



## Transition and Translation – Between Two Wor(L)Ds

Transgressability of Borders in Ion Nete's Novel *Ninge cu  
suflete de morți* and in Its Hungarian Translation

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**Abstract.** My paper focuses on a novel by a contemporary Romanian writer who lives in Miercurea-Ciuc and whose entire work can be characterized by the central importance of the topic of border, specifically the thin border between life and death, the transgressability of the border of this world and the world of dead souls. The mythical-mystical-religious atmosphere of his prose constitutes a difficulty for the translator who, through his/her work, tries to cross the border of two languages and two cultures.

“Being on the border” is a dangerous condition/state, and every culture tries to assure a safe border-crossing process. I will approach this topic from several points of view. On the one hand, I will analyse a sequence of the chosen novel in which a funeral scene is presented, while, on the other hand, I will reflect on how the translator is situated on the border when s/he has to do the translation of a ceremonial text (part of the folklore of an archaic source culture) to a target culture (namely, Hungarian culture) in which there is not a correspondent for this specific text type.

**Keywords:** translation, rite of passage, liminal space, correspondence, transgressability

### 1. Introduction

“Being on the border” is a dangerous condition, and every culture tries to assure the safety of the process of border crossing. Border crossing, in its general sense, is maybe the most common literary topic because the most important events and situations of human life are related to borders. Crossing physical, spiritual, emotional borders legally or illegally, or the impossibility of crossing borders seems to be one of the central issues of literature. Literary translation

– and translation in general – is also a border-crossing act: in order to assure the accessibility of literary work for a public who does not understand the text's language, translators have to cross the borders between two languages, two cultures. This is why Hermes – the messenger of gods, who transmits and translates the gods' messages to mortals – is also the protector of translators (and also that of the thieves and travellers).

My paper focuses on the novel entitled *Ninge cu suflete de morți* [It's snowing with dead souls] by Ion Nete, a contemporary Romanian writer who lives in Miercurea Ciuc. Not only this novel, but his entire work can be characterized by the central importance of the topic of border, specifically the thin border between life and death, the transgressability of the border of this world and the world of dead souls.

In my paper, the motif of border and border crossing appears in several senses. On the one hand, the paper deals with the topic of border in the novel, which is a central issue in the text even though it never appears explicitly.

Secondly, I will present a specific sequence of this text, which is itself part of a "rite de passage", it is a ritual poem from the Romanian folklore linked to the funeral ceremony known as "Dawns". The poem of "Dawns" marks the liminal stage of the funeral. This term is taken from Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, a theoretical frame which can be used to interpret this part of the novel and, in a wider sense, it can be a useful tool to interpret Nete's entire novel and a huge part of his oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, I will try to share the experience of the translation of this text because the mythical-mystical-religious atmosphere of this prose constitutes a difficulty for the translator who, through his/her work, tries to cross the border of two languages and two cultures. Every translation is a border-crossing act, and it becomes clearer when a second linguistic border appears in the discussion: the metalanguage of interpretation.

## 2. Borderline experience in Ion Nete's novel

As I mentioned earlier, Arnold van Gennep's theory related to rites of passage can be a useful tool in the analysis of the chosen novel. Arnold van Gennep's main work, *Les rites de passage*, was published in 1909 in France (Gennep 1909), and its influence is now indisputable in the academic fields of various kinds of social studies (anthropology, ethnography, folklore, sociology, theology) and even in literary studies.

1 Gennep's book was published in 1909, translated into English first in 1960 and then republished in reprint edition in 1977 and 2010. Its Romanian translation was published in 1996 and the Hungarian edition only in 2007; it was a great debt of Hungarian ethnography towards this scholar (Gennep 1909, 1960, 1977, 1996, 2007, 2010).

According to Gennep, communities perform rites of passages, special ceremonies every time when an individual leaves a group to enter another, and this implies a significant change of his/her social status. Gennep observed that the ritual ceremonies that accompany the landmarks of human life differ only in detail from one culture to another and that they are in essence universal. Every rite of passage has a triadic structure: the first part includes the rites of separation, the second one the rites of liminality, and the third one the rites of incorporation. As Gennep says: “I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *postliminal rites*” (Gennep 1977: 21). The preliminary phase, in which the individual leaves the previous state/status, is a period of segregation; the second phase, the liminal one, is a transitional state characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy; the third phase, the postliminal phase, is the process of introduction into the new social status or new life.

Nete’s novel contains three chapters; it is a story of initiation and, in a metaphorical sense, that of a Passion of Christ. It is situated on the border of reality, imagination, and dreams; it opens up toward the depth of the soul and higher levels of transcendence. The main character of the novel is Mirodonie, a child whose name evokes miracle (*miracol* in Romanian), wonderment (*mirare* in Romanian), myrrh (*mir* in Romanian), and groom (*mir* in Romanian). This richness of connotations and allusions of the name suggests the character’s openness to the final questions of life, to transcendental levels of human existence. All these senses of the name are somehow related to events or ceremonies performed on borders (between reality and beyond reality, reality and expectations, between a former social or spiritual state and a new one). The reader cannot be sure (as neither the main character is ever sure) where or how exactly certain sequences of the action take place: awake, in dreams, in imagination, in hallucinations, or on a blurred border zone between them. The “geography” of this novel is full of border-like places: the Bottomless Lake, the Valley of Vetrice, where the woodworker gypsies live, or the most important place of the novel’s world, the Hill of Chisamera with the huge walnut tree. All these places are dangerous if you are not old enough, if you are not prepared mentally and spiritually enough to confront these places and the encounters which can take place here. It can easily happen that you cannot return from there or you will be marked by this experience for the rest of your life.

The most important and most border-like place is the Hill of Chisamera with the walnut tree. One cannot help associating Mircea Eliade’s book, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Eliade states that in developed religious systems there were three cosmic levels: earth, heaven, and an underworld. The *axis mundi*, the vertical feature, was seen as the centre of the world and as

connecting all three cosmic levels. This axis mundi can be a pole, a pillar, a tree, a ladder, or a mountain (1957: 36–37). Chisamera is an “axis mundi”-like place, where heaven and earth come together. Chisamera is a sort of promise land for the boy, who hopes to find all the answers to his questions if he can reach this tree. In the belief of villagers, this is the place from where the dead come to visit their living relatives in big holidays, especially on Maundy Thursday, and they set huge elder fires to show the road for the spirits. The hill and the tree on it is a scene of reality – there is a precise description of how it can be reached, but for Mirodonie it is a rather mystical place which resists the boy’s strong will, and every attempt of his to reach it fails. The tree vanishes in mist, in the darkness, its contour becomes blurred, and Mirodonie loses his way and experiences dangerous encounters with strange people of his village who are already dead.

### 3. The “Dawns” – A ritual song of liminality

At the beginning of the second chapter, Mirodonie is in an unconscious state already for days due to one of his “non-controlled” incursions in the world of the dead. He is on the border between life and death, a very dangerous state not only for him and his family but also for the village community. To end this state, the family put the boy on the road in the sunshine, and day after day the elderly women of the village perform a specific part of the funeral ceremony to push the soul of the boy to decide whether to pass the border and go into the other world or to remain in this world of living people. This is the “Dawns” song, performed during the liminal phase of the funeral by women who are specialized in this rite. It is performed early in the morning of the day after death. Dawn in Romanian is *zori*, but it also means *to hurry* (*a zori*). So, the song is not the writer’s creation, but it is taken from the Romanian folklore.

In this sequence of the text, border appears in several forms. Besides the fact that Mirodonie is in a liminal state in a strict sense due to a strange illness, the road itself is seen by traditional culture as border – it is nobody’s place, it is not part of the inner/safer space of home, it has to be secured when something important occurs on it.<sup>2</sup> This variant of *Dawns* is an 83-line-long poem, and the main topic of this text is the border-crossing situation: after the singers ask the personified dawns – who appear in the form of sisters – not to come too early to have enough time to prepare the shroud, they start to urge the dead soul to part

2 During rituals linked to birth, marriage, and death, there are many rites performed on road to secure it. There is the danger that bad spirits can harm the child taken to the baptism/christening on the way to the church, the wedding procession has to stop several times on the road from the church to the house and complete some tasks to secure the young couple’s first way to home, and this is similar in the case of a funeral ceremony, too.

on the road which leads to the other world, and they enumerate the acts which have to be done for a successful passage. So, the physical place of the road is also a symbolical one, it makes intelligible a phenomenon that takes place in the depth of the mind and spirit. There is a spiritual geography of the road to the other world, with dangerous rifts on the left side and a clean road on the right side. The spirit is advised not to turn to the left but to the right; the burgeoning willow is in fact the Holy Mother, and the spray/full-blown branch is in fact Jesus Christ – these are the landmarks of the good transition. When he arrives at a fair, he has to pay the fee of transition to the other world with the money from his eyes and mouths. In the end, the recently died person is asked to transmit to the dead souls of the other world that they are invited to come and visit their beloved on holidays like Maundy Thursday for they are waiting for them completing all the ritual requirements for such an encounter (new tables, clean jugs full of milk, fresh bread, and clean clothes).

Returning to Gennep's terminology, the first chapter of the novel, entitled *Hide and seek with dead*, can be seen as a preliminal phase of the boy's journey to find his place in the world, to get to a deeper understanding of life's and death's central questions. The second chapter, *Hide and seek with the living*, is about the liminal phase in which certain decisions are made; the boy becomes conscious about his calling to the world of the *călușar's*;<sup>3</sup> his predisposition to muteness and his inclination to explore the transcendental world's secrets make him eligible to the role of the mute – this is the biggest fear of Mirodonie's mother because it means she might lose his son. The third chapter, in this interpretation, should be the post-liminal phase, the phase of integration in a new state – but this does not take place. The chapter's title, *Hide and seek between dreams*, deepens even more the obscurity of the boy's search.

#### 4. Translation – Difficulties in crossing the borders

The task of translation of this work is not an easy one: its polished, elaborated language, its rich vocabulary (sometimes with lexemes that are rare, archaic, or even inexistent in Romanian because they are the inventions of the writer) put the translator in difficulty. On the other hand, every translation crosses the

3 Călușari were members of a Romanian fraternal secret society who practised a ritual acrobatic dance known as the *căluș*, which is a protection, healing, and fertility ritual. Another important member is *mutul* (the mute), who wears a mask, carries a red-painted wooden sword, and has a red wooden phallus attached to his belt. With gesture and pantomime, he leads the ritual acts and also plays the comic. The Călușari were believed to be able to cure the victims of fairies and of unusual illnesses. (More ethnographical information about this topic on: [https://web.archive.org/web/20070927022121/http://www.dunav.org.il/dance\\_histories/romania\\_calusari.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20070927022121/http://www.dunav.org.il/dance_histories/romania_calusari.html) or on <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/calus-ritual-00090>).

borders between two texts and two languages, and my paper is also about the ongoing translational experience of this novel by Ion Nete.<sup>4</sup>

The theory of translation can offer theoretical handholds; e.g. Katharina Reiss, in her translation-oriented text typology, suggests that in the case of literary (form-oriented or expressive) text types the translator has to get inspiration from the form of the source-language text and recreate this form in the target language. The most important feature of the text which has to be preserved is its form (qtd in Klaudy 2004: 58–60). This task becomes even more difficult when the translator encounters a ceremonial poem within a prose text, a type of text which has its precise form and role in the source culture's funeral ritual.

The most convenient and most appropriate solution would be to find a text in the target culture which has the similar place, role, and atmosphere as the source text in the source culture. In this case, translation would be substitution or transposition. It would be a clear case of domestication; this solution would erase the ethnic and religious specificity of this text, and it would relocate the text in a Hungarian context. The terms domestication and foreignization describe two distinct strategies of translation. The former brings the translated text closer to the target culture; this often means that information from the source text will be lost. The latter tries to conserve the source-text information even if that would mean breaking the conventions of the target language and culture (see Gile 2009 and Venuti 1995).

In the case of this specific text, domestication would not be an acceptable solution because it would be in contrast with other parts of the text, with the Romanian names of the heroes and places. On the other hand, there is no such text in Hungarian folklore, and so we could not find a folklore text with the same purpose, similar length, and identical function. All the lyrical texts of Hungarian funeral ceremony are strongly related to the personality and private history of the dead person, are always made topical, can be performed any time during the funeral ceremony, and even though these texts have some fixed formulas they are highly improvisational.

The second solution would be to find an existing translation of a "Dawns"-song, because there are some collections of Hungarian translations of Romanian

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4 The "history" of this translation is specifically related to my prolonged difficulties in translating the lyrical folklore text of Dawns. I have already translated the first and third chapters of the novel. These texts were previously published as short stories in Romanian, and the translated texts were published in *Székegyföld*, an important cultural review of the Hungarian literature in Romania (Nete 2009, 2010). The translation of the second chapter was a more difficult task for the very reason that the poem of "Dawns" from the beginning of this chapter was an insurmountable obstacle for me in this translation for years. It was a borderline I did not have the courage and inspiration to pass. I had never translated a lyrical text, I had never seen myself as a translator of poems, and the fact that this text was a ritual/ceremonial one made the task even more difficult.

folklore,<sup>5</sup> but I could not find any of them. In fact, only a few Romanian folklore texts are translated into Hungarian even though there are several comparative studies regarding Romanian-Hungarian folklore.

The third solution would be to skip the text – in this case, I would not cross the border but jump over it. I am convinced that only in the last case can omission be an acceptable solution. Obviously, I chose a fourth solution, namely, to translate it, to try to conserve the rhythm, the images, the expressions, and other formal characteristics which are specific to this folklore piece, and see what happens. After several years of getting ready for this, I finally carried out the translation of this text. When I tried to “savour it”, I found that the resulting Hungarian variant of the Romanian Dawns is very close to the atmosphere of Hungarian classical ballads.<sup>6</sup> Another text type which can be recognized in this translation is the archaic prayer discovered by Zsuzsa Erdélyi and her followers<sup>7</sup> in many places in Hungary and the other countries around it where a Hungarian minority lives (Romania included).

As follows, I sum up the most interesting aspects of the translation. The English translation of the cited Romanian fragments will appear in a raw translation, and the Hungarian citations will be translated word for word to assure the reader's access to the Hungarian text as close as it is possible. Sometimes the result of this kind of translation is a grammatically incorrect text. It is a purely technical choice, though we could theorize it based on Nida's or Newmark's theories about the formal equivalence or semantic translation (Nida 1964, Newmark 1981).

In the Romanian text, dawns are personified, they appear as sisters (*surori* in a vocative form). In Hungarian, there is a word for the younger sister (*húg*) and another for the older sister (*néne*), but the name which designs both younger and older sister is a compound noun: *lánytestvér* ‘girl sibling’. In Hungarian folklore texts and religious texts, there occur several other forms for this: *testvérleány*

5 I would mention here the anthology “Román költők. 61 költő 480 verse 61 fordító tolmácsolásában” [Romanian poets. 480 poems of 61 poets in the interpretation of 61 translators] edited by Gábor Cseke, which contains 8 translations of Romanian folklore songs by Sándor Kányádi and 37 “shouts” from Băraii in Cluj County, translated by László Szabédi (Cseke (ed.)). None of the folklore texts in this book are related to the funeral ceremony.

6 Classical ballads in Hungarian folklore have an interesting history: they appeared after the disappearance of the extended family and the appearance of feudal organization of the society; they expressed the most important conflicts of this world. Once capitalism took the place of feudalism, classical ballads lost their role and, as many other species, they got on the verge of disappearance. But it happened that, due to their tragic plot and intonation, classical ballads became attached to the funeral ceremony; during the vigil, people sang these tragic texts, and so this folklore heritage has been conserved until today.

7 The folk prayer, or archaic folk prayer, or apocryphal folk prayer – these are the terms that refer to this text type in Hungarian ethnography – is part of the religious folklore used mostly in the Catholic and Greek Catholic peasant communities. It is linked to the great events of human life (birth, marriage, death), to the liturgical events of the year, and it is known as one of the oldest species of European folk poetry (see: Erdélyi 1974, 1988; Silling 1992, 1997; Tánczos 1995, 2001).

‘sibling girl’, *testvérasszony* ‘sibling woman’, or *asszonytestvér* ‘woman sibling’. Because of the rhyme, I chose the second one, which also has a religious meaning.

Zorilor, zorilor	[Dawns, dawns	Hajnalok, hajnalok,	[Dawns, dawns,
Voi, surorilor	You, sisters	testvérleányok ,	You, sibling girls,
Ia, nu vă tot pripiți	Let don't you hurry	ne siessetek,	Don't you hurry,
Și nu năvăliți	Don' you rush	még ne jöjjetek,	Yet don't come,
Până s-o găti	Until would get ready	míg készen nem áll	Until it's not ready
Dalbul de	The white of	a halotti gyooooooooolcs	The dead's lineeen]
pribeaaaaagggg	wanderer]		

One of the most thrilling sequences of the text was the metaphor *dalbul de pribeag* ‘the wanderer’s white’, which is the metaphor of the dead person. *Dalb* is an adjective meaning pure white, a sort of white that symbolizes purity; it often appears in folklore songs in structures like *florile dalbe* ‘pure white flowers’. In this specific case, *dalb* is the metaphor of the shroud, a material made of a pure white textile. The exact equivalent for this “shroud metaphor” would be *halotti lepel* in Hungarian. However, this would not contain the images of the original. So, the translator should try to find a Hungarian colour name or textile-type which is related to the funeral ceremony. One of them is *gyolcs* and the other is *patyolat* – both of them are names of fine, cotton-made materials, mostly white-coloured. The first one is used in structures like *halotti gyolcs* ‘funeral linen’, while the second one is used in structures like *patyolat fehér*, a specific, pure white. So, I have decided to use both of them alternatively, their use being determined by the constraints of the rhythm, rhyme, and the syllabic structure of the verses.

Dalbule pribeag	[White of wanderer	Vándor patyolat!	[Wanderer cambric!
Turtița de ceară	Little cake of wax	Kicsi fehér gyertya	Little white candle
Fie-ți de vedeață	To be for your sight	Világítsa utad,	Light up your way,
Vălușel de pânză	Little veil of canvas	Szép lepedővászon	Nice canvas sheet
Liniștea-ți s-ascunză	To hide your silence	Rejtse némaságod,	Hide your silence,
Carul cărător	The carrier cart	messze vivő szekér	cart which takes you far
Meargă călător	Let go traveling	vigyen elébb, elébb,	take you ahead, ahead
Din lumea-aice	From this world here	hogy az evilágból	from this world
Dincolo-n Vetrice	Beyond Vetrice	-----	-----
La rudari la vale	to the woodworker	-----	-----
	gypsies in the valley	juss a dombon túlra,	to get beyond the hill,
	on the big road.]		
Pe calea cea mare.		hosszú nagy útra.	on the huge, big road.]

Last but not least, I would like to mention one omission marked with lines in the target text, which was necessary due to the incompatibility of the “local



colour” of the source-text image: in the text, the Hill of Vetrice, a specific place of the region in which the action takes place, is mentioned as well as a group of woodworker gypsies who live there. This place is a bad place, a border-like place in the villagers’ beliefs. I considered that domestication would be a better strategy in this case; the fluency of the Hungarian target text would be disturbed by the foreign name and the unknown beliefs behind the ethnic name.

In conclusion, we can affirm that besides the fact that translation – any kind of translation – is a border-crossing event, the translation of a text whose main topic is the border itself in its various senses and is strongly related to the ethnicity and religion of the source culture shows this feature of the process of translation more clearly. As a translator, you have to find the fine balance between making accessible to your readers the specific features of the culture beyond their borders and making palpable its foreignness without jeopardizing the pleasure of reading.

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