLR**, s.v.) [restraint, refrain (from pleasures), control, moderation]; here, the translator borrows the meaning of the equivalent Italian term, 'conținut'. However, this procedure may run the risk of hindering the understanding of the verses' meaning.

In the case of the other translation analysed, the image by means of which Dante wants to describe the Trinity is unclear, especially since the idea of unity is absent. *În însăși profunzimea ei văzui / trei brîuri felurite la culoare, / la fel de largi în roți și pricepui*.

Eta Boeriu unsuccessfully uses the noun *brîu* ('1. cingătoare lată, purtată de țărani și țărance [wide belt worn by peasants]; 2. Ornament vopsit [painted ornament]; 3. P. ext. Partea corpului pe care o încinge brîul, mijlocul' [part of the body covered by this belt, the waist], cf. **DA**) to express the idea of circle since, by its plastic character and the meaning already established in Romanian (1<sup>st</sup> meaning in **DA**), it can lead to a whole new image compared to the one present in the Italian original; that is, instead of the perfection of the circle, the reader could be presented with the image of some peasant belts, an image that is difficult to associate with the attributes of divinity, whose image they are presumably representing. Moreover, the unhappy choice of this noun deprives the text of the implicit meanings the metaphor of the sphere implies (it is a symbol of divinity in the representations of Christian art, the world from beyond, the unity and perfection in the Greek tradition, etc.) (**Chevalier & Gheerbrant**, 1993, p. 223).

## 2.2. Designating the Trinity by the metaphoric enumeration of the entities

This procedure is used twice in the *Paradise*. The first context is the one from *Par.*, XIII, v. 55–57: *ché quella viva luce che si mea / dal suo lucente, che non si disuna / da lui né da l'amor ch'a lor s'intrea*. The triplet reproduced defines the Holy Trinity and attempts to present metaphorically this ultra-mundane reality,

<sup>6</sup>According to **DELI**, that noun was first used by Dante: *sussistenza*, s. f.: 'il sussistere; ciò che sussiste' (av. 1321, Dante), Lat. *subsistō*, *-ere* ('to stand firm', cf. **OLD**).

which is unique and threefold at the same time, asserting that the Son (*viva luce*) comes from the Father (*il suo lucente*) that is, it has the same substance<sup>7</sup> and is inseparable from both the Father and the Holy Spirit (*l'amor*).

Both translators modify the designation of referents in Dante's allegory. G. Coşbuc equates the expression referring to God the Father, presented as light in the original, with another phrase referring to the primacy and supremacy of this holy person, against the two other: *De Primul cel ce-o naşte-apoi, aceea / lumina vie-n veci nu se desparte / şi nici de-amor ce-i faţa lor a treia*. Eta Boeriu resorts to an explanatory approach of the metaphors present in Dante's text; she translates *viva luce* by means of the more explicit appellative of the Son of God, namely *verbul sfânt* [the sacred verb], *lumina* [the light], and *amore*, by the direct expression in Romanian of the referent, *sfântul duh* [the holy spirit]: *Căci verbul sfânt, lumina ce porneşte / din foc divin, de el nu se desparte / şi nici de sfântul duh ce-i întreieşte*.

In another context from the *Paradise* (XIII, v. 79–81), the Trinity is presented by joining other three metaphors which designate the three entities and which collaborate in order to accomplish the perfection of the creation: *caldo amor* (the Holy Spirit), *la chiara vista* (Jesus Christ), *prima virtù* (God the Father): *Però se 'l caldo amor la chiara vista / de la prima virtù dispone e segna, / tutta la perfezion quivi s'acquista*. Considering the difficulties inherent in interpreting the verses, not all commentators agree upon the fact that this stance would illustrate the three hypostases of the Divinity; however, we consider compelling the interpretation given by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi<sup>8</sup>, the one that we actually took into account in analysing this fragment. Perfection occurs when God creates, by means of the Holy Spirit—who is love, who decides upon (*segna*) impregnating the archetypal idea produced by the Son, imagined as the eye (*vista*) through which the Father sees and acts. In G. Coşbuc's version, the fragment becomes: *Deci când Virtutea prim-astfel dispune / şi-mprim-aşa iubirea sa-nfocată, / s-atinge-atunci suprema perfecţiune*. We reproduced entirely G. Coşbuc's version of the triplet mentioned, in order to show that it omits the equivalence of the phrase that can be interpreted as a metaphor for the second divine person (the Son), that he does not name directly; therefore, the image of the Trinity fails to be created in G. Coşbuc's version.

Eta Boeriu chooses to mention, unequivocally, the three persons composing the Trinity: *Iubirea însă, când pecetea vie / a Tatălui în verbul sfânt o-mplintă, / desăvârşit e ce-a fost scris să fie*.

### 3. Conclusions

In creating the image of the Trinity, a concept that is extremely important within the entirety of the text, Dante resorts to two methods. The first, and most frequent, consists in designating the Trinity by means of the cardinal numeral *three*, accompanied or not by a noun determiner (which expresses directly—*persona*—or indirectly—by metaphors: spheres, light—the components of the Trinity) or even other numerals (two, one). The second method used in designating the Trinity consists in enumerating its constituents, at metaphorical level.

For the Romanian translators, resorting to equivalence by means of the numeral seems to be the most affordable method, that is, the easiest type of equivalence. Nevertheless, metaphors are often “betrayed” during the process of translation, which occurs in two directions: they are either replaced by another metaphor (a case in point is the example of the belt [brîul] in Eta Boeriu's translation of the triplet in chant XXXIII, v. 116–117), or the metaphor is deciphered by directly naming the divine entities (which also occurs predominantly in Eta Boeriu's translation).

Poetry means not only what is said, but—more importantly—what is suggested; thus, it contains a certain amount of ineffable which renders the reception of its message (also) dependent upon the reader's

<sup>7</sup>The Nicene Creed states that the Son of God is “Light from Light”.

<sup>8</sup>“Nella terzina fortemente sintetica si adombra ancora una volta l'idea della creazione come atto trinitario: se lo Spirito Santo (*l' caldo amor, soggetto*) dispone e imprime con azione diretta la viva luce del Figlio (*la chiara vista, oggetto*) che procede dal Padre (*la prima virtù*), *quivi*, cioè nella creatura così formata, si otterrà il massimo della perfezione”, Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, in Dante Alighieri, *La Divina commedia. Paradiso*, p. 373, note to verses 79–81.

subjectivity. Moreover, the message of a poetry received through translation runs the risk of being distorted because of the double interpretation provided by the translator, during the process of deconstruction/reconstruction of meaning, and the interpretation given by the readers, depending on their cultural background or their sensitivity. The fact that in Dante's masterpiece nothing is fortuitous, that everything has a well established place in the entirety of Dante's vision, renders any translation attempt more complex than a mere equivalence of terms, be that a faithful equivalence or an adaptation; moreover, a successful translation requires, besides talent and philological balance, meticulous research.

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